

Pedagogical Effects of Social Media on Iraqi Kurd EFL learners

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Abstract

English language learners use social media platforms for improving their language skills through exchanging ideas, sharing their thoughts, and getting exposed to authentic language. The use of social media by learners might yield positive or adverse effects. This study, therefore, explores the pedagogical consequences of some social media platforms on Iraqi Kurd EFL learners. It Highlights the significant impacts of social media on learning English, vocabulary, and spelling. It explicitly attempts to discover how social media affects English language learning, word choices, and spelling for Kurd EFL learners. A questionnaire is used to randomly collect the study data from 96 Kurdish students studying English at various academic institutions. The data was organized and analyzed by SPSS. It was found that Kurd EFL learners use social media platforms extensively for numerous purposes, improving their English language skills being one of them. The results suggest that social media assists learners in learning and practising new vocabulary; However, it has a negative impact on the students spelling and academic writing skills. Kurd EFL learners use abbreviated forms and unnecessarily shortened forms under the influence of social media.

Keywords: English language learning, Kurd EFL learners, social media

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Introduction

Over the past years, the internet, and social media platforms, per se, have gained enormous popularity. As of January 2021, there were 4.66 billion (59.5% of the global population) active internet users in the world (Johnson, 2021). Social networking websites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are the most popular ones globally. They had 2.6 billion, 815 million, and 187 million active users respectively worldwide as of February 2021 (Johnson, 2021). These websites, which come in smartphone applications, offer the possibility of exchanging unlimited text messages, videos, images, and documents. Also, users can share their views and make social relations with other users (Gaudeul & Peroni, 2010); thus, it can be argued that social media has a significant effect on our lives. They are widely used for entertainment, business, marketing, advertisement, and especially for education (Abdul Halik & Rafeena, 2020).

The efficacy of social media in education, especially in language learning and teaching, is arguable. It has been suggested that students might not gain the personal experience they need to learn a language through social media, which might be a barrier to language learners (Kareemkhan, 2018). This view, however, is not held by other researchers. Given that social media is used properly, it can be a very effective educating tool (Namaziandost & Mehdi, 2019). This tool can be highly effective for language teaching and learning since, as Ferdig (2007) argues, due to its interactive design, social media is essential in language learning since language is interactive.

Social media is believed to provide a better opportunity and environment for learning and teaching. These community-centred websites allow language learners and teachers to cross-geographical borders and assist language learners in interacting with native speakers and in accessing distant places and cultures on a global scale beyond classrooms (Al-Jarrah, Al-Jarrah, Talafhah, & Mansor, 2019; Malbera & Barcelona, 2015; Thorne, 2010). As Blake (1998) also maintains, this technology "can play an important role in fostering second language acquisition by electronically increasing learners' contact with a wide array of authentic materials" (p. 20). These platforms allow oral and written two-way communication and are available for practising speaking and writing skills with real native speakers worldwide. Therefore, not only the communication is authentic; it is also live and very interactive. Slim and Hafedh (2019) assert these websites do affect your foreign language and your first language. Similarly, Lee (2006) found that Facebook use improved Korean students' oral proficiency, vocabulary acquisition, and syntactic complexity in their first language.

It can be concluded that social media has a significant effect on language learning. Consequently, research interest in these social networks is growing.

The prevalence of the internet and social media among students is not arguable, yet the effects of social media on education are. Abdul Halik and Rafeena (2020) believe that it all depends on the students; provided they are appropriately used by the students, social media websites can help to foster a positive effect on education or vice versa. Therefore, the impact of social media on English language learning has gained researchers' interest, especially after the Covid-19 lockdowns worldwide.

This study attempts to investigate social media effects on learning English language for Kurd EFL learners. It analyses the answers and opinions besides the viewpoints of Kurdish people on how social media affects their English language learning. The following are the main objectives of the study:

- Highlight the significant impacts of social media on learning English language for Kurdish native speakers.
- Identify the role of social media in vocabulary development and changes.
- Clarifies the impact of social media on improving learners' spelling and writing skills.

The results of this study can be quite valuable for teachers and Kurd EFL learners. Instructors of English language can benefit from social media and instruct students to use these platforms in a way that aids English language learning, significantly to improve student's vocabulary and spelling. Kurd EFL learners might also find the results beneficial since they are also heavy social media users. With such goals, this study aims to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent does social media affect English language learning?
2. To what extent does social media affect English language learners' word choices?
3. To what extent does social media affect English learner's spelling?

Literature Review

Many studies have discovered that social media impacts education and learning languages, and each study has its methods and conclusions. However, not all researchers agree on the positive or the adverse effects of social media on the process of language learning.

