

## A Study of EFL Saudi Students' Use of Mobile Social Media Applications for Learning

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### Abstract

This research addresses the gaps in the literature on m-learning approaches in Saudi Arabia, with a focus on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students studying at university level. The research aimed to explore university students' use of social media applications and their role in language learning, with a focus on how mobile devices can best be utilised. It analysed the attitudes of 102 learners towards the use of social media to improve language learning both inside and outside the classroom setting. Students of both genders completed a questionnaire, and five students engaged in semi-structured interviews. The aim was to discover whether the students are currently using social media applications to enhance their language skills, and what the students' attitudes are towards the use of social media via mobile devices inside and outside the classroom. Prior to designing the research instruments, the literature was reviewed, including examining the attitudes of learners in different countries towards mobile technologies, and to decide on the best approach to take in examining attitudes towards new forms of learning. Based on the findings from the literature, appropriate questions were devised, and these reveal an overall positive response towards from the student participants towards using social media and mobile technologies to facilitate learning English. The results of this research are positive, and it is important that Saudi Arabia keeps up to date with advancements in technology to ensure the best learning experience for learners and maximise their potential.

**Keywords:** attitudes, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), mobile devices, Social Media Assisted Language Learning (SMALL)

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## **Introduction and background**

It has been claimed that traditional learning has been disappearing due to the vast changes resulting from technology, which has impacted dramatically on both education and society. Hence, socialising which previously occurred only in the classroom often now takes place in the virtual world. Communication is a unique aspect of social life and social media can facilitate and help to improve it. In Saudi Arabia, a country where English is spoken as a second language, there are many difficulties when it comes to imparting knowledge in English; this necessitates the need to be learning English from nursery school and continuing to the university level. However, learning English at the university level has also been impacted by many lifestyle changes that have come about from the influence of western cultures and digital convergence with local culture. Social media can act as a source for communication between tutors and students, making it suitable to be used by EFL pupils in order to augment their English knowledge. Social networking sites have brought about drastic changes and have revolutionised ways of communication and the exchange of information over the past few decades.

## **Rationale and research questions**

A number of issues related to the collective use of social media via mobile devices have had an impact on EFL learning. First, the recent increase in the use of social networking platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook has led to its use by EFL learners and teachers alike. In addition, the efficiency and capacity of social media acts as an aid to enhance the skills of a student, which should lead to improving their English and higher attainment.

Moreover, in order to assist students to learn, there is an opportunity to improve standards of teaching through the application of modern techniques. However, the methods of teaching applied in the universities of Saudi Arabia are quite conventional and modern technology is often obsolete.

The research aims to explore university students' use of social media applications in order to serve the purpose of language learning, focusing on how the medium of mobile devices can best be utilised. The study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How are Saudi students using social media via mobile devices to advance their language acquisition in and outside the classroom?
- 2) What are Saudi students' attitudes towards the use of social media via mobile devices inside and outside the classroom?

## **Literature Review**

### **Technology and Pedagogy in Education**

The proliferation of technology is a major concern around the world among educators and researchers. Some scholars believe that there is a gap between the available technology and the uptake by educational institutions at all levels in terms of adopting these new products, applications, and mobile devices. Attwell (2007) warns that unless schools respond to this change, there is a possibility that the school experience may simply be thought of as irrelevant to young people in terms of their everyday social interactions with each other. At university level, a report by the UK National Union of Students conducted for the Higher Education Funding Council entitled 'Student perspectives on technology – demand, perceptions and training needs' (2010)

indicates that nearly a quarter of the students thought their lecturers needed additional training in information and communication technology ICT skills.

Over the years, the revolution that has been brought about by mobile devices has caused them to be regarded as an essential part of everyday life. A noticeable change has been seen, as a figure of around two billion has been achieved for the number of mobile devices that have been shipped on global level up to the year 2013 (Hepburn, 2013). The technological advancements over recent years have resulted in mobile devices becoming a tool that provides a number of functionalities. The technological revolution has resulted in the increased use of mobile devices by people of all ages, who use them for both formal and informal learning (Traxler, 2007).

