



Social Media Platforms and Informal Learning: Pathways to English Language Development

Aisha Omran Salem Alghahwash

University of Zawia, Abuissa College of Education, English Department, Zawia, Libya

Abstract- Social media platforms have become influential spaces for informal English language development, offering learners opportunities to engage with authentic input and participate in communication beyond classroom boundaries. This paper examines the pathways through which platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter (X), Facebook, and Reddit contribute to language growth. Drawing on existing research, the study highlights five key pathways: exposure to authentic input, interactive communication, self-expression, peer collaboration, and multimodal engagement. These pathways support the development of vocabulary, fluency, digital literacy, and learner autonomy, while also fostering identity construction and intercultural awareness. At the same time, challenges such as distraction, misinformation, and unequal access due to the digital divide are recognized as barriers that require careful attention. The paper further discusses implications for learners, educators, policymakers, and researchers, emphasizing the need to integrate informal learning with formal instruction, promote critical digital literacy, and ensure equitable access. Overall, the findings suggest that social media, when used strategically, can serve as a powerful complement to formal education and a dynamic tool for English language learning in the 21st century.

Keywords- Social Media Platforms, Informal Learning, English Language Development, Digital Literacy, Learner Autonomy.

I. Introduction

In the digital age, social media platforms have become an integral part of everyday life, transforming the way individuals communicate, share information, and access knowledge. Beyond their social and entertainment functions, platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X) have increasingly been recognized as valuable spaces for learning. Unlike traditional classroom settings, these platforms provide informal and flexible opportunities where learners can engage with authentic language content, connect with global communities, and practice language skills in real-world contexts.

English, as the global lingua franca, has benefited significantly from these developments. Millions of users around the world interact in English daily on social media, often without the primary intention of learning, but with outcomes that contribute meaningfully to language development. Through watching videos, commenting on posts, participating



in discussions, or following influencers and communities, learners are exposed to authentic input and interactive exchanges that enhance their listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities. These experiences highlight the role of informal learning in complementing formal education and fostering autonomous language growth.

At the same time, social media engagement presents both opportunities and challenges. While it offers rich exposure to diverse linguistic resources, cultural knowledge, and peer interactions, it also poses risks such as distraction, information overload, and unequal access due to digital divides. Understanding how learners navigate these platforms and the pathways through which they acquire language skills is therefore crucial for educators, researchers, and policymakers seeking to integrate informal digital learning into broader educational frameworks.

This paper explores the intersection of social media platforms, informal learning practices, and English language development. By synthesizing existing research, it aims to identify the pathways through which social media engagement supports language growth, highlight the benefits and challenges associated with these platforms, and offer insights into how informal learning contexts can be harnessed to enrich English language education in the 21st century.

This paper therefore seeks to examine the pathways through which learners engage with social media to develop their language skills, with particular attention to listening, speaking, reading, and writing in informal contexts. Accordingly, the guiding research question for this study is: In what ways do social media platforms, through their unique affordances, contribute to English language development in informal learning contexts?

II. Conceptual and Theoretical Background

Conceptual and theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding how social media functions as an informal learning environment for English language development, offering insights into the ways learners construct knowledge, engage with authentic input, and participate in digital communities that foster language growth beyond formal classroom settings.

Informal Learning and Language Development

Informal learning refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills that occurs outside structured, formal educational settings. Unlike formal instruction, which is typically guided by curricula, assessment standards, and institutional objectives, informal learning is often self-directed, interest-driven, and embedded in the natural flow of learners' daily practices (Livingstone, 2001). In the context of language education, informal learning is especially significant because it offers learners the freedom to engage with authentic materials, interact with peers, and experiment with new linguistic forms in low-stakes environments where the pressure of evaluation is reduced. Such settings provide meaningful opportunities for communication that may not be readily available in the classroom, particularly for learners with limited exposure to English-speaking contexts. Research consistently demonstrates that learners benefit from



informal exposure by developing vocabulary, pragmatic competence, and communicative confidence through everyday activities such as watching videos, participating in online discussions, following social media content, or engaging with digital media in the target language (Sockett, 2014). In this way, informal learning complements formal instruction by extending practice beyond classroom boundaries and creating a broader, more flexible foundation for communicative competence in English.

