

The EFL Learning Process: An Examination of the Potential of Social Media

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Abstract

Social media as a technological tool has recently come to support learning in both academic and public use. Students typically use social networks to enhance their education by discussing and exchanging academic content. However, its impact that needs carefully study to the vast inroads that social media has made into the academic sphere. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine its impact on the process of learning English language in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. It also aims to determine the impact of employing a social media platform in the Saudi classroom on the learning of EFL students. This study explores the role of social media by giving a panoramic view of the types of social media and social networking sites, the use of social medias in education, social media in learner engagement, social media and students' achievement, social media application in the EFL classroom and finally, social media research in the Saudi higher education scene, and the challenges of each of these. This study concludes that students can benefit the most from these media when they are encouraged to use their mobile devices as learning tools. This conclusion echoes earlier findings in the Saudi context that showed the positive impact of social media applications in boosting students' English language learning. Based on a review of the literature gathered from diverse sources, it is recommended to investigate the inclusion of social media applications, platforms and sites in the English language course descriptions at Saudi universities.

Keywords: academic performance, blogs, engagement, social media, technology

1. Introduction

Social media is an Internet-based tool for creating and disseminating online content that promotes participation in sharing of media and information (Evans, 2014). Social media also makes conversations and interactions possible between two or more people. Social networking sites like Google, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and LinkedIn hold a great deal of promise to help students learn online by helping them access information they can use to enrich, develop, edit, and sharpen their knowledge (Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021; Gaytan, 2013). With the rapid development of technology and the meteoric popularity of social media, there are diverse opportunities today to evaluate learning and inspire learners (Bin-Hady *et al.*, 2020; Gikas & Grant, 2013).

For daily communication, many people, especially students rely on social media. It has, in fact, become a widely used technological learning tool for both public and academic purposes. It is estimated that in a day, 1.93 billion persons use mobile devices to access social media sites (Regan, 2015). The use of social media drastically increased by 176 million users in the previous years. It amounted to over 2,206 billion users in 2015, accounting for 30% of global permeation. It is an opportunity at the disposal of school administrations to integrate social media technologies into the learning processes of EFL students since social media usage is extremely popular with the student communities globally. These enable people to observe, gather knowledge, and share it with others in their communities.

1.1 The Gadgets' Language

Devices like mobile phones, desktop computers, and laptops give users the choice of the language they choose to use. All users will undoubtedly profit from these options in a variety of ways, but intriguingly, new users stand to gain the most. According to numerous studies, choosing English as their preferred language for their devices has helped many people in a variety of language learning situations boost their second language learning (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

2. Types of Social Media and Social Networking Sites

Technology has made available a large number of social media platforms that can be utilized in numerous ways (Duong, 2020). What may sometimes be lacking, especially in academic contexts, is the will and skill to use them to the best advantage of learning. For instance, even though the majority of people own smartphones, they hardly ever use all of the apps that come with them. They occasionally receive inadequate instruction, and often lack the opportunity or time to devote to learning new things (Al-Ahdal & Shariq, 2019). For English learners, however, this is not the case because smartphone software and applications can help them connect with others. The following section explores the available social media and networking sites.

2.1 Blogs

Online blogs are apparently one of the social media platforms. Millions of people have started their own blogs and use them to post a variety of content, including news and opinions on many issues. On their blogs, they ask readers to respond by adding to or posting comments. Blogs cover a wide range of subjects, and they are said to help language learners read more quickly, expand their vocabulary, employ good syntax, and improve their reading comprehension (Aydin, 2014). Blogs can be used in a variety of ways and for a variety of objectives. For instance, in the field of English language learning, learners can learn new concepts about how people use blogs to engage with each other by consulting a blog in English language. Learning new vocabulary, reading (Yakut & Aydin, 2017), and writing skills (Sanjaya *et al.*, 2020) are beneficial in several modern contexts at a particular time. Some academics hold that the language of blogs is straightforward and easy to understand and that they are a good way to communicate with people who are not as sophisticated as themselves (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

