

Between the Feed and the Essay: An Affordance–Register–Mediation Framework for Social Media and ESL Academic Writing

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Abstract

Today, the social media is where one of the most important places for young people to read and write is; what that has quietly mutated in the very meaning of everything second language acquisition with respect to learning how to write — is nothing short of a paradigm shift. How that shift translates into the academic writing of university-based ESL students is what this paper wants to learn about, and why it may be both crucial to success yet disempowering - at least paradoxically - in their control over academic register; and why platforms which potentially build fluency more explicitly while relieving the terror of writing may also loosen control. To explain this I draw several strands of theory together. Research in second language acquisition on input, output, interaction, and sociocultural mediation supplies the base. An ecological reading of affordances explains why the platforms are not all the same. Selinker's work on interlanguage and fossilisation explains why certain errors settle in. And recent scholarship on translanguaging and digital literacies reframes what should count as an error in the first place. Out of that synthesis I propose the Affordance–Register–Mediation (ARM) framework. Its claim is that writing outcomes do not follow from "social media" as such; they follow from the way three things bear on one another, namely the specific affordances of a given platform, the register a target genre demands, and the quality of the teaching that sits between them. The framework yields a staged classroom model for moving students' informal digital writing toward academic writing, along with a set of propositions that later empirical work could put to the test. It is a theoretical and not an empirical contribution: the paper presents rather than results, an argument and a model. Its underlying point is simple. The platform does little settling of itself, and what decides the outcome is instruction that thinks of a student's writing in the digital space as something to build on rather than curb. **Keywords:** social media; ESL writing; second language acquisition; academic register; language affordances; translanguaging; fossilisation; digital literacies; English for Academic Purposes

ملخص

تُعد وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي اليوم واحدة من أهم الساحات التي يمارس فيها الشباب القراءة والكتابة؛ وقد أحدث هذا تحولاً جذرياً (نقلة نوعية) في مفهوم اكتساب اللغة الثانية، وتحديدًا فيما يتعلق بتعلم الكتابة. تسعى هذه الورقة البحثية إلى فهم كيفية انعكاس هذا التحول على الكتابة الأكاديمية لدى طلاب الجامعات الذين يتعلمون الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية (ESL)، ولماذا قد يكون هذا الأمر حاسماً للنجاح، ولكنه في الوقت نفسه قد يضعف قدرتهم - بشكل متناقض - على التحكم في "الأسلوب الأكاديمي" (academic register)؛ ولماذا قد تؤدي المنصات - التي تعزز الطلاقة بشكل صريح وتزيل رهبة الكتابة - إلى إضعاف هذا التحكم أيضاً. ولتوضيح ذلك، أجمع بين عدة مسارات نظرية: حيث توفر الأبحاث المتعلقة باكتساب اللغة الثانية - والتي تتناول المدخلات والمخرجات والتفاعل والوساطة الاجتماعية الثقافية - الأساس النظري؛ بينما يفسر منظور "الفرص المتاحة" (affordances) من منظور بيئي - سبب تفاوت طبيعة هذه المنصات؛ وتوضح أعمال "سيلينكر" (Selinker) "حول" اللغة البيئية (interlanguage) و"التحجر اللغوي" (fossilisation) أسباب رسوخ أخطاء معينة؛ كما تعيد الدراسات الحديثة حول "التناوب اللغوي" (translanguaging) و"الكفاءات الرقمية" (digital literacies) صياغة مفهوم "الخطأ" من الأساس. وانطلاقاً من هذا التوليف، أقترح إطار عمل

