

# **Exploring the Efficacy of Social Platforms as Informal Learning Environments for Language Skill Enhancement<sup>1</sup>**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research explores the potential of social platforms as informal learning spaces for improving English language competencies among Syrian EFL majors. A mixed-methods research designed has been employed where data were collected from 326 majors responded to structured questionnaires and 15 semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire items and interviews' protocols focused on access, engagement, and benefits of social platform usage. Quantitative data analysis disclosed considerable improvements in vocabulary, listening, reading, and pronunciation, with moderate improvements in speaking, writing, and grammar. Qualitative data results emphasized learners' attitudes about social platforms as motivational, flexible, and socially engaging spaces that offer authentic input, intercultural exposure, and opportunities for self-directed learning. In short, social platforms have become transformative instruments that extend learning beyond the traditional classroom, promoting integrated skill development and strengthening learner autonomy in environments confronted by structural and resource constraints.

**Keywords:** *Social Platforms, Language, Skill Enhancement, Informal Learning, Syrian, Tertiary Students*

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## **Dil Becerilerinin Geliştirilmesinde İnfomal Öğrenme Ortamları Olarak Sosyal Platformların Etkinliğinin İncelenmesi**

### **ÖZ**

Bu çalışma, Suriye bağlamında İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen (EFL) yükseköğretim öğrencilerinin dil becerilerinin geliştirilmesinde, informal öğrenme ortamları olarak sosyal platformların etkililiğini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmada karma yöntem (mixed-method) benimsenmiş; veriler, anketler aracılığıyla 326 üniversite öğrencisinden ve sosyal platform kullanımının erişim, etkileşim ve fayda boyutlarına odaklanan 15 yarı yapılandırılmış mülakattan elde edilmiştir. Nicel bulgular; kelime bilgisi, dinleme, okuma ve telaffuz becerilerinde belirgin bir iyileşme olduğunu ortaya koyarken; konuşma, yazma ve dil bilgisi becerilerinde ise orta düzeyde bir gelişim kaydedildiğini göstermiştir. Nitel sonuçlar ise öğrencilerin sosyal platformları; özgün girdi (authentic input), kültürel etkileşim ve öz-yönelimli öğrenme fırsatları sunan güdüleyici, esnek ve etkileşimli alanlar olarak değerlendirdiklerini kanıtlamıştır. Sonuç olarak sosyal platformlar; öğrenmeyi geleneksel sınıf sınırlarının ötesine taşıyan, bütünlük beceri gelişimini destekleyen ve yapısal engeller ile kaynak yetersizliklerinin yaşandığı ortamlarda öğrenci özerkliğini pekiştiren dönüştürücü araçlar olarak öne çıkmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Sosyal Platformlar, Dil, Beceri Geliştirme, İnfomal Öğrenme, Suriye, Üniversite Öğrencileri.*

## دراسة فاعلية المنصّات الاجتماعية بوصفها بيئات تعلّم غير رسميّة لتنمية

### المهارات اللغويّة

#### الملخّص

تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تقصي فاعلية المنصّات الاجتماعية بوصفها بيئات تعلّم غير رسميّة في تعزيز المهارات اللغويّة الإنجليزيّة لدى طلبة التعليم العالي من متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزيّة كلغة أجنبيّة في السياق السوري. اعتمدت الدراسة منهجاً مركباً، حيث جمعت البيانات من 326 طالباً جامعياً عبر استبيانات، إضافة إلى 15 مقابلة ركّزت على جوانب الوصول، والتفاعل، والفوائد لاستخدام المنصّات الاجتماعية. كشفت النتائج الكميّة عن تحسّن ملحوظ في مفردات اللغة، والاستماع، والقراءة، والنطق، مقابل تحسّن متوسط في مهارات التحدث والكتابة والقواعد. أما النتائج النوعيّة فأظهرت أن الطلبة ينظرون إلى المنصّات الاجتماعية بوصفها فضاءات محفّزة ومرنة وتفاعليّة، تتيح مدخلات أصيلة، وانفتاحاً ثقافياً، وفرصاً للتعلّم الذاتي المنظم. فبرزت المنصّات الاجتماعية كأدوات تحويلية تمتد بالتعلّم إلى ما بعد حدود الصف، وتدعم تنمية مهارية متكاملة، وتعزز استقلالية المتعلّم في سياقات تعاني من معوّقات بنيوية ونقص في الموارد.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** المنصّات الاجتماعية، اللغة، تنمية المهارات، التعلّم غير الرسمي، سوريا، طلبة التعليم العالي.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The last decade had witnessed a revolution in the field of technology where digital tools have transformed the life of everyone worldwide. Among these tools arise social platforms (SPs) as chief instruments for entertainment and communication. In addition to their main role, these platforms become active means for education where they support engagement and motivation. Furthermore, they started playing a crucial role in developing the EFL competencies as there are many channels, groups, communities that use English as main medium for conveying messages and communicating. Unique opportunities such as access to real-life materials and content, communicate and interact with different linguistic communities, and broad engagement with multimodal practices have been provided by such platforms. These platforms help EFL learners exceed the barriers of traditional classrooms.

In settings like Syria where the education system has been disrupted and challenged by political, economic, financial, and social barriers, these platforms become alternatives for traditional EFL classes, boosting cognitive and socio-cultural development. Unique affordances have also been provided by such platforms. These affordances enhance the language skill development. They also allow EFL learners to browse and navigate EFL content at their own pace, sketch their learning map according to their own interests, and engage with multimodal content and materials.

Additionally, these affordances reinforce EFL learners' agency and autonomy and self-controlled engagement, boosting reflective activities and practices. Moreover, the authentic communication practices are facilitated by the interactive nature of these platforms. Such practices enable EFL learners to use English in effective social environments. Beyond linguistic development, cultural and intercultural awareness are also promoted by these digital tools and spaces where they allow learners to be exposed to diverse and different speakers and communication styles which are usually missing in the traditional classrooms.