Traxler (2010) notes that in terms of how they grasp information and learn via technology, individuals and students can be split into two distinct generations, namely, web 1.0 and web 2.0. Mobility, E-learning and theories such as connectivism have created a new form of delivering teaching and have re-imagined the role of learning and institutions (Bessenyei, 2008). As a result of being born into a period of rapid technological change, younger students have become 'digital natives', as Prensky (2001) indicates, seeking and providing knowledge within a cooperative networked arena. Therefore, it seems to confirm the shift referred to previously that the younger generation are digital natives, growing impatient with their teachers. These learners, as Beetham et al (2009) put it, "are creating their own learning spaces, blending virtual with face-to-face, and formal with social. Informal collaboration is widespread, often facilitated by technology that is under learners' ownership and control" (p.24).

In essence, the ubiquity, usability and flexibility of mobile technologies will massively impact on learning and in turn this should be reflected in new pedagogical theory. This is one of the reasons why connectivism was proposed by Siemens as a form of learning which involves learners gathering information through a network via trusted people, content and tools. Craig and Van Lom (2009) argue that "neither mobile technology nor learning theory is the answer to our education," (p.1), but both of these can help enhance the process of learning. In the future, educators and researchers should attempt to connect theories to technology and not be surprised by learners' creativity in adapting new technology and social media to fit their own purposes, a process referred to by Silverstone and Hirsch (1992) as domestication of technology. In other words, digital natives are perfectly at home with digital technology.

### **The impact of technology on pedagogy and theorists**

Watkins and Mortimore (1999) put forward a definition of pedagogy as "any conscious activity by one person designed to enhance learning in another" (p.17) and shifts in theoretical paradigms relating to learning have usually affected theories of pedagogy; for example, in traditional classrooms, teachers are seen as reservoirs of knowledge whilst students are viewed as receptors of knowledge. However, this is not the case anymore. New ideas have influenced the nature of learning activities, the curriculum, teaching, organisation, and assessment. Psychologists originally developed theories of learning based on animal experiments, using these to gain insights into how humans learn and how they should be taught, and Skinner's work on behaviourism influenced approaches to pedagogy. Cognitivism then emerged, proposing a new way brain-based way of looking at learning which highlighted the importance of memory.

More recently, constructivism has suggested that “knowledge is [...] actively constructed by the individual and knowing is an adaptive process, which organizes the individual’s experiential world” (Mayer, 1992 p.). This had led to pedagogies being re-thought, as “learning how to learn” has become paramount in inquiry learning and problem solving. The advent of digital technology and the consequent cultural change has played a critical role in making us rethink how curricula and pedagogy need to be developed and implemented. This has also prompted theorists to explore ideas such as radical constructivism and social constructivism (proposed by Vygotsky 1994), connectivism (proposed by Siemens 2005) and rhizomatic Learning, as “all offer interesting insights into the new ways in which we can organise learning activity in a self-regulated manner” (Millwood et al 2013 p.216).

### **Social Media for Education**

Social media has impacted on the ways in which information can be delivered in teaching and learning, and on how people share ideas, materials, and news, cooperating and/or collaborating with each other. Kozar (2010) clarifies exactly what the difference between cooperate and collaborate is as follows: “cooperation can be achieved if all participants do their assigned parts separately and bring their results to the table; collaboration, in contrast, implies direct interaction among individuals to produce a product and involves negotiations, discussions, and accommodating others’ perspectives” (p.1.). Both types of working can be facilitated by using social media since, according to Scott,(2010), they provide a way for people to “share ideas, content, thoughts, and relationships online” (p. 38). This highlights the potential for incorporating social media practice into education. The best known social media networks, which are shared throughout many countries across the globe, are, in order of their original launch dates, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat.

