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The Impact of Social Media (Facebook and YouTube) on Vocabulary Acquisition of ESL Learners

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Abstract

This research paper studies the impact of social media, specifically, Facebook and YouTube, on vocabulary acquisition of ESL learners. Using data collected from 30 students studying at the Department of English, IIUI, Islamabad and online responses from teachers with PhD in English, we strove to find out how learners are assisted by social media in vocabulary acquisition. It was discovered through the responses that the majority of teachers and students believe that vocabulary acquisition is improved through social media as it enhances the level of interest of students in second language learning. Overall, this study allows us to analyze the differences in the learning habits of ESL (English as Second Language) learners in a typical classroom environment using the new electronic media which is social media.

Keywords: vocabulary learning, ESL learners, social media

Introduction

We live in an age that is marked with the expansion of social media and its increasing importance in our personal and professional lives. Today, geopolitical boundaries are seemingly blurred by technological advancements. The advent of social media as well as information and communication technology has influenced all developing fields and it has influenced the field of education the most. Indeed, if a student wants additional help in studies, he or she may refer to social media websites like YouTube and Facebook. The excessive use of social media by students of various disciplines has provided them with an easy way to access current knowledge and information. For instance, it has helped ESL learners to enhance their vocabulary to a greater extent. Vocabulary is the building block of any language of the world and the lack of vocabulary hinders the language learning process significantly. The role of social media with respect to vocabulary learning is not just confined to mainstream social media like

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Facebook or Twitter; indeed other networks also play their role in it. However, in this paper we shall analyze the role of two major social media websites, Facebook and YouTube, in the acquisition of English vocabulary by ESL learners while drawing upon Marconi Kamal's and Jenali Patel 's, Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman & Witty ([2010](#)) and Marshall McLuhan's researches in this field.

Facebook is a networking website which connects people with friends and others who work, study and live around them. Today, Facebook is a widely used web portal and an excellent forum all over the world that gives its users the freedom to bring their table talk about world issues online and discuss them with each other. This has helped users to communicate and interact with each other in a more productive way. In this regard, a research conducted by Jenali Patel states that “Facebook can enhance communication and interaction between users in an easy and convenient way” (Patel, [2013](#), p5). Moreover, users are given an open opportunity to study words in their own way and use them according to their own choice.

YouTube videos play a vital role in enhancing the vocabulary of ESL learners. To become fully conversant in foreign language vocabulary has always been a very complex process in foreign language learning which makes it harder for the foreign language learners to communicate, read, write and speak the target language. YouTube helps such learners to improve their vocabulary by providing them with an easy access to a number of audio-visual lessons. YouTube videos have the potential to play a major role in developing vocabulary. According to Dudeney & Hockly, “Technology offers new ways for practicing language and assessing performance” (Dudeney, [2009](#), p157).

2. Literature Review

Our world has been transformed into a global hub where anyone can share their opinion and ideas across the board regardless of their age, race, religion, and ethnicity. With the advent of the internet and the growth of social media, second language learning has developed to a great extent. Social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube have become extremely popular. They provide their users from all over the world a chance or a way to communicate, share ideas and research, and transfer knowledge to each other about their own culture and society. Indeed, they provide a medium where people who belong to different parts of the world can upload their

videos and let other people gain knowledge through them. According to Marshall McLuhan, the world has become a “*global village*” and the medium is the message (McLuhan, [1964](#)). Social media is playing a vital role in this regard. It is an effective source of social interaction, entertainment, and learning. It also enables people from different cultures to come together, share and promote their cultural values. Since it is full of diversity, people can learn and can have knowledge about other cultures and languages simply through their mutual interaction. For instance, they can learn English- a global language- through conversation with native speakers or reading comments and blogs of other users. Kaplan and Haenlein define social media as *collections of internet websites, services, and practices that support collaboration, community building, participation, and sharing* (Kaplan, & Haenlein, [2010](#), p23). This depicts that social media is one of the major sources through which ESL learners can learn English language in a convenient way. Warschauer underlines that “the more opportunities for real communication students might be exposed to when using the internet and the e-mail system in language learning” (Warschauer, [2012](#), p18). Nader admitted that “the great challenge for teachers to design individual and group activities using the internet resources and also praised the benefits of the students searching for them and thus exploring different cultures more directly and effectively” (Nader, 1996).