Social Media as Learning Spaces

Social media platforms are not designed primarily for education, yet they have increasingly become significant spaces for informal language learning in today's digital age. The everyday use of platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter (X) provides learners with unprecedented exposure to authentic linguistic input, enabling them to observe how both native and proficient speakers employ language across a variety of real communicative contexts. Such exposure includes not only formal registers but also colloquial speech, idiomatic expressions, and emerging digital slang, all of which contribute to learners' pragmatic competence and cultural awareness. Beyond passive observation, these environments actively encourage learners to engage with language by commenting on posts, participating in online discussions, and producing their own digital content, thereby strengthening both receptive skills such as listening and reading, and productive skills such as speaking and writing (Benson & Reinders, 2011).

Unlike traditional classrooms that often rely on carefully selected and structured materials, social media offers a form of multimodal input that integrates text, audio, video, and visuals in dynamic ways. This multimodality caters to varied learning preferences, sustains motivation, and enables learners to tailor their engagement according to personal goals and interests (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). Crucially, the participatory nature of these platforms positions learners not as passive consumers but as active contributors who can shape their own learning experiences. Taken together, these affordances highlight social media as more than incidental learning tools: they represent powerful platforms that foster autonomy, creativity, and self-directed English language development, empowering learners to extend their practice far beyond the constraints of formal instruction and to situate their learning within authentic global communities.

Theoretical Perspectives

Several theoretical perspectives provide valuable insights into how social media supports informal English language development. From a constructivist perspective, learning is viewed as an active process in which learners construct knowledge through interaction with their environment and peers. Social media platforms, with their interactive and collaborative affordances, create spaces where learners can co-construct meaning, share interpretations, and build understanding in authentic contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, connectivism emphasizes that in the digital age, learning involves forming and sustaining connections across networks of people, information, and technological tools. Social media exemplifies this process by enabling learners to engage with communities of practice, access diverse linguistic resources, and participate in ongoing cycles of informal learning (Siemens, 2005). In addition,



sociocultural theory underscores the role of social interaction and cultural context in shaping language acquisition. By participating in online communities, learners not only negotiate meaning and refine their linguistic skills but also develop intercultural awareness and communicative competence through authentic engagement (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Finally, self-directed learning theory highlights the autonomy that learners exercise when using social media. These platforms allow individuals to identify their own goals, select resources that match their interests, and monitor their progress, thereby taking ownership of their English language development outside formal instruction (Knowles, 1975). Collectively, these perspectives offer a robust framework for explaining why social media has become such a powerful tool for informal language learning.

Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive lens for understanding how social media functions as a pathway for informal English language learning. They highlight the interplay of learner autonomy, social interaction, and digital connectivity in shaping language development.

III. Pathways to English Language Development

Social media platforms create multiple pathways through which learners can develop their English language skills in informal contexts, offering opportunities that extend far beyond the traditional classroom. These pathways are diverse and interconnected, allowing learners to engage with language in ways that are both authentic and meaningful. They include continuous exposure to authentic input through videos, posts, and live interactions; opportunities for interactive communication with peers, educators, or native speakers across the globe; and spaces for self-expression where learners can share ideas, produce digital content, and construct their identities as English users.

Exposure to Authentic Input

One of the most significant contributions of social media to English language development is the constant availability of authentic language input. Unlike traditional classroom resources that are often limited to carefully selected texts or scripted dialogues, social media offers learners immediate and continuous exposure to the living language as it is used in diverse communicative contexts. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram provide access to a wide range of voices, registers, and genres, exposing learners to real-life vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and cultural references that extend far beyond the scope of textbook materials (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). This type of input is not only linguistically rich but also situated within meaningful and engaging contexts, which makes the learning process more natural, memorable, and relevant to learners' personal interests.

Because social media content is dynamic and constantly updated, it reflects contemporary usage and emerging linguistic trends, allowing learners to stay connected to the evolving nature of English. As learners repeatedly encounter language in authentic use, they are more likely to acquire new vocabulary incidentally and to develop pragmatic awareness—skills that are crucial for effective communication across diverse social and cultural settings (Sockett, 2014). In this sense, social media



serves as a powerful tool that mirrors immersion experiences, providing learners with ongoing opportunities to internalize language in context while simultaneously building confidence in their ability to use English for real-world purposes.

Interactive Communication and Collaboration

Social media enables learners to actively participate in conversations, discussions, and collaborative tasks with peers as well as with native and proficient speakers of English. Unlike traditional classroom interaction, which is often limited in both time and scope, online spaces provide learners with continuous and flexible opportunities to engage in authentic communication that extends beyond institutional boundaries. Features such as comment sections, direct messaging, and group forums create spaces for written interaction in informal yet meaningful contexts, while live-streaming platforms, voice messages, and video calls open avenues for spoken interaction and listening comprehension (Benson & Reinders, 2011).