Khan, Ayaz and Faheem (2016) studied the role of social media on English language vocabulary at the university level. Using a questionnaire, they attempted to discover what effects social media has on English language learning from the teachers' perspective. The study's findings indicated that social media has a dominant role in the vocabulary development of English for learners at all levels and stages. Khan et al. (2016) argued that social media should be integrated into teaching and learning English at the university level. They concluded social media assists learners of the English language.

The effects of social media on English language learning were also studied by Cabrera (2018). The researcher studied ten high school students, language teachers and instructors qualitatively. Moreover, to give an in-depth analysis, the researcher used Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities- Threats (SWOT) matrix to determine the strengths and weaknesses. It was concluded that social media has a positive impact on learning the English language because many social media sites can be a helpful platform for giving up-to-date information that English language native speakers input. Cabrera emphasizes social media platforms are vital for language learners due to the abundance of authentic material learners can find on these platforms.

The effects of social, especially WhatsApp, on essay writing was studied by Songxaba and Sincuba (2019) at the university level. The researchers focused on orthographic mistakes in 180 narrative essays written by high school students. The findings showed students used abbreviations,

unnecessarily shortened words, emoticons, and numbers instead of complete word forms in their essays. Songxaba and Sincuba (2019) maintained that social media has a negative effect on students' writings. Students copy the writing style of social media on their formal essay writings, which is academically not acceptable. Yet, they argue that, by using error analysis, teachers can help students to be aware of their mistakes and "make language teaching and learning more effective and assist learners in producing better written essays" (p. 6). Based on these findings, social media has adverse effects on student's academic writing skills.

Slim and Hafedh (2019) explored the impacts of social media, especially Facebook, on English language learning by Saudi students studying business administration. Using semi-directive interviews and passive observations, the researchers studied 64 students on the effects of Facebook on their business vocabulary. They found that social media, Facebook especially, has had a positive impact on students, despite their limited achievement, and they had a positive attitude towards using Facebook as a tool of teaching.

Al-Jarrah et al. (2019) investigated the role of social media in improving English language writing skills by students at the school level. They selected 132 secondary school students by random sampling and analyzed the collected data quantitatively. The researchers found that social media plays a vital role in developing English language writing and can make learning new words and phrases much easier for English language learners. Thus, they stated that social media could make language teaching and learn more accessible (Al-Jarrah et al., 2019).

Additionally, Poramathikul, Arwedo, Abdulhakim, and Wattanaruwangkowitz (2020) studied how students studying English language use different social media platforms for different purposes. They found that Youtube is used for various educational purposes and has contributed to developing the students' proficiency. Likewise, Altam (2020) studied the effects of social media on EFL Yemeni learners in Indian universities during the Covid-19 pandemic. He used a close-ended online questionnaire and a quantitative design for the study. The researcher found that Yemeni EFL learners develop their listening skills through social media, and YouTube was the most preferred social media to meet this end. Thus, this study demonstrates how some social media platforms can be used to improve specific language skills.

Nevertheless, not much is known about what social media are more preferred by Kurd EFL learners and how they affect the learner's vocabulary choices and writings, especially after the Covid-19 lockdowns in Iraq. Most universities in the world and Iraq moved their classes online due to lockdowns. Abdullah (2019) studied the effects of social media on Kurd EFL learners of the English department at the undergraduate level of Salahaddin University. It was concluded that learners' writing skills were not affected, whereas other skills such as listening, speaking skills, and grammar were improved due to the use of social media. However, the researcher collected her data in 2018, which was before the Covid-19 lockdown, and she recommends more research on the effects of social media on students from various academic institutions. Many researchers and reports confirm that Covid-19 lockdowns have changed people's behavior (Jia, 2021; Koh, Pan, Shoesmith, James, Nor, Loo, 2020; Sathish, Manikandan, Silvia Priscila & Mahaveerakannan, 2020). Therefore, this study investigates the use and effects of social media platforms, namely

Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, on Kurd EFL learners after Covid-19 lockdowns in the region using learners from various academic institutions and different levels.

Methods

The method used in this research is a quantitative research design as the primary and significant method of the study. Quantitative research design is the research strategy that focuses on the process of collecting and analyzing numerical data. This method can be used reliably with large samples and gives results that can be contextualized, and the findings can be reproduced in other cultures and settings with different participant groups reliably (Fielding & Schreier, 2001).

Participants

The participants of this study were randomly selected among high school, diploma, and bachelor students from the Classical School of Medes (CSM), Interchange Institute, and Komar University of Science and Technology (KUST), in the academic year 2020/2021, in the city of Sulaimani, Iraq. Ninety-six students were randomly selected from the three different institutions, and they were given the questionnaires in person. All participants agreed to be part of the study as volunteers.