In Syrian context, university majors have faced disruptions and access challenges as well as access to qualified teachers and learning

materials at their universities and departments. Consequently, they started looking for alternatives where SPs arise as practicable alternatives for supporting constant engagement with English, bridging gaps, and boosting adaptive learning activities and practices. SPs' affordances such as accessibility, multimodality, and flexibility enable EFL majors to overcome structural challenges and difficulties, furthering motivation, language exposure, and language skill development outside conventional classrooms. Therefore, figuring out how Syrian EFL majors perceive and engage with these SPs becomes serious for adopting and adapting contextually appropriate approaches that increase the effectiveness of digital learning tools in improving language competencies.

This study is inspired by the limited attention paid to the benefits of SP use in EFL learning environments confronted by educational limitations. Though the potential of SPs for language learning has been recognized, the conflict-ridden contexts are under-investigated with all their particular perceptions, experiences, and priorities of EFL learners. Two main aims guided the present study. First, it aims to examine the benefits of SP usage among Syrian majors in terms of linguistic, autonomous, motivational, cultural, and communicative dimensions. Second, it aims to explore how SP engagement helps in developing specific English language aspects and skills, including speaking, writing, reading, listening, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. These aims are proposed to offer a clear understanding of SPs' broader affordances for EFL learning and their impact on main skills and aspects. The study offers a multi-faceted view on digital learning in turbulent educational circumstances. These aims mentioned above can be turned into the following research questions.

1. What are the benefits of using SPs among Syrian majors in their search to improve EFL language competencies?
2. Do SPs help in developing specific EFL skills and aspects, including vocabulary, grammar, listening, reading, speaking, writing, and pronunciation?

The significance of this research is in its pursuit to update both theory and practice in EFL education. Theoretically, it contributes to the

increasing body of literature on technology-enhanced language learning by contextualizing the affordances of SPs within resource-limited, settings. Practically, the research provides implications and insights for instructors looking for incorporating SPs into teaching approaches, boost learner autonomy, and offer socially and culturally effective learning opportunities. By inspecting Syrian EFL majors' perceptions of SP usage, the research highpoints the role of SPs in endorsing engagement, skill development, and cultural and intercultural competence in EFL contexts. Besides, the research emphasizes the broader significance of flexible, learner-centered approaches in solving and working educational challenges out, providing guidance on designing adaptive EFL classes.

In brief, SPs' potential outspreads beyond just access to digital content, encircling social interaction, autonomous learning, intercultural engagement, and skill development. By inspecting the benefits of using SPs among Syrian EFL majors, this research aims to present a better understanding of how these SPs can enhance language competencies in education-constrained settings.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Reconceptualizing EFL learning in settings with limited instructional resources has been promoted by considering SPs as educational tools in addition to their main role as spaces for entertainment and communication. These SPs such as YouTube, Facebook, TikTok and many others have exceeded their role and function as means of entertainment and communication and become spaces that eases EFL learning in an interactive, multimodal, and learner-centered atmosphere.<sup>3</sup> In that way, they complement and supplement traditional classroom activities.

This shift in the role of SPs from just means of entertainment and communication to learning spaces reflects the orientation of the state-of-the-art digital learning theories, particularly Connectivism. Connectivism

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<sup>3</sup> Alkamel, Mohammed Abdulkareem Abdullah. "Social Media in Teaching English for EFL Students: A Review of Challenges and Suggestions." *International Journal of English Teaching and Learning* 2, no. 1 (2024): 8–17.

sees knowledge as being distributed across networks and nodes of people, tools, and digital resources. The learner's ability is underlined in navigating and synthesizing data across diverse sources.<sup>4</sup>

In instable settings like Syria, SPs can play a critical role in evading and encountering challenges and barriers to traditional classes at universities. They offer constant and consistent exposure to real-world and authentic English content and boost autonomy and self-directed learning.<sup>5</sup> The literature reviewed touches the concept that SPs are not only adjunctive to traditional classrooms but work as integral settings for thorough language development, promoting linguistic and metacognitive scopes.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.1. VARIED AND AUTHENTIC INPUT

A key benefit of using and engaging with SPs for EFL developing purposes is the access to real, authentic, and rich content. This access aligns with Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, and the principle of comprehensible input ( $i+1$ ). Exposure to English across diverse SP modalities such as audios, videos, podcast, texts, comments and many others offer EFL learners unique opportunities to enhance their competencies. In addition to enriching lexical and grammatical aspects, SPs help enhance other skills as listening comprehension, reading skills, and pragmatic styles.<sup>7</sup>

Evidence from empirical research validates the capacity of SPs to ease lexical development through recurring exposure to real authentic content and materials.<sup>8</sup> Paivio's (1991) dual coding theory additionally

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<sup>4</sup> Siemens, George. "Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age." *Elearnspace* (2004): 1–16.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Hashedi, Abdullah Hussein, Hend Abdullah Al-Halabi, and Abdullatif Ghallab. "The Impact of Using Social Media in Learning on the Academic Performance of Yemeni University Students." 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Sockett, Geoffrey. "Informal Learning and Languages." In *The Online Informal Learning of English*, 7–30. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Sundqvist, Pia, and Liss Kerstin Sylvén. *Extramural English in Teaching and Learning: From Theory and Research to Practice*. Cham: Springer, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Webb, Stuart, and Paul Nation. *How Vocabulary Is Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

explicates how multimodal content such as videos with captions and subtitles or interactive posts involve multiple perceptive channels, boosting retention and recall of lexis. EFL studies reflected this concept, as learners often consider vocabulary enrichment as a natural, context-driven process rather than the outcome of rote memorization. Accordingly, the active role of EFL learners is reinforced in creating their linguistic competence.<sup>9</sup> Beyond enriching vocabulary by using SPs, EFL learners are exposed to a diversity of dialects, accents, and speaking styles, which are indispensable for improving listening skills and pronunciation. Murphey (2001) highlights the educational benefits of *shadowing* strategies by repeating phrases and lines from audio materials. Such repetition helps EFL learners internalize rhythm and pronunciation patterns. These shadowing practices illustrates the Input-Interaction-Output (IIO) model, wherein comprehensible input, interaction, and comprehensible output together promote skill development.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the affordance of accessing varied and authentic content outspread to real-life interaction. EFL learners engage with native and non-native English speakers through video calls, messaging, comments, discussions, and other types of interactions. Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis accentuates the role of output in smoothing language reformation. Additionally, learners' pragmatic conventions and styles, including proper usage of idioms and grammatical structures, are also improved through such effective engagement.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, the gap between passive exposure and active language practice is bridged by using SPs, promoting receptive and productive competence in real authentic interactive and communicative contexts.

