

Social Media in ELT: A Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT:

Over the past decade, social media-based technologies have received significant research information in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), especially after the COVID-19 crisis, which catalysed the rapid digitisation of language education. This is a systematic literature review that aggregates the empirical results obtained from the analysis of 86 peer-reviewed studies that were retrieved from the Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, and Google Scholar databases located online, beginning from January 2013 and ending in March 2025, with the final ten months covered by a supplementary update search. The aim of this review is to look at (a) the social media platforms that have been prominently used in ELT and (b) the language skills most commonly dealt with and that are (c) better suited to ELT because of social media's pedagogical affordances, as well as to (d) barriers and challenges of integrating social media in language instruction. The results indicate that the most commonly-used platforms were YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok and Telegram, with writing and vocabulary development the most highly researched. The dominant theoretical framework appears to be social constructivism and the Community of Practice approach. There is strong evidence that it has benefited motivation, engagement, and skill acquisition, although issues of distraction, privacy, and teacher training pose significant challenges as well. The review ends with a discussion of a pedagogically sound approach for the responsible and effective use of social media in ELT settings and priorities for future research.

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Introduction

In our modern world in which social media is everywhere, many things have changed in the way of education and the way English Language Teaching (ELT) is taught. As of 2024, there are roughly 5.17 billion social media users worldwide, and learning platforms like YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok utilize their social features beyond face-to-face learning to become integral to the way learners learn, practice, and create L2. Everyday digital participation as a target for learners creates fascinating possibilities and provoking challenges for the teacher.

In recent 20 years, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has increasingly been supported and in many cases replaced by Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and language learning mediated through social media (Duman et al., 2015; Kessler, 2018), the two new areas of study that are based on today's online and mobile technologies. Thus, social media platforms provide a unique set of features desirable to communicative and constructivist-oriented L2 instruction: access to authentic end-user exposure to the target language; opportunities for collaborative creation; opportunities for asynchronicity and synchronicity in communication; and access to global communities of practice (Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Lim & Richardson, 2021).

Social media and ELT have been of great interest to researchers, and their number of studies has increased by leaps and bounds. A focused search of the Scopus database with the terms 'social media' and 'ELT' or 'EFL' yielded more than 2,400 records as of January 2024, but less than 200 records prior to 2015. Despite this growth, however, the body of research is disorganized, with each research study targeting a specific platform, useable skill, or specific institutional context, and making it challenging to make pedagogical generalizations. While these earlier reviews were useful, most were bounded to a single platform or a single skill and, in several cases, did not apply an explicit systematic methodology to study selection and analysis.

Barrot's (2022) bibliometric review of social media and language learning between 2008 and 2019 mapped the field's overall growth but did not synthesize pedagogical affordances by skill area, while more recent single-platform syntheses have each examined one application in isolation: Tayari Ashtiani et al. (2024) and Samani et al. (2025) on Instagram, Abbas et al. (2025) on YouTube, and Kaur and Sulaiman (2023) on TikTok. None of these reviews compares platforms against one another, tracks how pedagogical affordances map onto specific language skills across the whole social media ecology, or synthesizes the post-pandemic (1044-1061) surge in research alongside the earlier literature. This leaves a gap that this review is positioned to fill: unlike previous platform-specific reviews, the present study synthesizes evidence across multiple social media platforms, language skills, and educational contexts to build an integrated, cross-platform understanding of how social media supports ELT, and to distil pedagogical principles for effective implementation that no single-platform review can offer. This cross-platform, cross-skill synthesis is also what gives the review its educational significance: it provides educators and policymakers with consolidated evidence for selecting and integrating appropriate social media platforms into English language instruction, while identifying research priorities for responsible digital pedagogy.

This review aims to do so, first by providing a comprehensive review of the empirical literature that guides the development of this topic by social media in ELT globally on all platforms and skill areas, and second by analyzing that literature in a systematic way guided by the PRISMA framework and covering all educational levels. The study aimed to address four research questions:

1. Which social media platforms have been most prominently used in ELT research between 2013 and 2025?
2. Which language skills have received the most research attention in social media-mediated ELT?

3. What pedagogical affordances and theoretical frameworks underpin effective social media use in ELT?

4. What challenges and barriers characterize social media integration in ELT, and what solutions have been proposed?

By synthesizing 86 studies through a rigorous systematic methodology, this review aims to provide language educators, curriculum designers, and researchers with a comprehensive evidence base for decision-making regarding social media pedagogy.

Background and Theoretical Framework

Social Media in Educational Contexts

Social Media are online environments for the production, sharing and participation in user created content within networks of users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Their value for teaching and learning is related to a number of unique features, such as: multiformity of the content (Manca & Ranieri, 2016); the ability to sustain an unknown but constant possibility of development in interaction with native and other English speakers (Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Lim & Richardson, 2021); the possibility of a persistent asynchronous channel, which extends learning processes beyond the scheduled class time for education (Lim & Richardson, 2021); low-stakes informal environments that could lead to a reduction in language anxiety (Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Lim & Richardson, 2021).

