

# The Role of Social Network Sites in Developing English Language Skills: Students' Voices

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**Abstract**—The advance of technology has provided a third virtual space where people from various regions and linguistic background can interact with each other. Social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, among others, are the examples of these spaces. As a lingua franca, English is often used to enable this cross-cultural interaction. Despite the plethora of articles on SNS use, not many empirical studies have investigated further on this topic. Therefore, this study aims at investigating the role of SNS in developing English language skills among university students. Qualitative research design is employed to answer the research questions. In-depth interview is used to explore participants' experiences when using SNS. The participants of this study include 6 university students of a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia who were active users of SNS. All participants were enrolled in English language education department. The findings have revealed that SNS played a significant role in developing participants' English language skills by intensifying their exposure to English, facilitating authentic interaction, providing linguistic knowledge, providing a comfortable place to learn and facilitating their need to express themselves.

**Keywords**—social media, English language skills, Social Network Sites (SNS), outer circle

## I. INTRODUCTION

Referring to B.B. Kachru's division [1] of countries based on their English positionality, which includes inner, outer and expanding circle, Indonesia belongs to the group of expanding circles. 'Expanding circle' in Kachru's division is defined as regions in which English is used as a foreign language. In contrast with this, A. Kirkpatrick [2] and F. Fang [3] argued that due to the increasing role of English in various regions, Kachru's definition should be revisited. A. Kirkpatrick [2] further suggested that the context of 'expanding circle' should also be applied to countries in which English is not used as the main medium of communication among people from different regions.

Language functions as a communication tool that can be used to express opinions, views, and helps people understand each other so that communication can succeed [3]. Language activities actually refer to communicative interactions rather than to a set of language rules. Thus, language learning should be directed at the use of language in everyday contexts. Language learning is essentially an attempt to acquire oral communication skills with an emphasis on acquiring speaking skills and habituation in using language to communicate. Only by having good communication skills can speakers express themselves and

learn to follow the prevailing social and cultural rules [4]. People speak because they have something to say. The activity of speaking does not constitute a simple reality but a complex one, since it involves other activities, some of them directly observable, and some manifesting themselves if we add something to the facts observed [1].

Within the context of Indonesia, English is regarded as a foreign language. People mainly use either Indonesian language or regional languages instead of English in their daily activities. As a consequence, English learners in Indonesia have not widely been exposed to English. The situation is commonly observed in other expanding circle countries. As noted by Richards [4] in countries where English is regarded as a foreign language, learners tend to have minimum opportunities to use English beyond their classroom. He further elaborates that even in the English subject classrooms in 'expanding circle' countries, the opportunities to practice the language tend to be limited as can be observed from unfavorable classroom size consisting of 50 students or more, and limited hours of instruction, which may not sufficiently facilitate language practices

The lack of exposures within Indonesian context implicates that there is a growing demand for English exposure. One of the potential spaces that could fulfill the need of English exposure as in the expanding circle countries is the virtual space of digital media. Along with the advancement of technology, one of the digital medias, social network sites have mushroomed. K. McBride [5] defined social-network sites (SNSs) as 'websites built to allow people to express themselves and to interact socially with others. Duffy in Liu et al. [23] identified five common features of SNS which include users' ability to create a profile, make friends online, choose whether to confirm or reject a connection request, and collaborate with other users to share content and to create online communities.

Many young adults were reported to own SNS. According to a report published by Paw Research Centre (2015), there is a significant growth in social network sites usage with young adults aged 18 to 29 reported as the group which are most likely use social network sites (SNS). As a virtual space whose members come from various parts of the world, these sites may potentially bring educational benefits [7]. The population of SNS users that are dominated by young adults may offer various potential educational benefits.

One of the potential educational benefits of SNS is for language learning. W. M. Al-Rahmi, M. S. Othman, L. M. Yusof, and M. A. Musa [8] argued that SNS can be used a space for language learning. Social media can potentially be utilized for language learning as it can provide a virtual space where people with various linguistic backgrounds can interact. As a lingua franca, English can facilitate interaction among people of various linguistic backgrounds [3]. Therefore, the use of SNS can potentially expose students with more opportunities to use English, both receptively and productively.