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<sup>9</sup> See Siemens, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> See Sundqvist and Sylvén, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Ahdal, Arif. "Overcoming Pronunciation Hurdles in EFL Settings: An Evaluation of Podcasts as a Learning Tool at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia." *Asian EFL Journal Research Articles* 27 (2020).

## 2.2. ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION

A second substantial dimension of using SPs in EFL learning is their motivational affordance. Research continuously highlights the capacity of SPs to change language learning into an inherently rewarding, socially mediated process. Deci and Ryan (2012) argued that SPs offer mechanisms for interactive feedback, social recognition, peer visibility. These mechanisms are toughly related to augmented engagement and continuous effort.

Furthermore, Deci and Ryan's (2012) Self-Determination Theory speculates that perceived competence, social relatedness, and learner autonomy are crucial stimuli of motivation. These needs are supported by SPs through enabling EFL learners to steer their engagement, receive peer endorsement, and share cooperative knowledge creation. Studies such as Al-Hashedi et al. (2025), Godwin-Jones (2019), and Shihab (2024) demonstrated that the informal nature of SP-mediated learning also reduces apprehension and strengthens positive affective states. Therefore, it enhances engagement and motivation. EFL Learner reflections, such as those reflecting enjoyment and reinforcement from peer comments, illustrate this interaction between social presence and inherent motivation, strengthening engagement and encouraging insistent learning behaviors.<sup>12</sup>

The motivational dimension of SPs also subsidizes skill development in a self-reinforcing extent. As learners engage more intensively with real authentic content, linguistic competence increases, which leads to enhance confidence and further engagement. This dynamic correlates with social constructivist and sociocultural views, wherein

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<sup>12</sup>Rambe, Patient. "Constructive Disruptions for Effective Collaborative Learning: Navigating the Affordances of Social Media for Meaningful Engagement." *Electronic Journal of e-Learning* 10, no. 1 (2012): 132–46.

learning is understood as a socially rooted process mediated through interaction with peers, teachers, and the digital community.<sup>13</sup>

### **2.3. FLEXIBILITY, AUTONOMY, AND SELF-PACED LEARNING**

The flexibility afforded by SPs is central to learner autonomy and self-regulated learning. Digital platforms allow temporal, spatial, and cognitive freedom, enabling learners to select content, pace, and modes of engagement according to individual preferences and schedules<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, Benson's (2007) conceptualization of autonomy as active learner agency underscores the critical role of choice in fostering motivation and self-efficacy. SP-mediated flexibility is not merely advantageous but essential for sustained learning.

Moreover, Connectivist theory positions SPs as nodes in a distributed learning network, where learners navigate, select, and integrate information from digital and human sources to construct personalized knowledge frameworks.<sup>15</sup> This networked learning approach promotes exploratory and incidental learning, as learners follow threads of curiosity and serendipitously encounter new language input. Studies by Adami (2016) and Sockett (2014) support the notion that learner-driven exploration enhances engagement, reflection, and metacognitive skill development, highlighting the complementary role of structured and incidental learning in fostering both linguistic and strategic competencies.

### **2.4. OPPORTUNITIES FOR AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION**

SPs provide robust avenues for authentic communication in English, extending the boundaries of formal classroom interactions. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence indicates that learners perceive SPs as spaces to practice language production, receive feedback, and engage collaboratively with peers and instructors. This aligns with task-based

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<sup>13</sup> Shihab, Aatur. *The Impact of Social Media on the Development and Well-Being of Youth*. 2024.

<sup>14</sup> See Al-Hashedi et al. 2025

<sup>15</sup> Abrams, Sandra Schamroth, and Sara Walsh. "Gamified Vocabulary: Online Resources and Enriched Language Learning." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 58, no. 1 (2014): 49–58.

language teaching principles, which emphasize meaning-focused production and interactive engagement as critical mechanisms for improving fluency, accuracy, and pragmatic competence.<sup>16</sup>

The literature further suggests that SP-mediated communication reduces hierarchical and affective barriers, promoting classless interaction and reciprocal knowledge exchange. Such affordances enable continuous feedback, iterative skill development, and reflective practice, consistent with sociocultural perspectives on mediated learning. Blattner and Lomicka (2012) similarly emphasize the pedagogical benefits of informal online writing, where iterative posting and peer feedback consolidate both linguistic form and expressive competence.

## **2.5. CULTURAL AWARENESS AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE**

A distinctive contribution of SP engagement lies in the development of cultural awareness and intercultural competence. By interacting with content from diverse English-speaking communities, learners acquire not only linguistic forms but also pragmatic norms, sociocultural values, and context-specific conventions.<sup>17</sup> This aligns with contemporary perspectives on intercultural competence, which highlight the role of exposure, reflection, and cross-cultural engagement in fostering sensitivity and adaptability in communicative contexts.<sup>18</sup>

Further, Empirical studies confirm that incidental cultural learning, facilitated by authentic SP content, complements intentional exploration and strengthens global communicative competence.<sup>19</sup> It is argued that both deliberate and serendipitous encounters with cultural content enhance understanding of idiomatic expressions, discourse conventions, and

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<sup>16</sup> Ellis, Rod. "Task-Based Language Teaching." In *The Routledge Handbook of Instructed Second Language Acquisition*, 108–25. London: Routledge, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Mitchell, Claire. "Web 2.0 Use to Foster Learners' Intercultural Sensitivity: An Exploratory Study." *Dimension* 147 (2016): 168–82.

