

The Impact of Social Media Language on ESL Students' Grammatical Awareness

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a primary platform for communication among students, shaping how they interact and use language in their daily lives. The widespread use of informal digital language features such as abbreviations, slang, omitted punctuation, and simplified sentence structures has raised concerns about its potential influence on ESL learners' grammatical awareness, particularly in formal academic writing. This concept paper examines the impact of social media language on ESL students' grammatical awareness in the digital era. Specifically, it aims to (1) identify the common linguistic features of social media language used by students and (2) discuss how these features may influence ESL students' grammatical awareness in formal writing contexts. While social media encourages communication, engagement, and language exposure, the transfer of informal language into academic writing may affect students' ability to distinguish appropriate grammatical usage across contexts. Therefore, this paper highlights the importance of developing contextual language awareness and suggests integrating digital literacy with grammar instruction to support ESL learners in adapting their language use across communicative settings.

Keywords: social media language, grammatical awareness, ESL learners, digital literacy, academic writing

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technology has transformed the ways individuals communicate and interact in everyday life. Social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and X have become important spaces for students to communicate, share ideas, and express themselves. These digital platforms encourage fast and informal communication styles, leading users to adopt abbreviated expressions, internet slang, emojis, omitted punctuation, and simplified sentence structures in their daily interactions to sustain their emotional presence (Sitinjak et al., 2025). As a result, social media language has become increasingly integrated into students' communication practices.

The growing influence of social media language has raised concerns among educators and language practitioners regarding its potential impact on students' grammatical awareness, particularly among ESL learners. Since ESL learners are continuously exposed to informal digital communication, they may unconsciously transfer online language habits into formal academic writing contexts. This includes the omission of punctuation, shortened sentence forms, and informal vocabulary usage in written assignments. Such practices may affect learners' understanding of standard grammar conventions and language appropriateness in formal settings. Previous studies have suggested that students sometimes transfer texting habits and informal online writing patterns into academic contexts due to their recurring appearances in social media platforms (Dashti & Abdulsalam, 2025).

Despite these concerns, social media language should not necessarily be viewed entirely negatively. Social media platforms may also encourage active communication, language experimentation, and increased exposure to English language use among learners. Students may feel more confident using English in online

communication spaces, which may indirectly support language development and engagement. Therefore, the influence of social media language on grammatical awareness should be examined from a balanced perspective rather than through purely deficit-based assumptions.

Although many studies have explored social media usage and digital communication practices, fewer studies have specifically focused on grammatical awareness among ESL learners (Khalil & Sulaiman, 2025). Therefore, this concept paper discusses the impact of social media language on ESL students' grammatical awareness and highlights the importance of contextual language awareness in adapting grammar instruction to the realities of digital communication.

The discussion presented in this concept paper is informed by Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that language learning is socially mediated through interaction within cultural and communicative contexts. From this perspective, social media platforms function as digital social environments where learners are continuously exposed to diverse language practices and communicative norms. Such interactions may shape learners' grammatical awareness as they negotiate between informal online language use and the conventions of formal academic writing. Accordingly, this theoretical perspective provides a useful lens for understanding how social media language may influence ESL learners' awareness of grammatical appropriateness across different communicative contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Media Language as a Digital Register

Social media language represents a dynamic digital register that challenges conventional boundaries of grammatical standardisation. According to Frastiwi and Aisyah (2022), internet-mediated communication introduces new linguistic conventions shaped by speed, creativity, and informality rather than prescriptive grammar rules. This register is characterised by abbreviations, acronyms, emojis, omitted punctuation, lowercase orthography, code-switching, and fragmented syntactic structures (Clark & Araki, 2011; Omoera et al., 2018).

Rather than being viewed as linguistic deterioration, these features reflect adaptive communicative strategies within constrained digital environments. According to Ariantini (2021), social media should be seen as a valuable tool in enhancing students' motivation and fostering critical thinking skills. With adequate amount of use of social media, it is believed that students will be more motivated to engage actively in ESL classroom activities (Ramzan et al., 2023). However, without proper guidance, uncontrolled use of social media has raised pedagogical concerns, particularly in ESL contexts where learners are still developing grammatical stability.

