

# I'm Online: Social Media and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learning

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**Abstract**—Social media is widely used for various purposes in the modern world. This paper contributes to the literature by exploring the impact of social media on English language learning from the perspective of English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' perspective. A survey questionnaire was administered to university EFL students to determine their perceptions of various social media platforms. The sample comprised 118 female students in a Saudi university. The results demonstrated that the students generally had positive attitudes towards using social media for learning English. Thus, using social media in language-learning settings is likely to be perceived positively by students. This preliminary study provides insights into using social media for EFL learning purposes and makes a valuable contribution to EFL teaching and learning.

**Index Terms**—English, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp, TikTok

## I. INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL MEDIA AND LEARNING

Life today necessitates the integration of technology into language classrooms as a step towards improving education and facilitating learning while maintaining students' enthusiasm for learning. Such integration is useful in settings where access to the target language is neither easy nor guaranteed, marking an important transition from traditional to more modern, socially oriented classrooms, since 'technology like tablets, PCs, apps, and access to broadband internet are lubricating the shift to mobile ESL learning' (Yadav, 2020, p. 245).

As an easily accessible tool that can be installed as an app on mobile phones and tablets, social media is a significant type of technology that undoubtedly contributes to the globalisation and transferability of information. Social media can be defined as 'a group of Internet-based apps that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows the creation and exchange of user-generated content' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

In today's world, social media consumes most of people's, particularly young people's, time. There are 4.26 billion social media users around the world (Statista, 2021); thus, the question arises as to whether all these people use social media for the same purpose, since people inevitably differ in their needs and attitudes towards using the different social media apps. Kaplan (2015) supported the idea that social media is not simply and solely an amusing tool; people turn to social media as a first reaction to many life stimuli, such as when they want to communicate with others or research a local or global event. The importance of social media in our lives, with its openness to diverse cultures and languages, is indisputable. Social media apps have proven their significance in people's lives, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they played a vital role in connecting people to others, spreading information about the global situation, and providing inspiring lifestyle tips for people experiencing isolation and quarantine. During the pandemic, social media brought people together. In 2019, the whole world depended on social media for updates about the COVID-19 pandemic, and people used these apps to report their daily activities and maintain connections with others. The support social media provided during the pandemic has highlighted its value and made it a good platform for diverse sectors, including education. Social media complemented educational processes during the pandemic (Teng et al., 2022), when schools and educational institutions suddenly closed and public awareness of social media increased.

In English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) context, social media can create new and motivating arenas for linguistic interaction (Kessler, 2013) and simplify second and foreign language learning (AlGhamdi, 2018). In other words, social media can help to increase learners' knowledge not only of new linguistic information but also of the surrounding environment of that information. The wealth of online English language materials undoubtedly facilitates their use as a corpus for learners (Kessler, 2013). The fast dissemination of clips and pictures on social media platforms introduces people to the languages and cultures of other nations, which makes social media a good information channel that is free from the restrictions of formal settings.

Social media also promotes independent lifelong learning by providing learners with unlimited sources of content to suit their needs. Teachers are not the only source of knowledge in classrooms since students can obtain ideas and information about any topic and participate actively in teaching/learning processes online (Khan, 2018). Exposure to different online discussions on social media can provide learners with the necessary language to participate in future discussions on relevant topics, either virtually or in person (Derakhshan & Hasanabbasi, 2015). Additionally, social media offers a socially interesting setting with less stress than many learning classrooms (Carmean & Haefner, 2002). In support of social media, Al Jahromi (2020) claimed that social media offers a reduced-apprehension milieu for language practice. Learners can communicate and exchange information comfortably because they can control whether to reveal their

identities or remain anonymous. The privacy feature of online platforms, which is lacking in traditional classrooms, can assist learning by providing learners with a neutral outlet to practice languages. As Teng et al. (2022) stated, ‘providing [for] the psychological comfort of the learners is one of the major objectives of a successful education system’ (p. 5). Moreover, information on social media is always available and accessible—a feature that minimises the dread that a lack of knowledge on any given topic can generate.

In formal classes, particularly in EFL settings, many learners feel shy when asked to speak in front of their fellow students, especially at the beginning of the learning journey. Social media may assist learners by allowing them to practice a language before they enter the classroom. The language used on social media platforms is usually spontaneous and natural, differing from the structured language students are generally exposed to in language classes. This, the language on social media, shows learners the connection between language and various situations and raises awareness about specific expressions, phrases, and words according to the topic of discussion. This connection between language and context on social media apps can facilitate socially engaging learning environments that allow learners to maintain contact with other learners beyond classroom constraints (Ahmadi & Tabatabaei, 2021; Al-Ali, 2014; Manca, 2020; Rasyiid et al., 2021; Vadivel & Beena, 2019; Aloraini, 2018; Dhanya, 2016). Moreover, most social media apps are free of charge, meaning that learners can have many language-related accounts, form friendships with native speakers, and exchange messages with classmates and colleagues without leaving their places or paying extra charges.