<sup>18</sup> Schrader, Dawn E. "Constructivism and Learning in the Age of Social Media: Changing Minds and Learning Communities." *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 2015, no. 144 (2015): 23–35.

<sup>19</sup> See Sockett, 2014

context-specific norms, illustrating the intertwined development of linguistic and intercultural skills in digital learning ecosystems.

## **2.6. LANGUAGE SKILL IMPROVEMENT THROUGH SP ENGAGEMENT**

Empirical evidence underscores the multidimensional impact of SPs on specific language skills. Vocabulary enrichment emerges as the most significant area of improvement, with repeated exposure to authentic, multimodal content supporting incidental learning and lexical retention.<sup>20</sup> The active construction of knowledge through commenting, sharing, and interaction reflects constructivist and connectivist principles, emphasizing learner agency and engagement with authentic materials.<sup>21</sup> Listening and reading skills similarly benefit from multimodal input, including varied accents, registers, and discourse styles.<sup>22</sup> Immersive exposure enables learners to develop inferencing strategies, contextual understanding, and pragmatic awareness, while repeated engagement enhances comprehension and confidence in real-world contexts.

Speaking and writing, though exhibiting slightly lower levels of perceived improvement, are facilitated through iterative, low-pressure interaction in SPs. The opportunity to produce language, receive feedback, and engage in meaningful communication aligns with Swain's Output Hypothesis (2005) and task-based frameworks, fostering accuracy, fluency, and expressive competence.<sup>23</sup> Pronunciation, bolstered by auditory input and imitation, demonstrates the effectiveness of SPs for phonological development, consistent with usage-based and input-driven models.<sup>24</sup> Grammar, although less prominently improved, benefits from

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<sup>20</sup> See Webb and Nation, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> See Siemens, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Goh, Christine C. M., and Larry Vandergrift. *Teaching and Learning Second Language Listening: Metacognition in Action*. London: Routledge, 2021.

<sup>23</sup> See Ellis, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Cadierno, Teresa, and Søren W. Eskildsen. "The Younger, the Better? A Usage-Based Approach to Learning and Teaching English in Danish Primary Schools." *European Journal of Applied Linguistics* 6, no. 1 (2018): 171–82.

incidental learning through exposure to authentic, contextualized texts, reinforcing syntactic patterns in meaningful usage contexts.<sup>25</sup>

Multimodal and integrative skill development emerges as a distinctive advantage of SPs. Learners report simultaneous engagement across listening, reading, writing, and speaking modalities, reflecting principles of multimodal learning, dual coding, and cognitive theory.<sup>26</sup> This layered engagement fosters holistic EFL development, enabling experiential, contextually rich, and socially situated learning that extends beyond the classroom and reinforces self-directed, autonomous, and collaborative learning strategies.

## 2.7. RELATED STUDIES

Research confirms the growing pedagogical relevance of SPs in EFL learning while revealing contextual, methodological, and instructional gaps. Across Arab contexts, SPs are consistently shown to enhance learner engagement, autonomy, collaboration, motivation, and exposure to authentic English in informal learning spaces. Alharthi (2023) demonstrated that Saudi EFL learners extensively use platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube for vocabulary development, with effectiveness shaped by gender, age, motivation, digital proficiency, and multimedia-rich content. His mixed-methods findings highlight noticeable gains in vocabulary, confidence, and perceived proficiency, alongside challenges related to distraction and time management. Similarly, Alshabeb (2020) found that SPs such as WhatsApp and Instagram facilitate collaborative and autonomous learning within the Saudi university context, particularly by overcoming socio-cultural constraints such as gender segregation and limited face-to-face interaction.

Within the Libyan context, Altaleb (2018) confirmed widespread but relatively underdeveloped use of SPs for EFL learning. While students and instructors acknowledged their positive impact on English proficiency

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<sup>25</sup> See Sundqvist and Sylvén, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Mayer, Richard E. "Multimedia Instruction." In *Handbook of Research on Educational Communications and Technology*, 385–99. New York: Springer, 2013.

and learner autonomy, actual classroom integration remained limited due to infrastructural, institutional, cultural, and technological constraints. Her findings also revealed a predominance of undirected autonomous learning, underscoring the absence of structured pedagogical frameworks for SP integration. Focusing on identity and discourse, Aladsani (2018) showed that Twitter enabled Saudi female students to construct academic identities, participate in academic discourse, and engage across gender boundaries in culturally sensitive ways, primarily through student-directed learning with minimal instructor involvement.

At a macro level, Alsulami's (2018) systematic review synthesized empirical evidence on SP integration in language learning, confirming predominantly positive effects across language skills, with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp emerging as the most frequently used platforms. The review also highlighted a methodological dominance of experimental designs and emphasized the need for more context-sensitive and pedagogically grounded research. In short, these studies establish SPs as powerful informal learning environments for EFL development but reveal persistent gaps regarding structured instructional integration, teacher involvement, digital literacy guidance, and underrepresented learning contexts.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to explore the barriers to effective use of SPs for English language development at Syrian universities, combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of both structural and pedagogical challenges. The research focuses on EFL undergraduates enrolled in English departments, selected through purposive sampling to ensure participants had prior experience using SPS for language learning. A total of 326 students from three universities completed a structured questionnaire, while semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 students to capture in-depth perspectives on access, digital literacy, pedagogical practices, and institutional supports.

The questionnaire, informed by prior studies on social media in EFL contexts, included items using a 5-point Likert scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The interviews explored participants’ lived experiences, focusing on structural and technological barriers, cognitive and socio-affective challenges, and institutional conditions that support or hinder meaningful social-platform integration. Data collection was conducted over four weeks, with surveys distributed online and in person, and interviews recorded with participants’ consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. Participants were given pseudonyms to keep their anonymity and confidentiality. Ethical approval was obtained, and participants were assured of confidentiality.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify the prevalence and severity of barriers, and to examine relationships between access, digital literacy, and engagement with SPs. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis

## **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **4.1. THE PERCEIVED BENEFITS OF SP USAGE**

Learners’ perceptions of the potential benefits of SP use are explored, emphasizing linguistic, metacognitive, and socio-cultural dimensions. This discussion is structured around key thematic areas derived from the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, encompassing access to authentic and varied input, motivational affordances, flexibility and autonomy, as well as cultural awareness and intercultural competence.

