

# Social media in EFL Virtual Classrooms: A Study of Aural Skills at the Tertiary Level

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## Abstract

An urgent need for a study of this nature became emergent owing to the drastic change in learning environments brought about by the Corona pandemic. In these 'virtual' classrooms, technology took the center stage with seemingly non-academic platforms such as social media taking the dimension of learning tool for public and academic use. In Saudi tertiary level virtual classrooms, social media came to the rescue with teacher-learner communication becoming problematic to maintain. This study employed the analytical research methodology with a questionnaire used as data collection tool. The respondents were EFL professors at Majmaah University in KSA. Results showed that a vast majority of the respondents agreed that utilizing social media platforms in EFL virtual classes was highly significant in several ways such as strengthening the rapport between instructors and learners, augmenting interaction, reinforcing understanding, and motivating learners. Students had the added advantage of being able to supplement their learning through the discussion and sharing of academic materials on social networking platforms. In this role, this medium has gained great popularity in KSA and research, too, has indicated that it could be an effective platform for language learning. This study, therefore, set out to explore its impact on English language learning especially in the light of the fact that the teacher community as a whole, are rather wary of technology assisted classrooms with fears ranging from poor learner engagement to practical challenges of infrastructure and training. The aim was to find common grounds of teacher-learner agreement on the positive use of social media as a learning tool. Therefore, a sample of one hundred students and teachers each from the EFL setting at Majmaah University were administered separate questionnaires to evaluate the extent and popularity of social media as a learning tool at tertiary level. Results indicated that teachers were keen on using social media as a teaching tool

**Keywords:**Technology, social media, vlogs, students' engagement, students' academic performance.

Tob Regul Sci.™ 2021;7(6-1): 7402-7413

DOI: [doi.org/10.18001/TRS.7.6.1.62](https://doi.org/10.18001/TRS.7.6.1.62)

## Introduction

It is irrefutable that language is an instrument of communication between people, irrespective of their race, ethnicity, nationality or and color. People need as much language as air, water and food. Life seems almost impossible to imagine without this connecting channel Language teaching continues to be a

much-researched subject and has faced various challenges in the quest for change (Al-Ahdal & Alqasham, 2020; Baker & Westrup, 2003; Kitishat et al, 2020; Pichette, 2009; Thronbury, 2005). Especially, in the case of EFL instructors, the challenges are immense and of a myriad kind. In fact, one of the challenges for any EFL instructor is how to enable EFL learners to use the target language correctly in real life situations.

On the other hand, students too face challenges in language acquisition. Research and observations have reported inconsistent performance when they are asked to undertake class-speaking tasks; what complicates matters further is that some instructors use outdated and obsolete approaches and methods that neither support the learners nor help create the necessary atmosphere to speak comfortably (Brown, 1994; Alfallaj, 2020). Both teachers and students have, over the years, engaged in attempts to evolve methodologies and strategies that would facilitate positive learning outcomes. These efforts of students and teachers to identify corrective strategies have culminated in various practices and procedures that allow students to use the language (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Luanganggoon, 2020; AL-Ahdal, 2020). However, the language they study in training does not empower them to develop their communication skills effectively. The 21st-century student will never learn to talk by heart-learned workbooks or sentences (Bygate, 2002). It is a universal truth that the learner is motivated to learn only when the experience is interesting and enjoyable; and promises to be of use in the foreseeable future. In this context, Social Networking hold great promise in making language learning an enjoyable and productive activity. If employed right, social networking may emerge as a popular and useful educational tool.