Despite the plethora of published works (e.g. [4], [3], [5]) on social media and language learning, the number of empirical studies on the role of social media in facilitating language learning is still scarce [7]. J. Richards's [4] study reviewed opportunities that SNS provide for language learning. Meanwhile, F. Fang's [3] article invited ELT communities to reconsider native-speakerism within today's development of borderless communication that is facilitated by the advance of technology. In addition to the plethora of non-empirical studies on social media and language learning, K. McBride [5] discussed potential collaboration among online communities that can be facilitated by social media. Among the few empirical studies on SNS and language learning is A. Zaidi, F. A. Awaludin, R. A. Karim, N. F. Ghani, M. S. Rani, and N. Ibrahim's [9] study which investigated the role of YouTube in developing English language skills among sophomore university students in Malaysia. Another one is Soviyah, and D.R. Etikaningsih [10] investigation on the use of Instagram to improve students' writing skills among high school students in Yogyakarta. Both studies confirmed that social media could positively develop learners' English skills. However both studies did not explore further the role of SNS in facilitating language learning as voiced by EFL students. Therefore, the present study aimed at adding the bulk of research on SNS and language learning. This study particularly aimed at revealing students' voices on the role of SNS in their English language skills development.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. *English Language Skills*

According to H. Aydogan, and A.P. Akbarov [11], there are two kinds of English skills, micro-skills and macro-skills. Macro-skills are general skills of English which deal with the ability to comprehend and to communicate successfully using the language. There are four macro-skills that should be mastered when learning a language, i.e. listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. Meanwhile, the micro skills include pronunciation, spelling, grammar and vocabulary. The mastery of these micro-skills could help mastering the macro-skills.

### B. *Social Network Sites and Language Learning*

Social Network Sites (SNS) is used widely among youth. It is an important integral part among 'neo-millennial' youth [5]. According to a Pew Center's report (2015) on social media usage, by 2015, 90% of young adults aged 18-29 use social media. While the report only covers the United States, this may anecdotally resonates with numbers in other parts of the world.

Observing the above number, SNS can play a pivotal role as a virtual space looking for information, and for entertainment purposes. M. Ranieri, S. Manca, and A. Fini [12] exemplifying Facebook, as an SNS, suggested that the use of technologies may expand, enhance and accelerate an individual's social network with an increase in available information, opportunities and benefits from this wide and heterogeneous network. In addition, social media can also be a place for everyone in the world to share news or opinions [13]. In line with this, W. M. Al-Rahmi, M. S. Othman, L. M. Yusof, and M. A. Musa [8] suggested that people could communicate, collaborate and share information and news that they want to share in their social media. The interaction on SNS can potentially develop more authentic social and communicative behavior [5].

Observing these social media potentials, as a lingua franca, English can serve as a global language [3] for facilitating this international communication. SNS for those purposes could increase the exposure to English language. This is in line with what has been stated by Y. Liu [7] that one of benefits of social media in language learning is an independent learning. An independent learning can empower students with flexibility to decide activities and time that can successfully develop and benefit their English language skills. SNS features chat rooms that can facilitate students to communicate using English for real communication [4]. The unlimited resources, spaces and time that students can independently choose can potentially enable this independent learning.

There are many benefits of SNS to develop students' English language skills. The first benefit is that the social media use can increase student's motivation [14]. The use of SNS can be attractive for students due to its many interesting and updated contents. Another benefit of SNS use is to provide students with authentic language use experience. G. Blattner and M. Fiori [15] mentioned that the use of social media can encourage students to have a positive and collaborative relation with non-native and native speakers with the interaction that happen.

Despite those potential benefits mentioned above, the effectiveness language learning in SNS is still doubted K. McBride [5] argued that online socialization, which takes place in SNS, might not always be meaningful, as it does not always serve the purpose of exchanging information. In addition, learners may lack pragmatic knowledge of how to interact on SNSs in the L2 [5].

### C. *Sociocultural Perspectives on Language Learning*

The process of independent language learning in social media is in accordance with sociocultural theory. Within this view, learning can only take place when there is an interaction with other people [17]. This means that language acquisition process can happen in social media because of the interaction that it facilitates with other people.

The process of language learning and acquisition is an active and dynamic process. As mentioned by M. Lamy, and R. Hampel [17], sociocultural theory considers learning as "a process of participating in cultural and social practices". In accordance with this, P. Cobb in H. Borko [18] suggested that learning process is an active process where each individual reconstructs the knowledge that they acquire and integrates it in their individual practices in larger society. It

could then be concluded that English language use in social media can support an active and dynamic process of learning.

#### *D. Previous Studies*

There have been several previous studies aiming at investigating EFL students' experience in using social media in several contexts such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Pakistan. The methodologies employed ranges from quantitative to qualitative approach. These studies indicated that social media plays a positive role in developing students' English schools.

A. Zaidi, F. A. Awaludin, R. A. Karim, N. F. Ghani, M. S. Rani, and N. Ibrahim [9] investigated the role of YouTube in developing English language skills among sophomore university students. Employing quantitative approach, they gathered the data by distributing survey among students in a university in Malaysia. The research results indicated that YouTube could increase participants' English language skills due to their frequent use of YouTube independently. They actively use YouTube because the social media provides interesting contents in English which can motivate them and at the same time, improve their pronunciation skills.