All these advantages suggest that social media is an important aid throughout the language-learning process. However, it is not known how language learners feel about the importance of social media apps for their learning. Moreover, in EFL contexts, particularly in Saudi Arabia, the relevance of social media to teaching and learning has received little attention. Thus, there is a need to gauge the influence of social media apps on the acquisition of English from learners’ perspectives. In other words, it is important to determine learners’ attitudes regarding how such an influence may benefit the development of their EFL learning. Research has shown the effectiveness of some social media apps in improving language learning, (e.g., Al-Ali, 2014; Alnujaidi, 2017; AlGhamdi, 2018; Al Jahromi, 2020; Yadav, 2020) but a better picture must be drawn of the variety of apps. Allowing EFL teachers and learners to give their opinions about this issue would offer new insights and potentially enrich language learning. An investigation of the utility of social media apps for enhancing language learning is greatly needed. Therefore, in the present study, the author aimed to fill the existing gap in the literature on Saudi EFL learners’ views on these apps as tools for improving their English based on the following research question: how do Saudi EFL learners perceive the use of social media apps as tools for improving their English language proficiency?

As Basoz (2016) stated, learners’ attitudes can present valuable information to teachers and policymakers regarding activity design. Therefore, it is important to capture learners’ perceptions of social media apps as tools for improving educational processes in EFL contexts to determine whether learners consider them useful for improving their English. Such knowledge would potentially support the implementation of social media apps in classrooms.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers (e.g., Al Fadda, 2020; Muftah, 2022; Ayesh et al., 2023) have recently attempted to understand the post-pandemic impact of social media on language learning from learners’ perspectives. Social media apps have undoubtedly improved the quality of life of many individuals, including learners, and EFL learners create social media accounts daily to provide them with rich language content and learning support.

In 2010, when social media apps first emerged, their usefulness in language classrooms was questioned. For example, Baldwin (2012) postulated that the effect of social media on language development is not always consistently positive, since although social media apps advance lexical normalisation, they often encourage erratic spelling, the adoption of unacceptable terms, an increased use of acronyms, and the violation of grammatical rules. These observations are worth considering. In social media contexts, it seems that users prioritise abbreviated language over grammatical accuracy to support the communicative goals of the apps. The younger generation tends to be open to language change and appreciates the fast replies and sense of belonging facilitated by social media apps, which may explain their adoption of abbreviated language. Chomsky (2014) asserted that language change is a fact of life because it is a sign that contemporary society is lively and developing. Social media apps connect learners to universal language norms and update them on the recent changes adopted by native speakers, allowing the language of learners to sound natural and native-like if that is the goal. However, these caveats should not be taken as an excuse for avoiding the use of social media apps in language classrooms, although that use should be monitored and controlled. For example, in learning situations, it may be advisable to establish structured predetermined learning outcomes to make students aware of the goals of implementing social media in language classrooms.

Although research on the incorporation of social media apps into education is still in its infancy (Lambton-Howard et al., 2020), past educational researchers (e.g., Gao et al., 2012; Manca & Ranieri, 2013, 2016, 2017; Rodríguez-Hoyos et al., 2015; Tess, 2013), particularly in EFL learning contexts (e.g., Özdemir, 2017; Peeters, 2018; Sun et al., 2017; Zou et al., 2018), have found a positive relationship between the two. This suggests that the benefits of controlled social media implementation may outweigh any negative outcomes. Barrot (2022) conducted a comprehensive systematic review of the impact of social media on language learning based on an analysis of 396 documents published in 2008–2019. The findings showed that social media positively influenced language learning, and that the influence steadily increased over

the years in question. Lambton-Howard et al. (2020) elicited perceptions of social media from both learners and teachers, and learners reported using social media apps for learning purposes more frequently than teachers reported using them in class. Being able to use and understand English allows users to open a limitless number of social media accounts and facilitates interactions between people from different cultures, tending to normalise vocabulary and language structures through these interactions.

