OPTIMISING SOCIAL MEDIA FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY IN GHANAIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract:

The present study qualitatively investigates how to optimise social media for language learning from the perspective of students. Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from 80 first-year students from a university in Ghana. Harasim's (2012) Online Collaborative Learning Theory (OCLT) is adopted as the theoretical framework. The findings show that there are seven (7) social media platforms mostly patronised by students, with Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube being the top three most patronised. It also shows that while students usually use social media to communicate with family and friends and for entertainment purposes, education is the least important reason they use social media. The results also reveal that social media improves learners' speaking, reading, listening and writing skills, as well as their vocabulary and grammar knowledge, and reduces their language anxiety. The data show that there should be a supervised/directed learning, sharing of language materials on the platforms, conduction of language activities on social media, mitigation of automated distractions and support in the cost of the internet. The study recommends that social media can also be a very addictive and distractive tool. Hence, when used pedagogically, language instructors should guide and supervise the students well.

Keywords: social media; language skills; language pedagogy; education; Ghana

1. Introduction

The world is fast advancing in technology use, especially post covid'19 pandemic, with digital pedagogy or online, virtual, hybrid and blended learning becoming a subject of interest (Bali & Zarea, 2017; Bali et al. 2020). One of the dominant outlets of the digital space is social media. It is generally perceived that social media are not originally designed for pedagogical purposes but rather entertainment and social purposes

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(Mohammed et al., 2020). However, the fact that social media permeate every facet of life in recent times, including education, cannot be contended (Manogaran & Sulaiman, 2022). Chen and Xiao (2022) are clear in their argument that the use of social media is incomparably on the rise among students, influenced by the globalized forms of communication and the post-pandemic rush to use multiple social media platforms for education in different fields of study. Regan (2015) reports that as of 2015, the number of social media active users globally had risen to 2.206 billion, resulting in about 30% global penetration. Nuri et al. (2021) provide more updated data on internet usage, stating that as of January 2021, there were 4.66 billion (59.5% of the global population) active internet users in the world. Makki and Bali (2021) also add that, as of 2020, there were 3.96 billion people, representing about 51 percent of the global population, active on social media. They also detail that Facebook has 2.603 billion active monthly users, ranking first among the new media platforms, while WhatsApp and YouTube have 2 billion users respectively. Also, Facebook Messenger has 1.3 billion users, WeChat has 1.203 billion and Instagram has 1.08 billion users. They elaborate that TikTok, Snapchat and Twitter also have 800 million, 397 million and 326 million users, respectively. The other not-too-common platforms in Ghana, such as QQ, Sina Weibo, QZone and Kuaishou have 694 million, 550 million, 517 million and 400 million users, respectively. In Ghana, Apeanti and Danso (2021) report that there are about 3.6 million active internet users, about 50% of whom are active on social media as of 2012. These statistics buttress the point that social media have become dominant in life, especially among the young generation such as students (van den Beemt et al., 2020). Rou et al. (2019) are emphatic that 7 out of 10 youths check social media more than once a day.

It is elusive to give social media a strict definition (Tess, 2013). The concept of social media can, however, be explained to be all the internet applications that support and enable the exchange of content (van den Beemt et al., 2020). Adjin-Tettey et al. (2022) define social media as interactive digital tools which enable users to create and share information, ideas and interests with an audience. In addition, Kaplan and Heinlein, cited in Zhou (2021) define social media as "*a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content*" (p. 743). Social media has transformed the communication and interaction models among individuals across the globe, and it keeps impacting and influencing different facets of life. The invention of social media is argued to be one of the greatest inventions of the 21st century. If used effectively, it promises to produce desirable outcomes, especially in activities that involve interaction, communication and exchange/transfer of information, such as teaching and learning (Kumar, 2014). Social media is able to enhance engagement on multiple topics in a short period of time due to its speed, reach, ease of operation and relative affordability (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2022). It is not restricted by time and space. Regardless of the time of the day and the location in which one finds oneself, information can still be accessed virtually.

Social media are adapted for use in education and have become one of the major tools in teaching and learning because they provide viable platforms for the sharing and receiving of information, knowledge and documents among teachers and learners

(Hosen et al., 2021; Top, 2012). During the COVID-19 global shutdown, which affected about 1.2 billion learners across 186 countries, technology, generally, and social media specifically, became indispensable avenues that ensured the continuity of the teaching and learning process (Masfarizan & Yusoff, 2020). Even in the post-lockdown era, online learning platforms such as Snapchat, MS Teams, Twitter, Zoom, Google, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Google Classroom, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn, among other similar 'new media' platforms have become integral in education (Baniyassen, 2020). Makki and Bali (2021) assert that even before the pandemic, global investment in technology was huge and stood at $18.66 billion as of 2019. However, the impact of the pandemic, which has resulted in a significant surge in educational technology usage, has skyrocketed the amount, and the projection is that, by 2025, the global investment in technology will reach $355 billion, part of which will go into the procurements of language apps, online learning software, video and audio conference tools, or visual tutoring, among others (Anas, 2019). With over 100 social virtual platforms and over a billion subscribers or users, coupled with millions of capital investments, it is clear that social media have become a way of life for most individuals and nations (Cetinkaya & Sutcu, 2018; Monica-Ariana & Anamaria-Mirabela, 2014).

