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The Facilitative Role of Social Media in EFL/ESL Students' Language Skills and Academic Engagement: A Theoretical Analysis

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Abstract

The integration of technologies and social media into second/foreign language education has recently gained momentum in different contexts. Given their nature, social media have been empirically identified to improve different aspects of L2 teaching and learning. However, their facilitative role in enhancing EFL/ESL students' language skills and academic engagement has been limitedly explored. To fill this lacuna, the present study intended to provide a theoretical analysis on the utility and power of injecting technologies and social media into L2 classes and improve students' language skills and academic engagement. In so doing, the conceptualizations, definitions, dimensions, and empirical studies that provide evidence for the interplay of these constructs are presented. Moreover, a variety of implications are enumerated for EFL/ESL teachers, learners, teacher trainers, language policy-makers, curriculum designers, and scholars in L2 education, who can recognize the facilitative role of social media in English language teaching learning.

Keywords: academic engagement, EFL/ESL student, language skills, positive psychology, social media

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1. Introduction

With the rapid growth and advances in information and communication technology (ICT), many aspects of human's life and career are now significantly affected by social media as a whole (Rezaul Karim et al., 2022). These improvements in technologies have hugely transformed our lives, behaviors, and social norms (Baron, 2008; Xodabande, 2017). Likewise, education, in general, and second/foreign language teaching and learning, in particular, have dramatically benefited from advancements in technologies (Barrot, 2021; Chen et al., 2021; Derakhshan, Malmir, et al., 2023; Derakhshan, Wang, et al., 2023; Estaji & Ghiasvand, 2023; Mudra et al., 2022; Zhi et al., 2023). This shift from individualistic use of technologies toward social and integrative use of such affordances has led to the generation of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) that highlights the capacities of the Internet for language education (Chapelle & Sauro, 2017). Together with this shift, social media positioned itself as a popular form of ICT that has opened the door for EFL/ESL teachers and students to have access to native speakers, produce and share unlimited information and content, and interact with one another in a virtual community without physical and temporal constraints (Barrot, 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2024; Hew & Cheung, 2013; Manca, 2020). Social media are fertile grounds for spreading the seeds of edutainment in L2 education to meet the different needs and styles of students by immersing them in engaging activities (Bugeja, 2006). The spread of social media in education has made the current generation of EFL/ESL teachers and students tech-savvy and their pedagogical practices have transformed exponentially (Noori et al., 2022; Mohammadi & Shirkamar, 2018).

Furthermore, the utilization of social media such as Facebook, Telegram, WhatsApp, Twitter, Skype, Viber, YouTube, and Wikis in L2 education has brought about many positive academic outcomes including improved classroom interaction, empowering students, motivating new learners, sharpening students' critical thinking skills, and making teachers more active, flexible, and effective (Chakowa, 2018; Guo et al., 2023; Hu & Wang, 2023; Li et al., 2024; Noori et al., 2022; Prasojo et al., 2019). Two other areas that social media can enhance are English language skills and sub-skills and the academic engagement of the students in L2 contexts. Concerning language skills, some studies have been conducted on the impact of social networks (e.g., Facebook) on students' writing skills (Haidari et al., 2020), pronunciation (Mompean & Fouz-González, 2016), socio-pragmatic competence (Blattner & Fiori, 2009; Zhi & Wang, 2023), and speaking skills (Poramathikul et al., 2020). Despite

these studies, many other skills and sub-skills such as reading, listening, and vocabulary need more empirical studies to reach a more comprehensive image.

Academic engagement, as a significant psycho-emotional construct, has also been studied in relation to social media (Mahdiuon et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022; Wang & Derakhshan; 2023; Wang et al., 2022; Wang & Wang, 2024). The results of scant empirical studies are opposing in that some claim that social media improves students' academic engagement (Han et al., 2016; Mahdiuon et al., 2020; Lin & Wang, 2024; Pan et al., 2023), while others found that social media influences social engagement of the students, but not their academic engagement (Wise et al., 2011). The construct of academic engagement is a dynamic variable in L2 education that pertains to students' degree of involvement in classroom activities (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Wang & Hemchua, 2022; Wang & Kruk, 2024). It has been regarded as a sign of motivation (Guilloteaux, 2016), which is highly correlated to personal and emotional factors including buoyancy, interpersonal communication skills, well-being, love, resilience, care, hope, and many more (Derakhshan, 2022b; Gao, 2021; Wang & Pan, 2023; Wang et al., 2024; Wilkinson & Kaukko, 2020; Wu et al., 2023, 2024; Zhang, 2021). The predominant concern in researching this construct in L2 education has been identifying its predictors and correlates, while the facilitative role of technologies and social media in generating and maintaining EFL/ESL students' academic engagement has been widely ignored, to date. With a shift of instructional mode and delivery from traditional ones to those directed and governed by social media and innovative technologies, EFL students may experience different levels of engagement and disengagement in their learning process. However, the construct of engagement has mostly been examined in light of traditional face-to-face instruction without the mediating role of social media that is overwhelming the academia. There is a dearth of research on the contribution of social media to L2 learners' academic engagement. To fill this lacuna, this theoretical review aimed to present the theoretical and empirical underpinnings of the interplay of social media, language skills, and academic engagement. More specifically, the ways through which integrating social media can improve EFL/ESL students' language skills and engagement are discussed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Networks and Education