Since some of the participants were under 18, a consent form was used by the researchers. Passive consent procedures were taken in this study since they yield more participation and a more representative sample (Fletcher & Hunter, 2003).

Research Instruments

Data was collected using a set of Likert-scale English statements in a questionnaire. The researchers designed the Likert-scale questionnaire. The participants answered three groups of questions: demographic questions, social media usage, and social effects on English language learning for Kurdish native speakers. In addition, the participants were asked about their opinions on the impact of social media on learning English, especially after the Covid-19 lockdowns.

Since the researchers designed the questionnaire, the validity and reliability of the questionnaire were tested. The type of reliability used to determine the reliability of the study is test-retest reliability. Ten students from the English language and literature department at Komar University of Science and Technology answered the questionnaire on the 1st of November 2020. Using the SPSS 22.0 version, the researchers found Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = 0.75$) with the study sample. Any coefficient value between 0.4 to 0.9 makes a variable reliable (Ursachi et al., 2015). This result indicates the high reliability of the items of the questionnaire. As for validity, prior to the questionnaire distribution, the questionnaire was reviewed and revised by some experts at Komar University of Science and Technology to check its face and content validity.

Research Procedures

The data collection process was conducted between November and December 2020. The participants were randomly chosen inside their institutions to answer the questionnaire face to face. The first step of the questionnaire was the consent form that was given to them to sign, and they were given the questionnaire after consent was obtained. As for the students under the age of 18,

consent forms were sent to their parents before the data collection day. The students answered the questions immediately in five minutes or less.

The quantitative data were grouped into three groups. First, it was demographic information questions such as gender, age, and education level. The second questions were about the usage of social media. Finally, the questions of the third part were about the effects of social media on their English language learning. Then, this quantitative data was statically analyzed using statistical packages for social sciences (SPSS) version 22 and applying descriptive statistical tools to find reliable results for the study.

Results

Demographic Information Results

Among the respondents, 49 (51%) were female, while 47(49%) were male learners. The participants were from various age groups. 28 (29.2%) of them were 13 to 18 years old, 43(44.8%) of them were 19 to 24 years old, and the third group was 25 to 30 years old that had 14(14.6%) followed by 30+ age group that had 11(11.5%). Based on their education level, the distribution of the participants were 32(33.3%) high school students, 25(26%) diploma students, and 39(40.6%) were university students studying for a bachelor's degree.

Social Media Usage Results

The participants were asked about their social media usage daily. Figure one shows how frequent the participants used social media on daily basis. As the figure indicates, all participants use social media daily. Among the participants, seven (7.3%) stated that they use social media less than one hour a day. At the same time, 13(13.5) of the participants claimed that they spent one hour on social media per day. The result for three hours a day was 36(37.5/5) participants, which was the highest among the answers. Twenty-seven (28.1%) of participants answered five hours a day. The last option was chosen 13 (13.5) times for those who use social media more than five hours a day.

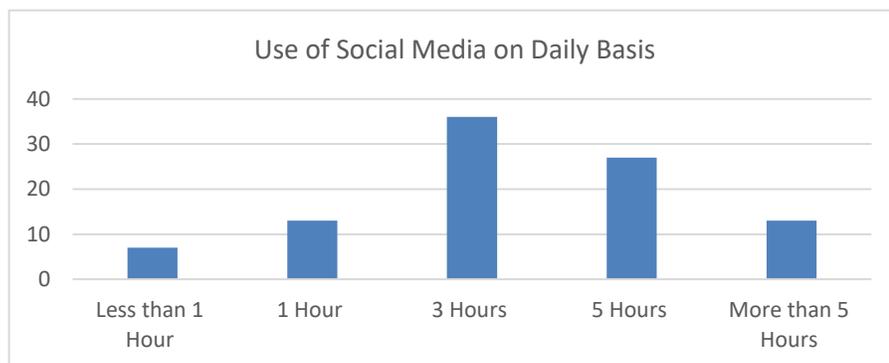


Figure 1. Use of social media on a daily basis by Kurd EFL learners

Most of the respondents claimed that Instagram was their favorite platform on their social media platform preferences, whereas Twitter was found to be their least favorite to use. Among the participants, 37 (38.5%) chose Instagram, 15 (15.6%) chose Facebook, 16 (16.7) chose Snapchat, and the least favorite was Tweeter, with only 9 (9.4) participants. The remaining 19

(19.8%) participants claimed that they used other social media platforms. Figure two shows the different social media platform users among Kurd EFL learners.