يجمع بين "الفرص المتاحة" و"الأسلوب اللغوي" و"الوساطة" (ويُرمز له اختصاراً بـ ARM) وتقوم فرضية هذا الإطار على أن مخرجات الكتابة لا تتبع من "وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي" بحد ذاتها، بل تنتج عن التفاعل بين ثلاثة عناصر: الفرص المتاحة التي توفرها منصة معينة، والأسلوب اللغوي الذي يتطلبه نوع النص المستهدف، وجودة التدريس التي تعمل كحلقة وصل بينهما. ويقدم هذا الإطار نموذجاً تدريسياً مرحلياً للانتقال بكتابات الطلاب الرقمية غير الرسمية نحو الكتابة الأكاديمية، إلى جانب مجموعة من الفرضيات التي يمكن اختبارها في دراسات تجريبية لاحقة. وتُعد هذه الورقة مساهمة نظرية وليست تجريبية؛ فهي تطرح حجة ونموذجاً بدلاً من عرض نتائج بحثية. وتتمثل الفكرة الجوهرية في أن المنصة الرقمية لا تحدد النتائج بمفردها، بل إن العامل الحاسم هو أسلوب التدريس الذي ينظر إلى كتابة الطالب في الفضاء الرامي باعتبارها ركيزة للبناء عليها وتطويرها، لا عائقاً يجب تقييده. الكلمات المفتاحية: وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي؛ كتابة اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية ((ESL؛ اكتساب اللغة الثانية؛ الأسلوب الأكاديمي؛ الفرص اللغوية المتاحة؛ التآوب اللغوي ((translanguaging؛ التحجر اللغوي؛ الكفاءات الرقمية؛ اللغة الإنجليزية للأغراض الأكاديمية.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

For most students at university now, social media is not something added on to life. It is where a great deal of life happens, writing included. They read there, argue there, and write there more than they write anywhere else, and language learners are no different. An ESL student opens Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, or X for friends and news and ends up practising English almost by accident (Pikhart & Botezat, 2021). This has consequences for teaching. Writing in a second language used to be mostly a classroom affair, run on grammar drills, model essays, and correction in red ink. Much of what many students write these days takes place out of class: bits and pieces to a real person (with flesh and blood, and likely heavy at stake in their own right) with no grade offer on the table (Reinhardt 2019). What those sites have that a textbook nearly never does is English as it is really spoken and an inducement to respond (Chen & Shu, 2024). You do a read, write and then takes a response in one elegant loop. The very item that brings life to the loop is also what makes it unclear. Online English, by contrast, is more rapid and much less formal and littered with the kind of forms an examiner would never let stand. Thus, the question to ask isn't that age-old worn-out rather tired one of whether social media helps or hurts. It happens when easygoing quickness and freedom meet a profession that celebrates accuracy, creating a conflict between desire and goal, And it is what every teacher can accomplish at that contact point (Abdushukirovna & Alimzhanovna, 2025).

1.2 The Problem and the Paradox

The positives are plentiful for ESL writing but it also comes with these few negatives of its own. Between the very relaxed post language, where sometimes speak in a chat-like manner and an essay writing need disciplined language, there is an enormous space. Readers could care less about penmanship sins on the internet (abbreviated verbiage, emojis, no punctuation and non-finite grammar) than academic writing voice-focused errors. But many of these fears — that all day use will paralyze them, petrify minutiae and turn readers into featureless blobs for a student just as marauding scarecrows do (Asafo-Adjei et al. However, beneath it mends a conundrum that genuinely drives this paper. Rather, they will find writing to family and friends fairly easy, confident to write freely in their own voices, whilst get stuck on a single paragraph of an essay. In fact, that same student usually can tell the difference between informal and formal registers but lets it slip through anyway — precisely then when composing labor is at its highest. Knowledge alone does not amount to control, confidence in one register must not be taken as a given for its other. There is yet to be a cost-benefit study of the place social media has in ESL writing. And it also must explain why awareness so often does not lead to performance. This is the task I take up in the rest of this paper.

1.3 Aims and Guiding Questions

A word on method is in order, since it shapes what follows. This is a conceptual paper. It reports no primary data of its own; it builds an argument from published research and points to the empirical work that could put that argument to the test. Three questions organise it:

1. Through what mechanisms does writing on social media support or hinder the development of ESL academic writing?
2. Why does the knowledge that registers differ so often fail to keep informal features out of academic work?
3. What sort of teaching can recruit students' informal digital repertoires toward academic ends?