The mid-2000s witnessed the rise of Web 2.0 technologies, which turned the web into a participatory space and thus drastically altered online experiences of digital language. Although the CALL research in the early years was about drill programs, the Web 2.0 era brought about the development of wikis, blogs, and early social networks, which resulted in opportunities for real communicative practice on a large scale (Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Kessler, 2018). With the explosion in the production of smartphones and mobile internet, the gradual infiltration of social media into the daily lives of language learners has made distinctions and methods of language exposure in and out of the classroom

even more vague, and formal curricula are only just starting to systematically use social media as a source of language input.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Social media and ELT research is a product of several theoretical traditions. The theoretical basis is the social constructivism which has been expanded and developed in the collaborative learning theories based upon the zone of proximal development (ZPD) Vygotsky (1978) proposed that social media sparks the establishment of a collaborative learning environment, where the students within the environment are capable of contributing to the learning process of their peers, native speakers, and educators by interacting with them (Al-Qaysi et al., 2020). The "setting up a study circle" affordance of Facebook Groups and WhatsApp are directly based on the principles of mediated learning from Vygotskian perspective.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) model on Communities of Practice (CoP) has proved especially useful in elucidating ways in which learners engage with natural communities (L2) of users of English. As an EFL student watches an English-language content producer on YouTube or Instagram, as he or she mimics the cross-cultural exchange and communication of the content producers on the social media platform Twitter and as he or she joins the globally distributed groups of ELCCs on the social media platform Facebook, he or she is peripherally and then actively involved in real communities of operational ELCs (Lim & Richardson, 2021; Manca & Ranieri, 2016).

The Input Hypothesis by Krashen (1982) and the Output Hypothesis by Swain (1985) continue to dominate the discussion on the double role of social media: social media like YouTube deliver comprehensible and challenging input with regard to the target language, and social media that demand production, like Facebook postings, WhatsApp voice notes, and TikTok videos, create meaningful output opportunities. Together the three theoretical viewpoints outlined above, social constructivism, CoP, and SLA input/output models constitute the

prevailing theory ecology of the literature that has been studied. Rather than treating these traditions as parallel but separate lenses, this review integrates them into a single explanatory framework that guides the synthesis reported in later sections. In this framework, social constructivism and Vygotskian mediation explain why social media environments can support learning at all: they supply the collaborative, socially mediated space in which a learner's zone of proximal development can be extended by peers, native speakers, and instructors (Vygotsky, 1978; Al-Qaysi et al., 2020). Communities of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) explains how sustained participation is organized over time, describing the trajectory by which a learner moves from peripheral observation (watching a YouTube creator, following an Instagram account) to fuller participation in an English-using community. The Input/Output Hypotheses (Krashen, 1982; Swain, 1985) explain what is being learned at the level of linguistic processing, distinguishing platforms that are input-rich (YouTube, Instagram) from those that are output-demanding (Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok). Read together, these three traditions form a why-how-what model of social media-mediated ELT: social constructivism accounts for why the environment is pedagogically enabling, Communities of Practice accounts for how participation deepens, and SLA input/output theory accounts for what linguistic gains should be expected. This integrated model, rather than any one tradition in isolation, is what the Discussion section returns to when explaining why particular platforms differentially support particular language skills.

Methodology

Review Design and Protocol

This review adheres to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021), which represent the internationally recognized standard for rigorous and transparent systematic literature reviews. PRISMA was adopted because it ensures that the process of literature identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and synthesis is

reproducible and free from ad hoc decisions, thereby maximizing the validity and credibility of the findings (Moher et al., 2015). A review protocol was established prior to database searching, specifying research questions, search terms, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and data extraction procedures. The protocol was documented internally and circulated among the three authors for agreement before screening began; it was not prospectively registered in a public repository such as PROSPERO or the Open Science Framework (OSF). We acknowledge this as a limitation of the present review's methodological transparency: because PROSPERO does not accept education-focused systematic reviews and no equivalent registry was used at the time the protocol was finalized, the *a priori* research questions and eligibility criteria cannot be independently time-stamped by a third party. Readers seeking to verify that no post hoc changes were made to the eligibility criteria are referred to the data extraction template, which is available from the corresponding author on request. Future updates of this review will be registered on OSF prior to searching.

Search Strategy

Systematic searches were conducted in four major academic databases: Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and Google Scholar. Searches were performed in January 2024, with a supplementary update search conducted in March 2025 to capture studies that had appeared in press or ahead-of-print since the original search (see below); no automated alert updates were run outside these two windows. Google Scholar was included, despite its acknowledged inconsistency in indexing and its inclusion of non-peer-reviewed material, because it retrieves regionally published and open-access ELT journals from the Global South that are frequently absent from Web of Science and Scopus; excluding it risked systematically under-representing the EFL contexts (e.g., Pakistan, Indonesia, parts of the Middle East) that make up the majority of this review's corpus. To offset the resulting reproducibility risk, consistent with Haddaway et al.'s (2015) caution that Google

Scholar mixes substantial grey literature into its results, only the first 300 hits ranked by relevance were screened, and every Google Scholar record that passed abstract screening was independently checked by a second reviewer for peer-reviewed status and indexing in at least one recognized bibliographic database before being carried to full-text review. The following Boolean search string was applied consistently across databases:

("social media" OR "social network" OR "Facebook" OR "Instagram" OR "YouTube" OR "WhatsApp" OR "TikTok" OR "Twitter" OR "Telegram") AND ("English language teach*" OR "ELT" OR "EFL" OR "ESL" OR "language learn*")*

Searches were restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles published between January 2013 and

March 2025. The 2013 lower boundary was selected to capture the period following the mass adoption of smartphone-enabled social media while excluding earlier, fundamentally different technological contexts. Hand-searching of reference lists from eligible full-text articles yielded an additional 42 records.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were screened against the criteria specified in Table 1 below. Two reviewers independently screened all titles and abstracts, with disagreements resolved through discussion and consensus. Full-text screening was subsequently applied to records meeting abstract-level criteria.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Study Selection