Over the past ten years, the amount of research exploring the use of social media for educational purposes has mushroomed (Chu & Meulemans, 2008), and social media is now being used in education, for both formal and informal learning. Most young people will already be aware of using social media for communication, or may be skillful at texting and gaming, but some have already grasped the potential which social media presents for learning. However, some teachers may be more reticent about using social media, either because they suffer from technophobia, are worried about the implications of using technology, or are not willing to learn (Tadros, 2011). Nevertheless, young students have already begun to domesticate social media, incorporating it into their daily lives by using mobile technology to remain constantly connected. This phenomenon has led to the emergence in educational theory of connectivism. One of the most widely acknowledged books written about social media learning for anyone involved in language teaching is Lamy and Zourou’s (2013) *Social Networking for Language Education*. Their book explores how language can be learned by using social media, providing a theoretical framework which is tested out using empirical research. In addition to examining the advantages of social media in this context, they are also realistic about the limitations of this learning and teaching tool.

### **Apps: the new revolution in education and learning**

The way we search for information changed dramatically when we shifted from material forms to browsing websites via the Internet. Nowadays, the fact that we can access the internet using mobile phones at just about any time and any place means a huge range of information types

is available through various mediums. The invention of applications (apps) for mobile devices has contributed towards the sharing of information swiftly and promptly. A telecoms industry website estimates that by 2016, we will have downloaded 44 billion apps which is equivalent to six apps for every person on the planet. That includes apps for gaming, working out, health, learning and teaching, and so on. Recently, social media applications through mobile devices have added a new resource to check for updates, news, receive feeds and post alerts. Many students of all ages, from primary school to postgraduates, are addicted to mobile phones and particularly social media applications. Consequently, as teachers and educators, one of the major challenges being faced is how to create new and updated methods which will bridge the gap between informal learning outside the classroom and formal learning inside, to enhance students' levels of interactivity, dialogue, and engagement. This means that it is necessary to work with programmers to launch educational apps to suit students at different levels; apps that would offer 'edutainment' and use more informal formats and ways of addressing students, making them more like games.

### **Mobile Devices: Key Support for Learning and Teaching**

Throughout the world, nearly two thirds of the population are making use of mobile phones. Out of these, 25% of phones have internet connection (Brand & Kinash 2010). A learning process that includes the use of handheld devices or palm devices as major technological tools is referred to as mobile learning (Traxler 2005). The mobile learning research conducted recently has been based on the availability of mobile technology in various locations. However, educational theorists have not yet thoroughly understood the extent of social networking and online technology in relation to education and the connectivity and mobility of learners. Even so, mobile learning theory has various proponents who are interested in understanding learner mobility and how they may best learn on their own (Traxler 2007).

Researchers are constantly evaluating the issues pertaining to mobile learning (Traxler, 2014), and deliverance through the usage of mobile gadgets is a highly focused concern (Kukulaska-Hulme, 2002). Moreover, the functionality of these mobile based devices is also being considered, along with their usage in tandem with the society of mobile learners (Salmon, 2000). According to a number of research studies, a substantial effort still needs to be spent in evaluating the utility of these concepts (Sharples, 2001). Up to now, researchers have arrived at some key conclusions regarding the extent to which the available applications can incorporate pedagogic theories (Kukulaska-Hulme, 2002). The research community is gradually exploring and critiquing the particular issues with respect to evaluating the mobile learning processes and the ethical aspects related to it (Traxler, 2005).

Traxler (2005) points out that only a few researchers were initially involved in mobile learning processes and their assessment. Their main focus was on incorporating smart features into these gadgets to enhance the productivity of these processes. Moreover, their priority was to formulate an effective agenda and the bulk of the research was conducted across a number of organisations. At first, these powerful hand-held devices could only be afforded by the institutions, but these gadgets soon gained much popularity and some were readily available across the market at reasonable rates (Beetham & Sharpe, 2007). This was also observed owing to the arrival of iPhones and iPads together. Later on, these robust and powerful mobile gadgets are being afforded by the public at large, and the research activities and their pace has increased.

During the past ten years, personal efforts have been made by the worldwide community of mobile learners to improve, deepen and extend this topic in a number of diverse ways. Nowadays, the needs of the learners can be easily integrated into most mobile learning programs owing to their smart features and flexibility in their processes. During their field activities in real-time, a large amount of data can now easily be processed by learners, and they can keep track of unfolding developments at the same time. In the past, researchers would need to initially gather data and later process this, making use of a specially designed set-up.