Beyond any doubt, EFL learners, no matter how much they know about the English language, still face many difficulties while speaking. Many studies such as, Hosseini et al. (2017) Levy (2009), Littlewood (2007) have indicated that achievement of learners' aural proficiency is not given much primacy in the language classroom, and teachers rather than learners tend to use a major portion of opportunities to speak. Yet, teachers' aural output does not contribute to enrichment of learners' knowledge or idea generation (Abram & Pearlman, 2010). Further, researchers engaged in creating new knowledge on dealing with problems of oral communication, first need to understand the nature and genesis of these 'problems'. The widespread expansion of social networking between students and even teachers has proven to be a positive opportunity for education. Many instructors also assume that language learning's primary goal is to speak the language fluently and correctly so that knowing the language isn't the cornerstone of competence (Dörnyei, 2003; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). But it is not easy and certainly not so natural to acquire a foreign language as is the speaking of one's mother tongue. A variety of researchers suggest, in order to address this, that the usage and effective use of ICT and social networking in a classroom will remove many hurdles to EFL students' learning of speech abilities.

### Speaking Skills

Speaking is a gateway to social interaction with others. Speaking is also the way meanings are built and expressed through verbal and non-verbal representations. Speaking is defined as a reactive mechanism in the structured meaning of obtaining, generating and exchanging data in various ways. A number of definitions occur in applied language speaking; talk as a friendship, situational practice and talk as a

gathering (Eren, 2012). Both these encounters see speech and language as a whole component of the regular lives of students. Vocabulary is an important component in the language learning experience. This is a nuanced, multi-level competence. The complex element is demonstrated by the significance of language comprehension in real-life situations. Speaking plays an important part in foreign language teaching/learning. In the development of language teaching, it has played a critical and delicate role. Speaking does not rely strictly on pronouncing words. English teachers thus commit their time to communication as essential to the growth of skills of English learners (Gibbina& Greenhow, 2016). Notice that the four skills are described as "productive" in relation to language learning, that is to say, the language generated by the learner in speech or in writing is "productive," while the language directed to the learner is "receptive" (in reading or listening). Another fascinating definition is the channel that refers to the medium (aural/oral or written). Therefore, speech is a productive sonic/oral capacity. It consists of systematic verbal "speeches" which convey meaning. Speaking, but this is a polite skill, students must still speak frankly to carry out some of their basic transactions. It is the skill for which they are evaluated most frequently. It reflects the means of societal solidarity, social standing, business and professional advancement. Perhaps therefore, the instruction on expression deserves more thought.

The question that follows from this discussion is, why is it so hard for students to articulate themselves orally? The explanation for this is that there are still not enough speech opportunities for students even considering the numerous initiatives teachers take to involve students in discussions and inspire them to talk. Moreover, the language which the students learn in the classroom would not further develop their communication abilities in current world circumstances (Haigh, 2010).

### **Technology and Learning Tools in the EFL Classroom**

Rapid information explosion in the last two decades has led to the urgency of addressing the continuing scientific acceleration in all fields. The internet information revolution is technologically, the most important achievement to date (Maney, 2009; Namaziandost& Nasri,2019; Namaziandost&Shafiee, 2018). The Internet can cancel distances, shorten times and create a worldwide small screen. Education is also required to meet the needs of this growing acceleration of science. That means that in Third World countries educational goals should be changed. Education must provide the students with the tools and skills to address these new needs effectively. Thus, it is no longer a privilege, but a pressing necessity to use technology as a goal. In second-language acquisition in which technology and digital capacity are increasingly integrated, the use of online technology should be a natural by-product of the changing educational world. The evidence demonstrates that online learners are better than students who work in traditional environments because of lack of language skills and concerns.

### **Social media**

The word "social media" derives from two words, "social" and "media." The first term is "social," which is the way they are organized and related to society, where others meet and spend time (Namaziandost, Abedi, &Nasri, 2019). Secondly, "network" means two or more interconnected computer systems. Social media is a recent phenomenon involving web-based Internet user communication via web sites

and cell phone interactions with others. It is clear that worldwide, the education sector is in the midst of a revolution caused by the development of new technologies such as web 2.0 and web 3.0. In recent years, there have been extensive debate in newspapers and conferences. Many of these discussions aimed to build a clearer understanding of the technological capacity as a new platform to improve autonomous student learning and the extent to which social media can help deliver academic achievements and whether these can be used as new pedagogical tools outside or within the classroom (Namaziandost et al, 2019). At the same time, researchers constantly examine positive issues and concerns regarding the use of these tools in different settings, providing new and different ways of using computers and/or mobile devices.