Our major concern in this paper is the role played by different websites and applications in improving vocabulary acquisition among ESL learners. As internet grows, the influence of online learning grows in several countries, although face to face discussion and paper resources still dominate public education. Internet has become an important feature of learning environment for youngsters. Research conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project in November and December 2000 shows that teens use the internet as an essential study aid outside the classroom and the internet increasingly has a place inside the classroom” (Kamal, [2013](#)). Thus, keeping in view Marconi Kamal’s comment about the expansion of internet among students, we may think of the same about the use of social media. There are many different forms of social media but Facebook is the most popular social network. People, specifically students, can learn much from it. They can earn academic assistance and support from Facebook. Shen and Kou observes that students’ reading habits have now shifted from paper-based to internet-based reading (Shen, & Kou, [2015](#)). There are passages from famous books and quotes available on the internet.

People having different perspectives and backgrounds share their precious thoughts and ideas as well as their knowledge through writings and videos. According to Kamal, “communication is the best of all ways for teaching vocabulary and we can easily understand that through the communication of social media students learn faster than paper-based learning” (Kamal, [2011](#), p24). According to Marconi Kamal’s point of view, vocabulary building is the foundation of every skill related to English language. “It’s much more than grammar because is the key to communicating successfully with other people. Knowing more words gives our mind more ways to think about things and more tools to plan or figure out about something” (Kamal, [2013](#), 36).

Furthermore, Brydolf says that students who are reluctant to participate in class are active in online discussion blogs and writings for real audience (Brydolf, [2007](#)). The foreign language learners who are shy and are hesitant to speak in class participate in online discussions through writing blogs. Similarly, Ariana and Mirabela states that “learning through social media is beneficial for foreign language learners, as it considerably builds confidence and increases learners’ interest in a topic” (Ariana, & Mirabela, [2013](#)). Yunus Abdullah believes that “students gain more vocabulary and improve their writing skills because of their participation on social media networks” (Al-Samadi, [2013](#)). Students come across many new words while interacting on Facebook. For example, Alessandro Cessarano is a teacher of beginner’s Spanish classes in the University of South Florida (USF). He uses Facebook for homework assignment and class discussions as a substitute of blackboard. According to him, “the Facebook page is better than blackboard because students have more access to authentic cultural material and not to waste class time to teaching them to use a new program because many of them already use Facebook”. This is how they learn new words on a daily basis along with their usage in different contexts. Kamal argued that in building up students’ vocabulary achievement, the students must learn it well. “The Facebook can be more effective if the student can interact with the Facebook; this interaction includes the activities that can expand the students’ understanding of the words and the use of them in any language skill. In addition, Facebook can add a new dimension to learning allowing teachers to explain abstract concepts while accommodating all learning styles”. Thus, it is different from classroom lessons and effective in a way that students do not have to memorize words. Instead, they learn them by practically using them in their sentences.

Phasita Anankulladetch in her article *The Impact of Social Media on ESL Student' Learning Performance* writes that “Students who utilize social networking technologies in their learning were not only found to be active and highly engaged, they are also reported to have higher gains in general education” (Anankulladetch, 2017). Moreover, Junco and colleagues (2011) conducted an experimental study using Facebook as a social networking platform for various types of academic and co-curricular discussions. The results indicated that Facebook can be used as an educational tool to support active participation and collaboration. Additionally, using Facebook as a microblogging tool can extend communication among students as it helps to increase a sense of connection among them. Furthermore, Facebook assignments promote active learning and allow instructors to provide prompt feedback. By effectively incorporating social networks as learning tools in classes, instructors can expect to reach higher levels of learning and maintain effective classroom management (Revere, & Kovach, 2011).

Besides the fact that Facebook enhances the vocabulary of ESL learners, there lies an unyielding fact that certain words and abbreviations used on Facebook have become a part of our daily lives although they are not the part of language itself, such as lol, XOXO, tbh, brb, ttyl, tc, rofl and many more. The use of these words and abbreviations has been found common among teenagers. Besides, many people are observed using short forms of words in order to save time. For instance, w8, m bzy or cm ol9. It is an undeniable fact that Facebook has not only provided an opportunity of exposure for multilingual cultures but also to some extent it has made language use even worse.

Besides, ESL learners using Facebook are found code-switching between their native language and English language. For instance, in the phrase “ok me yaa arahi hoon wait for me”, the speaker is switching between English and Urdu languages. Code switching is a widely observed phenomenon in ESL learners. They switch between their native language and English language for two major and basic reasons given below.

- (a) They are unable to find the substitute of the target word in the English language.
- (b) They may find it harder to convey their whole message in English.

In most of the comments made on Facebook, code switching was observed. ESL learners, while using English language, used their native

language as well in these comments.