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication period	2013–2024	Pre-2013 (unless foundational/theoretical)
Language	English-language publications only	Non-English unless translated abstracts available
Study design	Empirical (quantitative, qualitative, mixed); systematic reviews	Opinion pieces, editorials, conference abstracts without full text
Population	EFL/ESL learners and/or teachers at any educational level	Studies focusing on L1 (native) speakers exclusively
Intervention/focus	Use of social media platforms in formal or informal ELT	Social media use for marketing, health, or non-educational purposes
Outcome	Language skills, motivation, engagement, teacher practice, attitudes	Studies with no measurable/reportable ELT outcome
Publication type	Peer-reviewed journal articles (Scopus/WoS indexed preferred)	Grey literature, blogs, non-peer-reviewed reports

PRISMA Flow Diagram

The selection process is summarized in Table 2, presented in PRISMA flow format. Of the 5,932 initially identified records, 86 studies were ultimately included in the final review corpus. Two of these 86 records (Dashti & Abdulsalam, 2025; Samani et al., 2025) were identified as

ahead-of-print manuscripts during the original January 2024 search and were retained once their final, paginated versions appeared in 2025; their inclusion is what necessitated extending the nominal review window to March 2025, as noted above, and no additional full-text screening decisions were altered as a result.

Table 2. PRISMA Study Selection Flow

PHASE	DESCRIPTION & NUMBERS
Identification	Records identified through database searching: Web of Science (n = 1,240), Scopus (n = 1,580), ERIC (n = 890), Google Scholar (n = 2,180) Total identified: N = 5,890 Additional records identified through other sources (n = 42)
Screening	Records after duplicates removed: n = 4,312 Records screened (title & abstract): n = 4,312 Records excluded (off-topic, non-English, non-peer-reviewed): n = 3,758 Records assessed for full-text eligibility: n = 554
Eligibility	Full-text articles excluded: n = 468 Reasons: wrong population (n = 112), irrelevant outcome (n = 143), wrong study design (n = 98), outside 2013–2024 time frame (n = 88), duplicate data (n = 27) Studies included in qualitative synthesis: n = 86
Included	Studies included in final systematic review: n = 86 Quantitative studies: n = 48 Qualitative studies: n = 24 Mixed-method: n = 14

Note. Adapted from Page et al. (2021) PRISMA 2020 guidelines.

Data Extraction and Analysis

A standardized data extraction form was used to systematically record the following information from each included study: author(s), year, country, educational level, platform(s) used, language skill(s) targeted, participant profile (age, proficiency level, n), study design, data collection instruments, and key findings. Thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was applied to identify recurrent patterns across studies, involving line-by-line coding of findings, development of descriptive themes, and generation of analytical themes that go beyond the original studies. Inter-rater reliability was established for a random 25% subset of studies, yielding a Cohen's kappa of $\kappa = 0.81$, indicating strong agreement.

Methodological quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018) for the 14 mixed-methods studies, the Quality Assessment Tool for Quantitative Studies (Effective Public Health Practice Project, 1998; Thomas et al., 2004) for the 48 quantitative (experimental, quasi-experimental, and survey/correlational) studies, and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) qualitative checklist for the 24 qualitative studies. Two reviewers independently rated each study as strong, moderate, or weak on the relevant tool's global rating scale, with disagreements resolved by discussion and, where needed, adjudication by

the third author; inter-rater agreement on the global ratings was $\kappa = 0.77$. No study was excluded on quality grounds alone, consistent with the review's aim of mapping the full breadth of the literature rather than restricting synthesis to only the highest-rated designs; however, quality ratings were used to weight the confidence placed in specific findings during synthesis (see Table 5a) and low-rated studies whose findings conflicted with the wider corpus were flagged rather than treated as equally authoritative.

Results

Overview of Included Studies

The 86 included studies span 29 countries across six continents, with the highest concentration in East Asia (China, South Korea, Japan: 28.8%), the Middle East and North Africa (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Egypt: 27.9%), and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam: 20.9%). The predominance of Global South contexts is particularly notable: over 70% of studies were conducted in EFL rather than ESL settings, reflecting the growing importance of digital mediation for learners who lack immersive exposure to English outside the classroom. Table 3 provides a distribution of studies by platform and primary skill focus. Table 4 breaks down the language skills targeted across the corpus. Table 5 presents the methodological breakdown.

Table 3. Distribution of Included Studies by Social Media Platform

Platform	Studies (n)	% of Total	Primary Focus	Skill	Key Pedagogical Affordances
YouTube	22	25.6%	Listening, Speaking		Authentic input, subtitled video, pronunciation modeling, flipped learning
Facebook	18	20.9%	Writing, Vocabulary		Group interaction, collaborative writing, peer feedback, community building
WhatsApp	16	18.6%	Speaking, Writing		Mobile-first asynchronous practice, out-of-class communication, voice notes
Instagram	12	14.0%	Vocabulary, Reading		Visual scaffolding, multimodal content, hashtag communities, story challenges
TikTok	8	9.3%	Speaking, Pronunciation		Short-form video, creative output, peer modeling, gamified challenges
Twitter/X	5	5.8%	Writing, Vocabulary		Concise writing, authentic audience, microblogging, hashtag chats
Telegram	5	5.8%	All four skills		Asynchronous messaging, bot integration, channel broadcasting
Total	86	100%	—	—	—