The emergence and growth of the Internet led to a revolution in digital technologies used for communication and sharing information across the globe (Barrot, 2021). After establishing itself in societies, ICT gave birth to other modes of communication like social media when people sought cheap, portable, and manageable ways of interacting and sharing information. Later, in educational research, the concept of social media gained momentum and was defined in different ways. For some scholars, social media is equated to a web-based technology (Wagner, 2011), while Manca (2020) defined social media as Internet-based applications, which are used for sharing images, organizing information, video messaging, instant messaging, and a blend of all. It is believed that, nowadays, about half of the world's population is using social media in some way (Statista, 2020a). The enormous fame of social media has provoked educators to examine their affordances and utilities in pedagogical domains. They were found to let students share resources, collaborate and interact in the class, and study in a socially engaging context (Mao, 2014; Menzies et al., 2017). Given their flexibility, social media can be applied in different instructional levels (from primary school to higher education) and learning environments (formal and informal). In education, social media assists students and teachers to have instant interactions and obtain information about the courses, materials, and expectations at any point in time (Pempek et al., 2009). The same applies to second/foreign language education, which is explained in the coming section.

2.2. Social Network and Second/Foreign Language Education

The widespread use of technologies, in general, and social media, in particular, has infiltrated into second/foreign language education, as well. Given the fact that L2 education demands high amounts of input and interaction, the utilization and injection of technological advancements and social media is essential for a better teaching and learning process (Blake, 2008; Xodabande, 2017). A growing gamut of investigations have been conducted on the potentials of social media on English language teaching and learning whose results approved that social media platforms are promising opportunities for EFL/ESL teachers and students to have access to meaningful and authentic language use, target language input, unlimited interactions, feedback, and course contents, and applications to practice and improve language skills

electronically (Barrot, 2021; Golonka et al., 2014; Jia & Hew, 2019; Richards, 2015; Gao et al., 2022). Moreover, social media have been contended to raise EFL/ESL teachers' and students' awareness of English and provide them with an easy and fast communication mode in a virtual community (Mudra et al., 2022).

Due to their interconnected systems, social media can allow EFL/ESL teachers and learners to gain more experience in communicating in English in both public and private groups, which are open for many or specific people, respectively (Lewis et al., 2008). They also help EFL/ESL students to partake in online conversations and tasks, express their ideas and thoughts, watch videos, listen to audio files, and have peer or group discussions (Chotipaktanasook, 2016). As pinpointed by Friedman and Friedman (2013), social media are insightful tools for L2 education given its adherence to five tenets, namely making efforts to establish and generate communication, collaboration, community, creativity, and convergence in a virtual context.

2.3. Types of Social Networking/Media

Depending on the purpose of use and function, social networks and media are classified into different typologies. More specifically, they can be used for media sharing (e.g., Flickr, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube), social networking (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), recording audio and videos (e.g., podcasts, Skype), discussion (e.g., Reddit, Quora), blogging (e.g., WordPress), and instant messaging (e.g., WhatsApp, Twitter, Telegram, Viber). All these types of social media can enhance EFL/ESL teachers' and students' pedagogical practices and performance in case they are properly planned and used in English classes (Lomicka & Lord, 2016; Prichard, 2013).

