The Relationship between EFL Learners' Perception of Social Media Platforms and English Language Proficiency

Maryam Alghamdi

Mona Sabir
English Language Institute
King Abdulaziz University
PO Box 80200, Jeddah 21589
Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Young people use social media not only as platforms forsocializing but alsoas mediation tools for learning, including English language learning. This study investigated Saudi English learners' perceptions of using social media platforms in language learning and exploredthe relationship between these learners' perceptions of social media platforms and their English language proficiency level. Twenty-four Saudi female participants took an online questionnaire and the Oxford Quick Placement Test. The results of the questionnaire indicatedthat the participants have positive perceptions of the use of social medial platformsand that Twitter is the most commonly used platform. The study further reveals that learners use social media platforms to enhance their speaking and writing skills. However, the statistical analysis shows no correlation between students' perception of social media platforms and English language proficiency level. Therefore, the researchers call for social media-assisted classrooms to enhance language learning and engage students during instruction.

Keywords: Social media, perception, language proficiency, and language learning

1. Introduction

Existing literature has established that learning a language requires relevantexposure in order to acquire adequate L2 knowledge and achieveadvanced proficiency (e.g. Krashen, 1985). Therefore, social media platforms (SMPs) mayprovide foreign language learnerswith valuable L2 input and the opportunity to practicelanguage skills.Several recent studies have examinedthe role of SMPs in language learning(Kabilan, Ahmad, &Abidin, 2010; Gamble &Wilkins, 2014; El-Sawy, 2015; Almarwaey, 2017;Li, 2017).These studies have coveredvarious aspects of SMPs in language learning and include studies on learners' perceptionsas well as experimental classroom research into the use of SMPs as an intervention tool. The findings of these studies have suggested that SMPs can mediate language learning, based on the traditional definition of mediation within sociocultural theory. However, little is known of how Saudi EFL learners perceive various types of SMPs. This study aims to investigate Saudi female EFL students' perceptions of the use ofSMPs(outside the classroom) in learning Englishand the relationship between these students' perceptions of SMPs and English language proficiency level. Additionally, the study aims to determine which social media platforms are commonly used among the study participants.

The paper begins with an overview of existing literature in the field in order to ground the research questions and provide context. The methodology of the study, the participants, and the instruments employed are then described. The data analysis and results are presented, finally followed by a discussion of the results and their pedagogical implications.

2. Social media platforms and language learning

Studies that have focused on the effect of the use of different SMPs on students' language learning process have found that use of SMPs has positive outcomes. Kitchakarn (2016) examined86 university students' perceptions of and attitudes towards using Facebook as a learning tool to augment their performance and encourage them to engage in classroom activities. The findings of the studysuggest a positive relationship between the perceived ease of use of Facebook and students' English learning performance. Moreover, the study found that students who received higher gradesin the language course tended to hold positive attitudes towardsthe use of Facebook in their English language learning.Other studies that investigated the role of Facebookin language learning include Faryadi's (2017) study, whichfound that students who use Facebook to learn English achieve higher grades than students who do not use Facebook to learn English. The study also found a positive relationship between use of Facebook and students' English language proficiency level.

Slim and Hafedh (2019) covered the research context of the current study, Saudi Arabia. The researchersconducted a classroom experiment including two groups of learners, namely Facebook-assisted teaching on learning English for specific purposes group vs. the traditional teaching group. The researchers foundno significant difference between the two groups as measured using the pre- and post-test design. However, interviews illustrate that the participants have positive attitudes towards using Facebook. Alghamdi (2018) exploredSaudi-Arabic learners' preferences surrounding social media platforms and determined that they preferred simplified contentsusually accompanied by easy and brief explanation, which could be foundonSMPssuch as Instagram.

Researchers have focused on the use of SMPs as a valuable tool in an educational environment. According to Kablain, Ahmad, and Abdin (2010), Facebook could serve as a valuable tool in the educational environment as it enhances learners' motivation to learn; provides exposure to language; and enhances communication skills, self-efficacy, and confidence. However, the authors state that the use of Facebook cannot be directly linked to participants' language proficiency;it is instead a tool that provides students with theopportunity to improve their language skills. Moreover, Warschauer (1996) found that SMPs create a virtual environment in which students can have more courage to speak and participate in comparison to classroom face-to-face interactions. Students were found to bemore confident and interactive in online discussions compared to face-to-face discussions.