#### **4.1.1. ACCESS TO VARIED ENGLISH CONTENT**

One of the most prominent benefits identified in both quantitative and qualitative findings is the access to diverse, authentic, and contextually rich English content. The survey results revealed that 170 respondents (52.1%) agreed and 106 (32.5%) strongly agreed that SPs provide access to diverse English content, accounting for a cumulative 84.6% of the total responses. Only a small minority disagreed, and 12.9% were neutral. This overwhelming agreement underscores the recognition among students that

SPs function as dynamic repositories of learning materials, including videos, podcasts, interactive posts, discussion threads, and articles that cater to varied linguistic competencies and interests. As the data suggest, these platforms enable learners to engage with materials that are not only entertaining but also pedagogically valuable, supporting vocabulary expansion, grammar acquisition, listening comprehension, and reading fluency.<sup>27</sup>

Qualitative findings reinforce these quantitative insights. Participants frequently highlighted the dual advantage of SPs as both accessible and immersive tools. Yousef, for example, noted:

*“Social platforms have become a really important tool... especially here in Syria... because we don’t always have access to traditional learning resources. For me, the biggest benefits are, first, the easy access to learning materials, and second, constant exposure to the language through videos and posts.”*

This notion of “constant exposure” reflects the integrative function of SPs, whereby fragmented content is transformed into coherent, meaningful, and readily accessible learning experiences. Through engagement with video blogs, short-form clips, podcasts, and live lectures, learners encounter linguistic input across modalities, which is known to enhance retention and promote incidental learning. One participant described, “*I learned many new words while watching English vlogs. I remember them better when I see them used in real situations,*” demonstrating the importance of contextualized, authentic input in reinforcing memory and linguistic competence.<sup>28</sup>

Access to authentic English material is further enriched by exposure to diverse accents and speaking styles. In the quantitative survey, 182 respondents (55.8%) agreed and 96 (23.6%) strongly agreed that SPs exposed them to different accents, totaling 79.4% positive perception. Only a small percentage responded neutrally or negatively. Interview data

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<sup>27</sup> See Sockett, 2014

<sup>28</sup> Krashen, Stephen. “The Input Hypothesis: An Update.” In *Linguistics and Language Pedagogy: The State of the Art*, 409–31. 1992.

mirrored these findings, as students noted that repeated listening to varied voices enhanced comprehension, pronunciation, and speaking confidence. Several participants employed “*shadowing*” strategies, repeating lines from videos to internalize rhythm and pronunciation, exemplifying the Input-Interaction-Output (IIO) model, wherein exposure, noticing, and production operate collaboratively to enhance language acquisition.<sup>29</sup> This exposure aligns with connectivist principles, emphasizing learning across networks of people and digital content, and provides access to linguistic diversity rarely available in formal classroom environments.<sup>30</sup>

Furthermore, learners highlighted the opportunities SPs offer for practicing English in real-world contexts. Quantitative findings showed 57.1% agreement and 21.8% strong agreement, totaling 78.9% positive perception regarding the utility of SPs in promoting authentic language use. This corresponds with interview accounts in which students described interacting with native and non-native speakers, responding to comments, and joining live discussions as occasions for practicing pragmatic language, idiomatic expressions, and contextualized grammar in meaningful ways. For instance, a student reflected: “*When I reply to comments, I notice how people write sentences, especially verb tenses and common phrases. I try to copy them.*” Such engagements illustrate Swain’s (2005) Output Hypothesis, emphasizing the role of language production in reinforcing learning, and align with Al-Ahdal’s (2020) findings on the pedagogical value of online interactions extending classroom practice into informal, student-directed spaces.

#### **4.1.2. MOTIVATION AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT**

Motivation emerged as another core benefit, intricately linked to learners’ confidence, social engagement, and perceived language development. Both the quantitative and qualitative data indicate that SPs transform language learning from a formal, often stressful activity into an enjoyable, engaging, and socially embedded process. In the survey, 47.9%

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<sup>29</sup> Murphey, Tim. “Exploring Conversational Shadowing.” *Language Teaching Research* 5, no. 2 (2001): 128–55.

<sup>30</sup> See Sundqvist and Sylvén, 2016.

of participants agreed and 29.1% strongly agreed that SPs increased their motivation to learn English, resulting in 77% positive responses. Only 4% disagreed, highlighting the motivational impact of these platforms.

Interviews expanded on this, illustrating how SPs provide a sense of social presence and recognition that reinforces engagement. Omar emphasized, *“When I see classmates posting progress or sharing resources, it pushes me to stay on track. It feels less like studying alone and more like being part of a team, even if we’re not physically together.”* Huda similarly noted: *“Seeing others improve makes me want to do better too. Even if I don’t comment, just watching their growth reminds me to keep going.”* These observations underscore the role of SPs in creating socially mediated learning environments, where peer visibility, feedback, and collaborative engagement sustain motivation. Samer added: *“Getting a like or a comment on my post...even a small one...makes me feel like my effort matters, and that keeps me posting and learning.”* This social dimension reflects Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory, which posits that learning is fundamentally mediated through interactions in socially and culturally relevant contexts, while also supporting Self-determination theory by fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness in learners.

The motivational affordances of SPs are closely tied to skill development, particularly in listening, pronunciation, and vocabulary. As students engage continuously with authentic, multimodal content, they enter a positive feedback loop in which increased motivation drives engagement, which, in turn, promotes linguistic growth.<sup>31</sup> The informal, self-directed, and playful nature of SP-based learning reduces anxiety, enhances confidence, and encourages experimentation with language, facilitating both cognitive and affective development simultaneously.<sup>32</sup> One participant highlighted, *“Learning on TikTok or YouTube doesn’t feel like studying. I’m enjoying and learning at the same time,”* illustrating the

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<sup>31</sup> Godwin-Jones, Robert. “Riding the Digital Wilds: Learner Autonomy and Informal Language Learning.” 2019.