As educational institutions use social media, it is necessary to optimize their positive impact on pedagogical technology so that education and learning are active and applicable to the new millennium cyber environment (Abraham & Pearlman, 2010; Akinola, 2015). Over the past years, more social media apps like Blogs, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook have been involved in the education sector to find effective ways of building a collaborative interactive online system of learning. Technological culture therefore plays an important role in all pedagogical activities. Learning need no longer be linked to a particular place and timetable. Social media sites generally go far beyond their traditional communication and entertainment aims in order to promote students' autonomy in learning through research and sharing and, in particular, to enhance their voice skills through online interaction (Almusa, 2002; Almusa et al, 2005).

Social media of various kinds can be viewed as a means of attracting students by being flexible, fun and interactive. In fact, learners are usually enthusiastic to use social media to improve their ability to listen and speak/communicate, as their interests go hand-in-hand. Since social media is so deeply entrenched in our lives, it is very important to analyze when, how and how much of it can be used in learning.

### Research Questions

This paper is therefore intended to obtain answers to two main research questions:

- To what degree can social media affect the speech abilities of students?
- How can social networking support develop language skills in in the context of EFL?

### Methodology

#### Research Design

The current study incorporated the Survey Method to obtain responses to the Research Questions and to gather people's opinions in the context of language learning, language usage and social media. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches, valid and accurate data were obtained. Research, was undertaken at the Department of Foreign Languages in Saudi Arabia the researcher worked with a demographic pool of EFL teachers and students. The aim of this research was to map the influence of social media on EFL learners and to raise awareness towards social networking as a means to strengthen speaking skills in English among EFL learners.

## **Respondents**

The study involved both teachers and learners of EFL, each numbering at 100. The teachers' participation in the study is self-explanatory as teachers are the facilitators in the teaching-learning process and they are the direct observers and evaluators of learners' progress. The participating teachers either have a PhD or an MA, and a majority of them have taught multiple modules.

The student sample consisted of students from English departments across different courses and levels, ranging from the first year of graduation to the master's degree, in the University of Saudi. A varied group was selected in order to get a wide range of opinions and avoid overlap or repetition. The study involved examining the WhatsApp, Facebook and Telegram groups created by these students, involving learners in classroom discussions, including social media in classroom activities and generating ideas on how social media may be used to improve their verbal skills in English

## **Questionnaire**

The questionnaire presented to EFL students and teachers, includes questions that examine how social networking impacts students' speaking abilities and methods to incorporate social media in educational institutions. There are a total of eight questions varying from open, closed to multiple choice questions.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Teachers' Perspective**

Question 1 tries to determine how often teachers use social media. Responses to Question 1 reveal that 55% teachers use social media regularly, 35% use social media occasionally, and the percentage of those using social media rarely and not at all is 5%. It is clear that a large percentage of EFL teachers use social media quite frequently.

Question 2 probes the extent to which teachers use social media for matters related to education. This could be to teach or for self-learning and 80 percent did use social media for instructional purposes, such as tweeting, publishing links or sending notes to colleagues or students, while a mere 20% have never done so. Clearly, social media has been accepted by modern day language teachers as an aid in educational pursuits.

Question 3 tries to figure out if teachers make use of social media to communicate with their learners. The responses to this question show that 14% of teachers regularly use social media to communicate with learners on educational issues, although 7% have never used this medium for this purpose. A fairly large percentage i.e., 76%, communicate with learners via the social media occasionally and a very small percentage of teachers, i.e. 3% seek recourse in the social media as a medium to connect with learners.