The use of social media in an academic course can connect students and encourage them to create a virtual community that leads to better content learning. Social media provides an opportunity for students to expand their learning environment, explore new resources, and be used as a tool to facilitate the learning communities by encouraging collaboration and communication. Al-Rahmi and Othman (2013) conducted a study regarding the impact of the use of social media on academic performance among university students. The results revealed that the integration of social media facilitates students' academic experience, which relates to students' academic performance. Furthermore, social media integration was found to increase the interaction within the class among students and their teacher, which increases students' participation and enhances collaborative learning. Similarly, a study by Olaleke, Iroju, and Olajide (2015) revealed that social media can be used to enhance students' learning abilities through interaction among learners and teachers. Specifically, online social media can facilitate students' academic experience by creating the environment for academic discussions which helps to improve learning motivation. Moreover, by allowing students to discuss the same content at the same time within a virtual community, students can build on the ongoing conversation and make connections across multiple sources. This increases the chances of student learning outside the traditional classroom situation.

Additionally, YouTube videos also provide immense information for students. "Although YouTube offers new possibilities for educators and teachers and training all over the world to practice and interact through creating personal and official channels which can upload and download many videos with many contents. These days people upload their videos with a number of different subjects" (Derradji Hayet). Youtube is a visual media, therefore, we assert what Gairns and Redman (1986) have asserted already that "Visual tools considered as one of the valuable tools to introduce words and assist the word retention. Moreover, it boosts learner's motivation and changes the negative variable that affects the classroom in a positive way" (Gairns & Redman, 1986). It not only exemplifies pronunciation to English language learners but also enables students to enhance their listening skills. Furthermore, they can pause and replay the video where they need to, unlike classroom lectures where some students are reluctant to ask questions. Derradji Hayet states that *videos are one of*

the essential ways and factors that bridge the gap between students and their language learning. “YouTube videos can give a modern and attractive way to achieve this goal. YouTube with its extensive and endless resources offer large varieties of spoken language and different sort and style such as a song, poems, and conversation that serves language learning and it will be very helpful for learners to memorize in an easy way and acquire vocabulary in a meaningful setting” (Alimemaj, [2010](#)).

To conclude, social media does affect language learning skills. This way of learning is much more practical than the traditional ways. Social media can be an excellent source of learning English vocabulary, writing, listening, and reading. Research conducted by Jinali Patel also shows that Facebook has positive effects on the learning of English language. Bryfold also states that *when it is used in a positive way, Facebook and other social media can be an extraordinary tool for the betterment of students’ wellbeing* (Brydolf, [2007](#)). It entirely depends on students how they utilize these networks to enhance their knowledge.

4. Research Objectives of the Study

- To determine the role of Facebook and YouTube in opening up new horizons for vocabulary acquisition.
- To examine the impact of social media websites on vocabulary acquisition of ESL learners.

5. Research Question

To what extent social media (Facebook and YouTube) can become an effective tool of vocabulary acquisition for ESL learners?

6. Significance of the Study

ESL learners are more likely to face vocabulary learning issues because teachers are given a limited time for each language class and hence little attention is paid to vocabulary learning. Learning is not just concerned with the idea of reading something, rather it also deals with the idea of seeing, listening and interacting. For example, when I talk of YouTube and vocabulary development, students experience that whenever they watch videos by native speakers of a foreign language, they try to pick up their way of talking and their accent of a particular word. It is convenient for them to learn the vocabulary of English with the correct pronunciation of

words and they can memorize these words too. Not just ESL learners, but students related to other fields of education or professions can easily learn from YouTube videos as well. ESL learners can learn unfamiliar and active words through different videos. They can easily learn vocabulary items at home by accessing YouTube videos at home. At the end of this research, this point will be crystal clear that YouTube and Facebook play a vital role in vocabulary development of ESL learners.

7. Delimitations of the Study

In the following section of this research paper, I have generated two questionnaires as data collection tools. I distributed them among thirty teachers of English with PhD degree and 30 students of BS English at IIUI in order to get their opinion about the role of Facebook and YouTube in vocabulary acquisition.

8. Methodology

The current research is quantitative in nature. To conduct this research, the researcher designed two questionnaires which were distributed among the ESL learners at the Department of English, International Islamic University, Islamabad and the teachers of English language from different academic institutions. These questionnaires were emailed to ESL learners and teachers of English language. A total of 25 ESL learners and 10 English language teachers were selected for the study. The questionnaire given to the learners was close-ended whereas the questionnaire given to the teachers had 5 close ended and 5 open ended questions. The questionnaire for the learners consisted of statements in which they described their experience of learning English through social media. On the other hand, the questionnaire for the teachers was designed in a way that it may help the researcher to analyze their opinions regarding the use of social media by ESL learners.