1.4 Significance

Several readers stand to gain from the argument. Teachers get a clearer picture of what their students do with English once class ends, and a firmer basis for designing tasks and feedback (Jin, 2025). Those who build curricula get one more reason to treat digital literacies as part of a language programme rather than an optional extra (Joseph & Khan, 2020). And the wider field of second language acquisition gets a way past the familiar verdict of cure or curse, toward a statement of the conditions under which social media actually helps or harms (Haque, 2023). What the paper adds that earlier accounts do not is a name for those conditions, in the ARM framework, and a teaching model that grows out of them.

1.5 Scope

The focus here is writing, and inside writing the concern is grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, organisation, and awareness of register. Social media touches speaking, listening, and reading too, but those sit outside the argument (Mushtaq et al., 2022). For the purpose of this post, I will use "social media" as a way to describe social networking sites, microblogs and content-sharing communities (not including your email & / or foreigners language-learning apps built just for that). For intermediate / advanced university ESL students are well in my mind as both likely to be using it, and the group which is massively online at all times yet more than able to make sense of texts about academic writing etc. — these clearers directly impactatively with respect to their subject area. This is a conceptual paper, and therefore the assertions it makes are theoretical propositions based only on previously published work but not its own results.

2. Second Language Acquisition Foundations

Several older theories of language learning still account for much of what social media does, provided we read them into the new setting. Four matter most, and it helps to treat them not as a checklist but as one connected story about how a second language grows. Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis says that acquisition moves forward when a learner meets input a little past their current level but still within reach. Social media supplies input without pause, in posts, comments, threads, and clips, ranging from careful prose to fast slang. The snag is quality. Some of it models the target well and some does not, so its worth turns on whether the learner can tell which is which. Swain's (1985) output hypothesis looks the other way, at production. Made to write rather than only read, learners run up against the edges of what they know and test their guesses about the language. Social media constantly demands you creating output and completely discards it. A comment, a caption, a tweet (or what I choose to call that style of twitter post): each is a small piece of writing with a very real audience and the reader on the other end, where any obligation to clarity finds its pressure. Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis occupies the middle ground. Learning = when meaning has to be negotiated, the message that blew out misses its mark and the other side gets back on-track by questioning, checking or getting clarification on what was said. Repair of just this type fills comment threads, and evermore private messages. An writer writes, misunderstands, retries and this time refines the language taking the overlay input Long has fostered central. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory casts the whole business as social first and individual second, played out in the zone of proximal development, the gap between what a learner manages alone and what they manage with help. Later work carried this straight into language study (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Taken together, the four theories suggest that social media is not just somewhere to practise. It stirs the same machinery, input and output and interaction and social support, that drives second language development in the first place.

3. An Ecological Turn: Affordances and the Differentiation of Platforms

One habit runs through the literature and through staffroom talk alike: "social media" gets discussed as if it were a single thing. It is not, and to say how it acts on writing we need the idea of affordance. Gibson (1979) coined the term in ecological psychology to mean an action possibility that an environment holds out to an agent. van Lier (2004) carried it into language learning, where his point was that a linguistic environment does not so much deliver language as offer chances for meaningful action that a learner may take up or ignore. A platform, then, is not a neutral pipe carrying text. The setting is intentional, its qualities allowing for certain writing acts and quietly disallowing others. By way of example, boyd (2014) terms these settings networked publics and traces how their properties – persistence, visibility, spread – change the ways people write themselves into being; Barton and Lee (2013) detail how each digital space shapes its own writing habitus. Again, differences between platforms cease to look incidental through this lens of analysis and, indeed, look like the point. Stylised as X, it advances to the compressed — punishing punctuation; oxford commas; connective tissue. Facebook allows for longer posts, enabling more complex clauses. On Instagram captions reign supreme, and to some extent meaning too in the interplay between image and a few words while less of the writing is required to pull its weight. How