Question 4, tries to establish the most popular kinds of social media teachers use, in order to, get in touch with their students. The results reveal that WhatsApp is the most popular social networking platform, with its usage is at 51%, whereas Telegram is used at a reasonable 39%. Skype does not appear

to be very popular at 8%. Without doubt, WhatsApp is the most popular and frequently used kind of social media and Skype is the least in demand.

An analysis of answers to question 5 demonstrates the language of preference on social media by teachers. The results indicate that a majority of teachers, i.e. 84% choose English as the main language of communication, whereas the second language is the mother tongue at 13%, 2% use Arabic, whereas 1% do not use any of these languages. Hence, English emerges as the preferred language to communicate via social media.

Question 6 attempts to explore the opinion of teachers, towards the central theme of the research, i.e., the influence of social media on EFL learners' language skills, in particular verbal skills. The figures reveal that a fairly large number of teachers are in consensus that social media influences the standard of students' speaking ability in the target language and that this is a positive influence.

The figures show that 72% of the teachers feel that the impact of social media on language learning is moderately high, whereas 24% are convinced that the impact is strong. Only 4% do not agree and feel that social media has little or no effect on language learning.

### **Students' Perspective**

Question 1 tries to establish how conversant learners are with social media. The data shows that learners use social media to a great extent. With 82% saying that they use social media very frequently and 16% saying that they use it moderately, the large majority favour using social media. On the other hand, a miniscule 2% use social media rarely whereas, there is no respondent who has never used social media.

Question 2 tries to probe if social media has been adopted by students as a means to serve educational purposes. There is no doubt that this is indeed the case, with 71% respondents saying they use social media for educational purposes, 21% use this occasionally, 2% are unsure about this while there is no one in the study group who hasn't ever done so.

Question 3 tries to determine the popularity of the different kinds of social media among students. WhatsApp emerges as a clear winner with 69% using it, while the Telegram is moderately popular at 29%. Skype, on the other hand, fares pretty poorly in the ratings, garnering only 1%.

Question 4 aims to find the most frequently used language for social media interactions. English tops at 78% while the mother tongue lags at 21%. A small percentage of respondents i.e. 1%, donot use either of these social media.

Question 5 is directed at investigating if social media is used by respondents to communicate with native English language speakers from around the world. For 77% it is indeed, the case while for 33% it is not.

Question 6 tries to investigate the learners' opinion on the efficacy of social media in uplifting speaking skills in English. A large percentage, 82% are convinced that social media can surely enhance English verbal skills while a very small percentage at 18% think otherwise. Without doubt, social media is viewed as a useful tool in improving English language verbal skills.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Teachers in universities are conscious of the growth and progress in the field of communication and technology and their effect on the field of education. Teachers have adopted social media quite enthusiastically and regularly utilize it to publish information, connect with colleagues and share their experience with their students.

There seems to be a noticeable variation in the perceived benefits of using social media for educational purposes. Similarly, the preference for different types of social media platforms also exhibits variations. WhatsApp and Telegram are very popular among teachers compared to other social media. This reveals that colleagues and not pupils are a big part in their use (Nasri&Biria, 2017; Nasri&Karimi, 2018; Paliktzoglou&Suhonen, 2014).

Teachers have shown faith in the influence of social networking on language learning, particularly because of its welcoming environment, comfort and familiarity. Social media allows students to understand language by providing ample opportunities to use the target language. Another important thing is that teachers consider social media as an informal Virtual Classroom that helps improve student literacy and language skills by interactions with English speakers. The results of the questionnaire are encouraging and hold out great promise for social media and language learning. The main challenge, though, is the identification and introduction of pedagogical approaches for social networking, not to mention the availability and best usage of suitable equipment (ALoraini, 2012; Alexiou&Fotini, 2010).

