

The Role of Social Media in Enhancing Authentic Language Use and Critical Thinking among Fourth-Year EFL Students

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Abstract

The increasing use of social media among university students has raised interest in its potential role in supporting language learning beyond traditional classroom settings. This study examines the role of social media in enhancing authentic language use and critical thinking among fourth-year EFL students at the College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad. The study aims to explore students' perceptions of using social media for language learning and to examine the relationship between social media use, authentic language use, and critical thinking in a higher education context. A mixed-methods approach was adopted. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire administered to fourth-year EFL students, while qualitative data were gathered through open-ended questions to gain deeper insights into students' experiences. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, and qualitative responses were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that social media provides opportunities for authentic language practice and supports the development of critical thinking through interaction and exposure to real-world language contexts. The study concludes that social media can serve as an effective supplementary tool for EFL learning when used within a structured pedagogical framework

media sites have become a significant part of the everyday life of university students that provides them with new options of interaction, collaboration, and accessing the real language resources. Within the sphere of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), such websites received increased scholarly attention due to their potential to help learners gain extensive exposure to real language use. Although social media is increasingly popular in schools, there is still concern about its usefulness in the teaching process and whether it has a beneficial impact on the acquisition of the language. In the EFL context of higher education institutions, the extent to which the social media can help to engage in the actual use of the language and develop the skills of critical thinking among undergraduate learners is a controversial topic. Other studies dwell upon the positive social media impact on interaction and student engagement, whereas there are other studies which dwell upon the issues associated with the same, including the distracting nature of social media, the use of informal languages and the absence of systematic academic guidance. These difficulties indicate that the perception and use of social media among university level EFLs is a topic that requires empirical research. This paper will therefore aim at exploring the role of social media in encouraging genuine language speaking and critical reasoning among fourth year EFL students at the College of Education of Women, University of Baghdad. The research intends to explore the attitudes of the students on the social media as an aid to language learning and to determine the connections between social media use, use of real language and critical thought within a university setting. In order to achieve these goals, the study will analyze research questions that will focus on the level of participation of students using social media to learn a language and the nature of interactions between the study variables. The research strategy is a mixed-method to get a comprehensive understanding of the research

problem. The quantitative data are collected using a structured questionnaire to study the general trends and relationships between variables, and the qualitative data are collected using open-ended questions in order to trace the experiences and perspectives of the students in more detail. Such combination of methodologies allows us to examine the role of social media in EFL learning in greater detail. The importance of the study is that it contributes to the existing body of research that exists on the use of social media in EFL situations in higher education. The research focuses on the actual and critical language use among fourth-year undergraduate students and provides the information that may further refine the EFL teaching and learning, curriculum design, and the strategy of instruction at the university level. Also, the findings can assist EFL teachers and institutions of higher learning to make a sound decision regarding the deliberate use of social media in the language learning environment.

2.Theoretical Framework

This part will outline the theoretical basis of the research by defining the main terms and touching upon the most important theoretical issues involved in the social media, authentic language use, and critical thinking in EFL. The framework is based on the related literature that emphasizes the educational value of social media in tertiary education and language learning.

2.1 Terminology of the Study

2.1.1 Social Media

Social media refers to a collection of web resources and online tools that allow individuals to interact, connect and share content online. The social media sites have been providing the opportunity to connect, collaborate and even be exposed to real life linguistic input in the sphere of language acquisition beyond the formal classroom environment. Derakhshan and Hasanabbasi (2015) admit that social

media such as Facebook and email contribute to the improvement of language acquisition by expanding exposure of students to authentic text and enabling the establishment of the true contact with peers, teachers, and people with different cultural backgrounds. The social media in this research is characterized as a socializing environment that enables language acquisition and usage and does not only act as a social interaction or entertainment medium.