The relevance of social media to the success of education and the teaching and learning of language has become an issue of interest to language pedagogues and researchers (Mohammed et al., 2020). It cannot be discounted that (English) language is the predominant tool that is used to communicate, exchange or transfer information or ideas over social media (Reinhardt & Zander, 2011). That is why Thurairaj et al. (2012) recommend that social media can be exploited for language teaching and learning. There is research to suggest that using social media in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom helps facilitate language learning, and researchers have been calling for the use of social media in education (Reinhardt & Zander, 2011; Balakrishnan & Lay, 2016; Everson et al. 2013). In addition, its characteristic creativity, collaboration, communication, interactivity, convergence and community are useful tools for learning. Several studies have investigated specific social media platforms and their roles as learning tools. For instance, Facebook (Kabilan, 2016; O'Bannon et al., 2013), Twitter (Aydin, 2014; Prestridge, 2014), Blogs (Greenhow et al., 2015), YouTube (Abdullah et al., 2013), Wikis (Trocky & Buckley, 2016).

Extant literatures have investigated both the positive and negative effects of social media as a tool for learning, as well as its impacts on students' academic performance (Khan et al., 2016; Bicen & Uzunboylu, 2013; Giunchiglia et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2016). For instance, the studies of Lee, Koo, & Kim (2016) and Vikneswaran & Krish (2015) found that when students used social media, especially Facebook, as a learning tool, there were considerable improvements in their writing and language skills. The students showed more interest in learning, which resulted in improvements in their language skills. Similarly, Gurcan (2015) elaborates that social networks improve communication skills, foster academic relationships among peers, promote student engagement, and facilitate collaborative learning. Aloe et al. (2014) also found that shy and timid students who could not speak and actively participate in the physical classroom were able to express

themselves, construct knowledge, and actively involve themselves in online learning. Other literature has shown that learning results improve with online learning partly because interaction between students increases (Balakrishnan & Lay, 2016; Ahern et al., 2016).

On the negative effects, studies have found that social media is highly disruptive and has too many distractions, which shortens learners' attention spans, often resulting in negative or low learning outcomes (Gupta & Irwin, 2016; Wood et al., 2012). For instance, Adjin-Tettey et al. (2022) found that while using social media to learn, non-academic alerts, videos, and messages could pop up to disrupt the learning process. The tension between the possible pedagogical use of social media and its characteristic distractions could explain why many teachers and school managers struggle to integrate the two, hence the under-exploitation of social media in the classroom (van den Beemt et al., 2020). The use of social media in language teaching and learning is still at an infantile stage in Ghana; therefore, the field has not been optimally explored. In fact, e-/online learning became intensified in Ghana around 2020 when COVID-19 peaked, leading to school shutdowns. Consequently, resorting to virtual learning became imperative. Several tertiary institutions developed their own internal Learning Management Systems (LMS) to manage online learning, e.g., Sakai (University of Ghana), Moodle (UEW), etc. It must be noted that these institutions were using online systems even before the COVID outbreak, but at a minimal level. Some schools are still using these platforms in the post-pandemic era. Amidst all these, the use of social media platforms such as Zoom, Google Meets, WhatsApp, and Telegram for video/audio meetings and general dissemination of information also became useful and continues to be so.

The current study investigates the relevance of social media to the learning of the English language from the perspective of the learners and also looks into how social media use can be optimized to improve learners' language skills. This position is premised on the arguments of scholars such as Bali and Zarea (2017) and Bali et al. (2020) that learning approaches and pedagogy should continuously evolve to meet students' interests. The researchers hypothesize that when lecturers and instructors become aware of learners' interests and perceptions, they will be better informed on which strategies, approaches, media, and tools to employ to make English teaching effective.

To achieve this objective, the study is guided by the following questions:
1) What is the attitude of learners on social media?
2) How is social media relevant to the learning of the English language in Ghana?
3) How can social media be optimised to improve language skills?

The theoretical framework for the study is the Online Collaborative Learning Theory (OCLT). Generally, collaborative learning is an approach to teaching where learners of different ability levels work together in small teams towards a common task. The Online Collaborative Learning is a model that transitions collaborative learning from face-to-face settings to online environments. The theory was developed by Harasim (2012). According to Bates (2015), the OCLT is grounded in cognitive development theories that center on knowledge construction, academic knowledge advancement, deep learning conditions, and conversational learning. With this theory, learners are urged to

solve problems collaboratively through discourse instead of memorizing answers (Harasim, 2012). The theory affords learners the opportunity to learn through the generation of ideas by brainstorming, comparing ideas, organizing, and discussing them (Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). It centers on intellectual convergence, where learners build knowledge through discourse and consensus.

The theory has a strong affinity with social media because the collaborative nature of the theory connects smoothly with the inherent social nature of social media (Khan et al., 2016). The theory itself is founded on social constructivism, hence, learning and knowledge generation become a social or collaborative activity, rendering social media a suitable platform for learning (Khan et al., 2016). In all these, the instructor is expected to play significant roles. They facilitate the process by first providing the appropriate resources and learning activities to encourage student learning. Then, they ensure that core concepts, practices, and discipline are integrated into the learning cycle.

2. Method

The study adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on the case study design. The researchers believe that the inherent characteristics of the qualitative approach, as elaborated by Creswell (2012), including exploring a phenomenon, developing a detailed understanding of a problem, collecting word/text-based data, using text analysis to analyze the data, and interpreting or making sense of the findings, will afford them the opportunity to obtain a detailed appreciation of the phenomenon, analyze and report on it, and draw reliable, comprehensive conclusions. The case study design also enables the researchers to explore the depth and uniqueness of each respondent's perceptions and experiences of using social media for language learning (Adjin-Tettey et al., 2022).

The study participants were first-year students of a university in Accra, the capital city of Ghana. This is because these students study the course English Language 1, a 3-hour credit course delivered through a blended mode, comprising 2 hours face-to-face and 1 hour online each week. Eighty students willfully responded to the survey questionnaire and were included in the study. Ethically, participation was completely voluntary; no participant was forced, coerced, or compelled against their volition to participate.