Table 4. Language Skill Distribution Across Included Studies

Language Skill	No. Studies	% of Total	Most Used Platform	Reported Effect (predominant)
Writing	28	32.6%	Facebook, WhatsApp	Significant improvement in writing fluency, coherence, and vocabulary use
Vocabulary	24	27.9%	Instagram, YouTube	Enhanced retention and contextual word knowledge; incidental acquisition
Speaking	18	20.9%	YouTube, TikTok	Improved pronunciation, fluency, and oral confidence
Listening	10	11.6%	YouTube, Podcast apps	Better comprehension of authentic speech; improved phonological awareness
Reading	6	7.0%	Twitter/X, Instagram	Increased reading exposure; improved lexical inferencing strategies
Total	86	100%	—	—

Table 5. Methodological Profile of Included Studies

Research Design	No. Studies	% of Corpus	Notable Characteristics
Quantitative (experimental/quasi-experimental)	34	39.5%	Pre-/post-test designs; control and experimental groups; statistical analysis (t-tests, ANOVA, regression)
Quantitative (survey/correlational)	14	16.3%	Likert-scale instruments; structural equation modeling; large sample sizes (N > 200)
Qualitative	24	27.9%	Interviews, observations, reflective journals; thematic analysis; phenomenological approaches
Mixed Methods	14	16.3%	Combined survey + interview; sequential explanatory designs; case studies with multiple data sources
Total	86	100%	—

Applying the appraisal tools described in the Methodology, the 48 quantitative studies were

rated strong (n = 21), moderate (n = 19), or weak (n = 8) on the EPHPP global scale; the 24

qualitative studies were rated high ($n = 15$), medium ($n = 7$), or low ($n = 2$) confidence on the CASP checklist; and the 14 mixed-methods studies were rated as meeting all ($n = 9$), most ($n = 4$), or few ($n = 1$) MMAT screening and quality criteria. No study was excluded for quality reasons alone, but the eight quantitative studies rated weak, most commonly for unclear allocation or attrition reporting, were disproportionately concentrated among the smaller-sample WhatsApp and Twitter/X studies discussed below, and their findings are flagged accordingly wherever they diverge from the wider corpus. This appraisal profile indicates that the evidence base is, on balance, moderately-to-strongly rated, but that confidence in platform-specific claims is not uniform across platforms.

Platform-Specific Findings

YouTube

YouTube was found to be the most widely-studied platform ($n = 22$; 25.6%), due to its unique availability of multimodal, authentic English language materials. The most widespread pedagogy is the flipped classroom approach, where students watch authentic TED Talks, news reports or videos created by the teacher prior to class, and are then asked to practice their communication skills during class. Suseno & Darma (2024) carried out a systematic literature review to reveal that listening to native speaker models on YouTube can have a positive effect on oral language accuracy performance and oral fluency performance together with their related speaking procedures. A quasi-experimental study in Jordan also revealed that EFL undergraduate students who were instructed using YouTube integration outperformed control group students on listening comprehension and speaking task scores at both listening and speaking-heavy items ($p < .001$). YouTube incidental acquisition is a second but powerful finding across eight studies: Vocabulary incidental acquisition through YouTube. The findings showed that the learners who were exposed to English-language YouTube materials in both audio and visual format with closed captioning performed better on the vocabulary retention test than those who were

exposed to audio-only format and text-only format on this test, because they received two types of input (Dashti & Abdulsalam, 2025). As noted repeatedly, however, the benefit to pedagogy in using YouTube is strictly dependent on the type of task employed: unstructured uses of YouTube resulted in no significant vocabulary benefit in three studies, indicating that tasks must be structured and guided for any learning to benefit. This pattern is consistent with experimental work outside this review's corpus on the same captioning mechanism: Teng (2022), using a controlled captioned-viewing design outside a YouTube-specific sample, similarly found that learner-related factors such as proficiency and working memory, rather than captioning alone, determined whether incidental vocabulary gains occurred, reinforcing that YouTube's vocabulary benefit is conditional rather than automatic. This dependency on learner and task variables, rather than the video medium itself, mirrors the broader literature on incidental vocabulary uptake from audiovisual input outside the ELT-specific corpus: in a large-scale study of L2 television viewing, Peters and Webb (2018) found that word frequency, textual redundancy between soundtrack and imagery, and learners' prior vocabulary knowledge, rather than viewing per se, predicted how many words were picked up, a finding that generalizes the same conditionality this review observes for YouTube specifically.

Facebook

Facebook was the second most studied ($n = 18$; 20.9%) social media platform where the focus was mainly on writing skills and collaborative vocabulary learning. Based on the findings of Scopus and Web of Science literature, Klimova and Pikhart (2021) found this pattern of better writing skills across all studies analyzed, with a more notable improvement in terms of content organization, lexical diversity and motivational engagement with writing. It has been specifically identified that the Facebook Group feature is the most pedagogically versatile unit of Facebook for ELT because it is a semi-public space that has the benefits of a virtual classroom (teacher control, curriculum alignment) as well as those of a

networked classroom community (peer audience, informal tone, multimodal content sharing).

By assessing writing outcomes, Un Nisa et al (2023) concluded that the students of EFL universities of Pakistan who participated in social network Facebook Groups for writing task with descriptive prompt-based feedback, a statistically significant improvement was observed in terms of writing scores as compared to the students of EFL universities who were instructed in the traditional method. Peer feedback quality is another factor that has been identified as being different; the observation of written peer feedback that is visible and persistent on Facebook seems to elicit more detailed and specific peer feedback compared to subgroups created within private messaging channels (Asafo-Adjei et al., 2023). Not surprisingly, more importantly, writing motivation a generally cited weak area in formal EFL instruction appears in every study targeted; in 14 out of 18 studies on Facebook, writing motivation is consistently reported as a positive outcome from the use of this platform.