9. Data Analysis

The **first** question asked from the learners was “how many social media sites they have joined till date?” 72% of them said that they have joined 3-4 sites, 24% said 1-2 sites, while only 4% said that they have joined only 1 social media site.

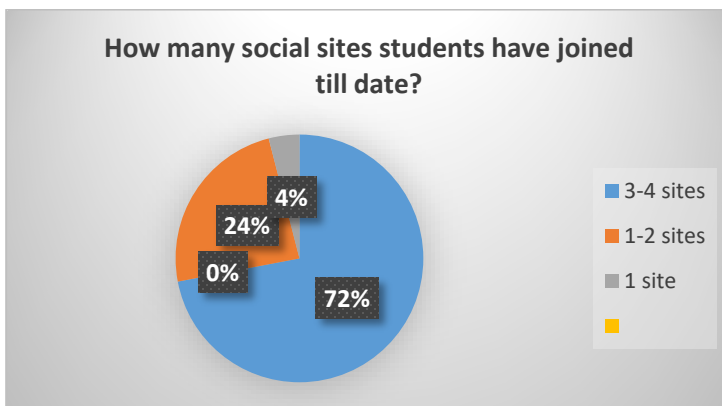


Figure 1. Social sites joining of students

The **second** question we asked the learners was “for which of the following purpose they have joined those social media sites?” We gave them the option of entertainment, education, communication and all of the above. Surprisingly, 56% of them said that they have joined social media for entertainment, 24% opted for communication, 18% opted for education and only 2% opted for all of the above option.

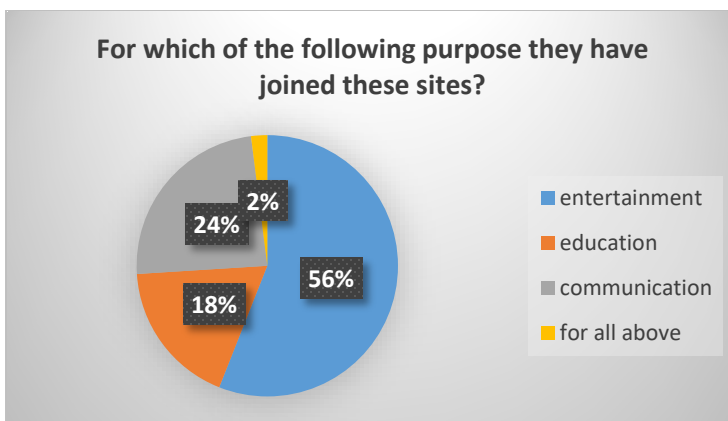


Figure 2. Purpose of joining social media sites

The **third** question was the purpose for which they use social media, is it really helpful in enhancing their vocabulary as ESL learners? 40% of them said that it helps them a lot as they interact with many people and they come to know many new things on an almost daily basis, so they learn many new vocabulary items. 20% said that social sites are not at all helpful in enhancing their vocabulary, while another 40% said that sometimes they learn new words while sometimes it’s not helpful.

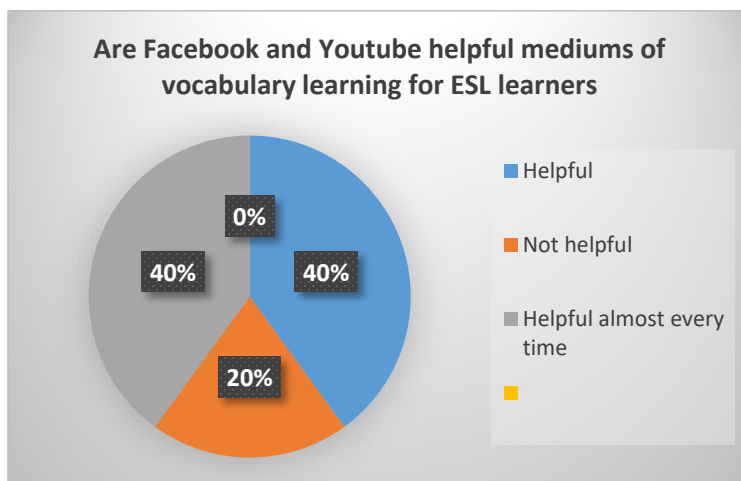


Figure 3. Vocabulary learning through Facebook and Youtube

The **fourth** question we asked the learners was “which language they often use on social media?” 52% of them said that they use English language, 44% said that they use both their native as well as English language, while only 4% said they use their native language.