Two instruments were used to collect data for the study: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire consisted of close-ended questions developed and shared online. Given that the study investigates a social media phenomenon, it was considered ideal to use social media as the medium to collect data. The questionnaire was shared and answered predominantly on WhatsApp and any other platform the respondents found convenient. The questionnaire items were adapted from several sources (Safitri, 2021; Altam, 2020; Sharma, 2019; Chueinta, 2017). Additionally, interviews were conducted to corroborate the questionnaire responses, providing respondents with the opportunity to offer open-ended explanations, reasons, and justifications for their opinions and perceptions of social media as a language-learning

tool. Eleven out of the 80 participants availed themselves of the interview, with each lasting between 20 to 30 minutes.

The data were analyzed using different techniques. First, the questionnaire data were summarized in figures and tables, presented as percentages and frequencies. Meanwhile, the interview data were analyzed following the three-pronged model advanced by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions. Data reduction involves summarizing the raw data to highlight key themes relevant to the study. Data display, the second phase, presents important data obtained from the reduction in various formats, including tables, essays, categorizations, themes, and graphics. In this study, the data display is presented descriptively. The final phase involves drawing conclusions based on the analysis of the data and the information available, addressing the research questions.

3. Results and Discussion

The efficacy of social media as a language teaching and learning tool is debatable (Kareemkhan, 2018). However, it cannot be discounted that if harnessed well and used properly, social media can be a powerful tool for developing language skills (Zhou, 2021; Hosen et al., 2021). In this section, the data gathered from the questionnaire and interviews are presented and discussed within the context of existing literature to answer the research questions. The section is divided into three thematic areas in response to the research questions. These three sub-sections include the attitude of the respondents relative to their use of social media, how relevant social media is to the learning of the English language, and how to optimise social media for language learning.

3.1 The Attitude of Learners on Social Media

This section seeks to provide a response to research question 1, which investigates the learners' attitudes on social media. It seeks to investigate the social media platforms that learners use most frequently, the time/duration they usually spend on social media, the form of media they love to use to communicate and the dominant reasons or purposes they visit social media. These attitudes are thematised and examined below.

3.1.1 Most Used Platforms among Students

The data show that the respondents predominantly use seven social media platforms. Arranged in the order of preference, these platforms are WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Telegram, Twitter and Instagram. Figure 3.1 below gives the statistical breakdown of the platforms.
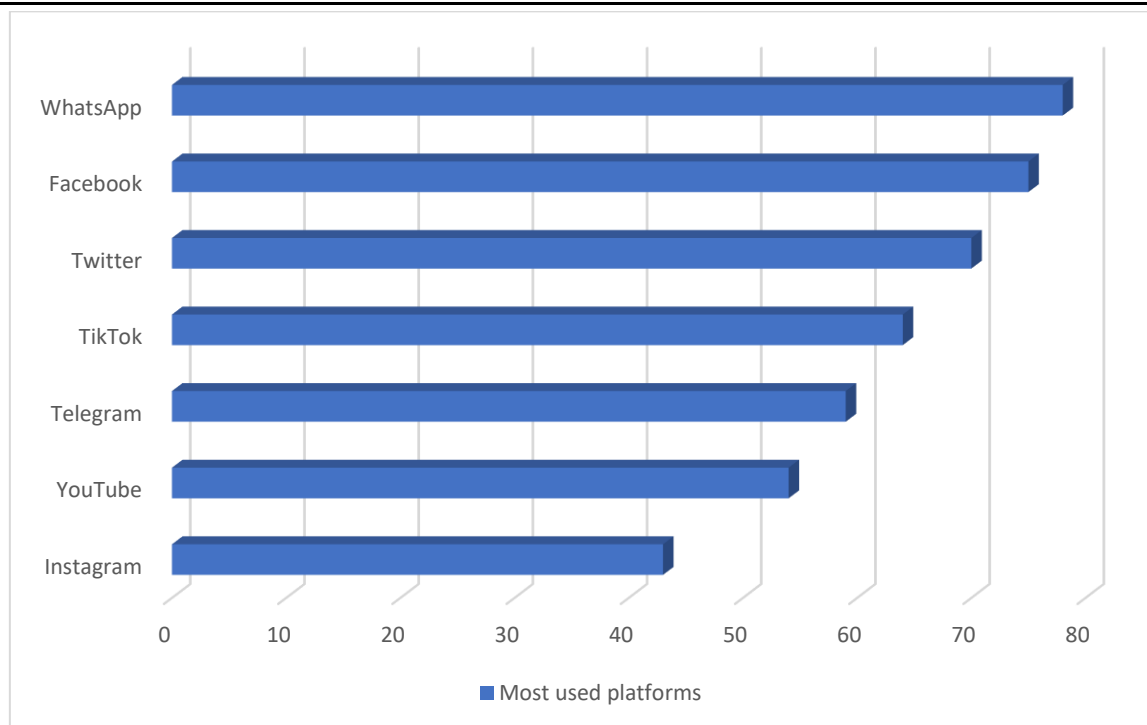
Figure 3.1: Most Used Social Media Platforms among Students in Ghana

The data reveal that WhatsApp, Facebook, and YouTube are the three most patronized social media platforms among the students. This finding is consistent with Yasar (2022) and Dixon (2023), who found that Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube are the three most popular social media platforms globally. Specifically, the data show that 78 respondents, representing 97.5%, prefer to use WhatsApp most often. This is followed by Facebook and Twitter, with 75 respondents (93.75%) and 70 respondents (87.5%), respectively. TikTok, which is the most modern among these applications, released in 2016, has 64 respondents (80%) indicating a preference for it. Similarly, 59 respondents (73.75%) indicate their preference for Telegram. YouTube and Instagram trail at the bottom, with 54 respondents (67.5%) and 43 respondents (53.75%) showing their preference, respectively.