Studies on learners' perceptions of social media apps as language learning tools have been conducted in different EFL settings, including Saudi Arabia. For example, Al-Ali (2014) found that learners enjoyed using Instagram as a learning tool and that using Instagram promoted students' active learning because they felt responsible for generating ideas and providing adequate images to illustrate their writing. Al-Ali (2014) concluded that social media apps could be used to redefine teaching and to integrate learners more effectively into learning processes. Similarly, Muftah (2022) studied the impact of the different social media platforms on Saudi EFL undergraduate students and found that these platforms significantly improved learners' English across all language skills—writing, reading, listening, and speaking—and increased their lexical variation, communication skills, and use of grammar. Muftah (2022) supported the integration of social media into classrooms and urged teachers to accept the shift from traditional pedagogical classrooms to ones equipped with new technology.

The reported results in the field suggest that because students today have extensive social media experience, it may be 'logical to leverage the current student generation's heavy reliance' (Godwin-Jones, 2008, p. 8) on social networking platforms in support of language learning. Many educational institutes have social media accounts and use them to promote their programmes, announce events and competitions, and maintain connections with their alumni, reflecting these institutes' awareness of the importance of communicating on these platforms. Such institutes typically use a wide range of social media platforms because they want to reach out to as many different individuals as possible.

Finally, it is worth drawing attention to the fact that the popularity of social media apps differs from one place to another. For example, Facebook is not as popular in Saudi Arabia as it is in Egypt; it is used in Saudi Arabia mainly by people who need to maintain contact with other people outside the country.

Learning is generally more fruitful if it mirrors real life and the society in which individuals live. Since social media reflects the real lives of learners, its introduction into classrooms may be beneficial. However, as mentioned previously, few studies have provided empirical data on learners' perceptions of the importance of social media apps to enhance their EFL development. Only Al-Ali (2014) conducted an EFL study to measure learners' attitudes towards the use of social media apps for learning English in a Saudi context. Other researchers (e.g., Al Jharomi, 2020; Yadav, 2020; Muftah, 2022) have reported that social media apps influence learners' performance positively. Since learners are central to any teaching and learning situation, it is vital to collect and analyse data on their attitudes towards and perceptions of any implementation of new technology. There is a need to collect comprehensive information on this emerging field to contribute to the literature and help identify hindrances to and modifications of the implementation of social media apps in learning to better suit learners' needs. The present study was designed with the intention of improving the current status of social media in language classrooms by analysing learners' attitudes towards diverse social media apps.

### III. METHODOLOGY

Since the connection between social media apps and language learning has not yet received adequate attention in EFL contexts, including Saudi Arabia, investigating social media apps' influence on language learning required the author to identify learners' attitudes towards the impact of the different apps on their EFL learning. Because learners were the primary data source, the author designed an online questionnaire to gather information about the top five social media apps used by EFL university students. The questionnaire was adapted from Aloraini and Kardoso's (2020) survey, which was used to gauge Saudi EFL learners' perceptions of four popular social media apps (WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, and Twitter). Because the survey setting, a Saudi university where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), was similar to that of the present study, the survey questions seemed appropriate for this study. Since 2020, when the original survey was designed, a new app (TikTok) has become popular among young people. Therefore, the author included questions about learners' attitudes towards TikTok in the questionnaire for this study. The questionnaire was designed to measure attitudes towards each of five apps: WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. The questions asked about participants' beliefs about the effectiveness of the apps for learning English, their feelings towards the use of these apps in their learning, and the frequency of their actual use of the apps in the learning process.

The recruitment and data collection period began on January 17, 2023, and concluded on February 18, 2023. This study did not require formal ethics approval, as it involved minimal risk and followed established ethical standards for educational and social science research. Prior to participation, all students were informed of the study's purpose and assured that their participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous. Participants were provided with an explanation of the research objectives and verbal consent was obtained from those who agreed to participate before completing the questionnaire. They were also made aware that they could withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. The questionnaire was distributed online via link to all final-year EFL students at a Saudi university, of whom 118 completed the questionnaire. Their answers provided data for the present research. The author conducted descriptive analysis of percentages using SPSS® statistics software to answer the research question.

## IV. RESULTS

Descriptive statistics are presented in tables. Table 1 shows the percentages for the participants' general perceptions of the different social media apps for learning English.