WhatsApp

Research on WhatsApp is nearly as extensive as for Twitter and SMS, and the majority of studies ($n = 16$; 18.6%) focus on Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Indonesia and Egypt ($n = 4$; 4.4%). The main pedagogical use in ELT is out of class communicative practice with groups; students continue their in-class conversation with groups, do voice note activities and play games relating to only using English. In a recent study, Bani Salameh (2023) explored the perceptions of Saudi EFL learners of WhatsApp as a language support tool to uncover the attitudes of the learners, which were found to be overwhelmingly positive with strong elements of access, informal environment, and ease of using the multimedia function of WhatsApp. The study results indicated large pre-/post- self-reported increases in speaking confidence and writing fluency, however, the study utilized solely self-reported data. This self-reported pattern converges with an independently conducted experimental study: Han and Keskin (2016), using the Foreign

Language Classroom Anxiety Scale as a pre-/post-measure rather than self-report alone, found that four weeks of structured WhatsApp speaking tasks produced a statistically significant reduction in undergraduate EFL learners' speaking anxiety, lending measurement-based support to the confidence gains that Bani Salameh's (2023) participants reported subjectively. A larger, criterion-referenced study reaches a consistent conclusion using a different assessment standard: across a mixed-ability sample of 110 learners, two semesters of collaborative WhatsApp tasks produced statistically significant gains on IELTS speaking criteria, specifically fluency and coherence, lexical resource, and pronunciation (Akkara et al., 2020), suggesting that the speaking benefit documented for WhatsApp is not an artifact of self-report methodology alone. However, some of the most methodologically sound conclusions produced in the course of this review have occurred when WhatsApp has been introduced in the flipped and blended learning models. Zhao et al. (2022) carried out a large-scale survey ($n = 412$) to prove that users' usage of WhatsApp significantly predicted their FLM ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$) and negatively predicted their LAA ($\beta = -0.29$, $p < 0.001$). Attitude toward learning mediated this relationship partially. Moreover, the use of WhatsApp was also a great help to the learners who have an introverted or anxious nature as they stated that they were more willing to communicate in written or voice note than interacting in the classroom.

Instagram

The visually rich and multimodal content space has been mostly used for vocabulary instruction and reading development in Instagram ($n = 12$; 14.0%). Its features (its affordances) are suitable to vocabulary pedagogy approaches that have a visual-based scaffolding and presentation of vocabulary items, as for example in Stories, Reels and interactive polls. Tayari Ashtiani et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of 12 studies that fulfilled the strict inclusion criteria for Instagram as a mobile assisted language learning (MALL) platform in ESL/EFL learning and reached a conclusion that the immediate post-tests showed

a significant advantage for the vocabulary learning approach in both mobile-assisted and non-mobile-assisted language learning scenarios, with modest effect sizes ranging from $d = 0.43$ – 0.67 . There was less evidence of effectiveness persistence however, indicating that learning using Instagram supports better when anchored to spaced repetition approaches. A separate quasi-experimental study of Instagram as a MALL tool for technical vocabulary among EAP learners similarly found that a structured, task-based Instagram intervention outperformed conventional instruction on both immediate vocabulary tests and self-reported attitudes, corroborating the review-level finding that Instagram's vocabulary benefit depends on deliberate task design rather than passive exposure (Tavassoli & Beyranvand, 2023). Beyond vocabulary, a randomized quasi-experimental study of Instagram feed-based tasks for grammar instruction found a similar pattern outside this review's search window: EFL learners assigned to structured Instagram feed tasks outperformed a webinar-only control group on grammar accuracy and reported more positive attitudes toward the platform, again indicating that Instagram's pedagogical value across skill areas is task-dependent rather than inherent to the medium (Teng et al., 2022). Using English learning tips, vocabulary, and grammar explanations with the use of Instagram accounts is a new and under studied phenomenon. Findings from Samani et al. (2025) confirmed that presence of at least three English-language accounts on education influencers' Instagram accounts increased their learners' receptive vocabulary scores and their out-of-class engagement with English when compared to peers from the control group, indicating that it can be viewed as an effective channel of English engagement outside the classroom.

TikTok

The most recent breakthrough that was explored reported was the use of TikTok as a language learning media, which was published by eight research works between 2021 and 2024. The brief video format (up to 10 minutes) introduces new opportunities for speaking and pronunciation

practice, and algorithm-driven content discovery and duet/stitch functions for user interaction make peer learning possible. Chuah and Ch'ng (2023) explored voice-over challenges on TikTok as a pedagogical approach for Malaysian undergraduates in their study on making ESL oral activities using TikTok. They reported that there was significant improvement in the participants' oral fluency and pronunciation accuracy following five weeks of structured oral activities using voice-over challenges on TikTok, where the participants found the platform to be fun for them to engage with in creating challenging oral activities. The "gamified" and non-stakes aspects of the TikTok challenge seemed to lower the performance pressure compared to the more conventional forms of oral examination.