These exchanges simulate real-world communication by exposing learners to unpredictable input and requiring them to respond spontaneously, thereby developing fluency and adaptive strategies. At the same time, interactive participation allows learners to experiment with new linguistic forms, negotiate meaning in collaborative dialogue, and receive immediate feedback from interlocutors, which helps consolidate accuracy. Importantly, this form of engagement nurtures communicative competence by integrating linguistic, pragmatic, and sociocultural dimensions of language use. In doing so, social media fosters not only language development but also learner confidence, empowering individuals to view themselves as legitimate participants in authentic English-speaking communities.

Self-Expression and Identity Formation

Another important pathway to development is through self-expression, which is a defining feature of many social media platforms. Learners frequently create posts, videos, podcasts, or blogs in English to share their thoughts, personal experiences, and creative projects with a wide audience. These activities require learners to use the language for meaningful purposes, encouraging them to practice writing, refine their speaking, and adjust their communication styles according to different audiences, genres, and digital contexts.

Unlike classroom assignments that are often evaluated by teachers alone, self-expression on social media invites real and immediate responses from diverse audiences, which increases the authenticity of the learning experience. Beyond the development of linguistic skills, this process enables learners to construct digital identities as competent English users, positioning themselves as legitimate participants in global online communities (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). By projecting their voices into digital spaces, learners demonstrate agency, creativity, and ownership of their language learning. This expression not only strengthens confidence but also fosters autonomy, as learners take responsibility for shaping their learning trajectories. Coupled with the intrinsic motivation that comes from authentic engagement and public recognition, self-expression on social media becomes a powerful driver of sustained language growth that extends well beyond the boundaries of formal classroom instruction.



Peer Learning and Community Participation

Social media communities, such as Facebook groups, Reddit forums, or other online platforms dedicated to language learning, function as communities of practice where learners come together to share strategies, resources, and experiences (Wenger, 1998). These communities extend the scope of individual learning by providing a collective space in which members feel a sense of belonging and mutual commitment to shared goals. Participation in such spaces allows learners to interact with peers from diverse backgrounds, thereby broadening their perspectives while developing linguistic skills in meaningful contexts. By taking part in discussions, asking questions, or offering advice, learners not only practice their English but also cultivate valuable collaborative and social competencies.

These interactions foster an environment of mutual support where encouragement, constructive feedback, and collective problem-solving are central to the learning process. This dynamic aligns closely with the principles of connectivism, as learners form networks of people and digital resources that expand their opportunities to engage with language in flexible and dynamic ways (Siemens, 2005). Importantly, this collaborative dimension does not only enhance linguistic proficiency but also promotes metacognitive growth, encouraging learners to reflect critically on their strategies, monitor their progress, and adapt based on the insights gained from the community. In this sense, social media communities serve as both linguistic and cognitive incubators, preparing learners to become more independent and reflective language users.

Multimodality and Creative Engagement

The multimodal nature of social media, combining text, images, audio, and video, offers learners a wide range of entry points that accommodate diverse preferences, strengths, and learning styles (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Unlike traditional classroom materials, which often rely on a single mode of input such as printed text, social media provides layered experiences in which meaning is communicated through multiple channels simultaneously. For example, a YouTube video with subtitles allows learners to process spoken language while reinforcing comprehension through written text, whereas TikTok clips or Instagram Reels integrate visuals and audio to contextualize vocabulary learning and pronunciation practice.

Exposure to such multimodal content not only deepens comprehension but also equips learners with the ability to interpret meaning across varied modes of communication, a skill that is increasingly essential in digital environments. Just as important is the active production of multimodal texts, such as subtitled videos, podcasts, digital storytelling projects, or memes, which require learners to blend language with creativity, problem-solving, and critical thinking. In producing these forms of content, learners practice language in ways that are both engaging and socially relevant, while simultaneously strengthening digital literacy skills. Multimodal engagement therefore enriches language development by integrating receptive and productive skills, while also preparing learners to participate confidently in the dynamic, interconnected communicative practices of the 21st century.

Collectively, these pathways illustrate how social media extends language learning beyond the boundaries of formal classroom instruction, creating opportunities for



learners to engage with English in diverse and meaningful ways. By facilitating authentic exposure to real-world language, enabling interactive communication, supporting identity construction through self-expression, fostering collaboration within online communities, and encouraging creativity through multimodal engagement, social media platforms provide a rich and flexible environment for informal English language development. These pathways not only complement the structured practices of formal education but also empower learners to take greater ownership of their learning journeys, highlighting the transformative role of digital platforms in shaping 21st-century language learning.