2.4. Developing English Language Skills through Technologies and Social Media

The integration of technologies into L2 classes has been largely substantiated to improve the English language skills of learners given the fact that "language" is one of the important components that influences and is influenced by ICTs (Ahmadi, 2018). Concerning language skills, the integration of technologies in the classes led to a shift from teacher-centered pedagogy toward learner-centered approaches (Baytak et al., 2011). In virtual milieus, teachers can be facilitators of their students'

language learning skills (Riasati et al., 2012). Empirical studies show that technologies and social media can improve different skills and sub-skills of the English language. For example, Peregoy and Boyle (2012) conducted a study on the impact of technology on L2 students' reading and writing skills. The results of their study demonstrated that such an integration enhanced students' reading and writing skills. The reason for such improvements was the potential of ICTs to offer a user-friendly environment in which the students can learn at faster paces and more effectively. Moreover, Alsaleem (2014) found that WhatsApp has brought about promising improvements in L2 students' writing skills, speaking skill, vocabulary, and word choice. In a similar manner, Lin and Yang (2011) investigated the potential of Wiki technology in increasing L2 students' writing skills and found that when learners are invited to join a Wiki page, they can write many texts and have access to those of their fellow classmates. This can considerably improve their writing skills. In a more recent study carried out in Iran, Xodabande (2017) explored the effectiveness of social media in enhancing EFL students' listening skills using an experimental research design. The results of his study indicated that the pronunciation of participants in the experimental group significantly improved in comparison to that of the control group. Although these studies are insightful enough for injecting social media and other types of technology into L2 education, they have sporadically (if any) examined other language skills (reading, speaking), sub-skills (grammar, vocabulary, spelling), and psycho-emotional factors of L2 education like academic engagement, which is explained below.

2.5. The Concept of Academic Engagement

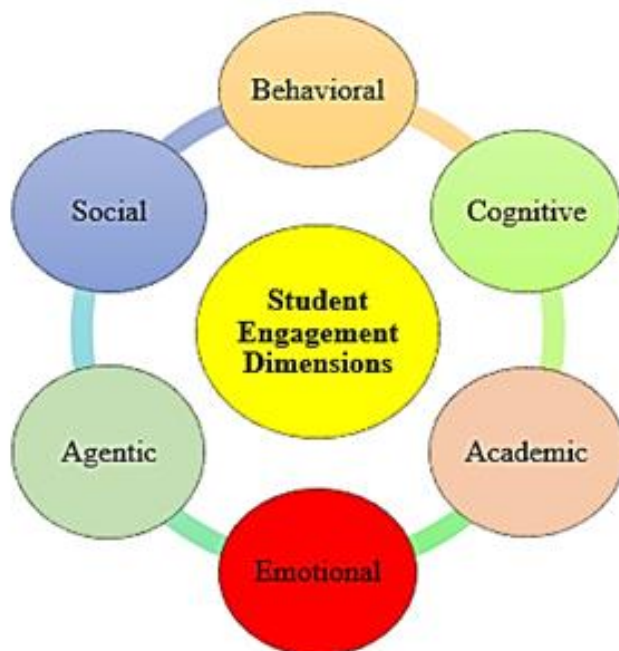
After the rise and popularity of positive psychology, L2 practitioners and researchers came to endorse the role and criticality of students' engagement as a crucial factor in causing academic success (Gu & Sun, 2021; Han & Wang, 2021; Wang, 2023). As eloquently defined by Skinner and Pitzer (2012), the concept of student academic engagement refers to students' extent and length of involvement in the given classroom tasks and activities. In language education, engagement leads to several competencies, which is an optimal objective (Sinatra et al., 2015). Academic engagement can be best seen as a manifestation of motivation among students that affords energy and motive for academic endeavor and achievement (Phillips, 2015; Fan & Wang, 2022). The construct of academic engagement is considered dynamic, shifting, and affected by several factors internal or external to the individual

(Derakhshan, 2022a; Guilloteaux, 2016). To be more precise, many phenomenological, individual, and instructional factors have been approved as influential in determining the degree of EFL students' academic engagement (Guilloteaux, 2016). As for this study, the use of technologies and social media, as new modes of delivery, can affect students' engagement in L2 classes. They can come under phenomenological and instructional factors that shape academic engagement, yet left uncharted, to date in EFL/ESL scholarly contexts.

2.6. The Dimensions of Engagement

The growing body of research on students' engagement in educational psychology and language education has unanimously certified that the construct of engagement is multi-dimensional (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Zhang, 2021). In their breakthrough study, Reschly and Christenson (2012), proposed six dimensions for the construct of engagement for the first time (Figure 1).

Figure 1
The Dimensions of Student Engagement



By behavioral engagement, Reschly and Christenson (2012), meant learners' compliance and active participation in the classroom, while cognitive engagement

concerned their psychological investments during learning via learning strategies. As the third dimension, emotional engagement refers to learners' internal feelings and emotions experienced during their learning process. Furthermore, the academic dimension of engagement pertains to pupils' psychological and behavioral efforts in grasping the knowledge and skills of an academic activity (Fredricks et al., 2004). Agentic engagement, as the next dimension, highlights the role of learners in enhancing the quality of their own education. Lastly, social engagement goes beyond the immediate academic environment and underscores pupils' engagement in tasks, exercises, and activities intended to instigate their social interaction and hone their problem-solving skills (DeVito, 2016). Given these dimensions, it can be argued that social media can touch all these aspects of students' engagement in that through social media students can have active participation in classes, use complex learning strategies varying from offline education, get emotionally involved in the learning process in a new mode of instruction, make more efforts to gain skills, be autonomous agents of their education, and acquire social skills that may facilitate their success and employment in societies.