SMPs have also been studied in relation to foreign language skills. El-Sawy (2015) found that students using these platforms experienced improvements in their English writing, grammar, and vocabulary skills. Furthermore, these students seem to have gained self-confidence in terms of writing comments on SMPs and their creative skills and thinking in English.

In general, learnersconsider SMPsconvenient tools inaccessing informationand sharing knowledge. Almarwaey (2017) andAlsaied (2017) reported that language students preferred using SMPs to search for answersand exchange informationandtopic ideas with their classmates, thereby enhancing their language performance and academic achievement. In addition,Li (2017) and Gamble and Wilkins (2014) found that students preferred using SMPs outside of the classroom for informal learning. The authors stated that SMPs encouraged interactions between students compared rather than thosebetween students and teachers. In particular, students were found to enjoy editing their classmates' writing and engage in discussions on SMPs.

Aside from studiesthat haveinvestigatedthe use of SMPs as a tool for learningor as part of the academic curriculum, other studies have dealt with learners' perceptions and attitudes towards the use of SMPs in language learning. Al-Shoaibiand Shukri (2017), for example, examined gender differences in the perceptions of 20 Saudi students in terms of use of social media to learn English. This studyfound that female students had negative attitudes towards the use of SMPs for learning purposes, while male students held positive views.

SMPs are widely used among learners, andvarious studieshave conductedinvestigationsto ascertain sites used among learners (Alsaied, 2017; Al-Shoaibi& Shukri, 2017;&Li, 2017). These findings suggestYouTubeisthe most frequently usedSMP among studentsto learn English in Saudi Arabia and other countries.Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the relationship between Saudi female EFL students' perceptions of the use of SMPs in learning English and their English language proficiency level. The study also aims to discover which social media platforms are most frequently used among the participants of the study in order to offer pedagogical recommendation based on the most frequently used platform.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study are24 female Saudi students enrolledin a general English language course, a requirement of the foundation year program. The participants' ages range between 18 and 20 years old.The participants' native language is Arabic, and they were born, raised, and educated in Saudi Arabia.

3.2. Instruments and Procedure

Data were collected using online structured questionnaires,which wereadapted from Al-Shoaibiand Shukri (2017) with modifications to fit the aims of this study. The questionnaireswere first piloted to determine if the items were fully understandable and whether they would result in the required information before conducting the study. Participants were asked to respond to the statements using a 5-point Likert scale including the following categories: 5= strongly agree;4=agree;3= neutral; 2=do not agree;and 1= strongly disagree.

In addition to the questionnaire, the participants were askedto take the Oxford Quick Placement Testto determine their English proficiency level. The purpose of taking the placement test was to investigate whether students who used SMPs belonged to higherEnglish language proficiency levels in comparison to those who did not useSMPsfor learning.