IV. Digital Literacies and Informal Learning

Digital literacies are increasingly recognized as essential competencies for navigating the opportunities and challenges of informal language learning in online spaces. Unlike traditional literacy, which has often focused primarily on reading and writing, digital literacies encompass a broader set of skills, including the ability to locate, evaluate, interpret, and produce multimodal content across diverse digital platforms (Godwin-Jones, 2018). These competencies are crucial for learners to participate effectively in the multimodal and participatory culture of social media, where meaning is often constructed through the integration of text, images, audio, and video. In the context of social media, the importance of digital literacies becomes even more pronounced because learners are exposed to vast amounts of user-generated content, much of which varies in quality, reliability, and appropriateness. Unlike carefully curated classroom materials, online resources are unregulated and shaped by the dynamics of global participation, which means that learners must navigate both opportunities for authentic learning and potential pitfalls.

Developing digital literacies therefore requires learners to cultivate a critical awareness that enables them to assess the credibility and relevance of online information, recognize bias or misinformation, and distinguish between standard and non-standard varieties of English. This evaluative capacity helps learners make informed decisions about which content and communities best support their linguistic and cultural learning goals (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). At the same time, digital literacies extend beyond reception and evaluation to include active production. Learners who create blogs, videos, or podcasts in English not only practice language skills but also demonstrate their ability to adapt language to multimodal formats and diverse audiences. In this way, digital literacies are central to ensuring that social media engagement translates into meaningful and sustainable language development.

Furthermore, digital literacies enable learners to engage actively with online communities by contributing posts, participating in discussions, and producing multimodal texts such as blogs, videos, or podcasts. These practices do more than provide opportunities for linguistic practice; they also foster higher-order skills such as creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking. In creating and sharing content, learners position themselves as competent users of English within digital contexts, thereby constructing identities that extend beyond the traditional roles of students and place them within global communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Through this process,



learners gain confidence and begin to see themselves as legitimate contributors to online discourse, which strengthens their sense of agency and belonging.

At the same time, the development of digital literacies directly supports autonomy and self-directed learning, as learners assume responsibility for selecting appropriate resources, monitoring their own progress, and adapting strategies to meet individual goals (Knowles, 1975). This independence is crucial in informal settings, where success depends less on teacher guidance and more on learners' capacity to navigate and evaluate digital environments strategically. Thus, digital literacies are central to maximizing the affordances of social media for language learning, ensuring that learners can engage not only critically and productively but also responsibly in diverse online environments. In this way, they serve as the foundation for transforming social media engagement from casual interaction into a purposeful and sustainable pathway for English language development.

V. Motivation and Engagement Pathways

Motivation plays a central role in shaping how learners engage with social media for informal English language development. Unlike formal classrooms, where participation is often driven by external factors such as grades, examinations, or institutional requirements, engagement in online environments is largely sustained by intrinsic motivation, personal interest, and enjoyment. Learners are attracted to social media because of the immediate relevance of the content, the flexibility to choose topics that align with their interests, and the opportunities for creativity and self-expression that these platforms afford. Just as importantly, social media fosters a sense of belonging within online communities, where recognition through likes, comments, and shares reinforces learners' efforts and provides social validation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Such intrinsic rewards help sustain engagement over time, encouraging learners to interact with English on a daily basis. This ongoing engagement not only ensures continuous exposure to the target language but also contributes to the gradual development of communicative competence, as learners repeatedly practice and refine their skills in authentic, personally meaningful contexts.

Moreover, the design of social media platforms reinforces engagement through interactive features such as likes, comments, shares, and follower recognition. These mechanisms function as forms of gamification that provide instant feedback and social validation, thereby increasing learners' willingness to contribute, experiment with language, and persist in language-related activities over time (Reinders & Benson, 2017). Beyond these interactive cues, motivation is further sustained by the authentic and meaningful nature of online communication, as learners can immediately apply the language in real-world contexts rather than through contrived or artificial classroom tasks (Benson & Reinders, 2011). This authenticity makes learning both more relevant and more rewarding, encouraging deeper levels of participation.

Importantly, sustained engagement through these motivational pathways contributes not only to vocabulary growth and fluency but also to the development of autonomy and self-regulation. Learners increasingly take initiative to explore topics of personal interest, establish individual goals, and reflect on their own progress, aligning with the



principles of self-directed learning (Knowles, 1975). Taken together, these motivational and engagement pathways illustrate how social media transforms language learning from a teacher-directed process into a learner-driven journey. Through the interplay of personal interests, platform affordances, and social recognition, learners are empowered to shape their own learning experiences, thereby enhancing the potential of informal English language development in dynamic digital environments.