What is noteworthy in the data is that for each social media application, the majority of the respondents—more than 50%—indicate that they use it. This attests to the prevalence of social media use among students (van den Beemt et al., 2020; Rou et al., 2019).

3.1.2 Duration of Use
The researchers also found out the average duration that the students spend on social media daily. Figure 3.2 below illustrates the responses that were received.
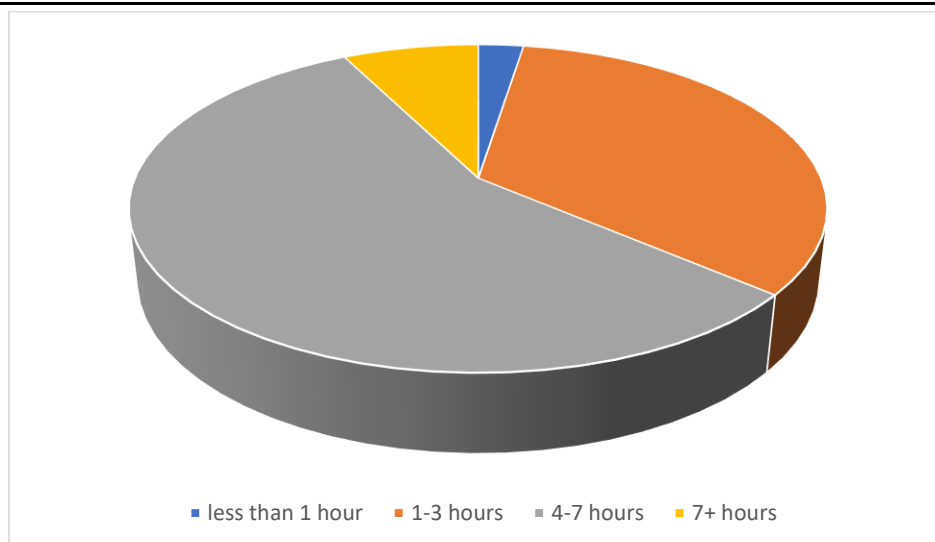
Figure 3.2: Duration Spent on Social Media Daily

The data show that a significant majority of the students—72 respondents, representing 90%—spend between 1-7 hours on social media every day. Only a few, specifically 2 respondents (2.5%), spend less than an hour on social media, while 6 respondents (7.5%) spend more than 7 hours on these platforms. These findings are consistent with Rou et al. (2019), who argue that 7 out of 10 youths check social media more than once a day. Similarly, Saha and Guha (2019) found that 85% of students spend between 1 to 4 hours on social media each day.

3.1.3 Form of Media

Again, the data reveal the form or mode through which respondents prefer to communicate on social media. The results are displayed on the figure below.
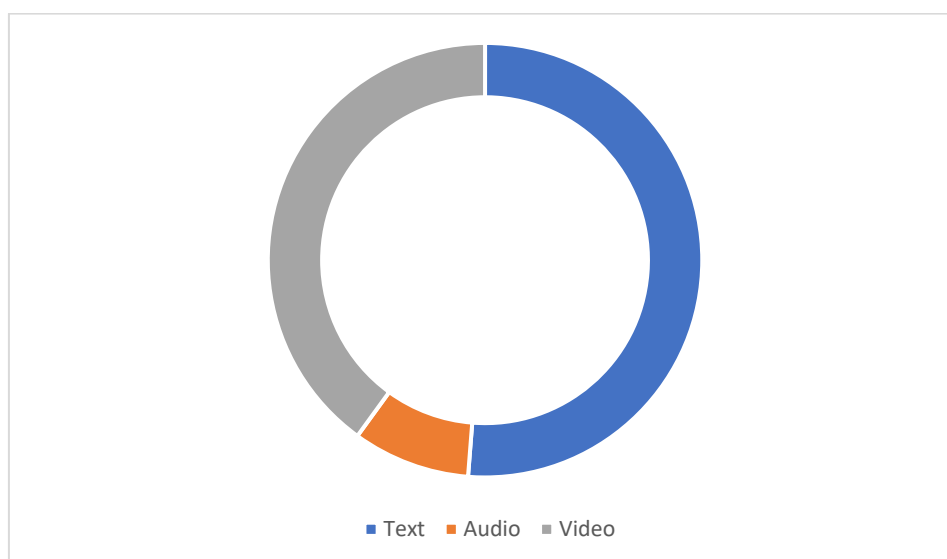

Figure 3.3: Form of Media for Communication

The results show that there is a high preference for text. In other words, social media users would want to be engaged through text and written means. 41 respondents,

representing 51.25%, chose text to be their preferred mode of communication on social media. Then, 32 respondents, representing 40%, prefer to communicate through video. The least preferred mode is audio, which is preferred by 7 respondents, representing 8.75%.