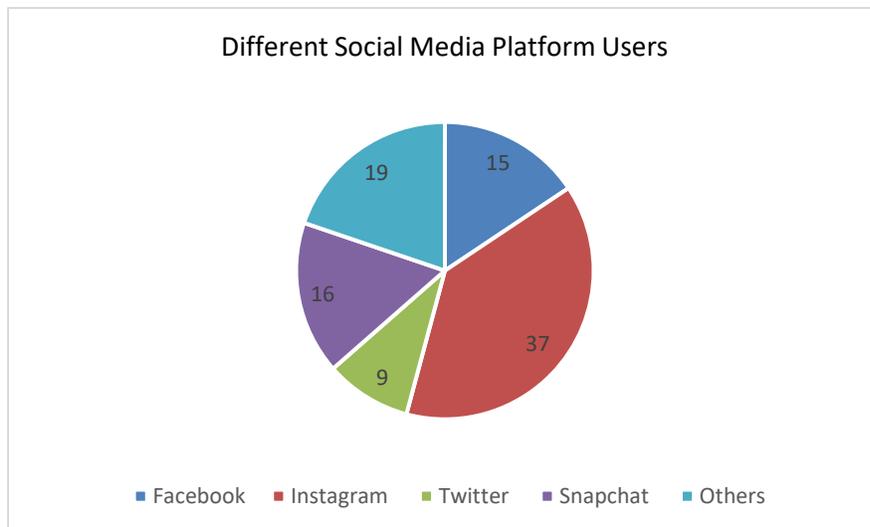


Figure 2. Which platform do you use more?

It was found that respondents use social media for various purposes. Most of the participants, 35 (36%), claimed they use social media to fill up spare time. In contrast, the fewest (7.3% only) indicated that they use social media to share photos and videos. In addition, 19.8% stated they use social media to chat with others, and a sizable number of 17 (17.7) of the participants claimed they use social media for educational purposes. Finally, the remaining 18 (18.8%) claimed that they use social media for other purposes. Figure 3 demonstrates these preferences.

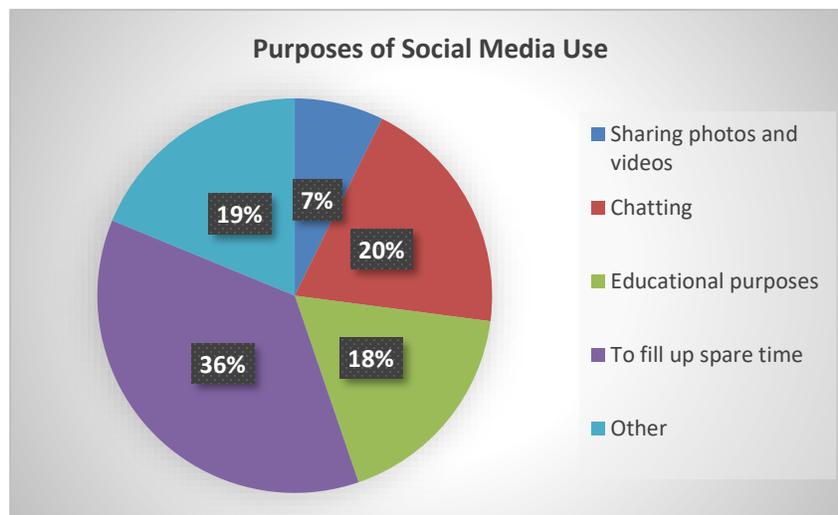


Figure 3. The reasons why the participants of the study use the social media platforms

Social Media Impacts on ELL for Kurdish Native Speakers

Most of the questionnaire questions were related to the impacts of social media on English language learning.

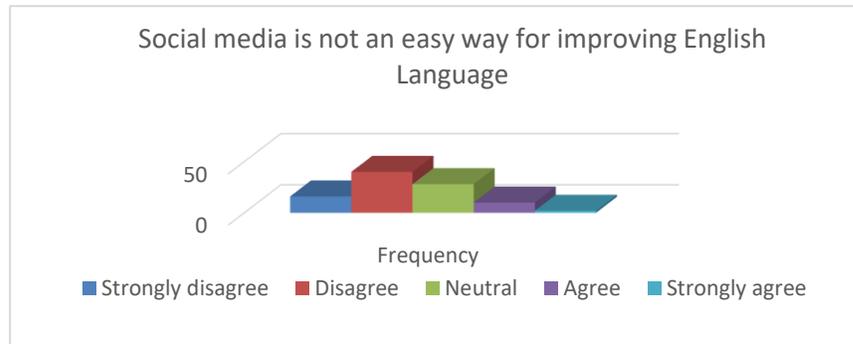


Figure 4. Social media is not an easy way for improving my English language

The above figure highlights that social media is an easy way to develop their English language since 56 (58.4%) of the respondents either 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with the statement that social media is not an easy way to develop my English language. 28 (29.2%) of the respondents were neutral on their social media and English language learning views. The other 12 (1.5%) respondents either chose 'agree' or 'strongly agree'.