VI. Mapping Social Media Affordances for Language Development

Different social media platforms provide distinct affordances that support the development of English language skills in informal contexts, each offering unique opportunities for engagement and practice. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram provide rich multimodal input by combining video, audio, and text, thereby enhancing listening comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and pragmatic awareness in ways that mirror real-life communication. In contrast, text-oriented platforms like Twitter (X) and Reddit encourage learners to engage in critical reading and concise writing while participating in authentic discourse communities, which fosters digital literacy and interactional competence.

Meanwhile, Facebook groups and live features create collaborative environments where learners can engage in spoken interaction, receive peer feedback, and construct their identities as English users through participation in supportive communities. To illustrate these affordances, Table 1 maps key platforms to the primary language skills they support, highlighting the multiple pathways through which learners informally engage in English language development and reinforcing the view that different platforms complement one another in facilitating balanced language growth (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Sockett, 2014; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016).

This table summarizes the main affordances of widely used social media platforms in relation to English language learning outcomes. In this context, affordances refer to the distinctive features and functions of each platform that enable, facilitate, or encourage particular language practices. These affordances highlight how different platforms create varied opportunities for learners to develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, while also fostering broader competencies such as digital literacy, collaboration, and identity construction.

Table 1: Social Media Platforms and Their Affordances for English Language Development

Platform	Key Affordances	Supported Language Skills
YouTube	Authentic videos, subtitles, user comments	Listening, vocabulary, pragmatic awareness, writing (via comments)
TikTok	Short video clips, duet/voice-over, trending content	Listening, speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary



Instagram	Visual posts, captions, Reels, Stories	Reading, writing, multimodal literacy, vocabulary
Facebook	Groups, live sessions, collaborative posts	Speaking, writing, peer learning, community building
Twitter (X)	Short posts, threads, Spaces (audio chats)	Reading, writing, critical literacy, speaking
Reddit	Discussion forums, AMAs, peer support	Reading, writing, collaborative learning, critical thinking

The table highlights how different social media platforms contribute to English language development through their unique affordances. For instance, YouTube and TikTok provide rich opportunities for exposure to authentic input, particularly in listening, pronunciation, and vocabulary learning, as learners are immersed in dynamic audiovisual content that mirrors real-world usage (Sockett, 2014; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016; Li, 2022). In contrast, platforms such as Instagram and Twitter (X) place greater emphasis on short, written modes of communication, where captions, posts, and threaded discussions encourage learners to engage in reading and writing practices that foster digital literacy and critical reading skills (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Reinders & Benson, 2017).

Meanwhile, Facebook and Reddit stand out as collaborative spaces that support interaction with peers, resource sharing, and feedback exchange, reflecting the principles of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) and the creation of learning networks described by connectivism (Siemens, 2005). Taken together, these platforms illustrate that social media does not contribute to English learning in uniform ways, but rather through differentiated pathways that reflect their specific affordances and modes of engagement.

Overall, the table demonstrates that social media platforms collectively support the development of all four language skills, though the extent and focus vary according to each platform's specific affordances. Visual and audiovisual platforms such as YouTube and TikTok provide particularly strong support for listening and vocabulary growth, while text-oriented platforms such as Twitter (X) and Reddit emphasize reading, writing, and critical literacy. This reinforces the idea that learners who engage strategically across multiple platforms are more likely to experience balanced and sustained language development, as they can draw on complementary opportunities for practice and input (Benson & Reinders, 2011).

At the same time, the diversity of these platforms underscores the necessity of critical guidance from educators. Without direction, learners may engage superficially with content or encounter distractions that limit learning outcomes. Educators, therefore, play an important role in helping learners evaluate online resources, select platforms that align with their learning goals, and maximize the potential of informal digital spaces for meaningful English language development (Godwin-Jones, 2018).



VII. Discussion

The findings from existing research suggest that social media plays a multifaceted role in supporting informal English language development. By offering authentic input, enabling interactive communication, facilitating self-expression, and providing multimodal resources, social media creates diverse learning pathways that complement formal education. However, while the benefits are evident, there are also limitations and challenges that must be considered in interpreting these outcomes.

Contributions of Social Media to Informal Learning

A key strength of social media lies in its capacity to provide learners with continuous access to authentic English in real-world contexts. Unlike the structured and often simplified input of textbooks or scripted classroom dialogues, online platforms expose learners to language as it is naturally used by both native and non-native speakers across a variety of communicative situations. Through videos, comments, and posts, learners encounter a wide range of registers, accents, and discourse styles that contribute to the enrichment of vocabulary, pragmatic competence, and cultural awareness (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016; Sockett, 2014).