<sup>32</sup> See Rambe, 2012.

integration of enjoyment, social interaction, and language acquisition into a single, motivating process.

#### 4.1.3. FLEXIBILITY AND SELF-PACED LEARNING

Flexibility and self-paced learning emerged as equally significant benefits of SP usage. The quantitative data indicate that 51.8% of respondents agreed and 19.3% strongly agreed that SPs allow for flexible and autonomous learning, representing 71.1% of participants who recognized the role of SPs in enabling personalized engagement. The qualitative findings corroborated these results, highlighting the temporal, spatial, and cognitive autonomy afforded by these platforms. Ahmed, for instance, noted: *“I can practice English at midnight if I want. It’s all up to me,”* exemplifying the freedom learners experience in choosing when, where, and how to engage with English learning materials.

This flexibility aligns with findings from Lee (2025) and Al-Hashedi et al. (2025), who reported similar perceptions among learners in other EFL contexts, particularly in settings with limited institutional support. Additionally, research by Adami (2016) emphasizes that multimodal digital resources allow learners to select materials and modes most relevant to their goals, further reinforcing autonomous engagement. The findings echo Benson’s (2007) conceptualization of autonomy as learner agency, wherein students actively direct their learning trajectories. SPs, therefore, exemplify connectivist principles.<sup>33</sup> In the Syrian context, where educational infrastructure is often disrupted, such autonomy is not merely desirable but essential.

Moreover, SPs support incidental and exploratory learning. Lina described: *“Sometimes I follow a topic or a word I don’t know and end up discovering new channels or pages. It makes learning feel exciting, not like an obligation.”* Mariam added: *“Every click can take me somewhere new...one video leads to another, and suddenly I’ve learned ten new words without planning to.”* These reflections highlight the active, curiosity-

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<sup>33</sup> Reinhardt, Jonathon, and Victoria Zander. “Social Networking in an Intensive English Program Classroom.” *CALICO Journal* 28, no. 2 (2011): 326–44.

driven engagement SPs foster, promoting reflection, self-monitoring, and intentional adaptation of learning strategies, consistent with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural emphasis on socially mediated and self-regulated learning.

#### **4.1.4. CULTURAL AWARENESS AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE**

A further dimension of SP benefits lies in the development of cultural awareness and intercultural competence. Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that learners perceive SPs as windows into diverse English-speaking communities and cultural practices. By engaging with authentic content from native and non-native speakers worldwide, students acquire not only language forms but also insights into cultural norms, social values, and pragmatic conventions. One participant remarked: *"Sometimes I follow native speakers or people from other countries, and it really changes the way I understand expressions and culture...it's like traveling without leaving my room."* These observations align with Mitchell (2016) and Ehlers (2013), who highlight the role of digital platforms in fostering intercultural sensitivity and exposing learners to *"lived culture"* that is often absent from traditional curricula. In interviews, students described both intentional and incidental cultural learning. Some deliberately followed content creators to explore cultural perspectives, while others encountered such learning serendipitously through engagement with entertaining or curiosity-driven content. This duality reflects Sockett's (2014) assertion that informal L2 engagement promotes incidental intercultural development, emphasizing the complementarity of structured and learner-driven exploration. The connectivist perspective further illuminates this process, showing how learners construct knowledge and interpret meaning across networks of human and digital nodes, enhancing both linguistic and intercultural competence.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See Schrader, 2015

The integration of quantitative survey results and qualitative interview data presents a coherent picture of SPs as multidimensional tools supporting EFL learning. Syrian tertiary students perceive these platforms as gateways to authentic and diverse English input. They are also motivational and socially engaging environments. Further, they form flexible, self-directed, and learner-centered spaces. These platforms are abundant settings for practicing authentic communication as well as being conduits for cultural exposure and intercultural competence development. Together, these dimensions reflect a shift toward digital, participatory, and autonomous learning models that align with modern pedagogical principles such as Siemens' (2005) connectivism, Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, and Deci and Ryan's (2012) self-determination theory. Furthermore, the findings situate the Syrian experience within a broader global context, resonating with studies conducted in diverse EFL settings. For example, Benson (2011a) and Sundqvist (2011) demonstrated that digital environments extend learning opportunities beyond formal classrooms, while Al-Hashedi et al. (2025) and Shihab (2024) highlighted the motivational and affective benefits of SP-mediated engagement. In the Syrian context, where political instability and infrastructural limitations constrain traditional education, SPs emerge not only as alternative learning channels but as essential tools for continuous, immersive, and socially mediated English language acquisition.

In short, the perceived benefits of SP usage for Syrian EFL tertiary students are manifold, encompassing linguistic development, motivational enhancement, flexible learning, authentic communicative practice, and intercultural competence. These findings reinforce the potential of SPs to serve as transformative agents in EFL education, particularly in contexts where formal instruction is disrupted or limited. By bridging gaps in access, facilitating autonomous and exploratory learning, and embedding linguistic practice within socially meaningful interactions, SPs contribute to the creation of learner-centered, resilient, and globally connected educational ecosystems that align with contemporary theories of language acquisition and educational technology.

## **4.2. LANGUAGE SKILL IMPROVEMENT THROUGH SP USAGE**

The integration of SPs into the language learning experiences of Syrian EFL tertiary students has revealed a complex and multifaceted impact on English language proficiency. This section addresses students' attitudes toward the improvement of specific English language skills and aspects through SP engagement. Seven key skills and aspects targeting vocabulary, grammar, speaking, writing, listening, reading, and pronunciation were highlighted, providing insights into both quantitative and qualitative outcomes of SP usage.