While this register may reduce communicative anxiety and increase participation, especially among less confident learners, it simultaneously risks establishing informal structures as default linguistic input. This is particularly significant given that frequent exposure may contribute to implicit learning of non-standard forms including irregular spellings and inaccurate language forms without corresponding awareness of formal grammatical rules (Astatke et al., 2021).

Social Media as Informal ESL Input Space

Social media platforms function as continuous input environments that expose ESL learners to authentic, unscripted language use. Unlike classroom discourse, which is often controlled and grammatically oriented, digital communication provides spontaneous interactional language shaped by real-time social negotiation. A study conducted by Rabongue et al. (2024) on the use of Facebook for language learning indicates that social media is a great platform to enhance language skills and foster cultural understanding. Through social media, users can communicate, comment and share their ideas freely in English, in a way that they find comfortable. This social interaction, hence, acts as a casual setting for learners to practise both their written and spoken English.

However, the authenticity of social media input does not guarantee pedagogical appropriateness. While learners encounter diverse discourse types such as comments, chats, and multimodal exchanges, the linguistic quality is often inconsistent, highly contextual, and predominantly informal. Vo (2024) and Nhan (2024) highlight both the pros and cons of integrating social media in English language learning. While social media offers flexible learning environment, students also reported to have experienced lack face-to-face communication leading to ineffective learning output. On the contrary, Anumanthan and Hashim (2022) believed that social media platforms, such as Tiktok, promote positive grammar learning environment as students were found to enjoy the language activities conducted using the app.

Additionally, social media encourages output-based interaction, requiring learners to produce language in real time. This may enhance fluency development and willingness to communicate, but it often prioritises communicative speed over grammatical accuracy. Tumanggor et al. (2021) noted that some of the common language errors made by Indonesian social media users include subject-verb agreement, sentence structure and tense. Similarly, Wardoyo et al. (2023) also agreed that language errors involving misinformation, addition and misordering often happen among social media users, which highlights the overall drawbacks of social media. While users may be aware of the grammatical mistakes they make, some prefer not to correct them if the meaning can still be understood.

Therefore, social media should be conceptualised not merely as a learning tool but as an uncontrolled input-output ecosystem. Without pedagogical mediation, its contribution to grammatical development remains indirect and potentially harmful.

Social Media Influence on Grammatical Awareness

Grammatical awareness refers to the understanding of how language works, including sounds, words, sentence structures, and meaning in different contexts (Taşdemir et al., 2025), is increasingly influenced by learners' engagement with digital communication. A key concern is the potential transfer of informal digital conventions into academic writing practices. Frequent exposure to reduced grammar structures, non-standard spelling, and minimal punctuation may shape learners internalised linguistic representations.

Empirical studies support this concern. Nanquil (2021), in a qualitative phenomenological investigation of college students' experiences with Facebook and other social media platforms, revealed that excessive exposure may negatively influence writing mechanics, particularly in relation to spelling accuracy and proofreading skills. Similarly, Rabongue et al. (2024), through interview data and content analysis of Facebook interactions, found that the spread of fake news and linguistic errors, including grammatical mistakes, misspellings and incorrect use of vocabulary are very common among social media users, which indirectly may blur distinctions between formal and informal English usage.

Yong (2021), drawing on reflections and anecdotal evidence from 550 international postgraduate students who experienced both face-to-face and blended learning during the COVID-19 period, also demonstrated that while supplementary learning tools through social media are effective, language learners are prone to misunderstandings if not monitored properly. With unlimited access to the unlimited amount of online grammar learning materials, learners' rational examination is still needed to validate the information they found online. Nevertheless, Khalil and Sulaiman (2025), using a quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-tests as well as questionnaires based on the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), reported that the integration of TikTok in grammar instruction improves students' grammar performance and engagement by linking lessons to authentic, real-life learning experiences. Instead, the critical issue lies in register awareness. Failures to differentiate between digital informality and academic correctness has caused many language learners to practise using inappropriate language patterns in formal writing contexts.