WhatsApp is designed makes its fast, private back-and-forth exchange — where the messages were never really meant to be viewed for form — an ideal cover for the kind of negotiation Long describes. Reddit and similar threaded forums imply just yet another: persistent disputation, assertion contending with counter-assertion and evidence in between — something a lot closer to an academic style of argument than any caption. This in turn has direct ramifications on how teaching is carried out. If every platform pushes a different writing act to the front, then each one stands in a different relation to the academic essay. The compression X rewards is exactly what an abstract wants and the opposite of what a developed body paragraph needs; the argument of a forum thread rehearses the moves of academic debate; the caption trains a writer to hold an audience but not to sustain prose. Asking whether "social media" helps or harms writing is, on this account, the wrong question, badly put. The question worth asking is which affordances, on which platforms, sit at what distance from the target genre. ARM, set out in Section 6, is built to answer exactly that.

4. Interlanguage, Fossilisation, and the Failure of Awareness

Section 1.2 left a puzzle open: why does knowing that registers differ so often fail to keep the informal one out? Selinker's (1972) account of interlanguage supplies the mechanism. A learner's developing second language, he argued, is a system in its own right, and parts of it are liable to fossilise, to stop moving toward the target and set in place, stubborn even against further teaching. Selinker tied fossilisation to the conditions under which forms get practised, and it is here that the ecology of social media does its damage. Look at what the platforms set up. Input is plentiful but unedited, so non-target forms, a missing article here, a slipped tense there, subjects and verbs that do not agree, turn up often enough to start looking normal. Output is heavy but rarely corrected for form, partly because correcting a friend is awkward and partly because the aim online is to be understood, not to be right. Under those conditions a wrong form gets produced again and again, understood every time, and never once contradicted. Little by little it becomes automatic, sliding from slow, watched production into fast production that runs on its own. But that solves the paradox. As Krashen (1985) states, the monitor has utility only when a writer possesses sufficient time and attention, as well as the rule in mind to check with; under the burden of building an argument, the monitor goes out of order. So a student may be able to learn the rule as abstract knowledge for repetition on a grammar test, but fossilisation – automatic language production relies on habitual forms which are not used until they become automatized and where conscious control is not exercised. The awareness lives on the screen; the error lives underneath it. This is why register short. It works at the site of where the knowledge lives, and leaves everything else — including trouble — alone. That is why any effective assistance must rely on means of production that are once again surveillable or correctable which the platforms not only fail to provide but also outright disallow.

5. From Linguistic Purism to Translanguaging

It is the label we slap on a problem that decides how we will fight it. The reflex is to define offline features present in essays as "interference" or just plain error and immediately automatically treat a student's electronic idiom as a contagion against which to defend. This reflex is defensible if you're the kind of person guarding the gates to academic register. The curriculum will usually present a rather thin and, in all likelihood, dangerous image of the learner. However, a stronger foundation is the translanguaging theory. García and Wei (2014) argue that a multilingual user, and by extension a user who commands more than one register, does not flip between sealed codes but draws on one integrated repertoire, picking features to suit the moment. Canagarajah (2013) makes the same case for writing: able writers negotiate and blend their resources instead of standing guard over a border. Seen this way, the informal digital repertoire is not static to be filtered out but part of how the student makes meaning, and so a resource worth recruiting. The New London Group's (1996) multiliteracies and Kern's (2015) work on language, literacy, and technology push the idea into course design, where the aim is a wider repertoire and the judgement to use it well, not the quiet suppression of one variety in the name of another. None of this licenses giving up on academic register. The essay is still marked and the article still refereed, and a student who cannot produce the valued register pays for it, whatever a sociolinguist might say in defence of the repertoire (Norton, 2013). Norton's notion of investment is useful here: students put themselves into learning a register when they can see it opening doors to identities and access they want, and teaching that waves away their digital voice cuts against that. So the position I take here is deliberately two-sided. Respect the repertoire the student walks in with, and teach the academic register openly, with no apology for doing so. Banning shuts the repertoire out; leaning on translanguaging by itself can leave the gatekept genre half-taught. The workable middle treats a new register as more range for the writer, not a swap of one code for another. That balance is the heart of the ARM framework and of the teaching model that comes out of it.