2.1.2 Authentic Language Use

Authentic language use refers to the real communication in real or realistic contexts using language. It involves material interaction, self-expression, and sharing of ideas with real audiences instead of the artificial classroom practices. Linguistic research on social media in language learning indicates that online communication allows engaging in accidental and natural language use and, consequently, improves communicative competence (Derakhshan and Hasanabbasi, 2015). Authentic use of language through social media in the context of higher education helps EFL learners in exercising English in real-world situations that replicate the context of real talking and the participation in culture.

2.1.3 Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is an advanced cognitive ability which involves analysis, assessment, contemplation, and decision making out of what you know. Critical thinking in schools allows the students to engage in active learning with the content, break assumptions and create rational arguments. Social Media and Learning studies have proven that an online discussion and interaction exposes a learner to different viewpoints and information resources, therefore, leading to an ability to evaluate and think critically. The integration of the use of social media in the EFL teaching method can contribute to the development of the critical thought process because students will be required to evaluate

content, respond critically, and articulate thoughts using the target language.

2.2 Social Media in Higher Education and Language Learning

In the recent past, research studies have highlighted the importance of social media applications in the creation of real learning environments that are not limited by traditional classroom environments. Situated real-life, significant work, an opportunity to collaborate and interact, and reflecting on what you have learned are all aspects that comprise authentic learning environments. The social media sites can assist in these characteristics by allowing students to interact with each other in real time, access real world content, and communicate with a vast array of people. Mulyono and Suryoputro (2020) examined the usage of social media sites in higher education and found that the sites served in real learning through the ability of students to share experiences, form collaborations, and have access to advice. They found out that apps such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram create authentic experiences and activities that enhance the engagement of learners and stimulate meaningful learning experiences. Besides, authentic learning theoretical models emphasize the need of relevant to the situation tasks, collaborative work, and the reflection on what you have learned, which may be assisted with the help of social media. When the students interact with each other on the social media, the real language input is exposed, and they are required to respond in a manner that is significant and appropriate to the context. This method enhances communication and challenges the students to apply the language in the real world rather than in the classroom performing exercises.

2.3 Social Media and Authentic Learning Environment

Recent studies have underscored the significance of social media platforms in fostering authentic learning settings that transcend the confines of conventional classrooms. Real-life situations, meaningful

assignments, chances to work together and engage, and thinking about what you've learned are all things that make up authentic learning environments. Social media sites help with these traits by letting students engage in interaction in real time, access real-world content, and talk to a wide range of people.

Mulyono and Suryoputro (2020) investigated the utilization of social media platforms in higher education, concluding that these platforms facilitate real learning by enabling students to share experiences, collaborate with peers, and access expert information. Their research revealed that platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram generate genuine contexts and activities that boost learner engagement and promote significant learning experiences. Also, theoretical models of authentic learning stress the necessity of tasks that are relevant to the situation, working together, and thinking about what you've learned, all of which can be helped by using social media. When students communicate with one other on social media, they are exposed to real language input and have to answer in ways that are meaningful and fit the situation. This technique improves communication skills and pushes students to utilize language in real-world instead of only doing exercises in the classroom.

2.4 Social Media and Development of Critical thinking.

The social media can also be quite beneficial in teaching EFL students to think critically. Students are forced to understand what is true, contrast various viewpoints, and express themselves when they peruse digital material. All these things are necessary to think critically. Students do not just passively receive information, they should talk, comment on it, and share it, Research shows that systematic use of social media can improve the analytical abilities of students and make them think more critically. Mulyono and Suryoputro (2020) argued that learning contexts that deploy social media positively influence verbal