2.2 Twitter

Murthy (2011) noted that the 140-character limit on microblogging and social networking sites are what people appreciate the most. This simple arrangement is the only means of communication that has captured users' imaginations, and as a result, it has developed into an intriguing manner for students to stay in touch amongst themselves and with the teacher. Twitter has been associated with many studies in the field of English language. Mompean and Fouz-González (2016) explored the impact of Twitter in pronunciation classes, Espinoza-Celi *et al.* (2018) gauged the impact of using Twitter in improving students' reading comprehension. Montaner (2020), on the other hand, investigated the effectiveness of Twitter in ameliorating students' competence in writing.

2.3 Facebook

According to Blattner and Fiori (2009), this social networking site boasts more than a billion users and is one of the most popular and rapidly expanding websites on the Internet. Further, McLoughlin and Lee (2008) mentioned that Facebook can be used for a variety of functions, including communications, material sharing, modification of learning output, and collaborative task accomplishment. However, keeping in touch with friends was the top reason students used Facebook.

3. Social Media in Education

Never before have the student communities' utilized electronic social platforms as in the contemporary times. Although it was once thought that technology can mostly be utilized for the purposes of entertainment, it has slowly entered the realm of education (Top, 2012). App stores offer many affordable and free programs that could immensely help the academic community. The use of these programs contributes to the development of a social media-centered society, which has an inevitable impact on how people communicate, educate, and learn (Mao, 2014). Online social networks, according to Lau (2012) encourage students to initiate learning activities. Students who utilize social networking sites online have access to substantial communication and knowledge exchange opportunities, which can help them grow their knowledge. Mao (2014) looked into the affordances of social media for high school students, their perceptions toward these modern technologies, and related challenges and concerns with using social media. The results showed that students have good attitudes and opinions about the usage of social media in the classroom. Students specifically stated that using social media may enhance their learning and that they also enjoyed using it for homework or individual, informal, self-study. However, several students believed that social media was time-consuming and a distraction (Mao, 2014). The study's findings also indicate that in order for social media to be used in teaching-learning, scaffolding is required. Recently, many studies investigated the use of social media in English language learning (Al-Ahdal, 2019; Ariantini *et al.*, 2021; Li, 2017). They unanimously reported the positive impact of social media on students' learning.

3.1 Social Media and Student Engagement

As stated earlier, many studies have reported the positive relationship between the use of social networks and learner engagement (Alharbi *et al.*, 2021; Fujita *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, other studies have found a connection between engagement and the usage of technology (Chen *et al.*, 2010; Faizi *et al.*, 2013; Ha *et al.*, 2018; Junco *et al.*, 2011; Tkacová *et al.*, 2022). Chen *et al.* (2010) examined the effects of Web-based learning on engaging students and their learning outcomes in regular classroom settings and online learning environments. The study reported students feeling active and highly engaged. Furthermore, those who use social networking tools in their education have also been shown to make greater overall academic progress. Tkacová *et al.* (2022) investigated the use of social media during the Covid19 pandemic. The study revealed that the majority of teachers used social media for virtual teaching. Similarly, students were also keen to use social media in their learning. Junco *et al.* (2011) carried out an experimental study using Twitter as a tool for developing various aspects of academic talks. They found that Twitter can be utilized as a teaching tool to encourage involvement and collaboration. Additionally, by fostering a sense of community among students, adopting Twitter as a microblogging medium can further communication among them. The Twitter assignments also encouraged active learning and gave teachers the opportunity to give quick feedback (Revere & Kovach, 2011).