This diversity allows learners to move beyond prescriptive models of English and to develop the flexibility required to communicate effectively in global contexts. Equally important, the exposure provided by social media is dynamic and constantly evolving, reflecting the fluid nature of digital communication. Learners can observe new expressions, cultural trends, and linguistic innovations in real time, making the process of language learning more engaging, relevant, and authentic. Such immediacy ensures that learners' language development is not only sustained but also aligned with contemporary usage, thereby narrowing the gap between classroom instruction and real-world communicative demands.

Furthermore, the interactive nature of social media fosters active participation in communication, transforming learners from passive consumers of content into active contributors to discourse. By engaging in meaning negotiation, feedback exchanges, and collaborative tasks, learners encounter authentic opportunities to refine their language use and enhance both accuracy and fluency (Benson & Reinders, 2011). These interactions closely simulate real-life communicative exchanges, where learners must process input, respond spontaneously, and adapt their language according to context. Such experiences allow them to test hypotheses about language use, adjust their output based on peer or community feedback, and gradually develop pragmatic awareness.

These opportunities are particularly valuable for learners in contexts where access to English-speaking environments is limited, as social media reduces geographical and social barriers to interaction, enabling global participation at minimal cost. In this sense, online spaces function as global communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), where learners do not simply acquire linguistic competence in isolation but also build meaningful social connections, engage in intercultural communication, and participate in shared practices that validate their identities as legitimate users of English. Ultimately, this interactivity highlights the potential of social media to provide learners



with both the linguistic input and the social scaffolding necessary for authentic language development.

Challenges and Contradictions

Despite these benefits, several challenges emerge that may limit the effectiveness of social media as a tool for language learning. First, not all learners approach these platforms with educational purposes in mind. For many users, the primary motivation for using social media is entertainment, social networking, or leisure, which can significantly reduce the extent to which engagement translates into meaningful linguistic gains (Godwin-Jones, 2018). This tension raises questions about learner autonomy and motivation, since the benefits of informal learning depend largely on the learner's ability to use digital tools strategically and with intention.

In addition, the unregulated nature of social media content introduces several risks, including the spread of misinformation, exposure to inappropriate or offensive language, and interaction with non-standard varieties of English (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). While such linguistic diversity can enrich learners' understanding of global Englishes and real-world communication, it also carries the risk of confusion, particularly for lower-proficiency learners who may struggle to distinguish between standard and non-standard forms. This may hinder their acquisition of academic or professional registers, which are often required in higher education or workplace contexts. Taken together, these challenges suggest that while social media presents unique opportunities for language learning, its potential is not automatically realized. Effective use requires careful navigation, the development of critical digital literacy, and, in many cases, guided support to ensure that learners maximize the educational value of their engagement.

Another challenge lies in the persistent issue of the digital divide, which continues to shape who is able to access and benefit from social media-mediated learning. Learners with limited or unstable internet access, outdated devices, or insufficient digital literacy skills may find themselves excluded from the full range of opportunities that digital platforms provide (Livingstone, 2001). Such inequalities create a widening gap between those who can fully participate in global online communities and those whose engagement remains restricted by technological and socioeconomic barriers. As a result, while some learners enjoy constant exposure to authentic input and interaction, others are left with minimal access, thereby reinforcing rather than reducing existing educational inequalities.

This divide not only impacts learners' ability to practice English effectively but also limits their chances of developing critical skills such as digital literacy, intercultural competence, and autonomy. Addressing these challenges requires educators, institutions, and policymakers to place greater emphasis on issues of access and equity when advocating for social media as an informal learning tool. Without adequate infrastructure, training, and support, the advantages of digital platforms risk becoming privileges enjoyed by a limited group of learners, rather than inclusive opportunities that promote equitable language development for all.



Bridging Informal and Formal Learning

The discussion also underscores the importance of bridging the gap between informal and formal learning environments in order to maximize the potential of social media for language development. While platforms promote autonomy, self-expression, and learner-driven engagement, their impact is most effectively realized when these informal practices are meaningfully connected to structured educational frameworks. Formal instruction provides the scaffolding, assessment, and academic orientation necessary to transform incidental learning experiences into sustained and measurable linguistic growth.

Teachers, therefore, play a pivotal role in guiding students to critically reflect on their social media use, evaluate the reliability of online content, and transfer informal practices such as commenting, posting, or content creation into classroom-based activities that align with curricular objectives (Reinders & Benson, 2017). Through such integration, educators not only validate the significance of learners' informal experiences but also foster the development of metacognitive skills that enable students to use digital tools strategically and purposefully. In this way, language development is not left to chance or shaped solely by learners' individual choices, but is supported by systematic, intentional, and pedagogically sound design.