3.1.4 Purpose for Using Social Media

The respondents were also engaged to find out the purposes for using social media, and the responses received are illustrated on the figure below.
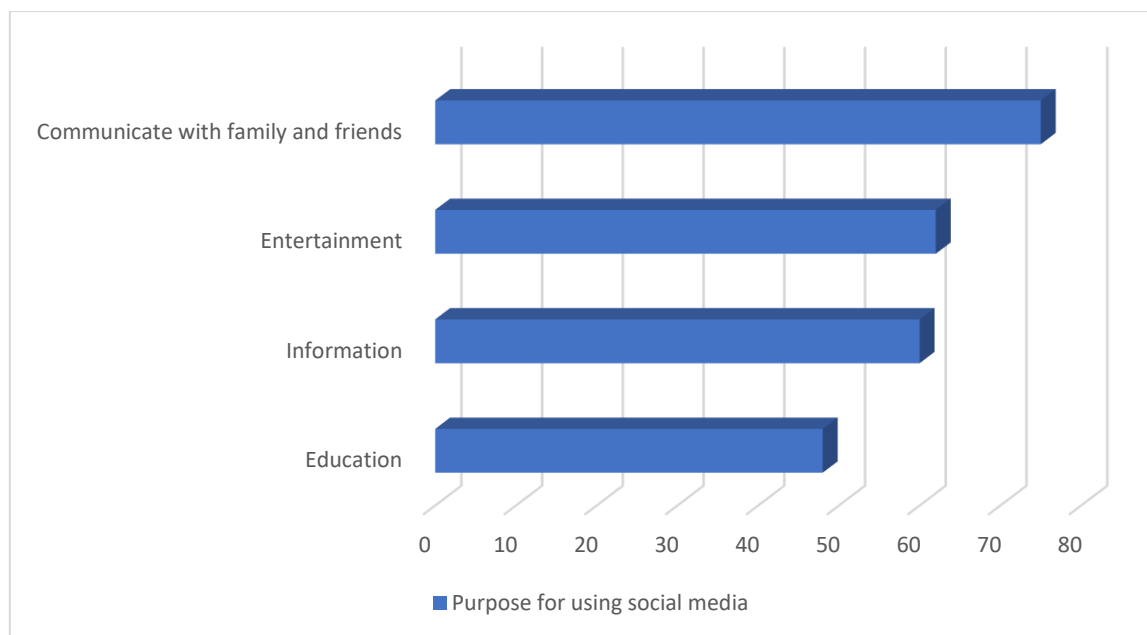

Figure 3.4: Purpose for Using Social Media

The data indicate that 75 respondents, representing 93.75%, affirm that the topmost reason for using social media is to engage, link up, or communicate with family and friends. This finding corroborates Owusu-Acheaw and Larson (2015), who discovered that 93.6% of students use social media predominantly for chatting (with friends and family) and downloading pictures and videos. Similarly, 62 respondents (77.5%) indicate that they engage in social media for entertainment, while 60 respondents (75%) also use social media to obtain information about current affairs and trending issues.

The data show that 48 participants (60%) use social media for educational purposes. Clearly, education is the least cited reason for using social media among the respondents. This aligns with the findings of Kolan and Dzandza (2018), who revealed that only 17.5% of students use social media for educational purposes; the significant majority use it for downloading pictures, watching videos, and chatting. This highlights the need for careful integration of social media into the curriculum, as without appropriate guidance, students may divert their focus from educational content.

3.2 Relevance of Social Media to English Learning

This section seeks to provide and discuss the results obtained in response to research question 1. The data show the relevance or affinity between social media and English learning from the perspective of the students. It seeks to examine why the use of social media in learning English need to be encouraged. The results are presented on Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1: Relevance of Social Media to English Learning

No.	Statement	Agree	Disagree	Total
1	Social media needs to be incorporated in the language curriculum	76	4	80
		95%	5%	100%
2	Social media reduces my anxiety towards EFL learning.	65	15	80
		81.25%	18.75	100%
3	Social media forms a more relaxed and stress-free language learning environment.	71	9	80
		88.75%	11.25%	100%
4	I can use social media anytime and anywhere.	74	6	80
		92.5%	7.5%	100%
5	It is easy to communicate with other people through social media.	63	17	80
		78.75%	21.25%	100%
6	Learning using Social Media is fun and pleasing.	70	10	80
		87.5%	12.5%	100%
7	It gives me opportunity to improve English listening skill	67	13	80
		83.75%	16.25%	100%
8	It gives me opportunity to improve English speaking skill.	51	29	80
		63.75%	36.25%	100%
9	It gives me opportunity to improve English reading skill.	78	2	80
		97.5%	2.5%	100%
10	It gives me opportunity to improve English writing skill.	78	2	80
		97.5%	2.5%	100%
11	It gives me opportunity to improve English grammar skill	69	11	80
		86.25%	13.75%	100%
12	It gives me opportunity to improve English vocabulary	45	35	80
		56.25%	43.75%	100%
13	Unlimited access to language materials	74	6	80
		92.5%	7.5%	100%

The data make some important revelations about the relevance and correlation between social media and language learning. First, the data emphasises that students wish for social media to be formally incorporated into the teaching and learning of English. This is consistent with Khan et al. (2016), who argue that social media should be incorporated into language teaching at the university level. 76 respondents, representing 95%, assert that social media should be used as a recognised tool in the teaching of the English language, while 4 respondents, representing 5%, disagree. A respondent has this to say:

> *"Whether we like it or not, most youths like to use social media, and they enjoy using it as well. Therefore, turning it into an educational tool or a learning platform will make learning seamless and more enjoyable for us."*

It must also be noted that a significant majority of the respondents, that is, 65, representing 81.25% and 71, representing 88.75%, agree to items 2 [Social media reduces my anxiety towards EFL learning] and 3 [Social media forms a more relaxed and stress-free language learning environment] respectively. This implies that the learners believe there is less anxiety when language is learnt through social media because social media forms a more relaxed and stress-free language learning environment. A respondent explained,

"Sometimes, the physical presence, demeanour, body language and facial expressions of a lecturer, or even colleague students appear quite intimidatory. Using technology to teach fairly removes some of these physically intimidatory barriers rendering the language classroom less tensioned and reducing the anxiety towards learning."