2.7. Related Studies on EFL/ESL Students' Academic Engagement

The construct of academic engagement is one of the most significant positive traits in academia that was flourished by PP. It has been the focal point of many studies in diverse educational contexts. An array of research corroborates that students' engagement has strong and positive association with several psycho-emotional factors such as buoyancy, resilience, care, self-esteem, social climate, self-confidence, self-efficacy, interpersonal communication skills, ambiguity tolerance, effectiveness, retention, emotions, willingness to communicate (WTC), and grit (Gu & Sun, 2021; Hiver et al., 2021; Qiao, 2022; Radmehr & Karami, 2019; Shakki, 2022, 2023; Wind, 2021; Xie & Derakhshan, 2021; Zhang, 2021; Fan & Wang, 2022).

Furthermore, student engagement has been found to influence students' socialization and psychological well-being (Qiao, 2022; Zepke, 2015). Likewise, research shows that students' high degree of classroom engagement can prevent negative emotions such as boredom and self-sabotaging behaviors in L2 classes that prevent learning (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Zhang, 2022; Han & Wang, 2021). Although these investigations signify the criticality of the construct of student engagement in EFL/ESL contexts, they have turned a blind eye to the potential of ICT, CALL, and social media in fostering and establishing this paramount factor

among L2 learners. It is noteworthy that the existing body of knowledge of this variable is narrowed down to correlational studies and running studies the role of specific teaching approaches and modes of delivery via social media/networks in improving this construct in students has been extensively overlooked, to date. Here is the place that this review study can have contributions and add to the body of knowledge concerning the utility of technologies and social media in enhancing psych-emotional variables proposed by PP, which has been limited to one-shot correlational investigations.

3. Concluding Remarks

In this theoretical review article, it was maintained that the integration of technologies and social media has many potentials for L2 education. It was also contended that using social media of various typologies can facilitate EFL/ESL students' development of language skills and academic engagement. This is obtainable given the nature of social media and ICTs in providing an edutainment opportunity in which L2 teachers and students can have access to rich target language inputs, authentic materials, and multifarious course contents. As a result, the students feel excited in such a virtual community and have more passion to cooperate and collaborate with their teacher and peers. Since social media establish a more friendly and democratic climate for students to learn at faster paces, it is warranted to contend that the integration and injection of technologies, in general, and social media, in particular, can enhance L2 students' language skills and classroom engagement.

Another logic for defending the use of social media is that these tools convert education to a less formal and rigid setting, where various dimensions of academic engagement are tapped into and this, in turn, paves the way for language skills development. As ICTs offer much more materials for teaching, interaction, and feedback, the improvement of different language skills and sub-skills is by no means outlandish. Based on these propositions, the present theoretical review can be advantageous to EFL/ESL teachers, students, teacher educators, language policy-makers, curriculum designers, and researchers. Teachers can use this article as a starting point in utilizing various types of ICT and social media in their L2 classes to improve different English language skills and sub-skills. They can also use technologies to develop psycho-emotional constructs influential in EFL/ESL students' language learning. The study is also beneficial for students in that they can

understand the importance and power of technologies in their L2 education. Hence, they can work on different ICTs for fostering their language learning process. L2 teacher educators may also find this review helpful and design and deliver training courses to EFL/ESL teachers in which the utilities of social media and the ways they can improve English language education are taught to novice and experienced teachers. Moreover, language policy-makers may use this study to revisit their plans and decisions and provide ICT infrastructures in L2 classes so that L2 teachers and students can work at a faster pace using an ocean of authentic materials and inputs.

Curriculum designers are the next group, which may find this study valuable and consider more courses and credits for ICT-related subjects like CALL and the ways EFL/ESL teachers and students can benefit from technologies after becoming technologically literate enough. Lastly, this review article has implications for researchers in that they can run more studies on the association between technologies and L2 education. They can fill the existing gaps in this domain by conducting qualitative and mixed-methods studies on how social media can improve English language learning and psycho-emotional variables. Future studies can also focus on the role of cultural differences in the success of failure of integrating social media into L2 classes. Finally, further investigations are demanded to see if social media predict and facilitates different language skills and sub-skills and positive emotions introduced in PP.

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