4. Results

In addition to the qualitative analysis, a Spearmantest was performed to ascertain whether a positive correlation existed between the use of SMPs and students' scores in the proficiency test. The first three items of the questionnairesexplored the reasons for using SMPs for learningin terms of the nature of the SMPs. The descriptive results suggest that the majority of the participants had positive attitudes towardsthe use of SMPs as part of their learning process.80%of students agreed that SMPs were easy to use, learn with, andaccess. Moreover, 42% and 29% of the participants strongly agreed and agreed, respectively, that SMPs were enjoyable and engaging tools to learn with.This finding suggests that the majority of the participants held positive attitudes toward SMPs and tended to use SMPs to learn English because of their convenienceas learning tools. Figure 1 illustrates the reasons behind using SMPs to learn English in percentages as reported by participants.
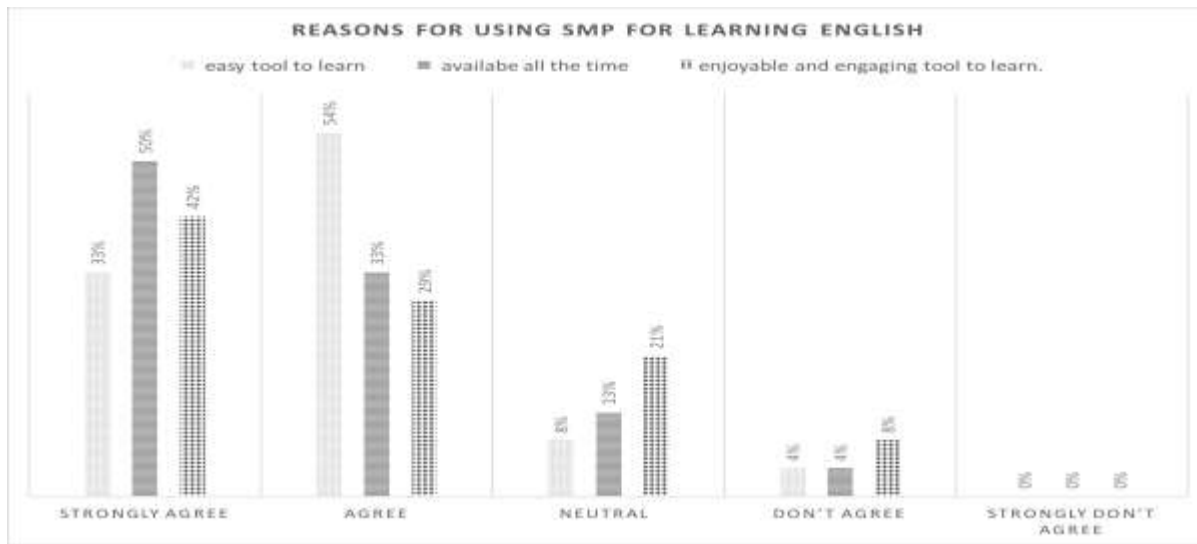

Figure 1. Reasons for using SMPs.

The subsequent items of the questionnaires examinedwhether students preferred using SMPs inside or outside of classrooms. The results suggest that a majority (76%) of the students were likely to use SMPs outside of the classroom. Only 24% strongly agreed and 32% agreedwith the use of SMPs inside classrooms. However, 24% of the participants were neutral in response to these items.The following items examined how and why students used SMPs for learning, as presented in in Figure 2 below.
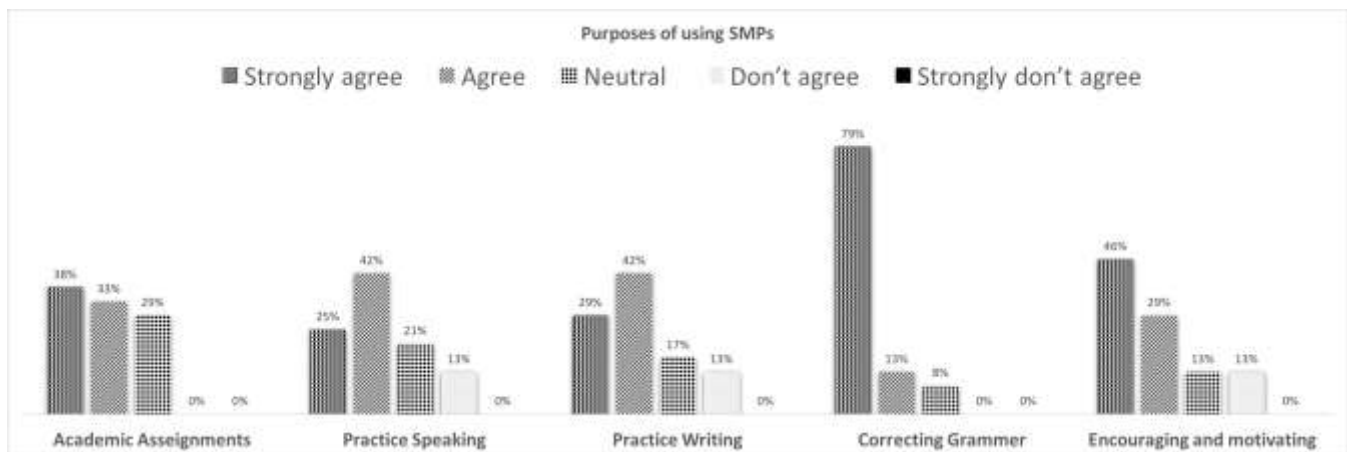

Figure 2. Purposes of using SMPs.