Gaps and Future Directions

Current research has mainly concentrated on the motivational benefits and lexical outcomes of social media engagement, often highlighting how learners acquire vocabulary and sustain interest in language learning through online interaction. However, considerably less attention has been given to the long-term dimensions of language development, including how learners' skills evolve over extended periods, how critical digital literacy is cultivated, and how emerging platforms such as TikTok are reshaping contemporary language practices (Li, 2022). Given the rapid pace of technological innovation and the constantly changing nature of online communication, it is essential that future research move beyond short-term observations to adopt longitudinal approaches capable of capturing sustained learning trajectories.

Comparative studies across different platforms would also be valuable, as they could illuminate how varying affordances influence language use and specific learning outcomes. In addition, more focus should be placed on the role of learners' identities, cultural backgrounds, and social contexts in mediating their engagement with digital spaces, since these factors strongly shape how meaning is negotiated and how opportunities for learning are accessed (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Addressing these gaps will not only deepen our understanding of informal language learning through social media but also enhance its integration into broader educational frameworks, ensuring that such engagement is recognized and leveraged as a legitimate component of English language education.

VIII. Implications

The findings on social media engagement and informal English language development carry important implications for learners, educators, and policymakers. While social media platforms are not designed as formal educational tools, their widespread use and



affordances create opportunities to extend language learning beyond traditional classrooms.

Implications for Learners

For learners, social media offers unparalleled access to authentic English input and opportunities to communicate with a global audience in real time. Unlike traditional classroom activities, which are often constrained by curricula, assessment requirements, and limited exposure, these platforms encourage autonomy and self-directed learning, enabling individuals to set personal goals, explore topics of interest, and select content that aligns with their learning preferences (Knowles, 1975). Learners who approach social media consciously as a language resource can significantly enhance their vocabulary, improve their fluency, and develop greater cultural competence by engaging with diverse forms of authentic input and real-world interaction (Sockett, 2014; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). Importantly, these experiences allow learners to practice language in meaningful contexts, which contributes to increased motivation and confidence.

At the same time, however, the vast and unregulated nature of online content requires learners to cultivate strong digital literacy skills. The ability to critically evaluate the credibility, relevance, and appropriateness of online material is essential, not only for avoiding misinformation but also for ensuring that engagement with social media leads to constructive and sustainable language development (Godwin-Jones, 2018). In this sense, the benefits of social media are maximized when linguistic engagement is combined with critical awareness, reflective practice, and strategic use, allowing learners to harness digital spaces as powerful tools for informal English language development.

Implications for Teachers and Educators

Educators can play a pivotal role in leveraging students' informal learning practices by thoughtfully integrating social media into classroom activities. Rather than treating these platforms as distractions, teachers can design tasks that purposefully connect learners' digital engagement with academic objectives. Activities such as analyzing online discussions, creating digital content in English, or reflecting critically on informal interactions help to bridge the gap between structured instruction and the more spontaneous learning that takes place in online environments (Benson & Reinders, 2011; Reinders & Benson, 2017).

Such practices not only validate the learning that occurs outside the classroom but also encourage students to see their everyday digital interactions as legitimate opportunities for language development. At the same time, educators should guide learners in developing metacognitive strategies for online engagement, including setting clear goals, monitoring progress, and critically evaluating the reliability of online content. This type of scaffolding ensures that social media use enhances, rather than distracts from, learners' linguistic growth. In doing so, teachers empower students to become more autonomous, reflective, and strategic users of digital platforms, ultimately supporting more systematic and intentional language development while preparing them to navigate the complex communicative demands of the digital age.



Implications for Policymakers and Institutions

For policymakers and institutions, the rise of informal learning underscores the importance of recognizing and valuing out-of-class language development as an integral part of modern education. Traditional curricula and assessment frameworks often privilege formal classroom achievements, yet a growing body of evidence indicates that learners are acquiring valuable linguistic and intercultural skills through informal engagement with digital platforms. Incorporating such outcomes into curricula, accreditation systems, or lifelong learning initiatives can therefore promote more holistic and inclusive approaches to language education, acknowledging that significant learning occurs outside institutional settings (Livingstone, 2001).

This recognition not only validates learners' efforts but also encourages them to engage more purposefully in informal practices, knowing that these experiences contribute meaningfully to their academic and professional growth. At the same time, policymakers must address structural barriers that restrict equitable access to informal digital learning opportunities. Bridging the digital divide by ensuring affordable access to technology, improving internet connectivity, and fostering digital literacy programs is essential to guarantee that all learners, regardless of socioeconomic background, can benefit from the affordances of social media as a language learning tool (Li, 2022). Without such measures, the advantages of social media for language development risk being unevenly distributed, thereby reinforcing existing educational inequalities rather than helping to reduce them.