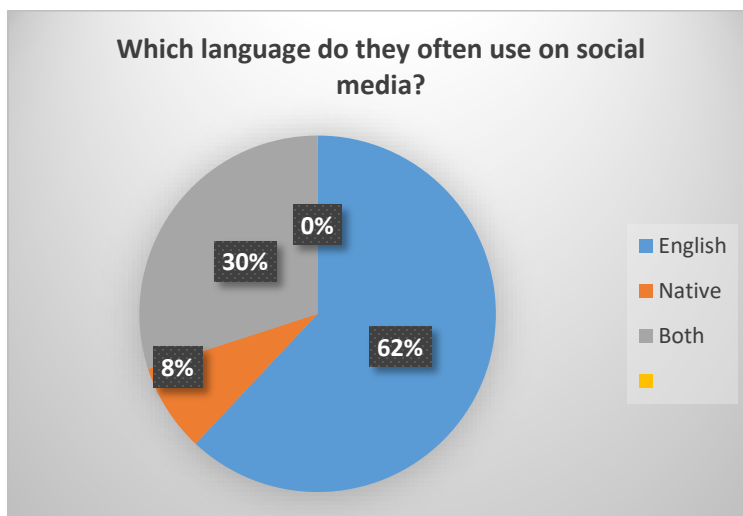


Figure 4. Use of language on social media

The **fifth** question we asked the learners was “what kind of language they prefer most on social media?” 12% of them said they use informal language, 32% said formal language, while 56% said that they use either formal or informal language keeping in view the people they interact with.

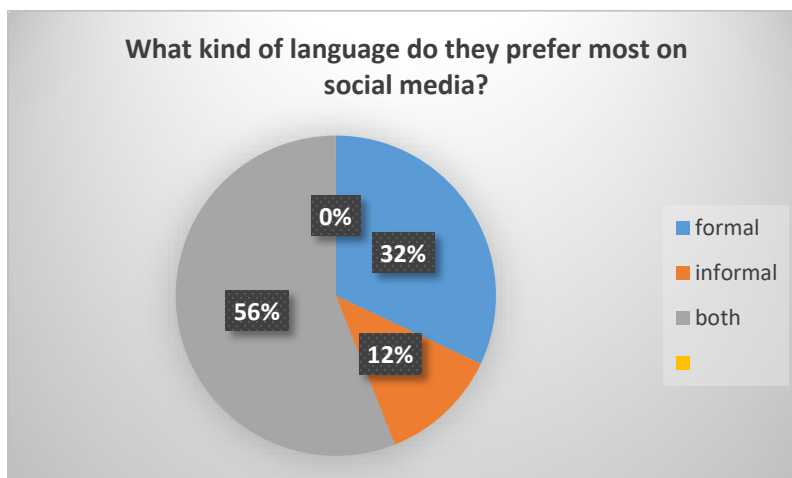


Figure 5. Preferred language on social media

The **sixth** question we asked the learners was whether they try to learn vocabulary explicitly or implicitly on social media. 24% of them said they learn vocabulary explicitly, 52% opted for both ways, while 24% said they learn vocabulary implicitly.

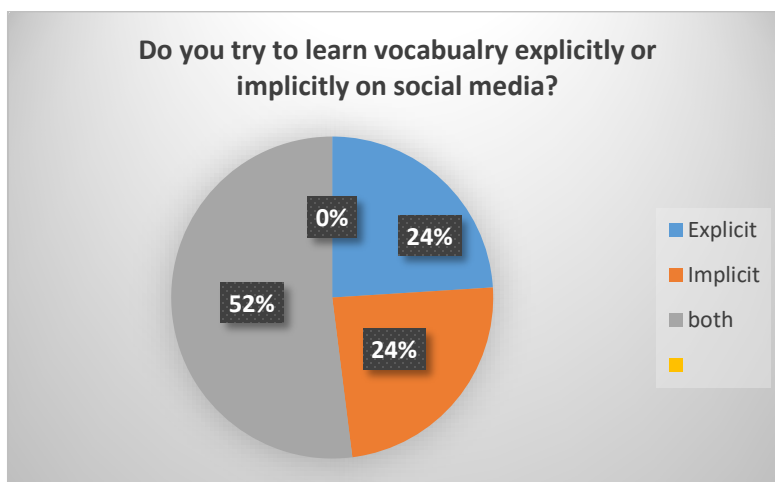


Figure 6. Explicit and implicit vocabulary learning through social media

The **seventh** question we asked them was “whether social media is more helpful for them in learning vocabulary as compared to their classrooms?” 28% learners said that social media is not that helpful, 24% said that social media is more helpful, while 48% said maybe.