communication and critical thinking and evaluational skills and, therefore, promote the growth of higher-order thinking skills. In such cases, students find it easier to consider what they have read, determine its meaning and express their conclusive what they mean in a clear manner particularly when they are speaking a different language. Students should not only learn passively in order to become better in critical thinking. They have to analyze, review and contemplate on the knowledge they have acquired. According to Paul and Elder (2014), critical thinking refers to the process of conceptualizing, analyzing, and evaluating knowledge in a systematic way to generate belief and action. This could be assisted through the use of social media sites since they provide students with a fair share of alternative opinions and require them to articulate their own and communicate with those who do not agree with them. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) also assume that computer mediated communication system assist individuals to think critically because they continue talking and thinking about things. Debates in social media allow the EFL students to analyze their own views, verify the facts and present convincing arguments using the language they want to learn. This will show students how to think more complexly, as well as, authentic social media conversation will enable youngsters to think critically by placing them in real-life situations where they are expected to understand what others are saying, give correct answers, and accept the opinion of others. This is in line with what is believed today, that the ideal solution to becoming stronger in critical thinking is doing things in the real world, not just in school.

2.5 Supporting the Real Language Use with Social Media.

Through social media sites, people can easily interact in the same manner as people interact in the real world. This renders them superb aids of motivating individuals to speak real language. EFL students may be able to use the language functions through activities such as

commenting, messaging, and joining online forums, to practice the functions of the language in the real-life context. Research shows that the interaction through a social network provides an opportunity to be exposed to actual input and output, thereby developing language skills in writing and interactional competence (Derakhshan and Hasanabbasi, 2015). Moreover, interaction with a wide variety of cultures and communication styles through social media enhances the pragmatic awareness and cultural understanding of the learners, which are crucial components of real language use.

2.6 The use of Social media as a critical thinking developing tool.

There has been a connection between the development of critical thinking capability using the social media in school particularly when students are required to reflect on what they read and participate in debates. By being introduced to other students through an online connection, the students are exposed to a variety of points of view that compel them to think critically about the material, compare various points of views and value the reasons why they think something. The studies of digital interaction show that structured online discussions make individuals think analytically and learn through reflection of the learned information. Critical conversations via social media in the EFL setting help learners to develop the language, as it is essential to express complex thoughts and arguments in the target language. Therefore, social media may be the synergistic location of cognitive development and language learning, The incorporation of social media into the teaching of the EFL can be viewed as a convergence of learning the language, real-life interactions, and critical thinking. The social media context provides a condition that promotes both the actual use of language and the reflection and critical thinking processes. Not only are these platforms fantastic in chatting with one another but also

when applied through a teaching method they are good in learning and enhancing language and thinking skills.

2.7 Previous Studies

Many studies have explored the role of social media in enabling real learning and language use in institutions of higher education. Mulyono and Suryoputro (2020) conducted a comprehensive survey that included both university educators and students to explore the attitudes of the use of social media in the context of promoting the authentic learning environment. The study was based on a quantitative methodology, which is the Social Media Authentic Learning Environment Inventory (SOMALEVI). The findings revealed that the vast majority of the respondents enjoyed positive attitudes towards the social media as a tool of authentic learning, particularly when it comes to enhancing cooperation, access to resources and interacting with professionals.

On a local scale, Hamood (2017) examined the use of the English lingua franca among university students and how authentic interaction is important in the development of communicative strategies. The research has shown that the students employ valid and legitimate ways of communication such as repetition, paraphrasing and code switching to achieve mutual understanding, which is how important genuine use of language in multilingual academic settings is.

Although an increasingly growing amount of research is available on the topic of social media and language learning, the majority of the current research that has been conducted has been on general concepts or individual language skills. Attention has not specifically been drawn to the investigation of the synergetic effect of social media in fostering both authentic language speech as well as critical thinking among EFL learners in the context of Iraqi higher education system. This gap is an indication of the need to present the current study, which will synthesize these variables and test them against each other in respect to fourth-

year EFL students in the College of Education for Women, the University of Baghdad.

2.8 Analytical Framework Adopted in the Study

The analytical framework applied in the current study involves the investigation of the connection between the social media use and two of the essential learning outcomes: authentic language use and critical thinking. The social media is a considered independent variable where the authentic language use and critical thinking form the dependent variables. The paradigm is supported by the past studies highlighting interaction, authenticity, and reflective learning in the digital environment. This paradigm will be used to analyze the data gathered among the fourth-year EFL students and interpret the results in connection with the research goals.