As shown inFigure2, over 70% of the students agreed and strongly agreedwith using SMPs to complete homework assignments. Studentsconsideredthese platforms asvaluable resources for research information and knowledge. The responses also suggest that students use SMPs to practice their writing skills to a larger extent than speaking skills. These results may reflect the nature of the platformused. The highest percentage of positive responses, though, was

given to the item focusing on the grammar and correctness of comments on SMPs,with which92% of the students strongly agreed and agreed.

It is possible thatthis result might rely on the concerns of the learners regarding their self-image as they were concernedwith making English language mistakes in public.Therefore, the studentswould paycareful attention to their comments posted on public SMPs pages. Finally, 75% of participants believed that SMPs increased their motivation to learn English as they encouraged them to learn more. 13% of the participantswere not encouraged to learn through SMPs, while an equal percentage of them remained neutral.

Figure 3illustrates the responses gathered from the final question, which investigated the type of SMPs used by the students to learn English outside of the classrooms. As depicted in this graph, Twitter had the highest percentage (38%), followed by YouTube (29%), Instagram (17%),and others(13%),while Snapchat hadthe lowest percentage (4%).
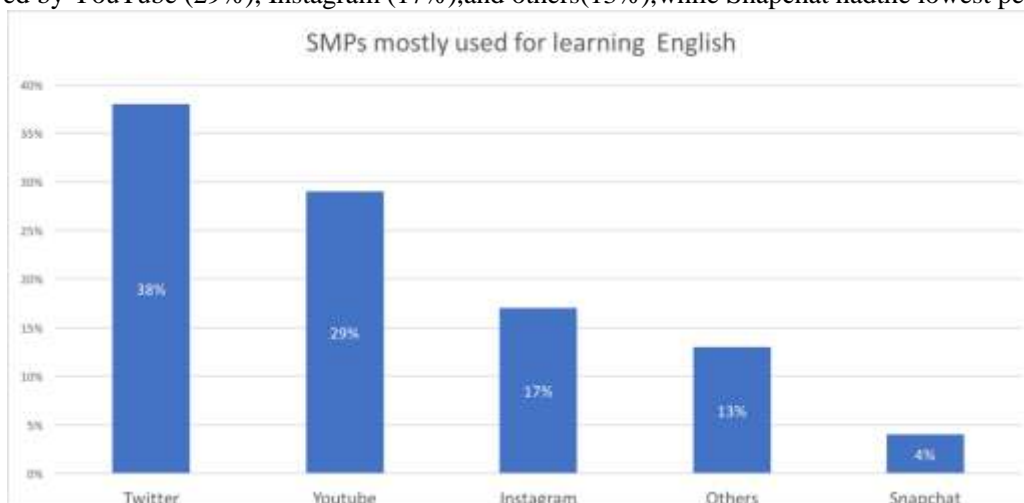

Figure 3. SMPs that students used to learn English.

To determine the relationship between students' perception of the use of SMPs in language learning and their English proficiency level, a Spearman's rank-order correlation test was performed. The results indicate no correlation between perception of SMPs and language proficiency, which was statistically insignificant ($r_s(8) = .221$, *p*=.149).

5. Discussion

The principalaim of this study was to determine how students perceivedthe use of SMPs as a tool in learningEnglish and developing their language skills. The findings of this study indicate that almostall the participantsheld positive perceptions toward the use ofSMPs. Figure 1 reveals thatthevast majority of the participants preferred using SMPs because they found them useful and enjoyable tools to learn English because they are easy to access. These results are consistentwith the findingsof existing research that has reported positive perceptionsof students of the use of SMPs (Alsaied, 2017;Almarwaey, 2017).

Participants reported that SMPs are usually usedfor academic purposes. A large percentage of the participants stated that they usedSMPs to help them with academic homework andassignments. These findings are in line with studies that discuss the use of SMPs for academic purposes (Kitchakarn, 2016;Alsaied, 2017;Almarwaey, 2017).Additionally, the results suggest that SMPs provide learners with ideas and informationfor their academic projects. Students can socialize and share informationamongst themselves, as well as with other students from different academic institutions. Moreover, the results indicate that the participants like using SMPs outside instead of inside of theclassrooms, andsome students may prefer to maintain traditional teaching methodsin classroomswhile using SMPs to learn outside of classrooms.These results are consistent with Li (2017),who found that students had more positive interactions with other students when using SMPs in an informal learning environment. However, the participants of the current studydid not completely reject the idea of using SMPs inside classrooms, which implicates that the use of SMPs had a positive effect in terms ofaiding interactions between students and teachers in classrooms (Razaei&Meshkatian, 2017).