These pedagogical shortcomings have also been documented in TikTok: Users on TikTok are urged to view content that starts on entertainment rather than the pedagogical purpose, and the competitive social nature of TikTok's creator culture can hinder those with lower levels of skills or output. The study conducted by Amirjalili (2024) is a qualitative exploration of the use of TikTok by EFL learners with different levels of proficiency and it revealed that using TikTok is beneficial only for high-proficiency learners, due to their creativity and confidence in using the app; however, when the content of low-proficiency learners is not engaging they are feeling inadequate, which shows the importance of the design of a bounded and planned learning task in TikTok for EFL: to be able to consider and design the learning tasks in TikTok to get better grades from both learners and their teachers.

Telegram and Twitter/X

Other methodologically diverse and smaller groups within the corpus occur with the smaller samples of telegram ($n=5$) and Twitter/X ($n=5$). The vocabulary and listening exercises and the various bits of grammatical cues are now used to offer additional vocabulary, listening and grammar prompts through the automated bots and make CALL happen in a social messaging environment, by building additional exercises on

top of Telegram channel features. When teaching through pedagogic design in the context of content average to low ambiguity in low friction delivery, application of the notification-based vocabulary training approach in the Telegram app significantly improved the delayed vocabulary scores of their EFL students as compared to the control group students ($p < .01$), suggesting that the notification or low-friction delivery in the popular Telegram app can benefit vocabulary learning through spaced repetition. This aligns with a larger perception-based survey of 300 EFL college students, which similarly found that Telegram was most valued for vocabulary learning specifically, ahead of other language areas, even though the study did not measure spaced-repetition effects directly (Abu-Ayfah, 2019). Twitter/X research has focused on its kind of a platform for short messaging, and real engagement with the audience. The character limit restriction has also been argued as a benefit in learning to create writing economy and precision, but with the vehement and divided nature of the new political landscape that has emerged in the company since 2022, there has been concern that TW might not be an appropriate ELT platform. Of the five existing Twitter studies, three have been submitted prior to 2020, and they are of a different platform culture. One of these pre-2020 studies offers a rare direct platform comparison rather than a single-platform design: Altkhaine and Al-Jallad (2018) randomly assigned Arabic-speaking EFL learners to a Twitter or a Facebook writing-mechanics condition and found no statistically significant difference in error reduction between the two platforms, suggesting that, at least for lower-order writing mechanics, the specific platform may matter less than the task structure imposed on it, a point consistent with the affordance-pedagogy interface argued later in the Discussion.

Language Skills Analysis

Writing received the greatest research attention across the corpus ($n = 28$; 32.6%), followed by vocabulary ($n = 24$; 27.9%), speaking ($n = 18$; 20.9%), listening ($n = 10$; 11.6%), and reading ($n = 6$; 7.0%). This distribution is a consequence of

the fact that it is relatively easy to measure the outcomes of learners' writing and because, historically, written communication has played an important role in social media communication. Despite this, the lack of listening and reading research items is particularly noteworthy and may be attributed partially to difficulties that arise in measuring such more passive and process skills for social media.

In all skill areas, the most consistent finding was that there was an improved level of student motivation and engagement. The results of this study were remarkably consistent with a positive effect for motivation or engagement being reported in 79 out of 86 studies (91.9%), even when the results were mixed or inconclusive for linguistic outcomes. It mirrors general Educational Technology literature, which indicates that: digital novelty effects, authentic audience awareness, and social recognition dynamics of social media platforms can reliably boost initial engagement; the sustainability of these motivating effects in the long term is yet to be determined (Han, 2022). Beyond these frequency counts, cross-tabulating skill, platform, research design, and educational level reveals three patterns that a simple count-based summary would obscure. First, the studies reporting the strongest and most durable linguistic gains, rather than motivation gains alone, were disproportionately the quasi-experimental designs rated strong or moderate on the EPHPP scale (see Results overview, above) that combined an out-of-class social media task with an in-class follow-up activity, a pairing present in the majority of the higher-rated Facebook and WhatsApp writing studies but largely absent from the lower-rated Twitter/X and single-session TikTok studies. Second, this pairing was far more common in tertiary-level studies than in secondary-level studies, suggesting that the age or institutional autonomy of the learner, not the platform itself, may condition whether out-of-class social media use is reliably followed up in class. Third, the EFL-dominant, Global-South concentration of the corpus (Section: Overview of Included Studies) co-occurs with the platforms showing the largest

reported motivational gains (WhatsApp, Facebook), which is consistent with these platforms' low data and device requirements relative to YouTube or Instagram, and suggests that motivational benefit may itself be partly an artifact of the infrastructural constraints under which these learners are studying, rather than a platform-intrinsic property that would necessarily replicate in better-resourced ESL contexts. These cross-cutting patterns, rather than the raw skill or platform frequencies alone, are what the Discussion section below draws on to explain why particular platforms support particular skills.

Discussion

The Affordance-Pedagogy Interface

The key issue of this review is not whether social media use in ELT always has a positive impact, but about the pedagogical design of its impact, which is very influential in shaping outcomes to a great extent. Research conducted with precisely designed tasks—with clear learning targets, teacher scaffolding, and explicit links to curricular learning targets—always saw bigger and lasting outcomes compared to research with less structured or self-chosen social media. This is in line with the CALL literature that has shown that the focus should not be on the technology per se, but on the quality of its pedagogical use, as this is proven to effect learning outcomes (Chapelle, 2001; Kessler, 2018).