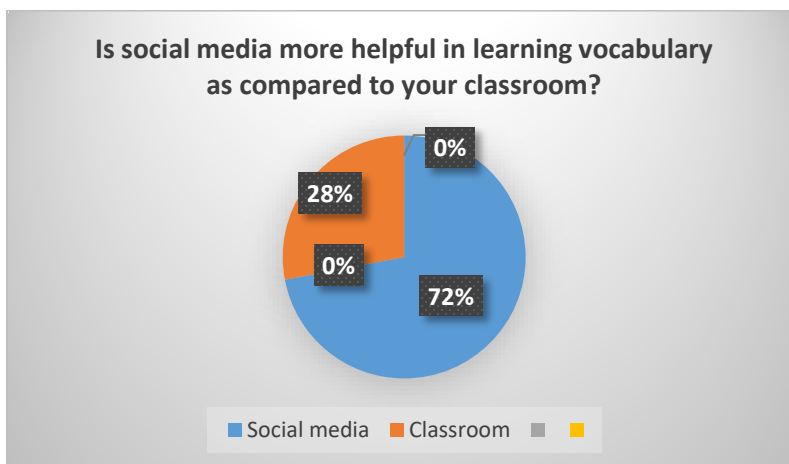


Figure 7. Comparison of social media and classroom in vocabulary learning

The **eight** question we asked them was “being an ESL learners have they joined any vocabulary learning page or group on social media?” Surprisingly, 52% learners said yes while 48% said no. It shows that student use social media sites for entertainment as well as educational purposes in English language learning courses.

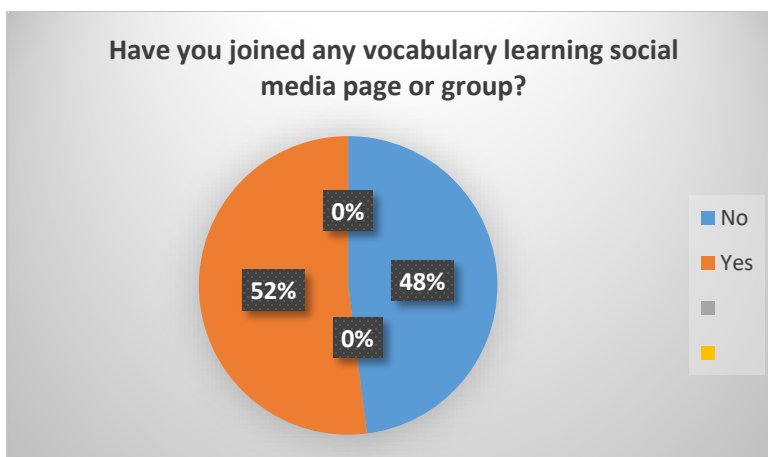


Figure 8. Joining of any social media page for vocabulary learning

The **ninth** question we asked them was “whether they make use of newly learned vocabulary through social media on a daily basis or not?” 40% learners said no, 28% said yes, while 32% said most of the time they use it.

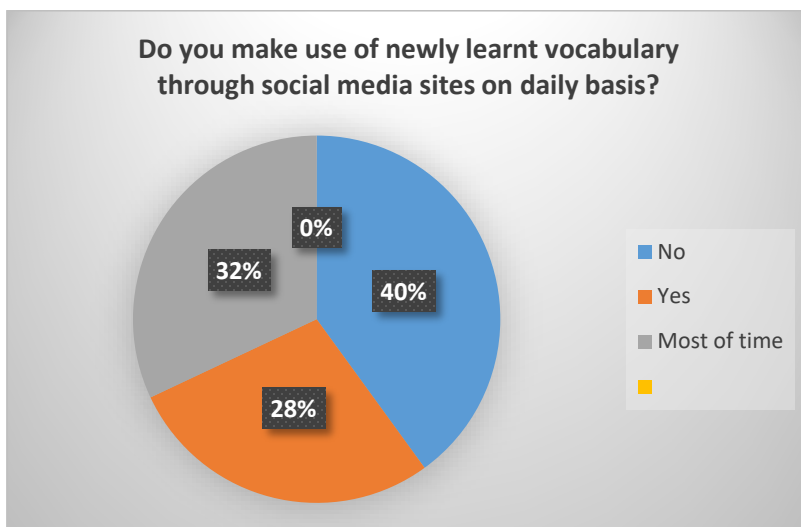


Figure 9. Newly learnt vocabulary through social media

Moreover, we asked them if using social media is harmful for their spelling skill. 24% learners said yes, 40% said that it does not affect their spellings, and 28% responded may be.