Social media applications support learners to access share and gather information due to their undependable value of collaboration in the learning process. Additionally, social networking encourages students to (a) form rewarding friendships with their classmates (Yu *et al.*, 2010), (b) maximize students' involvement and communication with their colleges and tutors (Alharbi *et al.*, 2021; Fujita *et al.*, 2017), and (c) work together to accomplish shared objectives (Faizi *et al.*, 2013). It is also likely that some learners will feel more secure in expressing and exchanging ideas via online platforms (Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019). Online social networks also enable students to collaborate on ideas, discuss them with peers, and post them in a form that permits revisiting and revision, in contrast to traditional instructional methods that focus on solitary learning processes (Faizi *et al.*, 2013). Finally, many studies have shown that group projects help students learn more and retain material longer, particularly when they can actively participate in the learning process (Alharbi *et al.*, 2021; Tkacová *et al.*, 2022).

3.2 Social Media and Students' Achievements

Using social media can foster connections between students and motivate them to establish online communities, which improves content learning. Students have the opportunity to boost their learning environment by exploring new resources and use social media as a tool to support learning and communicate and cooperate with communities. Accordingly, several studies have gauged the impact of social media on students' achievements (Safwat *et al.*, 2020; Tambunan & Mukhyidin, 2022).

Al-Rahmi and Othman (2013a) explored the effects of social media on university students' achievements. The findings showed that social media integration improves students' academic achievement by facilitating their academic experience. Additionally, it was revealed that integrating social media into the classroom increased contact between the teacher and students, which boosted participation and improved collaborative learning. Similarly, Tambunan and Mukhyidin (2022) studied the effect of social media on student development in Islamic religion course during Covid-19. The study found that the majority of students use social media in their learning. It was also reported that social media positively affects the students' achievement. Furthermore, Olaleke *et al.* (2015) reported that social media improve students' learning skills by fostering connections between students and professors. Online social media specifically can assist young learners succeed academically by fostering a discussion-friendly environment that boosts learning motivation.

3.3 Social Media and EFL Students

The value of social media in achieving academic success has drawn much attention. There is no denying that communication and language skills are crucial for conveying knowledge about the use of technology in education (Al-Ahdal & Alharbi, 2021; Espinoza-Celi *et al.*, 2018; Montaner, 2020). Social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter ameliorate communication and may be used to further language acquisition (Pikhart & Botezat, 2021). Many of these have been integrated into academic course materials to promote student involvement, which enables students to engage with others, learn from them, and enhance and share their knowledge. According to some studies, social media can be used in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and has been linked to improved language learning (Holmberg, 2019). For instance, Boonmoh (2010) found that including blogs into ESL writing lessons might inspire students to write and develop their creativity. Similarly, Puthikanon (2009) reported a similar effect when using WebQuests in ESL reading classes. Additionally, Ali and Bin-Hady (2019) revealed that using WhatsApp in the Saudi context helped EFL students develop not only in the four-language skill, but also minimized their anxiety. Al-Ahdal, and Alharbi (2021) found that using MALL was effective in enhancing Saudi

EFL students' vocabulary repertoire.

Social media in Saudi higher education EFL context

Several studies have examined the new opportunities that social media have given people, particularly in university education (Alharbi *et al.*, 2021; Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019; Lin *et al.*, 2016). WhatsApp, YouTube, Flickr, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Wikipedia are among the popular social media platforms. They focus on the creation of collaborative knowledge, while microblogging is offered by Twitter (Balakrishnan & Lay, 2016).

Many researchers have emphasized the use of social media in the field of education due to its widespread use and the opportunities presented (Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019; Alharbi *et al.*, 2021; Everson *et al.*, 2013; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Roblyer *et al.*, 2010).