3. The Analytical Part

3.1 Research Design

The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods in their mixed format, which clarifies the effects of social media in shaping real language use and critical thinking among the EFL learners. A mixed-method approach provides the researcher with the benefits of both the fields: quantitative data provide a researcher with quantifiable tendencies and correlations, and qualitative data provide deep insight into the opinions and experiences of learners. By combining both approaches, the study will attempt to provide a more detailed and all-encompassing insight into the research issue.

3.2 Population and Sample

The participants involved in the study consisted of fourth year EFL students in the College of Education of Women in the University of Baghdad. It was a convenience sample of 60 EFL (fourth year) students, as they were available to the researcher during the data collection period. This sample was considered relevant to achieve the

objectives of the study in the given research scenario.

3.3 Research Instruments

The required data were obtained with the help of two research instruments a questionnaire and a set of open-ended questions.

3.3.1 Questionnaire

The quiz was designed to obtain figures regarding the way students use social media, how they use real language and how they think critically. It had 22 items and each was assessed on a five-point Likert-scale between strongly disagree (1) and strongly agree (5). The questionnaire consisted of three main sections including Social Media Use, Authentic Language Use and Critical Thinking. These variables were formulated after the theoretical framework of the research is formulated and also after the relevant previous studies in the field of EFL learning and educational technology.

Reliability of the Questionnaire

In order to test the reliability of the study instrument, the Cronbachs Alpha coefficient was employed to determine the consistency of the questionnaire with the parts of the questionnaire. The results showed the acceptable reliability rates in every dimension, which proves the reliability of a questionnaire and its suitability to analyze data.

Table 1 Reliability Statistics of the Questionnaire

Dimensions	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Media Use	8	0.82
Authentic Language Use	7	0.79
Critical Thinking	6	0.81
Overall Questionnaire	21	0.84

Note. Cronbach's Alpha values above 0.70 indicate acceptable reliability.

3.3.2 Open-ended Questions

The study was supplemented with three open ended questions that sought to supplement the quantitative findings and provide a more detailed account of student attitude towards their experiences. These questions were aimed at learning what the students believe about the way social media assists them to use language meaningfully correctly and think critically and the issues they experience when they use social media to learn English. Open ended questions allowed the students to write what they believed without any limitations and also provided qualitative data to support and define the quantitative results.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

The data were gathered throughout the academic year 2024–2025. The questionnaire and open-ended questions were given to the participants at the same time. Students were told why the study was being done and that their answers would only be utilized for research. Participation was optional, and confidentiality was upheld during the data collection procedure.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected information were analyzed using the quantitative and qualitative methods, based on the mixed-method research approach.

3.5.1 Analyzing Quantitative Data

This will be conducted to evaluate the impact of the changes made on the company performance.

We also employed descriptive forms of statistics such as means and standard deviations to examine the quantitative data that we obtained in the questionnaire and how students responded to it. In addition, correlation analysis was conducted to determine the relationships between the use of social media, use of authentic language and critical thinking.

3.5.2 Quantitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data, which were obtained out of the open-ended questions, were analyzed through thematic analysis. We analyzed the responses of students and discovered that there were patterns and themes that were reoccurring with regard to the use of real language and critical thinking. This research assisted to put the figures into their perspective and to justify them with reference to the personal experience and viewpoint of the students.

3.6 Research Limitations

The study is narrowed down to fourth-year EFL learners in the College of Education for Women, University of Baghdad, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Further, the use of convenient sampling and self-reporting could present certain issues in regards to subjectivity and representation. In spite of these shortcomings, the research is still relevant in its specific educational setting.