From a sociocultural perspective, grammatical awareness develops not only through formal classroom instruction but also through learners' participation in authentic social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978). As social media has become an integral part of students' daily communication, the linguistic practices encountered in these digital environments may contribute to learners' evolving understanding of language use. This suggests

that grammatical awareness is influenced by both formal educational experiences and informal communicative practices beyond the classroom.

Thus, the impact of social media language on ESL grammatical awareness is best understood as a pedagogical challenge. It simultaneously expands linguistic exposure while complicating learners' ability to regulate grammatical formality. This underscores the need for explicit instructional intervention focusing on register awareness, grammatical sensitivity, and context-based language use.

DISCUSSION

The increasing integration of social media into students' daily communication practices has led to a gradual blurring of boundaries between formal and informal language use. ESL learners today constantly move between digital communication spaces and academic writing environments, which may affect how they understand grammar conventions depending on context. This situation suggests that grammatical awareness is no longer only about knowing rules, but also about being able to manage language use across different settings. In this regard, learners may develop weaker sensitivity to register differences when informal digital language becomes highly familiar and frequently used or even worse, they may just pretend to ignore the language errors they made (Wardoyo et al., 2023).

At the same time, the influence of social media language should not be seen as entirely negative. Social media platforms can encourage students to participate more actively in English communication, increase their confidence, and provide more authentic opportunities for interaction outside the classroom. Previous studies have shown that digital communication environments can reduce anxiety and increase motivation in language use (Ariantini, 2021; Ramzan et. Al, 2023; Khalil & Sulaiman, 2025). This is especially important for ESL learners who are less confident in formal speaking or writing, as social media gives them space to express themselves more freely and practise the language in a low-pressure environment.

However, issues may arise when informal language patterns from social media are transferred into academic writing. Studies have shown that frequent exposure to informal digital communication can influence writing habits such as punctuation use, spelling accuracy, and proofreading practices (Sitinjak et al., 2025; Dashti & Abdulsalam, 2025). Features like omitted punctuation, shortened sentence structures, and casual expressions may appear in formal writing without learners realising it. This issue may be more obvious among lower proficiency ESL learners who are still developing a strong understanding of formal grammar rules and academic writing conventions.

This situation shows that the main issue is not social media language itself, but learners' awareness of when and how to use different types of language. Social media language is a valid form of communication in its own context, but learners may struggle when they cannot clearly separate informal digital usage from formal academic expectations. Without clear guidance, they may treat both environments in the same way, which leads to confusion in grammatical application. This supports the idea that grammatical awareness is closely linked to metalinguistic awareness which embodies the contextual understanding of language use (Taşdemir et al., 2025).

Therefore, grammar instruction in the digital era should not only focus on correctness, but also on helping students understand language appropriateness based on context. Learners need to be guided to recognise that grammar use changes depending on purpose, audience, and setting. Integrating digital literacy into grammar teaching may help students become more aware of how language works in different environments. This includes exposing students to discussions on digital communication practices and encouraging them to reflect on how informal language differs from academic writing. Such an approach can help learners develop better control over their language use across contexts.

CONCLUSION

Social media language has become an increasingly influential aspect of students' communication practices in the digital era. The widespread use of informal digital language features such as abbreviations, slang, omitted

punctuation, and simplified sentence structures may influence ESL learners' grammatical awareness, particularly in formal academic writing contexts. However, social media language should not simply be viewed as a threat to grammar learning, as it may also support communication, confidence, engagement, and language exposure among learners.

This concept paper highlights the importance of understanding how digital communication practices may shape learners' perceptions and application of grammar conventions. It also emphasises the need for contextual language awareness in helping students distinguish between informal online communication and formal academic writing practices. Therefore, ESL educators may need to adopt more adaptive pedagogical approaches that integrate grammar instruction with digital literacy and awareness of language appropriateness.

Future empirical studies may further investigate how different forms of social media communication influence grammatical awareness among ESL learners across various educational settings. Such studies may provide deeper understanding regarding the relationship between digital communication practices and language learning in the contemporary educational landscape.

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