In general, we can say that the existing styles of learning have been reshaped because of mobile technology. With its rapid growth, it has the ability to produce underlying change in our social dynamics, such as how, when and where we work as a mobile workforce (the so-called rise of the digital nomad), and how we are collaborated and socially connected with each other. Consequently, mobile technology should not be a new method of learning or just a gadget; rather, a whole new way of being together with advance transformations should be taken into account (Kukulska-Hulme and Traxler, 2005). As far as academic applications and the allied tools and technologies are concerned, practitioners are required to emphasise the complex and fundamental issues pertaining to the structure of knowledge, the basic purpose of learning and its connectivity with the humans, so that the society can gain the maximum benefit and realisation of the ultimate power of knowledge.

### Research design

The current study functions as an exploratory survey in which both qualitative and quantitative methods tools were used. The rationale behind approaching this study from an attitudinal perspective, rather than an experimental perspective, is due to three reasons: Firstly, there have been no attitudinal studies on podcasting in Saudi Arabia, and so that makes experimental studies important. Secondly, previous studies on emerging technological applications are reported to have started with an investigation into attitudes and feedback. Once such applications have become established in a society, their effect can be researched and examined; podcasting in education in general, and in language teaching in particular, is considered to be an emerging technology in Saudi Arabia. The third reason is ascribed to the difficulty in assessing any improvement in the students' pronunciation due to the lack of native speakers of English.

### Study setting and participants

The study population consisted of 102 Saudi Arabian university students at a university in Riyadh. The students were both male and female, studying the English language at levels 1 to 8, and were aged between 18 and 28 years. It was aimed to interview 10 students, however only six agreed to be interviewed. The questionnaire went out to all EFL students studying between levels one and eight, and the participants for the interviews were chosen using systematic sampling, with every tenth student chosen, and eight out of these ten agreed to be interviewed.

Table 1. *Sample for Data collection*

| Data collection strategy   | Participants | Sample number |
|----------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| Questionnaire              | Students     | 102           |
| Semi-structured Interviews | Students     | 8             |

### Data collection and analysis

In order to answer the research questions that have guided the study, qualitative and quantitative methods are designed and carried out sequentially, so that the quantitative data from the first phase can be collected and analysed independently, and the qualitative methods in the second phase can assist in the interpretation of the findings and results from the quantitative phase. The questionnaire forms (n=150) included 18 questions. The sample of participants to which the questionnaires were given was selected randomly by their English tutors for each level, which Dörnyei (2007) explains can “minimize the effects of any extraneous or subjective factors” ( p.97). Then, a semi-structured interview format was used. This format is flexible because it allows new questions to be brought up during the interview as a result of what the interviewee says. The data collected from the interviews was coded and anonymised, with respondents identified as Student A, Student B, and so on. Analysis is conducted to draw findings, in conjunction with quantitative data from the questionnaire where appropriate. In this manner, data was triangulated where possible.

### Main findings

The results and discussion are organised based on two themes: usage and difficulty, and interest and motivation. The sample population consisted of students taking English language courses at levels one through to eight. Students were aged between 18 years and 28 years. Moreover, all participants are regular users of mobile devices (phones, iPads, iPods, and Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs)) in their day-to-day lives; while 70% of the participants are intermediate users, and 30 percent were advanced users. The advanced users were not only aware of the various social media applications; however, they were also fully aware of how to use them.

Table 2. *Frequencies and Percentages of Learners' Responses*

| Assess the level of technical expertise required to make the best use of social media for learning English. |                                                                                                      |                                                                                      | Response Percent | Response Total |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 1                                                                                                           | Beginner (e.g., browsing and searching)                                                              |                                                                                      | 0%               | 0              |
| 2                                                                                                           | Intermediate (e.g., using a social media program to interact with occasionally)                      |  | 70%              | 71             |
| 3                                                                                                           | Advanced (e.g., well aware of the various social media programs and apps, and use them occasionally) |   | 30%              | 31             |

**Assess the level of technical expertise required to make the best use of social media for learning English.**

|   |                                                                                             | Response Percent | Response Total |
|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| 4 | Expert (e.g., well aware of the various social media programs and apps, and use them daily) | 0%               | 0              |

(Note: figures in brackets indicate percentages)

In order to make the interpretation and analysis easier, the descriptive statistics table is presented first, followed by the interpretation and analysis. The following findings are based on the data obtained from the attitude questionnaire and the semi-structured interview.