Use of social networking is a daily experience amongst students and its popularity is growing with every passing day. This is an invaluable opportunity to enhance and upgrade English language skills. Online communication in English provides a pleasant and non-threatening atmosphere and allows students to use the target language in an informal way. This informal platform of language use allows students to practice the target language at a convenient pace and place. Students themselves are comfortable with the effects of social networking (Azzadi et al, 2018; Aziz et al, 2013). In fact, social networking is now omnipresent in the students' lives and they use it, from education to communication and entertainment, from the perspective of language learning, if such activities can be achieved in the target language (English), students would be able to achieve extraordinary progress in mastering the language.

The study shows that WhatsApp and Telegram are highly popular among students, and this phenomenon can be customized to facilitate language practice. It is to be noted that Messenger is a secondary forum for the world's best-known social networking platform Facebook. Hence, regular presence on Facebook is a marker that English language is being used by students. It is no surprise then that English language is the most popular language among students who use social media and not so much with other students who use social media rarely or not at all. In fact, in the Immersive Approach, social media communication is conducted only in English. A majority of teachers and students believe that the influence of social media on language learning cannot be debated. Further, most students accept that usage of social media in the teaching-learning process needs to be increased, in order to, improve

language skills. Students also accept that contact with native-speakers is an effective way to incorporate language learning during social networking.

Improving speaking ability is a challenge for most EFL teachers and their students. Many teachers are in agreement that new strategies need to be introduced both, in and beyond the classrooms. In this context, an emergent strategy in the contemporary world appears to be social media.

Our research focuses on the effective use of social networking to improve EFL learners' verbal skills. The study consisted of theoretical and practical components. The research section comprised of a simple summary of the variables involved and their mutual relationship. The practical component analyzed the results obtained from the students' and the instructors' questionnaires. The findings were compatible with our hypothesis that proper and effective use of social media can be an invaluable tool in improving language skills. The study also highlighted the need for teachers to incorporate social media as a component of their language courses, and to evolve viable methodologies to do so.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Teachers should

1. Consider using language teaching methodologies that involve social media.
2. Encourage their students to learn vocabulary items and terminologies through social networking.
3. Motivate learners to speak in English without fear or hesitation.
4. Create a positive and encouraging atmosphere for learners to speak in the target language.
5. Set activities that involve using social media.
6. Map the frequency of language items students' use that have been learnt via social media and create contexts for practicing them.

### Students should:

Use social media appropriately, with a clear aim to develop their language skills.

1. Communicate with native speakers to strengthen their ability to speak in the target language
2. Set clear self-tasks that they should pursue while using social media.

### Logistical requirements

1. The administration should provide the resources needed to facilitate uninterrupted access to the internet.
2. The administration should provide materials needed for completing tasks instructed on social media.

Undoubtedly, technology and social networking can be used to enrich learners' verbal skills. Teachers need to adjust to their students' needs and allow them space to express their ideas and develop their oral skills. In this context, the researcher attempted to generate a variety of suggestions that could enable positive EFL learning. He also recommended practical classroom activities involving the use of social media to make language learning effective, interesting and contemporary. It is safe to say that the ease of interaction and speed of learning that electronic learning can offer, now puts social networking at the

heart of education, in particular, language learning. Technology offers a means, unlike ever before, to build or construct learning opportunities by concerted and focused use. Specifically in oral production schools, technology may play a leading role. On the other hand, the role of teachers is central to the entire exercise. They need to have the skills to use technology effectively to attain planned goals, such as, through groups of 41 Building and Operating Technology.

In brief, this comprehensive article proposed that EFL teachers need to consider the inclusion of social media in higher education, without neglecting the traditional methods and techniques. Adding social networking components into EFL will provide links to better language activities and thereby, stimulate the students' passion for learning and using the target language freely. This, in turn, will lead to improved verbal and listening skills and an overall enhancement in speaking proficiency.

### Acknowledgement

The author would like to extend his thanks and appreciation to the Deanship of Scientific Research at Majmaah University for funding this study under project No: R-2021-185.

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