TABLE 1  
PERCENTAGES FOR PARTICIPANTS' GENERAL PERCEPTIONS OF DIFFERENT SOCIAL MEDIA APPS FOR EFL LEARNING

Social Media App	Twitter	WhatsApp	Snapchat	Instagram	TikTok
Participants' perceptions of the app's usefulness for developing English language proficiency	41%	28%	33%	60%	47%

As shown in Table 1, of the five apps listed in the questionnaire, Instagram appeared to be perceived by more than half the participants as the most useful platform for improving their English. WhatsApp was the least commonly used platform for English language development, perhaps because WhatsApp is usually used only to communicate with acquaintances of other nationalities or nationals living outside Saudi Arabia. Most communication was conducted in the participants' national language (i.e. Arabic). WhatsApp was rated the least in improving English, this still suggests that it is used by some participants, albeit a small percentage, as a tool to improve their English.

TABLE 2  
FREQUENCIES OF USING SOCIAL MEDIA APPS FOR EFL LEARNING (%)

Frequency of using social media apps to communicate in English (in percentages)	Twitter	WhatsApp	Snapchat	Instagram	TikTok
Always	11.9	15.3	28	30.5	26.3
Usually	22.9	15.3	12.7	14.4	15.3
Sometimes	28	35.6	23.7	23.7	20.3
Occasionally	0	9	0	0	0
Rarely	16	18	21.2	11	9.3
Never	15	0	8.5	13	21.2

Only 11% of the participants said that they always used English on Twitter. The largest percentage of participants (28%) reported that they sometimes used Twitter to communicate in English, while around 22% usually used English when they communicated with others on Twitter. However, 15% said that they never used English on Twitter.

Only 15% of participants always used English on WhatsApp. Similar to the situation with Twitter, the largest percentage (35%) reported sometimes using English on WhatsApp, while 15% usually used English on WhatsApp.

The largest percentage of the participants (30%) reported that they always used English on Instagram, while 23% said they usually did so. Only 13% reported that they had never used English on that app.

Of all participants, 28% always used English on Snapchat. A smaller number (23%) reported that they usually communicated in English on Snapchat. However, 21% never used Snapchat to communicate in English.

TikTok was always used by 26% of the participants to communicate in English. However, 20% reported that they sometimes communicated in English on TikTok, and 21% stated that they never communicated in English.

Participants were asked to rate which app was the easiest to use. This question was intended to measure learners' familiarity with using the app to help teachers determine which app could best be used in the early stages of using social media apps in language classes. The results are shown in Table 3.

TABLE 3  
SOCIAL MEDIA EASE OF USE

Ease of Use	Twitter	WhatsApp	Snapchat	Instagram	TikTok
	84%	82%	75%	82%	78%

Table 3 shows that most of the participants were familiar with using the apps. This meant that, if these apps were incorporated into learning, most learners would adapt easily to using them. Twitter was rated highest for ease of use, followed by WhatsApp. The introduction of these two apps preceded that of the others in the social media world, which enabled people to become familiar with them because there only ones available.

As previously mentioned, a primary reason for integrating social media apps into learning processes is that they provide reduced-stress milieux. Unlike classroom settings, which usually require prompt responses from learners, social media apps allow more time for students to read, re-read, and edit their answers. Participants in this research were asked about their attitudes towards social media apps as providing user-friendly learning environments. The results are shown in Table 4.

TABLE 4  
SOCIAL MEDIA APPS AS FRIENDLY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Which apps provide the friendliest learning environments?	Twitter	WhatsApp	Snapchat	Instagram	TikTok
	65%	43%	40%	71%	59%

Most of the participants agreed that Instagram provides a friendly learning environment. Similarly, over half regarded Twitter and TikTok as friendly learning platforms. WhatsApp and Snapchat were rated relatively low, although they were

not viewed entirely negatively. The nature of Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok as public accounts may allow them to be used in a friendly question-and-answer way.

In an open-ended question at the end of the questionnaire, the participants added YouTube and Telegram as apps they felt were useful for improving their English. When asked whether they would like their teachers to integrate social media apps into their teaching, most learners answered positively. However, a few learners rejected the idea, justifying their rejection by claiming that social media would be distracting if they were officially incorporated into the learning process.

## V. DISCUSSION

In the current study, the author investigated learners' attitudes towards the influence of social media apps on their overall EFL development. The results showed that, in general, learners viewed these apps positively and believed that they could contribute to their overall EFL performance. Regarding specific apps, Instagram appeared to be the top app for assisting the participants in their learning, perhaps due to the nature of the app. Instagram enables images and video clips to be posted with no limitation on the space provided for the account creator's or viewers' comments. Indeed, Instagram was probably favoured because of these features; users can present a topic with visual content and add many pictures and videos under which they can write long informative comments. Content on Instagram does not automatically disappear after 24 hours, and it will remain on the platform until deleted by the account holder.