4. Results

The chapter presents the results of the research as per the mixed-methods research design. These results are divided into two key sections which include the quantitative results of the questionnaire and qualitative results of the open ended questions. The findings are given in an objective manner, without any interpretation, without discussing them much in the subsequent chapter.

4.1 Quantitative Results

This section presents the figures that were obtained in the survey, which was supposed to determine the way students perceive the use of social media, the use of real language, and critical thinking.

4.1.1 Using Social Media

Table 2 presents the mean and Standard deviation of the responses to the questions on the use of social media by the students.

Table 2 Means and Standard Deviations of Social Media Use

Item Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
Social Media Use	3.92	0.61

These findings indicate that the general mean score of social media usage is quite high, which means that the participants have a certain degree of interest in social media usage.

4.1.2 Authentic Language Use

The mean and standard deviations of responses of students on authentic language use are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Means and Standard Deviations of Authentic Language Use

Item Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
Authentic Language Use	3.85	0.64

The findings indicate that the median is quite high regarding the use of the authentic language.

4.1.3 Critical Thinking

table 4 indicates the mean and standard deviation of the perception of students about critical thinking.

Table 4 Means and Standard Deviations of Critical Thinking

Item Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation
Critical Thinking	3.78	0.67

The results indicate that mean scores of the critical thinking dimension are moderate to high.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

The correlation analysis was conducted to examine the correlations between social media use, the use of authentic language, and critical thinking.

Table 5 Correlation Matrix among Study Variables

Variables	Social Media Use	Authentic Language Use	Critical Thinking
Social Media Use	1.00	0.62	0.58
Authentic Language	0.62	1.00	0.65

Use			
Critical Thinking	0.58	0.65	1.00

A positive correlation was found between social media use and authentic language use ($r = 0.62$).

4.3 Qualitative Findings

This part shows the qualitative results of looking at how students answered the open-ended questions. The data were evaluated conceptually, revealing three principal

Theme 1: Exposure to Authentic Language Use

The students indicated that the social sites exposed them to actual English phrases and scenarios that involve people interacting with others. Quite a number of the individuals who participated indicated that they learnt how to meaningfully use language in real life situations through their interaction with the posts, comments, and multimedia materials

Theme 2: Opportunities for Reflection and Critical Engagement

Participants noted that going through content on social media encouraged them to take time before responding particularly when expressing themselves and responding to different views. Some responses underlined that discussing and drawing comparisons contributed to their thoughts.

Theme 3: Challenges of Using Social Media for Learning

students talked about how the informal language used on social media can be hard to understand and how it might be hard to stay focused when there are so many things going on. People said that these problems were typical when they used social media to learn, Other students discussed how the informal language of social media is difficult to understand, and it could be difficult to focus when it seems like there is much to be done at once. According to people, these issues were common when they learned using social media.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

5.1 Discussion

This segment discusses the way the findings of the study can be related to the research objectives, theoretical model and other significant studies in higher education. The discussion incorporates both qualitative and quantitative findings to present an overall picture of how social media can assist eFL fourth-year students to engage language in a meaningful and more natural way, as well as how they can think critically. The statistical data indicated that the individuals who participated were rather interested in the use of social media. This observation suggests the widespread use of the social media by the undergraduate students and supports the view that the media are supplements to technology-based learning in university education. In the context of second language learning, frequent contact and exposure to linguistic content through the social media make it easy to realize meaningful communication and interaction among the learners in non-formal learning settings. The results have shown that the mean scores of authentic language use were relatively high, meaning that social media provides learners with a chance to practice English in real-life situations. This finding was supported by the qualitative data, students reported exposure to real expressions, daily conversations, and different linguistic inputs. These findings resonate with the principles of true learning where major activities, real-life practice, and social interaction are a key aspect of successful higher education learning.

The outcomes of critical thinking showed that there were moderate and high results among the individuals. The qualitative study indicated that students who encountered the content of the social media were more prone to thinking about what they were reading, to contrasting other points of view and to formulating insightful remarks in English. This lends credence to the fact that online interaction in higher education

may aid in making students think critically and reflectively as they engage in debates and do content evaluation.