6. The Affordance–Register–Mediation (ARM) Framework

Here the strands of the argument come together. The paper's main theoretical claim is the Affordance–Register–Mediation (ARM) framework, and its starting assertion is that the writing outcomes people pin on social media are not really a property of social media at all. They are the joint result of three things pulling on one another:

Affordance (A): the differentiated action possibilities of a given platform, meaning the writing acts it invites, rewards, and discourages (Section 3).

Register (R): the demands of the target academic genre, understood as a point in a space of registers rather than a fixed absolute standard (Sections 4–5).

Mediation (M): the amount and quality of teaching that stands between the platform and the essay (Sections 4 and 7).

The core of the framework is relational. Whatever effect a given A has on a given R is moderated by M. From that, five propositions can be stated, each of them open to test.

P1. Fluency and the affective gains, meaning more writing, more willingness to write, and less anxiety, come mainly from the output and interaction affordances that nearly all platforms share, and so depend little on which platform is used.

P2. Register risk grows with the distance between a platform's leading affordance and the target academic genre, and is amplified by how much unmonitored use a student puts in; the compression a microblog rewards carries more risk for essay writing than the argument of a forum thread does.

P3. Awareness of register difference is needed but not enough to stop transfer, because fossilised, automatic forms slip past the conscious monitor once the work of composing takes over.

P4. Mediation moderates the tie between affordance and register. Rich, feedback-heavy teaching turns a given affordance from a liability into a resource; where such teaching is missing, the risk runs unchecked.

P5. The biggest gains show up where instruction makes cross-register transfer explicit, through contrastive analysis and guided rewriting, and does so from a translanguaging stance that treats the informal repertoire as a resource rather than a fault.

ARM is meant as a heuristic for organising research and teaching, not as a model already proven out. Its use is that it turns the field's big, unanswerable question into a smaller and answerable one. Instead of arguing over whether social media is good or bad for writing, it asks after a specific interaction, one that can be measured, among platform affordances, genre distance, and teaching. How each proposition might be tested is taken up in Section 9.

7. A Register-Transfer Pedagogical Model

If teaching is the thing that moves the needle (P4), then the obvious next question is what that teaching should actually contain. The model below turns the ARM stance into a four-stage sequence for carrying digital writing across into academic writing. It rests on Vygotskian scaffolding inside the ZPD and on Gutiérrez's (2008) third space, a stretch of the classroom set up on purpose to bring a student's everyday and academic repertoires into contact instead of keeping them in separate rooms.

Stage 1 — Harvest. Teaching starts from the student's own digital text, a post, a thread, a handful of comments they are willing to share. Beginning from the learner's real production respects the repertoire discussed in Section 5 and secures the investment Norton describes, and it keeps the analysis that follows concrete instead of abstract.

Stage 2 — Contrastive register analysis. The harvested text is set next to a short academic passage on a similar topic, and the class works through the differences one by one: word choice and lexical density, the complexity of the syntax across its clauses and phrases (Ortega, 2003; Lu, 2011), stance and hedging, cohesion, and the job each text is doing. A discourse-analytic reading (Gee, 2014) takes the analysis past the surface to the social work the writing performs, who is being addressed, what authority is being claimed, what self is being put forward. This is the stage that turns a vague awareness into explicit knowledge that can be examined, and in doing so it puts to work the very monitor that Section 4 identified as the sore spot.

Stage 3 — Guided recontextualisation. Under scaffolding, students rewrite and expand their digital text into an academic paragraph. A compressed microblog claim gets opened out into a topic sentence with support behind it; a run of chat messages is reordered into an argument that holds together; a sharp opinion from a forum becomes the germ of an argumentative essay. Because this is watched, feedback-rich production of the same forms that were quietly fossilising, it reaches the automatic layer that awareness on its own never touches (P3).

Stage 4 — Independent transfer. Students then take the moves to a fresh academic task with the source text out of sight, and the teacher names, out loud, the skills that carry over. Concision picked up on a microblog does the work of an abstract; the habit of holding a reader serves the essay; the claim-and-rebuttal rhythm of a thread argument feeds straight into handling counter-arguments. Naming the transfer is what turns a lucky by-product into a skill the student can pack up and reuse.