TikTok has not yet gained the same popularity as Instagram as an EFL learning facilitator, despite the emergence of many accounts that offer English teaching content. TikTok was considered more valuable for EFL learning than the other apps, although it was only recently launched. Twitter has a strict limitation of 120 letters for comments (at the time of conducting this research)—a limitation that may discourage users from elaborating on their responses or comments. It is worth mentioning that the topic presentation on Twitter is visually straightforward and, consequently, may appeal to some types of learners e.g., reading/writing learners who value reading and responding to short texts and feel distracted by pictures or videos. Similarly, Snapchat is mostly a visual resource that requires learners to be accepted by account holders if they wish to see the content, which disappears after 24 hours. Therefore, to use Snapchat as a learning channel, learners must record the content within 24 hours. WhatsApp was not seen as a valuable learning resource compared to Instagram and TikTok. Since WhatsApp requires users to select other users to communicate with, it is only valid for acquaintances. Thus, unless learners subscribe to an online channel for which that app is the only tool used, they may not find the app useful for supporting their EFL learning.

Compatible with the rating for Instagram as the top app for EFL development, most of the participants who reported using English on social media used Instagram. This compatibility shows the participants' awareness of the importance of Instagram for improving their English and suggests that instructors could employ Instagram in their teaching without fear of it being rejected by students. Tips for its use may include requesting learners' comments on or descriptions of visual material posted by the instructor. Other practices involving Instagram may include digital storytelling, practicing grammar by developing photo captions, participating in hashtags, and role playing (Bell, 2013; Hudson, 2013; Spencer 2012). These interventions could be a good way to control for any disadvantages may appear because of the employment of social media in classrooms.

Similarly, TikTok was perceived as useful for improving learners' English. Many of the participants who used social media to communicate in English reported using TikTok. However, when asked about the app they never used to communicate in English, most participants said that they never used TikTok. In other words, although TikTok was ranked second after Instagram for its usefulness for EFL learning, it was never used by those who used all the other social media apps. Since the question asked about using English in general, it is possible that the participants considered receptive skills more than productive skills when answering this question. Instagram has an exploratory feature that allows users to provide recommendations and explore thousands of different international accounts without needing to follow them. Although this feature is also available in other apps (e.g., the explore icon in TikTok), it was first introduced on Instagram. (It is worth noting that TikTok was not as popular at the time of conducting this research as it is now.) However, comments on Instagram are displayed below posted pictures or videos, which helps users follow up if something in the comments catches their attention. Comments on TikTok are hidden, and users have to tap the comment icon to see them. In terms of regularity of use, Twitter and WhatsApp were rated higher than the other apps. Notably, although Twitter informs users of trending issues and topics without the need to actively participate, it acts as a search engine with regard to language learning. The formality of the app means that language learners must define what they are searching for before they can obtain valuable results. Similarly, with WhatsApp, users need to specify the channels/people they are interested in communicating with in English. In the context of the current study, it is possible that the participants considered brief conversations with their classmates and instructors when asked about using English on WhatsApp.

Learners were given the opportunity to name any additional app they felt was useful for improving their English. Those who responded added YouTube and Telegram. YouTube, which was launched in 2005, offers a number of free, well-known English teaching channels, such as BBC Learning English, Oxford Online English, Talk English, Let's Talk, and many others. YouTube is accessible worldwide, and learners can access these channels free of charge at their convenience. Telegram could also be a great source of improving English, but, like Instagram and Snapchat, it requires learners to have prior registration with the account holders. The size of shared files may also be limited.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, by exploring and mapping learners' perceptions of social media apps as learning tools, the author provides insight into the available learning facilitation options presented by the apps. The study results indicate that social media apps can be introduced into EFL teaching/learning processes to update the older approaches still applied in many of today's classrooms. EFL teachers should use all the equipment they are offered to engage learners more actively in learning processes. Young people these days spend many hours on their smartphones and are therefore highly familiar with using social media and other online apps. Technology is an important learning facilitator that teachers should incorporate into their classes to obtain the best possible engagement from their students. However, using social media apps for teaching does not mean relying on them to the exclusion of traditional classroom practices and activities; they should be employed as supplements to traditional teaching approaches.

This study reported students' preferences for certain apps, however, it has some limitations; although it asked about students' preferences for certain apps, their answers were entirely subjective and the study thus gave no insight into how students used the apps, the levels/styles of English they used, who they communicated with, or whether using the apps did, in fact, improve their English. Further research is thus needed to address these issues and contribute to the literature about social media and language learning.

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