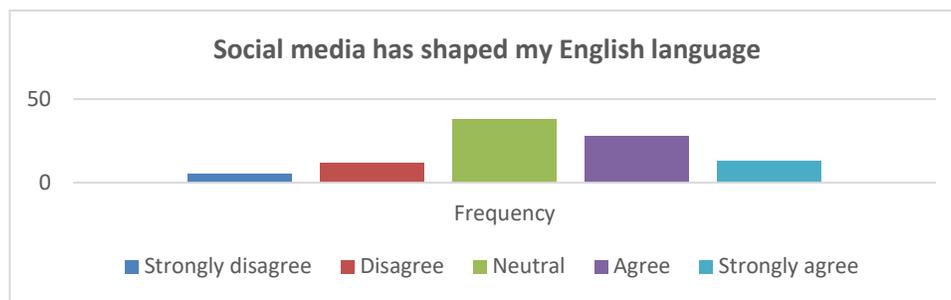


Figure 5. Social media has shaped my English language

The presented data in Figure five indicates that out of 96 participants, five (5.2%) 'Disagreed' with the statement that social media has shaped the participants' English language. Another 12 (12.5%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement. While a majority of 38 (39.6%) stayed neutral. However, 41 (42.7%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

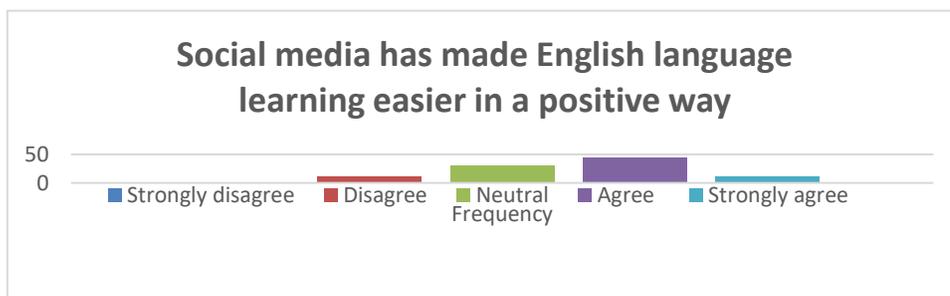


Figure 6. Social media has made English language learning easier in a positive way

Figure six shows the participants choices for the statement that social media made English language learning more accessible in a positive way. Out of 96 respondents, 55 (57.3%) agreed or strongly agreed to the statement above. While none of them strongly disagreed, and only 11 (11.5%) agreed with the statement. The remaining 30 (31.3%) choices were neutral.

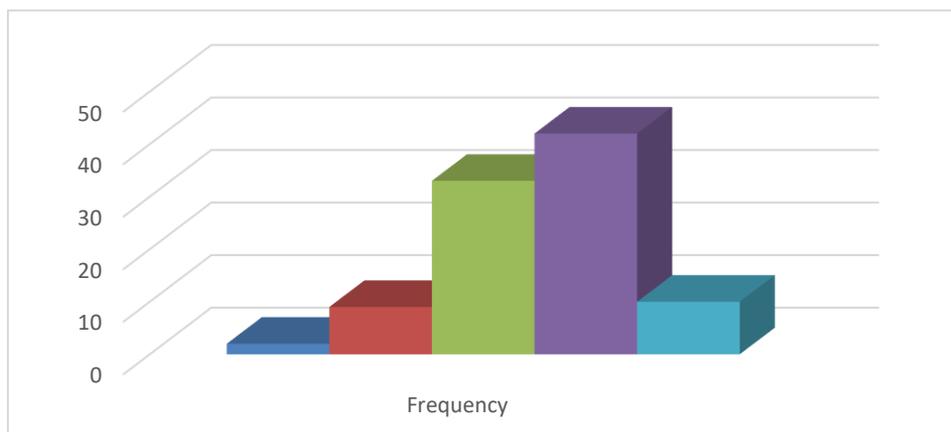


Figure 7. Social media is a simple way for developing English vocabulary

The data placed in Figure seven demonstrates that out of 96 respondents, a vast majority of 52 (54.1%) respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that social media is a simple way for developing English vocabulary. A medium number of 33 (34.4%) respondents remained 'neutral'. While 11 (11.5%) respondents showed their disagreement and strong disagreement with the statement.