Another respondent agreed with the assertion above, citing a personal experience.

"Personally, I am a shy person. Speaking, acting or playing any role in front of a large group of people gets me anxious. Therefore, for me, learning online is life-saving. I am able to contribute, share my mind and opinions in an online class more than a face-to-face one. And I know a lot of my colleagues find themselves in similar situations like mine."

Clearly, the opinions above affirm that social media offers a less stressful learning environment and reduces learner anxiety. Shy, timid and introverted students are able to express themselves better via social media platforms than in the physical classroom.

Similarly, the majority of the respondents, that is, 74, 63, and 70, respectively, representing 92.5%, 78.75%, and 87.5%, affirm to items 4, 5 and 6, respectively. Offering some explanations during the interview sessions, the respondents opined,

"We can access social media anywhere we find ourselves. That is why holding classes online is becoming ideal. The last we had a class through Zoom, while some students accessed it from their bedrooms, others accessed it from a restroom, cafeteria, kitchen, roadside, public transport, and other places. We realized that location was not a barrier to class attendance at all. In a class of about 100 students, we had about 94 attendance. Meanwhile, in the physical face-to-face class, attendance has never exceeded 80."

"Social media is fun to use. Learning through social media is relaxing and fun. It is a whole community on its own. It is easy to access pictures, videos, images, and texts on social media. Therefore, while learning, if one is not able to understand something, you can easily cross-check with other sources. That makes learning interesting."

As indicated above, one of the relevance of social media to learning is the ability to access information and learning materials from them anywhere and anytime. Clearly, place/location and time are not limitations to social media. One can access educational materials from any location and at any opportune time without restrictions. This makes

it easy for language instructors to communicate and share information and learning materials with learners, knowing that, irrespective of where they find themselves, the materials would reach them. This finding is consistent with Bagarukayo (2018), who found that learners can access current materials and information on social media without constraints.

Regarding the impact of social media on language skills—namely listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary—scholars such as Khan et al. (2016) and Rostami & Balmaki (2018) argue that social media plays important roles in developing and improving these skills. Consistent with this assertion, the respondents indicate that social media provides opportunities for them to develop these skills. Specifically, 67 respondents (83.75%) and 51 respondents (63.75%) attest that social media improves their listening and speaking skills, respectively. Moreover, 78 respondents (97.5%) affirm that it enhances their reading and writing skills. Similarly, 69 respondents (86.25%) and 45 respondents (56.25%) indicate that social media improves their grammar and vocabulary skills, respectively.

The respondents explained the correlation between social media and language skills. Altam (2020) indicates that social media enhances learners' listening skills, asserting that listening is the most improved skill through social media engagement. A respondent said,

"There are several videos and audio tapes on various issues on social media. Every single time we log onto social media, we listen to a video or an audio tape. The consistent practice and exposure to listening gradually improve our listening skills."

Relative to reading and writing skills, some respondents indicated:

"On WhatsApp and Facebook, we read and write texts every day. Text is the predominant mode of exchange of information on these platforms. As we constantly write texts, send information to our friends and family by writing texts, and also receive information from them, and other sources, by reading texts constantly, our skills in reading and writing get improved."

Writing texts and reading texts are characteristic of social media. For me, even though I find it difficult to buy and read books, I am able to read several texts on social media each day. This has helped me improve my reading skills.

Some years ago, the classroom was the major avenue for students to write. It was only in the classroom that students had the opportunity to write. We wrote notes, assignments, and project work, among others. Nevertheless, these days, with the dominance of social media, writing has become a daily routine, with or without the classroom. We write our opinions, feelings, ideas, and perceptions and share them with friends, family and the global community each day. This practice has improved my writing skills greatly.

In his study, Abdullah (2019) confirms that social media improves the speaking, listening, and grammar skills of L2 learners. Regarding vocabulary skills, Khan et al. (2016) report that social media plays a dominant role in enhancing the vocabulary skills of ESL learners. A respondent asserted,

"The more I read, the more I come across new words each time. Obtaining new words and looking up their meanings in the dictionary are no longer practices limited to the physical classroom. With the advent and dominance of social media, it is now a daily culture."

With item 13, a majority of the respondents, 74 of them, representing 92.5%, agree that social media gives unlimited access to learning and language materials, while 6, representing 7.5%, disagree. This is what a respondent had to say,

"These days, we rarely buy physical books. Many of the materials we learn are e-books, PDFs and virtual materials. Because the materials are mostly on our phones, we are able to access them anytime, any day, and anywhere. This makes learning relatively easy, convenient and interesting."

This section sought to answer Research Question One, aiming to establish the relevance of social media to language learning. The revelations made here are an effort to justify why social media needs to be incorporated into language education. According to Chen and Xiao (2022), social media has become a valuable learning tool, especially in the post-pandemic era. However, some scholars argue that social media can be distracting and should not be encouraged in educational contexts (Owusu-Acheaw & Larson, 2015).

Based on these differing views in the literature, the study aimed to investigate and provide substantial evidence to argue that social media is important for learning and should be integrated into the language curriculum. The results indicate that social media improves learners' language skills—specifically listening, speaking, reading, and writing—because it exposes them to a wealth of written and spoken texts or materials that require constant engagement. This exposure helps enhance their reading, vocabulary, grammar, and listening skills. Furthermore, through regular interactions with friends and family, learners consistently practice writing and speaking on social media, thereby improving these skills as well.

These findings corroborate the studies of Altam (2020), Khan et al. (2016), Bagarukayo (2018), and others. The next section will address Research Question Two, discussing how social media can be optimized to effectively teach and learn the English language from the perspective of students.