In the Saudi context, social media platforms have been explored by many researchers. Ahmed (2016) studied the impact of using Facebook on grammar discussion as well as developing Saudi EFL students' writing skills. The study recruited 60 students at Oklt Al Sqoor College divided into two groups that appeared in pre and post grammar and writing test. The experimental group which was taught via Facebook outperformed the control group in both the writing and grammar posttest. The use of Twitter was also investigated by many researchers in the Saudi EFL context (Allam *et al.*, 2017; Alsharidi, 2018; Alshalan, 2019). Alsharidi (2018) investigated the use of Twitter by Saudi female EFL students. She reported that Twitter was an essential factor to develop the participants' English proficiency. Similarly, Alshalan, (2019) gauged the impact of using Twitter in improving Saudi learners' EFL vocabulary. The study revealed that social networking sites were effective in boosting learners' abilities to become authors and readers. WhatsApp was also the focus of educational research in many studies (Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019; Almogheerah, 2021; Alshammari *et al.*, 2017; Bensalem, 2018; Khan *et al.*, 2021). Bensalem (2018) compared the use of WhatsApp and traditional methods in teaching vocabulary to Saudi EFL students. The study recruited students in two groups. The findings showed that the experimental group who studied via WhatsApp scored significantly higher than the control group which was taught traditionally. Almogheerah (2021) studied the impact of WhatsApp-based activities on enhancing Saudi EFL learners' knowledge in idioms. The study recruited 70 EFL female students at Imam Mohammad ibn Saud University in an experimental design. Findings showed that the experimental group's knowledge in idioms was boosted significant and it outperformed the group which was taught traditionally. Finally, YouTube was also found to develop Saudi university EFL students' language learning (Albahiri & Alhaj, 2020; Al Harbi, 2021).

3.4 Challenges for Social Media Use

It can be said that challenges in language education in the last few decades have diminished in the wake of social media use. The current challenge is how to make the students use social media for their benefits and developing their English language learning. The use of these tools in the classroom, however, raises the question of how well students can balance their personal and academic lives. According to Al-Rahmi and Othman's study (2013a), there is a need to regulate and supervise the time students spend using social media because it could have a detrimental impact on their academic performance. Researchers at Baylor University conducted a study that revealed students spent more time on social networking sites for entertainment-related activities like following sports personalities or reading the news (Wood, 2014). Additionally, some students cited social media as a useful tool for studying but also identified some challenges, such as the poor quality of home Internet (Al-Rahmi & Othman, 2013b). Given this data, scholars are still debating social media's place in education and whether it fosters engagement in the classroom or only serves as a distraction. To decide whether social media is effective as a tool to speed up the learning process, more data is required.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, scholars firmly feel that social media benefits English language learning. Social media sites help in preparing ELF learners to search, exchange and share information. Many studies have shown the positive impact that such platforms have on boosting learning. It is clear that students in ELL classes are attached to their phones, especially when they are requested to use the devices to check the definition of a word or complete an assignment. Teachers may undoubtedly leverage their students' enthusiasm for and commitment to technology to their advantage and convert it into something valuable for the teaching process. However, the positive impact and effects of social media as shown by empirical studies firmly establishes the need to explore the level of integration of social media in academic curricula in the Saudi context. To put it succinctly, whether the English course outlines in the Saudi university include social media such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube as a teaching aids or assessment can be observed in the virtual or conventional classroom.

5. Recommendations

Research lays down the path for the future course of action in all fields in the contemporary knowledge society and academia is no exception either. There is, therefore, a solemn need for scientific studies on the impact of social media on the language learning outcomes in the Saudi context. In the meanwhile, following the global practices, teachers should be encouraged to integrate social media into the learning process and conduct action research as no other agency can be a better judge of the ground facts than the learners and teachers. There is also a need for educating learners on constructive use of social media platforms in learning, consciously keeping the accompanying distractions at bay. Finally, training teachers in pedagogies that employ social media in academics is a sore need and institutions and policy makers must take the call.

6. Limitations

The current study is in the nature of review of available research on the inclusion and role of social media as a language learning tool. The researcher feels that empirical data in the form of learner and teacher feedback and evaluation of perceptions to the same would add to the value of future studies. Factors such as gender and proficiency may also be included in such studies to make the outcomes more wholesome and usable in other contexts.

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