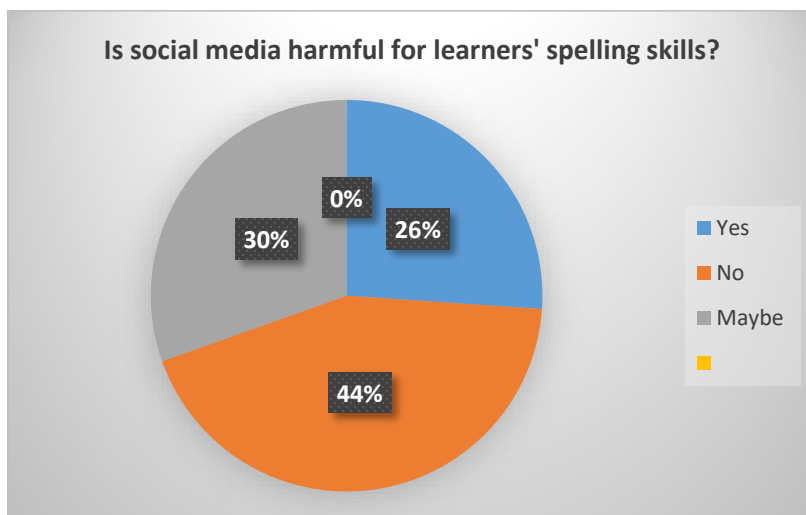


Figure 10. Is social media harmful for spelling skills?

Finally, learners were asked if social media is more interesting than books in vocabulary learning process. Interestingly, 51% learners said yes, 31% said no, and only 18% said that both books and social media sites are equally interesting for them.

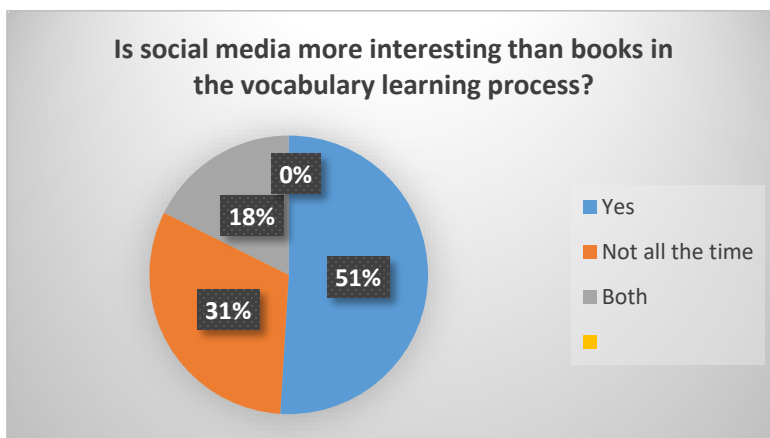


Figure 11. Social media is more interesting than books in the vocabulary learning process.

The first question that we asked the teachers was about learners' interest in activities like reading books, gaming, sports and social media. 90% of them said that the learners' interest is mainly in social media, while only 10% mentioned gaming. The second question that was asked from teachers was to choose any one of the option mentioned in the questionnaire regarding learners who like to use dictionaries. The majority of teachers responded that most of the time learners don't like to use dictionaries. The next question was that how often learners learn language through practical use of language? 70% teachers agreed with the option "in most of the cases", 20% chose "seldom", only 10% chose to agree with the option "rare", while no one chose "never".

Another question was "whether students learn from YouTube lectures?" 60% teachers agreed with the option "quite often". On the other hand, 40% agreed with the second option "sometimes". The next question was to name the sources to which students can relate to. 70% teachers said that the students mostly relate to the "words from social media", whereas, 20% said that they mostly relate to the words from the lectures. Only 10% of responses agreed with the option "words from the books".

Questions 6-10 were open-ended questions in which the teachers gave detailed responses. Question no. 6 was about the effects of social media on vocabulary acquisition of ESL learners. Almost 85% teachers said that it has positive effects on vocabulary acquisition of ESL learners. 15% had a different opinion that it has both positive and negative effects on language

learning as learners learn wrong spelling and ungrammatical structure of the target language. We asked them also whether this effectiveness of social media allows students to learn new vocabulary items or not. 80% of them believe that social media expands learners' consciousness about the use of vocabulary items which helps them to learn more words. 20% said that while using social media they ignore formal usage of language, as it is informal and not an authentic source of language learning. The next question was asked to find out whether social media provides the learning environment for students. 60% of teachers believe that social media sites are effective in drawing the attention of learners and they provide a healthy learning environment. Whereas 40% of them are not in the favor of the use of social media.