In terms of developing English language skills, the results suggest that students hold positive attitudesto the use ofSMPs to further develop and improve their language skills. The resultsshow that participants use SMPs for writing more than speaking. Almost all of theparticipants agreed that they paidcareful attention while writing comments on SMPs andensuring the grammatical correctness of the posts. This finding indicates that this strategy could help them

improve their writings skills,which is consistent with the results of El-Sawy (2015), whofound that the use of SMPs enhances students' writing skills and self-confidence.

It is also possible that students likeusing SMPs to develop their writing skills because they provide exposure to authentic written language,therebyallowing users to practice their writing skills. The responses to thequestionnaires' final item, which revealed that SMPs motivate and encourage students to learn English, the findings were consistent with those of other research(Kabilan, Ahmad,&Abidin, 2010; El-Sawy, 2015; Alghamdi, 2018).

The secondhalf of the discussion covers the second aim of theresearch, which is concerned with ascertaining the relationship betweenstudents' perceptions of SMPs and their language proficiency. The findings of this study suggest that there is no significant relationship between EFL students' Englishlanguage proficiency and their perceptions of the use of SMPs. Although this finding is not consistent with the findings ofFaryadi (2017), it is consistent with the findings of Kabilan et al. (2010), who argued that Facebook did not serve as evidence for students' proficiency or improvements in language skills.

The findings of this study also indicate that Twitter was the most commonly used platform for English language learning, followed by YouTube. This finding does not contradict previous literature, in which YouTube has been found to be the most utilized platform for students to learn English in Saudi Arabia (Al-Shoaibi&Shukri, 2017;Alsaied, 2017).This study's participants found that Twitter providesthem with the opportunity to practice their language skills and interact with other users. Moreover, the siteprovides links that redirect learners to specific YouTube videos instead of searching between thousands of videos, which makes it easier for them to use and learn from.

The results of the study have a number of pedagogical implications. Teachers and academic institutions highly advised to utilize SMPs in the classroom. SMPs may be used as part of the lesson activities or as a homework assignment. Furthermore, SMPs can be utilized in the classroom to teach a number of different language skills.

As the number of participants in this study is relatively small, future research should focus ona bigger sample size that comprises different academic levels as they are likely to present different results for the proficiency test and offer further insights into the correlation between students' perceptions of SMP use and their English proficiencylevel.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study wasto investigateSaudi female students' perception of SMPs and the relationship of the students' perceptions with English language proficiency level. The results indicate that students had positive perceptionsof using SMPs to learn English and werelikely to integrate SMPs intothe development oftheir language learning skills. However, there was no significant correlation between students' perceptions of using SMPs and students' English language proficiency, though this result may be due to the small sample size. Additionally, Twitter was found to be the most commonly used SMP to learn English among students.These results have a number of pedagogical implications that may inform teachers and academic institutions.

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Appendix

Questionnaire

1= Strongly Disagree2= Disagree 3= Neutral 4= Agree5= Strongly Agree

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I like to learn English through social media platforms because it is easy.	1	2	3	4	5
I like to learn English through social media platforms because I have access to these platforms anytime.	1	2	3	4	5
I like to learn English through social media platforms because these platforms are engaging and interesting.	1	2	3	4	5
I like the idea of using social media platforms for learning English outside the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
I like the idea of using social media platforms for learning English inside the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
I use social media platforms to practise my speaking skills.	1	2	3	4	5
I use social media platforms to help me with my academic assignments.	1	2	3	4	5
I use social media platforms to improve my writing skills.	1	2	3	4	5
I focus on correcting my grammar during writing comments on social media networking sites.	1	2	3	4	5
I think social networking sites have encouraged me to learn English.	1	2	3	4	5

Which social media platform do you mostly use when learning English?

1. Snapchat
2. Twitter
3. YouTube
4. Instagram
5. Other(s)