### **4.2.1. VOCABULARY ENRICHMENT**

Among the assessed language aspects, vocabulary enrichment emerged as the most prominently perceived improvement. Findings indicated that 244 respondents (74.9%) reported moderate to significant gains in vocabulary, highlighting the central role of SPs in supporting lexical development. Specifically, 112 respondents (34.4%) noted moderate improvement, 97 (29.8%) considerable improvement, and 35 (10.7%) significant improvement, whereas 78 respondents (23.9%) perceived only slight improvement, and 4 (1.2%) reported no improvement. These data suggest that SPs provide substantial opportunities for learners to encounter new vocabulary across varied contexts, though the degree of improvement is contingent upon the level of engagement and active participation. The prominence of vocabulary improvement through SPs aligns with theoretical perspectives such as connectivism and constructivism. Connectivism posits that knowledge is distributed across networks and that learners gain competence by navigating and integrating information from multiple digital sources.<sup>35</sup> Constructivism, by contrast, emphasizes active, contextualized knowledge construction through authentic interaction. SPs inherently embody these principles by offering multimodal, authentic language input that allows learners to interact with content in meaningful contexts. Empirical support for incidental vocabulary acquisition in input-rich digital environments is

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<sup>35</sup> See Siemens. 2005.

provided by Webb and Nation (2017), who argue that repeated exposure to lexical items across diverse contexts enhances retention and usage. Multimodal features of SPs such as captioned videos, interactive posts, hashtags, and contextual clues engage multiple cognitive channels, facilitating vocabulary acquisition through both visual and auditory processing.<sup>36</sup>

Qualitative reflections from participants reinforced these findings. Khaled described the transition from rote memorization to experiential learning: *“I got used to hearing the language daily and naturally... not just from books. I now have a real vocabulary, not just memorized words.”* Similarly, Samer highlighted the reinforcing effect of multimodal exposure: *“Seeing words in posts, videos, and captions makes it stick more than just reading them in a book.”* The active engagement in retrieval and usage further consolidates lexical knowledge, as Rami noted: *“When I comment or answer a question using new words, I remember them better than if I just wrote them in my notebook.”* These accounts illustrate how SPs promote incidental, contextually rich vocabulary learning that extends beyond the confines of traditional classroom methods.

#### 4.2.2. LISTENING AND READING COMPREHENSION

Receptive skills, particularly listening and reading, were among the most positively affected aspects of language proficiency. Quantitative data indicated that 207 respondents (63.5%) perceived moderate to significant improvement in listening comprehension, while 229 respondents (70.3%) reported similar gains in reading comprehension. The immersive nature of SPs exposes learners to authentic spoken and written English across multiple registers, accents, and genres, including podcasts, TikTok clips, YouTube videos, and user-generated posts. This exposure fosters both cognitive and affective engagement, enabling learners to process language in context and enhancing comprehension. These outcomes are supported by Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, which emphasizes the necessity of

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<sup>36</sup> Paivio, Allan. “Dual Coding Theory: Retrospect and Current Status.” *Canadian Journal of Psychology* 45, no. 3 (1991): 255–87.

comprehensible input slightly above learners' current proficiency (i+1) for effective language acquisition (Krashen, 1992). SPs provide such input in multimodal, meaningful contexts, allowing learners to engage with authentic content at their own pace. Furthermore, interactive elements of SPs, such as hyperlinks, comments, and multimedia, encourage inferencing, reflection, and critical processing, enhancing reading comprehension and metacognitive listening strategies.<sup>37</sup> The incidental exposure to diverse registers and discourse styles additionally strengthens pragmatic awareness and contextual understanding.

Qualitative reflections corroborated these findings. Participants emphasized the benefits of immersive listening experiences for comprehension and confidence building. Noor observed, *"Listening to speeches and conversations online every day makes me feel more confident when someone talks to me in English."* Similarly, Layla noted that daily engagement with varied spoken English helped her understand natural speech patterns: *"Watching short videos and listening to people talking in English every day helps me understand different ways people speak, not just textbook English."* Repeated exposure also enabled learners to infer meaning from context, a process Huda described as crucial for improving listening skills over time: *"Even if I don't know all the words, I can guess the meaning from how people speak, and that makes listening easier over time."*

#### **4.2.3. SPEAKING AND WRITING SKILLS**

Productive skills such as speaking and writing also showed meaningful, though slightly lower, levels of improvement. Quantitative analysis revealed that 62.8% of respondents reported moderate to significant improvement in speaking, while 53.7% reported similar gains in writing. Despite the presence of some participants who reported slight or no improvement reflecting variability in engagement. The overall trend underscores the potential of SPs to provide authentic opportunities for language output. Voice-based interactions, including voice messages and

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<sup>37</sup> Goh and Vandergrift, 2021.

peer communication, were particularly instrumental for speaking practice, as Ali noted: *“Help us pick up new vocabulary and hear natural pronunciation from native speakers.”* Similarly, Samar highlighted the iterative benefit of listening and repeating, which improved both accent and fluency.

Writing skills benefited from frequent, low-pressure engagement with online comments, discussion threads, and posts. Participants reported that informal writing opportunities facilitated iterative development, allowing for practice without fear of negative evaluation. Khaled explained, *“Every time I write a comment or a post in English, I feel like my writing and confidence are improving,”* while Layla emphasized the psychological safety of SP-mediated writing: *“Writing on social platforms is different because it’s relaxed. I can make mistakes and still feel okay, and that helps me write better.”* Peer feedback emerged as a motivational factor, reinforcing error correction and promoting reflective practice.<sup>38</sup> These findings can be interpreted through Swain’s Output Hypothesis, which posits that language production fosters deeper processing and restructuring of linguistic knowledge.<sup>39</sup> Task-based approaches similarly highlight the necessity of meaning-focused production for improving fluency, complexity, and accuracy.<sup>40</sup> SPs replicate these principles in informal, interactive contexts, providing learners with meaningful opportunities to produce language, monitor output, and refine expressive skills.

#### **4.2.4. PRONUNCIATION AND GRAMMAR**

Pronunciation emerged as one of the highest areas of perceived improvement, with 69.6% of respondents reporting moderate to significant gains. This improvement underscores the efficacy of SPs in providing

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<sup>38</sup> Blattner, Geraldine, and Lara Lomicka. “Facebook-ing and the Social Generation: A New Era of Language

Learning.” *ALSIC—Apprentissage des Langues et Systèmes d’Information et de Communication* 15, no. 1

(2012).