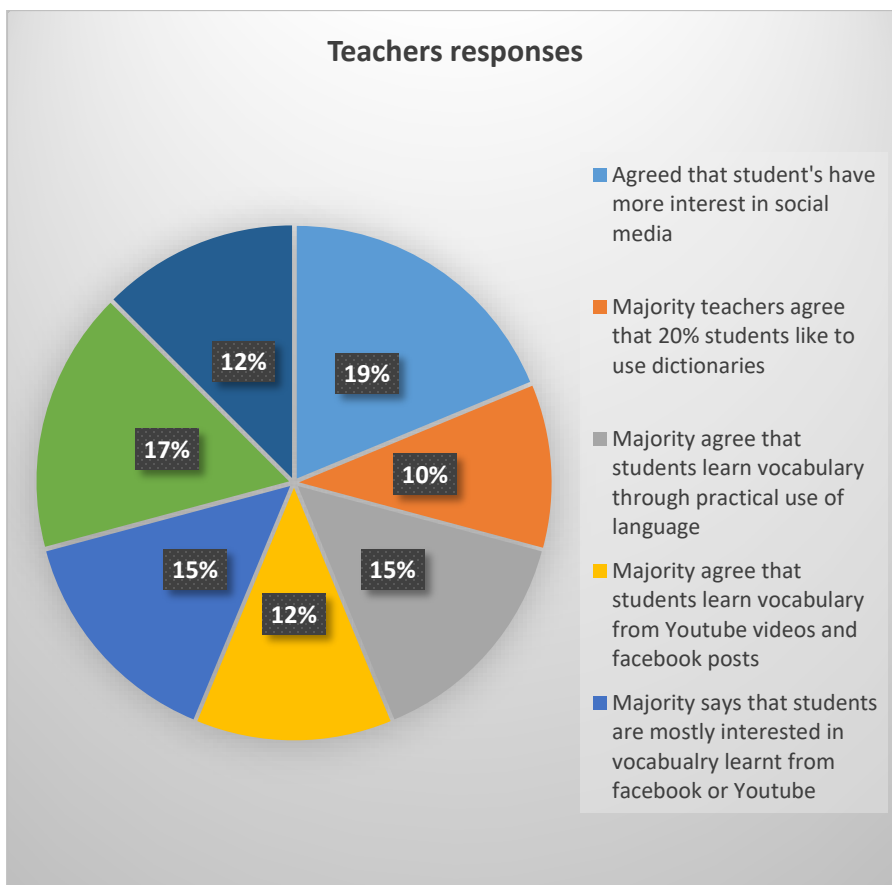


Figure 12. The responses of the teachers about vocabulary learning through social media

Moreover, we found a downward slant in the graph when we asked teachers whether social media provides a better learning environment than that of the classroom. 60% of them believe that classroom is always a better environment for learning. On the other hand, 40% believe that classroom is the primary resource of learning but they also believe that social media can also provide a better environment than a classroom. Lastly, when teachers were asked whether social media improves the writing skills of ESL learners, we found that the majority of them replied in affirmative. 98% had the opinion that it does improve the writing skills of ESL learners to a great extent. Whereas 2% only partially agreed with the idea that it effects learners' writing skills but it also has negative effects as there is a lot of slang used on social media.

10. Findings

So, if we look at the results, we infer that among ESL learners social networking sites are very popular. They provide an easy and rapid access to the world outside and it is a cost-effective source through which learners can have entertainment and gain knowledge. As far as the role of social media in enhancing vocabulary is concerned, students do not find it very much helpful as they showed little interest in using social media for increasing their vocabulary. There were few students who said social media is helpful in enhancing their vocabulary as they interact with new people and come to gather new information through it. However, students agreed that social media is more interesting than books in the learning process.

Learners find it easy and entertaining to refer to online websites for academic purposes and also it is a way of learning which is easily accessible at home. Students can download and replay lectures and through social networking sites they can share information easily in very little or no time. Therefore, we discovered that language learning on social media is very effective for ESL learners. We also came to know that teachers find social media sites more attractive and a catchy medium of learning which improves learners' vocabulary and expands their consciousness about the use of language. Thus, we found that social media sites are an effective medium of learning and improving the vocabulary of ESL learners and for teachers these are effective tools of teaching vocabulary.

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