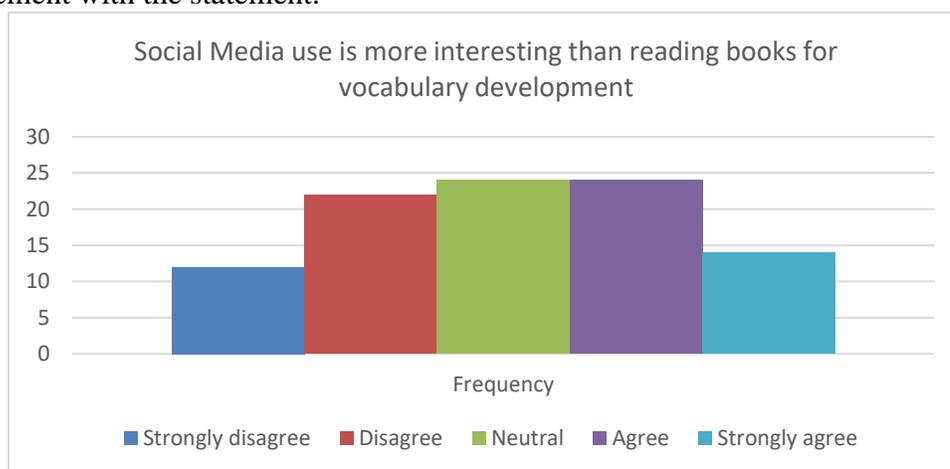


Figure 8. The use of social media is more interesting than reading books for vocabulary development

Figure eight highlights the use of social media is more interesting than reading books for the vocabulary development statement since 38 (39.6) of the participants agreed and strongly agreed to the idea. While 24 (25%) responded to the neutral option, 34 (35.4%) of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed.

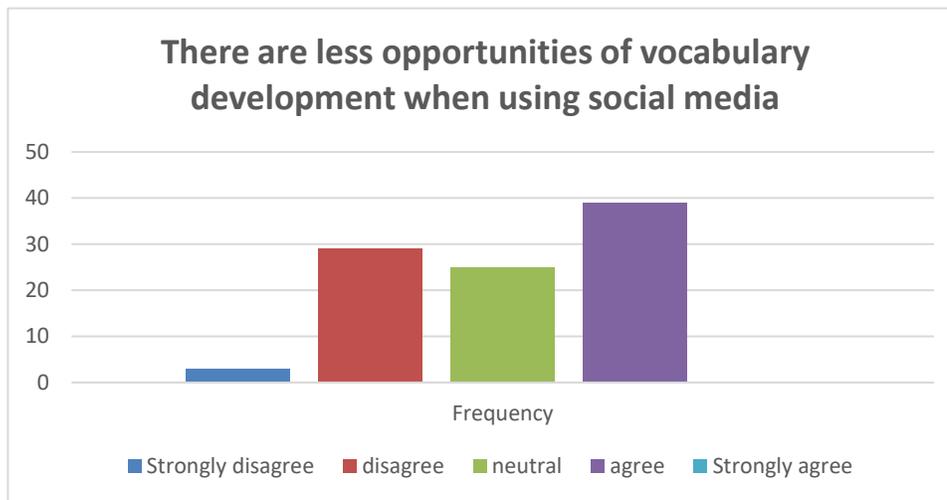


Figure 9. There are fewer opportunities for vocabulary development when using social media
The data shown in Figure nine indicates fewer vocabulary development opportunities when using social media for Kurd EFL learners because 39 (40.6%) of the participants agreed to the statements. While 25 (26%) were neutral about the statement, 32(33.3%) of them disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea.