### Usage and Difficulty

Table 2 shows that the majority (n=81, 81%) of the participants disagree that there is difficulty in using social media for language purposes to interact with the lecturer, while only (n=21, 19%) of the participants agree that there are some difficulties in using social media for language purposes to interact with the lecturer. In the interview, Student A pointed out that it is difficult for learners to use most functions and features of social media applications because there is no internet connection in the classroom, whereas outside the classroom it is easy and more interesting to access the material and contact the tutor. This lack of internet access might prevent learners from using social media applications properly.

Moreover, 19 (23.2%) of the participants agreed and 88 (77.8%) strongly agreed that the use of social media applications is clear and understandable. Also, most subjects (n=94, 91.5%) strongly disagreed that using social media is a waste of time. However, using social media applications in English classes might be a waste of time if students use them improperly, such as by chatting to friends in Arabic, or playing games that are not relevant to English classes. One student in the interview complained that it is difficult to keep all students focused on the tutor, because some students participate in a chat group. She commented "I don't know if they are with the tutor or not if they play with their devices or follow other people". Hence, the use of social media applications via mobile devices may negatively affect English language learning, because students may become distracted.

The researcher believes that the technological progress over the last five years and its wide adoption among all ages has resulted in improved ease of use for learners. Social media applications and various mobile devices are among those technologies that have spread dramatically. Thus, learners are readily able to work with these devices both inside and outside the English classroom. Those who have a negative attitude toward the use of social media applications in English classes might need training before the implementation of any such programs; as student B said "we do not have training courses for us as students or for teachers who are very slow in understanding the usage of the applications". However, the majority of learners have a

positive attitude toward the use of social media via mobile devices in and outside English classes, which needs to be considered. Overall, the above table shows that the majority of participants (n=84, 82.6%) strongly agree that the use of social media via mobile devices in English classes is easy.

### **Interest in and Motivation to Use Social Media**

Learners' responses about their interest in and motivation to use social media via mobile devices were mostly positive, and it was found that most participants strongly agreed that using social media for learning English is interesting. Student C discussed the reason for learners' interest in using social media via mobile devices. She claimed that the use of social media via mobile devices is "a new method for students, so they are zealous to use this". These findings indicate that learners' motivation has increased as a result of social media application use. Overall, most of the participants agreed that they feel happy about the use of social media via mobile devices in English classes, about which they have a positive attitude.

### **Social Media as a Tool for Learning English**

Additionally, some students use social media as a platform for communicating in English. Specifically, 36% agreed that they only communicate in English when using social media, 26% were neutral to the statement, and 22% agreed with it strongly. It can be concluded that social media applications are used to promote the English language among Saudi Arabian university students at the Saudi University. In fact, 36% of the participants agreed that they are always discovering or looking for new vocabulary on social media (S.16). Furthermore, 26% strongly agreed that they are always discovering or looking for new vocabulary on Twitter or Instagram. On the other hand, 18% indicated that they were neutral to this statement. Similarly, while 32% agreed with the statement that they have used social media to chat in English in a conscious attempt to improve vocabulary, 31% were impartial to the statement, and 17% disagreed with it.

It is evident that some of the university students use social media, for example, Twitter/Instagram/Facebook as a language learning tool, and more importantly, a significant number of these students indicate that they use Twitter in learning the English language, specifically by discovering and looking for new vocabulary and communicating in English. Thus, social media applications, such as Twitter, seem to be rapidly growing in importance as a language learning tool.