3.3 Optimising Social Media for English Learning

This section seeks to answer research question 2. It presents the students' perception of what they believe should be done by the university and language instructors to ensure

that social media can be used optimally to improve learners' language skills. The responses are thematised and discussed. Figure 3.5 below illustrates the responses.
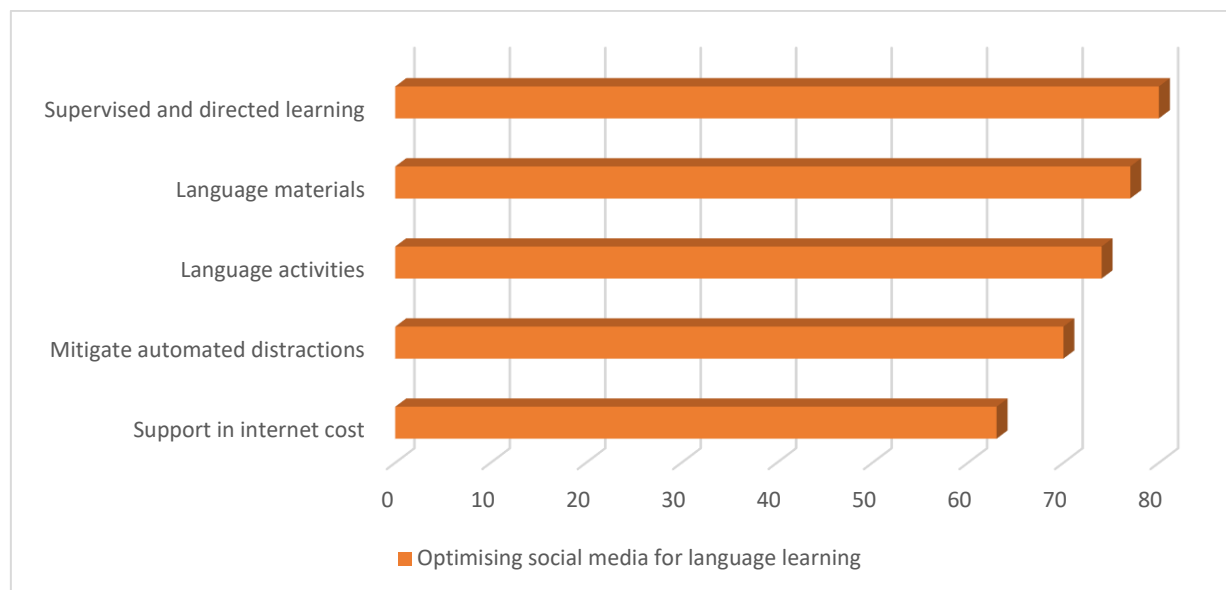

Figure 3.5: Optimising Social Media for Language Learning

3.3.1 Supervised and Directed Learning

Songxaba and Sincuba (2019) report that social media significantly negatively impacts students' writing. They argue that students often use many shortened forms and ungrammatical structures on social media, which can sometimes translate into their academic writing. Cabrera (2018) also contends that such media can sidetrack learners into ungrammatical content. Additionally, there are numerous resources shared on social media, some of which contain linguistically conflicting and incorrect information.

Learners are exposed to various English speakers from different parts of the world who use unique linguistic variants of grammar and pronunciation. While some of these variations can be beneficial, many others could be detrimental to learners' language development. It is argued that language instructors should supervise and direct how learners use and learn on social media to maximize the pedagogical affordances of authentic online resources (Cabrera, 2018).

Learning online, generally, and social media specifically, can be fun, pleasing, effective, convenient and successful but if the learning is not properly coordinated, supervised and directed, it could end up being a mess. These platforms could be extremely distracting; therefore, inasmuch as they have come to be accepted as part of life, using them as learning tools could be slippery. A learner shared her experience.

I encountered this structure on Facebook, "You was my friend", and it got me confused. However, my English lecturer explained to me that it is an acceptable structure in American English. However, since Ghana uses the British variant, such a structure is not acceptable here. This, among other reasons, is why we, the students, need to be guided and directed on what to learn on social media.

This finding corroborates the assertion of Zhou (2021) that one expression that could be acceptable in one place or context might be offensive or not acceptable in another context. Hence, language instructors need to guide learners on what language, structure or grammar to pick from social media.

3.3.2 Language Materials

Blake (1998), cited in Nuri et al. (2021), maintains that social media "*can play an important role in fostering second language acquisition by electronically increasing learners' contact with a wide array of authentic materials*" (p. 203). Consistent with Nuri et al. (2021), the current study found that one of the ways learners believe social media can be optimised for effective learning is to share or distribute appropriate language learning materials through virtual platforms. They assert that it is easy, fast, convenient and relatively cost-effective to share and receive learning materials on social media. To them, many of these platforms can reach a mass number of people within a short period of time. A respondent indicated,

> *"It is easy to share learning materials such as PDF documents, PPT documents, e-books, language videos, games and audio via social media. For instance, a 1,000 people can access YouTube and watch or learn language illustrations within a short period of time."*

Another respondent agreed,

> *"Social media offers a more convenient means of sharing information and materials with learners. You can upload a whole book, including audio books, on WhatsApp, Facebook for learners to access. You can also upload language games for learners. I believe lecturers can ensure an optimal use of social media if they take advantage of them and share language materials through them."*

This finding corroborates Cabrera's (2018) finding that there are a lot of authentic materials on social media that could be used to develop learners' language skills.