The correlation study also revealed that the use of social media, use of real language and critical thinking was positively correlated. This implies that the increased engagement with social media is associated with greater opportunities of having substantive language practice and cognitive engagement. The quantitative and qualitative findings combined with each other demonstrate the interconnection of language and cognitive development in socially mediated contexts of higher education. Although these findings were positive, the qualitative results also indicated that schoolwork with the help of social media could be difficult since it is distracting and individuals speak informally much. These challenges highlight the need to offer instructional guidance and well-structured practices in the integration of social media in higher education EFL coursework.

5.2 Conclusions

The findings of the research give us an opportunity to draw several conclusions.

1-To begin with, the social media will assist the fourth-year EFL students in using a real language more frequently by providing them with an opportunity to communicate with real people in the real world and listen to a natural language.

2-Second, social media makes the students be critical thinkers as it makes them consider the material in as many ways as possible, to think more critically, and to be more cautious with their writing in English.

3-Third, the correlations that exist between the use of social media, the use of real language, and the critical thinking prove that these are closely interconnected in the EFL context of the higher education.

4-The presence of both quantitative and qualitative data indicate that social media could become a valuable learning tool at the university

level in case it is applied towards a certain purpose. However, the presence of certain issues emphasizes the importance of intentional planning of pedagogical activities that can help ensure that the use of social media is aligned with educational objectives. The research concludes that social media would aid in educating undergraduate EFL students in higher learning institutions to get better in language and thinking.

6. Recommendations

The results of this research propose numerous suggestions of how the effective use of the social media in EFL learning could be enhanced in higher educational institutions.

1–First, the teachers of EFL at the university level are invited to resort to social media during language lessons by designing the activities that are clear and goal-oriented. Provision of social media guided assignments and clear learning goals can be used to ensure that the use of the social media brings on the real language use and critical thinking rather than a random interaction.

2–Second, professional development programs should be supported in colleges and universities to equip EFL teachers with the skills required to plan and conduct learning activities involving the use of social media. Such programs may assist teachers to make more students interact, think and think higher.

3–Third, EFL undergraduate students need to be instructed on how to use social media in a responsible manner when doing schoolwork. Providing information about how to approve the information in the Internet, how to polite communicate with other academics, how to use formal and informal terms can help make social media networks more helpful to study.

4–Fourth, the people designing university curriculum may consider including social media-related tasks in the syllabi of EFL courses in an

attempt to enable EFL students to learn in an authentic manner. These tasks can be incorporated into the curriculum so that the students can see the relevance between what they learn in school and how they can apply the language in a way that is meaningful in the real world.

5–Finally, higher education officials should view social media as a beneficial tool of learning which can aid individuals in learning languages in situations where rules are clear on the side of the school, and the appropriate digital infrastructure is present.

7. Suggestions for Future Studies

Judging on the findings and limitations of the current study, a number of recommendations are proposed to further studies in the field of EFL learning in higher learning institutions.

To begin with, further studies may adopt experimental or quasi-experimental designs to examine the causal effects of social media-based instructional strategies on the real language use and critical thinking ability among undergraduate EFL students.

Second, further studies can consider the role of social media on specific language skills such as speaking, writing, listening, and reading and their impacts on different levels of proficiency in higher education institutions.

Third, further studies can be conducted to determine how specific social media can be applied in the pedagogical practice to identify features that best support authentic language use and active participation of university students.

Fourth, longitudinal research can be pursued with an aim of analyzing how the use of language and critical thinking among undergraduates studying EFL develops over time, with the assistance of the systematic introduction of social media into academic learning.

Finally, a comparison of research conducted in different institutions of higher learning or cultural backgrounds might result in all round

information on how contextual factors can influence the effectiveness of social media in EFL learning.

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