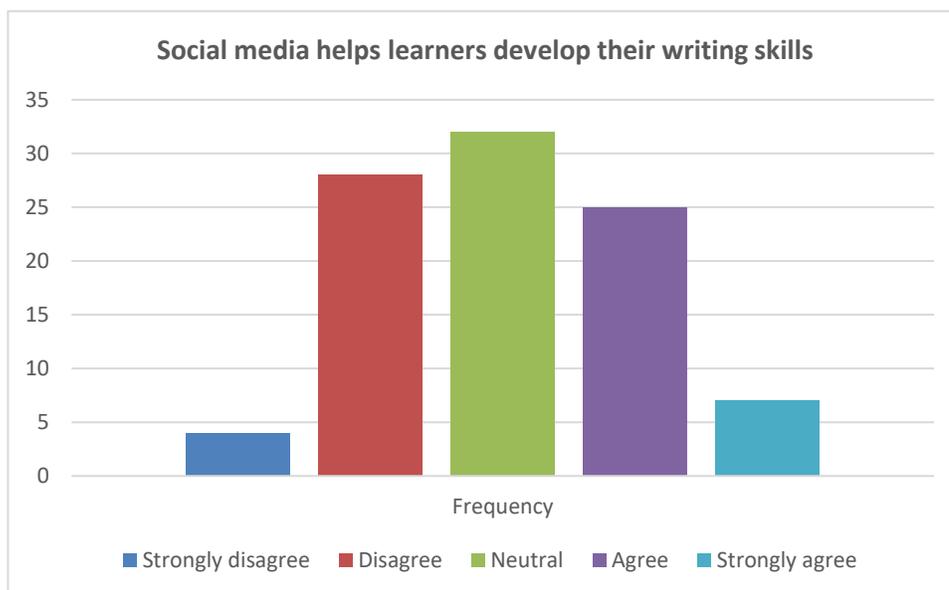


Figure 10. Social media helps learners develop their writing skills

The data in Figure 10 reveals, 28(29.2%) disagreed and four (4.2%) strongly disagreed while 25 (26%) agreed, and seven (7.3%) strongly agreed with the statement that social media helps learners develop their writing skills. However, 32 (33.3%) remained neutral.

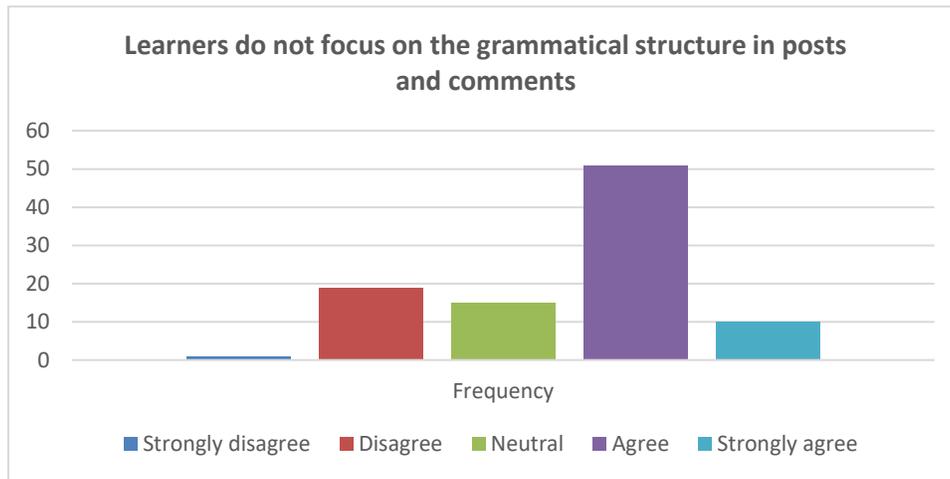


Figure 11. Learners do not focus on the grammatical structure while posting or commenting on social media

Figure 11 shows that learners do not focus on the grammatical structure while posting or commenting on social media. Sixty-one (63.5%) of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. With that result, 20 (20.8%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea. Among them, 15 (15.6%) respondents prevailed neutral.

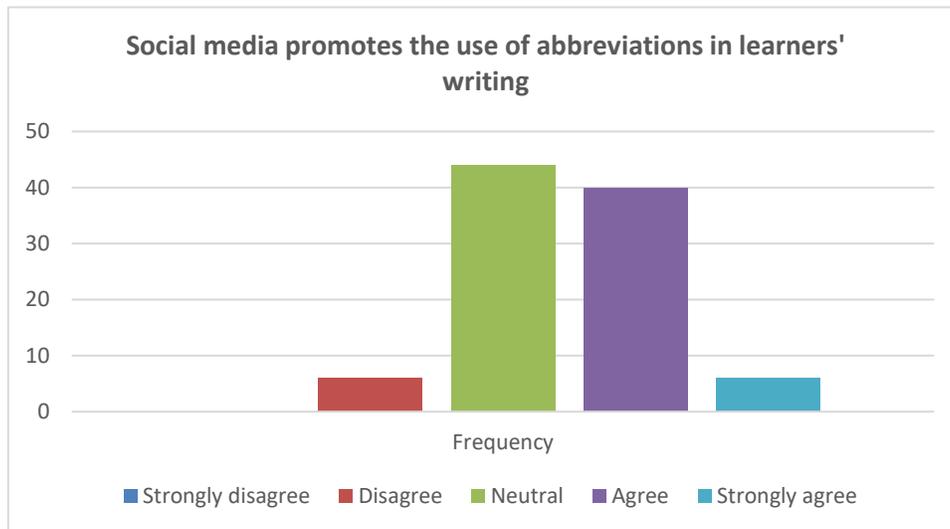


Figure 12. Social media promotes the use of abbreviations in learners' writing

Lastly, the data given in Figure 12 indicates that social media promotes abbreviations in learners' writing because a substantial number of 46 (48%) of the participants agreed and strongly agreed. While 44 (45.8%) respondents stayed neutral. A small number of 6 (6.3%) responders disagreed with the statement.