The affordance pedagogy interface is not consistent across platforms. The most affirmative value of YouTube can be produced from rich and authentic input, however, for the best pedagogical value of rich and authentic input, you should have the learners process the input through prediction, note-taking and production activities. The main affordance of Facebook is the facilitation of networked interactions between peers; the pedagogical advantage lies in using structured collaborative writing along with feedback mechanisms that are conducive to contexts that are neither social nor casual, but instead have positive feedback. The pedagogical benefits for WhatsApp lie in its low-friction mobile communication: pedagogical extension activities, outside of class time and fulfilled

through WhatsApp, must also take into account English-only norms and accountability structures. Instagram's affordance is its visual-multimodal content; its pedagogical value is enhanced in instruction focused on vocabulary, in which content images can be associated with words and when those images can be spaced-checked. The educational benefit of TikTok is best realized in tasks designed to address speaking and pronunciation learning using the app's performative and peer-modelling culture and where language production/public comparison is not threatening or discouraging. Why particular platforms support particular skills, rather than simply that they do, follows from the integrated theoretical model set out earlier in this article. Skill-affordance matching is explained by which side of the input/output divide (Krashen, 1982; Swain, 1985) a platform's core interaction format sits on: YouTube and Instagram are structurally receptive media, built around consuming a video or image feed, so the skills their affordances most readily support are listening, reading, and incidental vocabulary uptake; Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok are structurally productive media, built around composing a post, message, or video, so they more readily support writing and speaking. Within each side of that divide, the Communities of Practice trajectory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) then explains why some platforms produce durable gains while others plateau: platforms whose native culture rewards repeated, socially visible production over time (Facebook Groups, TikTok duet chains) generate the sustained legitimate-peripheral-to-full participation that this review's corpus associates with lasting skill development, whereas platforms whose native culture rewards one-off consumption (a single YouTube video watched once) generate short-lived motivational spikes without the same participatory depth. Read this way, the platform-skill patterning reported in Table 3 is not an arbitrary empirical curiosity but a predictable consequence of where each platform sits on the input-output and consumption-participation dimensions, which is also why, as the pedagogical-shortcomings evidence for TikTok and Twitter/X shows, the same platform can support a skill well only when

task design compensates for the dimension the platform does not natively provide (e.g., adding structured reflection to an otherwise input-only YouTube task, or adding a scaffolded planning stage before an otherwise unplanned TikTok recording task). This mechanism-level account also clarifies how the present findings relate to prior single-platform reviews. Barrot's (2022) bibliometric mapping of the field found that social media research had grown steadily since 2008 but did not test whether platforms cluster by affordance type; the present synthesis extends that work by showing that the growth Barrot documented is not evenly distributed across skills, but concentrated on productive platforms and writing/vocabulary outcomes, a pattern

invisible to any single-platform review such as those on Instagram (Tayari Ashtiani et al., 2024; Samani et al., 2025), YouTube (Abbas et al., 2025), or TikTok (Kaur & Sulaiman, 2023), each of which necessarily reports within-platform rather than cross-platform variation.

Challenges and Barriers

Although on the one hand the overall picture of findings suggests the adoption of social media in ELT depends on a positive experience, on the other hand, this review reveals 6 main challenges that encompassed the issues encountered by people when using social media in ELT. These challenges are shown in Table 6 with solutions provided in the literature.

Table 6. Challenges, Barriers, and Proposed Solutions in Social Media-Mediated ELT

Challenge Category	Specific Challenges Identified	Proposed Solutions / Implications
Technological	Unequal device access; poor internet in rural/low-income settings; platform instability; incompatible file formats	Institutional provision of devices; offline-capable tools; blended delivery models
Pedagogical	Absence of clear learning objectives; lack of integration with curriculum; teacher over-reliance on informal use	Structured task design; alignment with course outcomes; explicit digital literacies curriculum
Privacy & Ethics	Data security risks; exposure of personal information; unauthorized recording; age-related platform restrictions	Closed group settings; institutional social media policies; student data consent protocols
Distraction & Off-task behaviour	Entertainment-driven platform algorithms; peer social interaction overriding academic use; reduced deep focus	Clear task guidelines; usage monitoring; designated study hours; purpose-driven prompts
Teacher Competency	Lack of digital skills; resistance to change; insufficient pre-service training	In-service professional development; institutional digital literacy training; peer coaching
Learner Factors	Low intrinsic motivation; fear of public exposure; language anxiety online; preference for passive consumption	Scaffolded participation; anonymous contribution options; formative feedback; role modeling

The digital divide becomes a structural issue that crosses the categories, where access to devices and reliable Internet is not equal to that of others, social media-based teaching could worsen disparities in education, rather than mitigating them (Al-Qaysi et al., 2020; Lim & Richardson, 2021). This was especially reported in lower income settings in Sub-Saharan African Association and rural South and Southeast Asian,

where infrastructure constraints forestall the good implementation at larger scale of the social media pedagogy. The lack of structural support is consistently highlighted as an issue, as mentioned by Manca & Ranieri (2016) and Han (2022): institutional policy frameworks are absent, such as institutional data governance and guidelines for the use of platforms and teacher digital literacy training programs.

The second major systemic challenge is the preparedness of the teacher. In total 24 studies explicitly addressed teachers' perceptions on the adequacy of their initial teacher training in digital pedagogy, and in particular of them using the social media principle as a pedagogical tool, not as a communication or organizational tool. In 24 studies, eight of which explicitly drew on teachers' perspectives, the majority of teachers claimed that their pre-service training was inadequate in terms of digital pedagogy, particularly in using the social media principle as a pedagogical tool, rather than as a communication or administrative channel. The teachers who had been given formal training in the field of social media education in ELT engaged in more structured, purposeful activities and are more confident and satisfied than those who had to give this teaching field a formal start or were self-teachers and ad hoc teachers (Dashti & Abdulsalam, 2025; Klimova & Pikhart, 2021).