Similar notions were also shared by student E, who claimed that:

*'Instagram and Facebook use is all about social networking but now that I follow a lot more educators on Twitter, I can see how it can be used to share with other educators'.*

In addition, Student D reported that

*'In fact it is a very useful way to enjoy and learn either English or any other language, however I will talk about my experience in learning English via social media especially on Twitter. There are many accounts written about learning the English language and the admins of these accounts write new vocabularies, rules, and some common grammar or spelling mistakes. I get a lot of information from these accounts'.*

The study also reveals that some students follow EFL accounts that could be tools for English vocabulary learning. The majority of accounts that are followed by the students include @askengt (followed by 48% of the participants), @LEBP55 (followed by 20% of the participants), @Engli (followed by 22% of the participants), @Abuomar (followed by 25% of the participants), and @english2arabic (followed by 22% of the participants) (S.32). Most of these accounts help Arabic students to improve their English language skills, including vocabulary learning.

This is in agreement with Student F's response:

*'I follow @english2arabic, @englishmastery since they use both Arabic and English which makes it simple for learning English vocabulary. Also, I think following some accounts are useful because it helps me improve my vocabulary without me noticing. The learners can read, chat, and communicate with English native speakers and through this communication they can improve their language skills'.*

It is worth noting that following these accounts is a deliberate choice, which indicates that most of the students are willing to polish up their English skills via social media.

## Conclusion

The present study has been designed to explore the attitudes of Saudi learners towards integrating social media applications via mobile devices in and outside English language classes. Through analysing the data gathered from the questionnaire with 102 students, and semi-structured interviews with five students, this study has found that Saudi EFL learners showed positive attitudes toward the usage of social media applications via mobile devices in English classes. Also, the results discussed above indicate that there is an influence on learners' attitude from the use of social media applications in English classes, as the majority are willing to pursue the use of mobile devices both inside and outside the classroom. The research findings suggest that there might be a need for training for both students and tutors at the Saudi University. Lack of knowledge of the use of social media applications in English classes for some students or the teacher can create negative attitudes. Also, technical support needs to be supplied to avoid any problems with technology.

Furthermore, teachers and educators should formulate clear guidance about how to use social media to enhance students' learning. It is worth noting that interacting through social media may also negatively influence language learning, particularly because it encourages the shortening of words. For example, using variations of "LOL", such as "LOLing", to complete sentences is common among many students who use social media. With the use of these new word forms, the concept of vocabulary taught to students in the classroom begins to degrade. Consequently, it is advisable to rethink the drawbacks and the potential associated with social media before jumping on the bandwagon.

Based on the findings of this study, in order to integrate social media into the education system of Saudi universities, policy-makers of the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia should support and provide all universities and schools with enough facilities, including strong internet connections and sufficient outlets. They should also provide teachers with training courses to develop the necessary skills to interact with mobile devices, to enhance their understanding of using

social media applications, and to cope with any problems that might occur inside and outside the classroom. Moreover, the Ministry of Education should implement several pilot trials in universities and schools, and evaluate them to reach reliable results.

### **Implications**

This exploratory study could open the doors to more comprehensive studies as part of further research. A similar experimental study with a larger number of participants may produce more generalisable results. Further studies on podcasting that include more students, more levels and more raters should result in clearer and more reliable outcomes. It would also be useful to follow up the results from similar studies in order to assist learners and educators by producing model strategies for using podcasts in EFL contexts. Learners' attitudes towards new MALL technologies such as podcasting have been shown to be generally positive. Moreover, language educators should keep up with new MALL innovations, as today's students are demanding the use of technological applications in the classroom, and if educators do not provide these, they are likely to be left behind. The use of social media applications is particularly useful in Saudi EFL settings, given the potential of social media to improve not only the learning and teaching experience, but to also facilitate the adjustment of the language learning field to an increasingly resource- and time-sensitive environment, it is necessary to conduct more comprehensive and additional research in this area.

Social media's roles for pedagogical use, especially for learning English, can be maximised. Undoubtedly, this study is not only relevant for university students, but it could also be very helpful for teachers and the university administration as well. The students can take advantage of the fact that most of their peers can access and use social media applications daily. Many university students are now using smartphones and tablets with enhanced capabilities for connectivity and communication. Although students use these technological devices for communication, their potential for improving language acquisition is evident. This implies that social media can create a platform for students to form study groups within, for example Facebook, where they can discuss and assist each other to learn vocabulary or discuss the module material.

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