<sup>39</sup> See Swain, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> See Ellis, 2017

abundant auditory input and opportunities for imitation, consistent with usage-based and input-driven theories of language acquisition.<sup>41</sup> Through repeated exposure to authentic speech in diverse accents and registers, learners internalize segmental and suprasegmental features of English, enhancing both intelligibility and comprehensibility. Features such as replaying, captioning, and slowing videos support individualized, self-paced learning and reinforce phonological awareness through repetition and active imitation. Leow's (2018) *Noticing Hypothesis* further explains how learners' conscious attention to phonetic details fosters internalization, with SPs providing continuous opportunities for such noticing in emotionally engaging contexts.<sup>42</sup> These findings highlight the complementary role of SP-mediated auditory input in phonological development, particularly in settings where formal oral practice may be constrained.

Grammar improvement through SP engagement was also notable, with 60.4% of respondents reporting moderate to significant gains. These findings challenge the assumption that informal digital environments inherently impede grammatical development. Exposure to authentic written content, including posts, captions, and comments, fosters incidental grammar learning, allowing learners to internalize syntactic patterns through repeated contextualized encounters.<sup>43</sup> Interactive features, such as commenting and content creation, encourage learners to produce grammatically accurate language, promoting both receptive and productive reinforcement of structures.<sup>44</sup> Noticing and reflective engagement further facilitate the acquisition of grammar, supporting a blended approach that combines SP use with formal instruction for optimal outcomes.

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<sup>41</sup> Ellis, Nick C. "At the Interface: Dynamic Interactions of Explicit and Implicit Language Knowledge." *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 27, no. 2 (2005): 305–52.

<sup>42</sup> Vanderplank, Robert, and Vanderplank. *Captioned media in foreign language learning and teaching*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.

<sup>43</sup> See Sundqvist and Sylvén, 2016.

<sup>44</sup> See Blattner and Lomicka, 2012.

In short, the study's findings illuminate the substantial potential of SPs in enhancing EFL learners' language skills. Vocabulary and receptive skills, particularly reading and listening, benefit most consistently from sustained engagement with multimodal, authentic input. Pronunciation also shows notable improvement through repeated exposure and imitation, while grammar and productive skills (speaking and writing) exhibit moderate gains contingent upon active participation and reflective engagement. Qualitative insights reinforce the quantitative trends, illustrating how SPs enable experiential, contextually rich, and socially interactive learning that extends beyond the classroom. The data collectively suggest that SPs provide a complementary, integrative tool for EFL development, promoting vocabulary growth, comprehension, pronunciation, and productive skill practice, while emphasizing learner autonomy, engagement, and motivation.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that SPs function as high-impact learning systems for Syrian EFL tertiary students, repositioning everyday digital spaces as engines of language growth. Key findings show that sustained exposure to authentic, multimodal English content, such as videos, podcasts, posts, and interactive texts, significantly enhances vocabulary enrichment, listening and reading comprehension, and pronunciation. Repeated engagement across varied accents, registers, and contexts supports incidental learning, retention, and the internalization of linguistic patterns, effectively compensating for gaps in formal instruction within a context of instability and limited institutional support.

The findings also highlight the motivational power of socially mediated learning. Peer visibility, feedback, and collaborative interaction increase learners' motivation, confidence, and accountability, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which engagement accelerates proficiency. Learning shifts from obligation to participation, aligning with principles of autonomy and self-determination through flexible, personalized pathways. Additionally, SPs foster authentic communication and intercultural competence. Participants actively interacted with native and

non-native speakers, practiced real-world discourse, and developed pragmatic and idiomatic awareness while gaining cultural insight beyond textbook boundaries. Finally, SPs enable integrated, multimodal skill development, where listening, reading, writing, and speaking co-occur in immersive contexts. Pronunciation shows strong improvement through repeated auditory exposure, while gains in grammar and productive skills depend on active participation. In general, SPs emerge as a strategic complement to formal EFL instruction in disrupted learning environments.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study acknowledges several limitations that temper the generalizability of its findings. The reliance on self-reported perceptions through surveys and interviews introduces a degree of subjectivity, as learners' assessments of improvement may not fully correspond with measurable gains in proficiency. Variations in digital literacy, access to reliable internet, and familiarity with SPs likely influenced engagement levels and the perceived benefits of usage. Moreover, the study's focus on Syrian tertiary students constrains the applicability of results to other EFL contexts with differing sociopolitical, technological, or institutional conditions. The cross-sectional design captures only a snapshot of learners' experiences, leaving the longitudinal impact of sustained SP engagement underexplored. Future research incorporating objective assessments, longitudinal tracking, or experimental designs could provide a more robust understanding of SP-mediated learning outcomes.

In light of the findings, the study also points toward implications for pedagogical practice. Educators and institutions may consider integrating SPs as complementary tools within formal curricula, designing tasks that leverage the platforms' interactive, multimodal, and socially mediated affordances. Encouraging learners to engage actively with authentic content, participate in peer interactions, and reflect on cultural and linguistic insights can enhance both motivation and skill development. Supporting learners in cultivating digital literacy, managing self-directed learning, and employing strategies such as shadowing, commenting, and content creation can optimize the educational value of SPs. Institutions can further facilitate this integration through training programs for both

instructors and students, ensuring that SP engagement is purposeful, structured, and aligned with broader learning objectives.

The study also invites further investigation into several avenues. Longitudinal studies could examine the sustained effects of SP engagement on vocabulary, pronunciation, and productive skills, while experimental or quasi-experimental research could provide causal evidence of effectiveness compared to traditional pedagogical approaches. Cross-cultural studies could explore how socio-political and technological factors shape the role of SPs in EFL learning across different contexts. Incorporating objective performance measures or digital analytics could complement self-reported data, providing a more comprehensive understanding of learning outcomes. Additionally, research on the integration of AI-driven tools, adaptive content, and digital scaffolding within SPs may illuminate new possibilities for personalized and responsive language instruction, while studies examining the perspectives of educators could further inform best practices for integrating these platforms into curriculum design.

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