Ethical Dimensions

One gap in the ELT social media literature that needs continued exploration is privacy and data ethics, which are not often the focus of ELT ET studies (less than 10% of the studies analyzed in this corpus discussed ethics). Educators have students' personal social media accounts that must be used for educational purposes, introducing the learners to data collection practices of these platforms, possible harassment or unwanted contact, and existence of digital footprints. Closed 'secret' Facebook groups, group access on platforms such as WhatsApp, and teacher-managed Telegram groups can help to act as a mitigative measure, although institutions should make a note of the responsibilities in giving guidance and seeking informed consent from learners, especially minors (Lim & Richardson, 2021).

Implications for Practice

Attaining pedagogically responsible social media integration in ELT is proposed here through a 5-principle framework that is derived from the synthesized findings of this review, some of which are:

1. Alignment: Tasks carried out on social media need to be clearly linked to the learning objectives, to the content skills and to the evaluative criteria.
2. Structure: Tasks should be intentionally engineered to include reminders, opportunities to participate, feedback loops as well as accountability systems to ensure that tasks are not passive or off-task.
3. Equity: Teachers must review the level of devices and internet each learner will have before requiring platform use; must have alternatives for participation, if necessary, for learners and groups who cannot access the internet or their devices.
4. Ethics: The institutions' policies in relation to privacy, use of a platform and consent of the students need to be developed and communicated prior to implementation.
5. Criticality: Learners should learn to critically examine digital content for linguistic correctness, cultural appropriateness, misinformation, while fostering the critical digital literacy required for using social media.

These principles are aligned with the evidence synthesized in this review and align with current emerging consensus regarding responsible and appropriate technology integration that is found across the larger field of educational technology (Chapelle, 2001; Kessler, 2018; Lim & Richardson, 2021). Rather than standing as five independent checklist items, the principles are directly traceable to the challenges reported earlier as three linked conditions on a single implementation pathway, rather than three unrelated concerns: Equity is the access condition that determines whether a learner can reach the platform at all (Section: Challenges and Barriers; Al-Qaysi et al., 2020; Yousofi et al., 2025); Ethics is the trust condition that determines whether reaching the platform is safe once access exists (Section: Ethical Dimensions; Lim & Richardson, 2021); and Alignment, Structure, and Criticality are the pedagogical-design conditions that determine whether safe, equitable access is actually converted into learning, consistent with the affordance-

pedagogy mechanism proposed above. A platform that satisfies the pedagogical-design conditions while failing the access or trust conditions will not produce equitable learning gains, and a platform that is accessible and safe but pedagogically unstructured will produce engagement without measurable skill development, a pattern this review found repeatedly (e.g., the unstructured YouTube and TikTok cases). Teacher competency, discussed above as a standalone challenge category, is in this integrated model the mechanism that operationalizes all three conditions simultaneously: frameworks such as DigCompEdu (Redecker, 2017) describe exactly the pedagogical, ethical, and equity-aware digital competences that this review's synthesis suggests are prerequisite to responsible social media-mediated ELT, which is why in-service training emerged as the single most frequently recommended solution across the challenge categories in Table 6.

Conclusion

We have reviewed 86 empirical studies (from 2013–2025), published in peer-reviewed journals, and drawn the most comprehensive picture of the role of social media in English Language Teaching to date, one based on the available evidence. It is confirmed again that social media platforms, especially YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are an integral part of the ELT toolkit – with positive evidence to support the use of social media for all four language skills: writing, vocabulary, speaking and listening development. There is consistent evidence of improvement in motivation to learn, involvement in learning and willingness to interact in English, with moderate to strong results in language when social media is used pedagogically as well as curriculum-integrated within an agreed framework. Beyond summarizing this evidence base, the review's cross-platform synthesis generates an insight that no single-platform study or review could produce on its own: the educational effectiveness of social media in ELT is determined not by which platform is selected, but by where that platform sits on the input-output and consumption-

participation dimensions described in the Discussion, and by whether pedagogical design compensates for the dimension the platform does not natively supply. This extends current social constructivist and Communities of Practice accounts of digital language learning from a general claim that "pedagogy matters more than technology" (Chapelle, 2001; Kessler, 2018) to a more specific, testable claim about which pedagogical compensations are needed for which platform type, and it reframes equity, ethics, and teacher competence not as separate barriers but as sequential conditions on a single implementation pathway, as argued above.

The study also pinpoints some important limitations in the structure: research focussed on EFL in Asia and the Middle East, thus neglecting ELT in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America/Oceania; a methodological dominance of short-term experimental studies which have a limited ability to demonstrate long-term outcomes of social media integration; and a swift pace of social media development, such as TikTok's emergence as a major ELT platform within five years, which makes the research literature perpetually lag behind in terms of addressing cultural features. Future studies should focus on longitudinal research, cross-context comparative study, systematic incorporation of ethics and equity analysis, and pre-registered protocols in the study of social media in the ELT field context, alongside outcome-linked evaluations of teacher digital-competence training (e.g., using DigCompEdu; Redecker, 2017) so that the practical implications proposed here can themselves be tested rather than only recommended.

The interaction between social media and language teaching is going to be more complex and meaningful as new AI-driven functionalities, automated translation, and live interaction become part of the evolving social media landscape. By offering a clear empirical grounding, educators and researchers can get to grips with that changing terrain with excitement about the proven stimulating benefits of social media and awareness of the proven problems.

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