Discussion

Effects of Social Media on Kurd EFL Learners

The questionnaire results indicate that social media profoundly affects Kurd EFL learners, and Instagram and Facebook are their favorite platforms.

Although not all learners use social media for educational purposes, most of the study respondents agreed that social media is an easy way to improve their English language; it has shaped their English language. It has made language learning a more straightforward process. These results are in line with Cabrera's (2018) study. In her research, Cabrera argues that social media affects English language learning since most give up-to-date language input by English native speakers. The results also confirm Namaziandost' and Mehdi's (2019), Al-Jarrah et al.'s (2019), and Poramathikul et al.'s (2020) studies. Previously conducted studies claimed learners use social media, not necessarily as their top use, for educational purposes, and social media shape their language learning.

Effects of Social Media on Kurd EFL Learner Word Choices

This investigation revealed that social media plays a dominant role in the vocabulary development of Kurd EFL learners. Social media are seen as a simple way to learn new English vocabularies, provide opportunities for English learners to develop their language, and are more interesting than reading books, especially for improving vocabulary. These results are also in line with some other studies. For example, Khan et al.'s (2016) study concluded that social media has a dominant role in vocabulary improvement and aids EFL learners in enriching their vocabulary. Similarly, Al-Jarrah et al. (2019) state that social media help English learners learn more new words, and they are more accessible than reading books or other materials.

In contrast to books, learners view social media as more interesting; therefore, they spend long periods without boredom. Abdul Halik and Rafeena (2020) argue that EFL learners can improve their vocabulary and other language skills through the extensive number of worthwhile online pages on social media platforms. Nevertheless, prolonged exposure to social media might have a negative impact on the language register the students are learning (Ghouali & Benmoussat, 2019). Students might utilize words and structures that are informal and not suitable in academic domains.

It can be concluded that social media does affect and enrich an EFL learner's vocabulary. However, this is sometimes at the expense of language register. As a result, EFL learners might learn a language register that is informal and not suitable for academic domains.

Effects of Social Media on Kurd EFL Learners' Spelling

This study indicates that social media has a negative effect on students' spelling and writing skills. Most of the participants claim that they do not focus on the grammatical structures of their writings when they write a post or comment on social media. The respondents also agreed that Kurd EFL learners use more abbreviations and informal language in academic writing because of their long exposure to social media.

There is no consensus in the literature regarding the impact of social media on spelling and writing skills. Al-Jarrah et al. (2019) assert that social media's role is essential in developing the

writing skills of school children. Social media has transformed the forms and genres of writing for better, motivated students for writing, and provided more opportunities for learners to engage with more written samples in their daily lives (Khan et al., 2016; Al-Jarrah et al., 2019). These altogether have strengthened learners' written reports in the classroom. On the other hand, Songxaba and Sincuba (2019) argue that students use more abbreviations and unnecessarily shortened words in their academic essays due to the effects of social media. The current study results confirm Songxaba' and Sincuba's (2019) and Abdullah's (2019) arguments. The participants of this study mainly stated that social media has negatively affected their spelling and writing skills. They prefer to use more informal and unnecessarily shortened forms of words instead of academic terms.

Conclusion

This study quantitatively explored the use of social media by Kurd EFL learners using a questionnaire. Inconsistency was found in the literature on the impacts of social media on English language learning. However, it was discovered that social media is used extensively around the globe by all people and EFL learners. This study was designed to discover whether social media affects English language learning and what language skills social media improves or affects negatively. This study indicates that Kurd EFL learners use social media extensively in their daily lives; They use social media for various purposes, learning English language being one of them. It was also discovered that social media platforms have a dominant role in helping learners to enrich and improve their English vocabulary through their exposure to various authentic materials. Social media is viewed as a straightforward method for learning and improving language skills, especially for improving vocabulary.

On the other hand, Kurd EFL learners spelling and academic writing skills were severely affected by social media. Kurd EFL learners on social media overlook grammatical and spelling mistakes. In addition, they tend to use more abbreviated forms, unnecessarily shortened forms, and very informal words under social media influence. Thus, it can be concluded that social media helps learners to improve their vocabulary and learn more words. Still, it does not assist learners to enhance their conventional spelling and writing skills.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study dealt with a limited number of 96 participants studying or holding high school, Bachelor, and university degrees from the Classical School of Medes (CSM), Interchange Institute, and Komar University of science and technology. The emphasis was mainly on three social media platforms, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The students were from one city, Sulaimani city. Therefore, it is necessary to explore further the educational use of social media by studying more participants from different cities and more qualitative methods to collect data. Future studies can study these effects from the educator's, instructor's, and teacher's views.

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