Implications for Researchers

Finally, researchers should continue to investigate underexplored areas of social media use for language development, with particular attention to its long-term impact on proficiency, the ways learners construct and negotiate their identities online, and the influence of emerging platforms such as TikTok in shaping contemporary linguistic practices (Li, 2022). While existing studies have yielded important insights into short-term outcomes such as vocabulary acquisition, learner motivation, and engagement, questions about sustained development, critical digital literacy, and intercultural competence remain relatively unanswered. Addressing these gaps requires more comprehensive research designs.

Longitudinal studies could provide evidence of how informal engagement supports or limits skill progression over time, while mixed-method approaches would allow for a richer understanding of the interplay between quantitative patterns of language use and qualitative learner experiences. Such approaches can capture the evolving nature of learners' interactions, track developmental trajectories, and shed light on the complex relationships between social, cultural, and technological factors in informal learning environments. By broadening the scope of inquiry, researchers will not only advance theoretical knowledge within applied linguistics but also generate practical insights that help educators and policymakers better integrate informal learning into formal educational frameworks.



IX. Conclusion

The rapid expansion of social media platforms has reshaped the landscape of language learning, offering learners new opportunities to engage with English outside the boundaries of formal instruction. This review has shown that while these platforms were not originally designed for educational purposes, they now provide powerful pathways for informal English language development. Through authentic input, interactive communication, opportunities for self-expression, collaborative participation, and multimodal engagement, learners can extend their language practice in dynamic and meaningful ways that complement classroom instruction.

At the same time, the challenges associated with social media use, such as distractions, misinformation, non-standard input, and unequal access due to the digital divide, highlight the importance of critical awareness and guided support. Effective language development through social media is not automatic; it depends on learners' ability to use these tools strategically and on educators' capacity to scaffold digital engagement with structured reflection and purposeful integration into curricula.

The findings of this review carry significant implications for multiple stakeholders. Learners are encouraged to approach social media as a resource for authentic and sustained practice, while educators should recognize and build upon the informal learning that takes place in these digital spaces. Policymakers and institutions must also address issues of equity, ensuring that access to technology and digital literacy training is widely available. For researchers, there is a need to expand the scope of inquiry by investigating long-term impacts, identity formation, and platform-specific affordances in greater depth.

In conclusion, social media platforms represent dynamic and evolving ecosystems for English language learning in the 21st century. By recognizing their potential and addressing their challenges, educators, learners, and policymakers can work together to create richer, more flexible, and more authentic approaches to language development that reflect the realities of our increasingly digital and interconnected world.

References

1. Benson, P., & Reinders, H. (2011). *Beyond the language classroom*. Palgrave Macmillan.
2. Godwin-Jones, R. (2018). Using mobile technology to develop language skills and cultural understanding. *Language Learning & Technology*, 22(3), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.10125/44639>
3. Knowles, M. S. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. Follett.
4. Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford University Press.
5. Li, V. (2022). Social media in language learning: Opportunities and challenges in the era of TikTok. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 35(8), 1551–1568. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09588221.2021.1959391>



6. Livingstone, D. W. (2001). Adults' informal learning: Definitions, findings, gaps, and future research. NALL Working Paper #21. University of Toronto.
7. Reinders, H., & Benson, P. (2017). Research agenda: Language learning beyond the classroom. *Language Teaching*, 50(4), 561–578. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444817000192>
8. Siemens, G. (2005). Connectivism: A learning theory for the digital age. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 2(1), 3–10.
9. Sockett, G. (2014). *The online informal learning of English*. Palgrave Macmillan.
10. Sundqvist, P., & Sylvén, L. K. (2016). *Extramural English in teaching and learning: From theory and research to practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.
11. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
12. Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
13. Godwin-Jones, R. (2018). Using mobile technology to develop language skills and cultural understanding. *Language Learning & Technology*, 22(3), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.10125/44639>
14. Knowles, M. S. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. Follett.
15. Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford University Press.
16. Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.
17. Benson, P., & Reinders, H. (2011). *Beyond the language classroom*. Palgrave Macmillan.
18. Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2011). *Teaching and researching motivation* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
19. Knowles, M. S. (1975). *Self-directed learning: A guide for learners and teachers*. Follett.
20. Reinders, H., & Benson, P. (2017). Research agenda: Language learning beyond the classroom. *Language Teaching*, 50(4), 561–578. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444817000192>