In ARM's terms the model leaves the affordance where it is and raises the mediation instead. It takes the writing a platform already produces and adds, stage by stage, the watching and the feedback the platform leaves out. The point is not to ban the informal register, and it is not to leave students guessing at the difference on their own. It is to build a bridge they can see between the two.

8. Implications for Teaching and Curriculum

At the level of the whole programme, a few things follow. The first is that the old wall between formal writing done in class and informal writing done online is getting harder to hold. Teaching that means to stay useful has to meet students where they already write (Abdushukirovna & Alimzhanovna, 2025). This is not a call to throw out the syllabus; it is a call to bring digital tools and literacies into it deliberately rather than by accident. A private class blog or a closed group can carry peer review, shared brainstorming, or the exacting practice of summarising an article inside a tight character count, turning a platform's pull toward academic ends (Lira-Gonzales & Grégoire, 2022).

A second point is that code-switching and register have to be taught on purpose, not left to instinct. It is a mistake to assume a student will simply feel the difference between a post and an essay; they need direct, analytic work on the features of each, digital and academic alike, of the kind Stage 2 lays out (Mahfoodh & Hashim, 2021). Underneath all of it sits critical digital literacy: the judgement to weigh a source, to read the purpose behind a piece of online writing, and to behave responsibly in public writing spaces (Nkhi, 2023; Joseph & Khan, 2020). On the argument of Section 3, this is the literacy that turns the churn of the feed into input worth learning from, and that lets a learner move on purpose across the registers each platform holds out.

9. Limitations and an Empirical Research Agenda

The limits of the paper are the limits of its kind. What it offers is conceptual: ARM and the teaching model are argued for, not shown, and the propositions in Section 6 are claims waiting on evidence rather than results in hand. The framework also smooths over some things. Affordances are neither fixed nor felt the same way by every learner, and the line between "digital" and "academic" register is itself on the move. These are reasons to test the framework, not to hold it back.

It has at least been built so that testing is possible, and it says how. A mixed-methods programme could put ARM to work along the following lines. A survey of intermediate-to-advanced EAP students could measure platform-specific use rather than a single lump figure for screen time, which would let P1 and P2 be told apart. Paired writing samples, one academic essay and a self-chosen set of the same student's social-media texts, could be examined for register features and, importantly, for syntactic complexity using established indices such as the L2 Syntactic Complexity Analyzer (Lu, 2011; Ortega, 2003), and for lexical density, to see whether affordance distance really does predict register transfer (P2). Semi-structured interviews with students and teachers, read thematically and through discourse analysis (Gee, 2014), could get at the awareness-control gap that P3 turns on. For P4 and P5, the most rigorous test would be a comparison of taught vs. untaught conditions, comparing Section 7 model classes with carefully-selected match controls. Such a study would need approval from an ethics board, informed consent to publish private writing by students, and extremely careful curation of student writing — you would only be able to make claims based on data collected in that way. This paper does not claim to do anything of this nature. This is referred to as the study you should do.

10. Conclusion

Instead, this paper was intended to provide a rationale of how social media drags ESL academic writing down. In short, the platform itself is only specified to a small extent. Real opportunities open up through Social media; it allows learners to express themselves more fluently, with greater motivation, and exposure to live English through original writing & responses. It also brings real trouble: informal features drifting into academic work, errors fossilising below the reach of awareness, and time pulled away from careful revision. Which of these wins out is not fixed by the technology. It is fixed by how a platform's affordances, the distance to the target register, and, above all, the teaching between them happen to line up.

ARM gives that interaction a name and makes it something a researcher can study; the register-transfer model turns it into something a teacher can do on a Tuesday morning. The larger message is plain enough. ESL writing

instruction has to catch up with a world where most writing already happens online. It should take seriously the real practice students get in informal spaces, teach the gatekept academic register openly and without a sneer, and hand students the judgement to move between every register they are going to meet. Whether the framework holds is a question for evidence. The claim here is only that it is the right question, and that the paper has shown how to put it.

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