3.3.3 Language Activities

With the development of the world and technology, language teaching has expanded beyond the confines of the traditional classroom (Yunus et al., 2012). Students can engage in various language activities on social media. For instance, Facebook facilitates writing, reading, and speaking activities; YouTube supports listening activities; and WhatsApp enables writing, reading, and speaking activities, among others (Bali & Zarea, 2017; Bali et al., 2020).

Similar to the physical classroom, social media provides a platform for learning activities to take place (Regan, 2015). Ensuring optimal use of social media involves leveraging these virtual platforms for educational purposes, such as conducting writing activities like blogging, engaging in speaking activities by recording speeches or oral explanations on YouTube or Facebook, listening to native speakers of English, and

reading various texts. Additional activities could include brainstorming, brainwriting, jigsaw exercises, group discussions, and presentations. Platforms like Zoom or Google Meet allow for breakout sessions, where students can be assigned group tasks.

During the interview session, a participant remarked, "*Social media not only makes learning more accessible but also allows us to collaborate and share ideas in real-time, which enhances our understanding of the language.*" This underscores the potential of social media as a dynamic tool for language learning.

Clearly, social media can be optimized when language activities are regularly conducted on it, helping students practice and refine these skills. This will enhance learners' language abilities. This finding corroborates the studies of Aldukhayel (2019), Al-Khalidi & Khouni (2021), and Anas (2019), which revealed that speaking, listening, reading, and writing activities can be effectively conducted on social media to sharpen the skills of language students.

3.3.4 Mitigating Automated Distractions

Kolan and Dzandza (2018) elaborate that social media could be distractive, and part of these distractions are automated websites, videos, audios, messages that pop up occasionally when users are accessing social media. He further asserts that some of the ways of dealing with some of these distractions is for users to turn off their notifications, and install a social media blocker, among others. Consistent with Kolan and Dzandza (2018), the data show that students, while learning via social media, encounter irrelevant and unrelated videos, audios, documents and messages from friends and strangers alike, which pop up on their devices.

It is clear that not all social media distractions are avoidable from a lay users' perspective. Some distractions are automated and might need other applications and software to mitigate them, such as Kohlbach's social media blocker. This is where the university may have to set in and encourage their IT team/department, or even procure the services of IT experts to develop and install software that could automatically immune the students' devices from unsolicited distractions. These distract them from concentrating on their studies. They said,

> "*Learning on social media, inasmuch as it is convenient, can also be very distractive. Unnecessary videos, audios, tapes, and documents do pop up every now and then to distract us. I know there are applications that can be used to curb these unsolicited and unsubscribed platforms. Hence, the university should install it on our devices.*"

The distractions on social media are too much. Almost every minute, some diversionary material pops up on our devices. Is it possible for the university to give as directions on what to do to stop these distractions? If yes, then they should help us. Social media is a very efficient platform so I believe the university should help us use it well.

3.3.5 Support in Internet Cost

Access to social media depends heavily on internet connectivity (Yasar, 2022). The ability to afford internet connectivity and a strong internet connection play significant roles in one's usage of social media. However, the investigations revealed that the participants, as shown in Figure 3.5, believe that the cost of the data bundle is too expensive. They believe that the university should support, subsidize, or arrange with network providers to offer affordable student packages. This will encourage and enhance learner participation in social media learning. Some respondents asserted,

> *"The cost of data bundle has become very expensive. If it is possible, the university should arrange with the network providers to give us special student SIM cards with renewable internet packages at affordable costs."*

Social media has become a part of our lives as students. That is why I believe it should be used as a learning tool. But, downloading documents, lectures, and videos, among other things, comes at a cost. This is where I believe the university should step in and intervene for us.

This section of the study has sought to answer research question 2. It elaborates, from the perspectives of English language learners, how social media can be put to productive use in improving their language skills. The result shows that the most prioritized activity to optimise social media is supervised and directed learning, followed by the sharing of language materials and conducting language activities on social media. The students also recount that if the university or language instructors support them in mitigating the plethora of automated distractions on social media and possibly support them with the cost of data or internet connectivity, they could access social media easily and make effective use of it.

4. Conclusion

Technology assures an optimistic future for language teaching and learning. It has revolutionalised education, especially in the post-COVID-19 era, with social media playing an active role (Altam, 2020). The growing interest among language teachers and researchers in using social media as a tool for language teaching and learning cannot be overemphasized. This partly explains why there is a rise in the research interest and studies on social media as a pedagogical tool in the ESL classroom. The current study adds to and extends knowledge of social media as a language-learning tool. It qualitatively investigates the perspectives of learners on their attitudes to social media, the relevance of social media to English learning and how social media can be optimised to improve learners' language skills.

The data show that Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube are the most patronised social media platforms among learners. The data also show that the learners spend a good part of their day on social media. The dominant reason for which the learners use social media is to communicate with their family and friends and entertainment generally. In

fact, the results show that education is the least purpose they use social media. This implies that, for social media to be used as an educational tool among learners, universities and language instructors are expected to put in place pragmatic measures to attract or compel learners. Some of these pragmatic measures are revealed in the data, including a directed or supervised learning, sharing language materials on social media, conducting language activities on social media, mitigating distractions and supporting in the cost of internet connectivity.

The study is not without limitations. One such issue is the inability to generalize the findings since it is a qualitative study. Again, the study focused on the students' perspectives, leaving out that of the teachers and other stakeholders such as principals and university managers. Therefore, a future study on the pedagogical use of social media may want to expand the study sample and conduct a quantitative study so that the findings can be generalized. Similarly, a future study may also want to investigate the teachers and the university administrators to know their perspectives on the use of social media as an educational tool and possibly do a comparative analysis of the perspective of the students and the teachers or administrators.

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