Another study conducted by Soviyah, and D.R. Etikaningsih [10] investigated the use of Instagram to improve students' writing skills among high school students in Yogyakarta. Using quantitative approach, fifty students took part in this study. The research result indicated that there was a significant difference in terms of writing skills. Participants who actively used social media to write were indicated to demonstrate writing proficiency.

Another study on social media was done by I. U. Khan, M. Ayaz and M. Faheem [19]. The study aimed at investigating Pakistani university teachers' vocabulary size development when using social media. The data were collected from 36 teachers using quantitative approach. The research result indicated that social media played an important role in developing its users' vocabulary size.

### III. METHODOLOGY

Due to the scarcity of empirical study within the topic of social media role in developing language skills, qualitative approach was applied. K. M. Eisenhardt in Z. Dornyei [20] argued that qualitative research is effective to explore under researched area. J.W. Creswell [21] mentioned that qualitative research is an effective way to investigate social phenomenon. Within the qualitative paradigm, the current study belonged to phenomenological research as it attempts to explore a phenomenon under investigation. As defined by J.W, Cresswell, and J.D. Cresswell [22], "phenomenological research is a qualitative strategy in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study".

To collect the data, in-depth interview was used to investigate the role of social media in developing English language skills among EFL university students. The participants include 6 senior students, two male and four female students of a private university in Yogyakarta, Indonesia that were active users of social network sites. All participants were selected through snowball sampling, in which the first participant recruited the second participant

and so forth. The technique was used due to researcher's lack of accessibility in observing participants who actively used SNS. Since all participants were from the same batch, their observation and experience interacting with each other in SNS were helpful for them in recommending other potential participants' who are actively involved in SNS.

Upon completion of the data collection process, the recorded interviews were transcribed into written texts. Afterwards, the verbatim was sent to participants for member checking to maintain the trustworthiness of the data. All participants agreed that the verbatim represented their interview and they did not make any changes. To protect participants' anonymity, all names of the research participants mentioned are pseudonyms. All six participants are Sari, Ana, Nia, Ikal, Tama and Anti. The data collection process took place in March 2019. Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to one hour.

### IV. FINDINGS

*Sari*. Claiming herself as an avid user of social media, Sari mentioned that she used 65% of her day to check out her social media. The social media platforms that she used almost daily include Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Facebook. Among these platforms, Twitter was the one she mostly used. This was due to Twitter's fast flowing of information that enables her to keep updated with the world's most current information and situation such as warning on natural disasters, travel promotions, scholarship information and relationship advice.

When using social media, she used both English and Indonesian language. She admitted that she was exposed to English when reading posts and watching videos. Meanwhile, she tended to use English when she replied a post to either commenting or raising questions and when she did posting on social media.

Despite calling it as incidental, she admitted that her English improved due to her social media use. One of the aspects of her English that she felt improving was vocabulary. Her vocabulary improved especially when she came across unfamiliar word use in a post and she then checked them on dictionary. The second one was grammar. She felt that her grammar improved because of her noticing different grammatical patterns used when different time line (past, present or future) was being talked about. She also considered translation feature in social media has helped her to check on her grammar use. Additionally, several posts, such as short videos on grammar was considered to contribute towards her understanding on grammar. She asserted that the interactive and personal approach that the content maker applied on his short video on grammar has made grammar more interesting. She further noted that she found posts on grammar on social media in the form of infographic and short videos to be interesting and attractive because of its design and daily examples on love. In addition, she also considered that English can make her posts on several trivial daily things sound normal as opposed to be cheesy. For instance, a post saying that she was tired in English would sound normal as opposed to conveying it in Indonesian language.

*Ana.* The second participant, Ana, stated that she checked out her social media as long as she had internet connection. She listed Instagram, Twitter and YouTube to be social media platforms that she most frequently used. She additionally noted that she used both Bahasa Indonesia and English when checking out her social media. However, instead of making posts, she preferred enjoying others' posts. The posts that she enjoyed included funny videos or stories, and posts on grammar and vocabulary. She highlighted that she knew about various pronunciation due to her social media use. She further elaborated that she enjoyed checking out her social media because she found it interesting and informative. She also noted that social media in an interactive space in which she could ask questions when she felt like to. The informality of social media made it comfortable for her to ask questions.

*Ikal.* The third participant, Ikal, mentioned that he used social media a lot. Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Facebook were three platforms that he most frequently used. The contents that have been accessed included musics, videos and English knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and TOEFL tips). Through checking the post, he considered his linguistic knowledge has improved.

He mentioned that he used English, Indonesian language and a little of Chinese languages in his social media. Meanwhile, the posts that he checked out were mostly in Indonesian language and English. He particularly preferred to use English especially when it came to posting quotes. Being a student in an English language department, he felt that people may expect him to be proficient in English. Therefore, writing posts, especially quotes could help him fulfil this expectation. Additionally, before posting, he would check his grammar use using a grammar platform, Grammarly.

Another aspect of social media that has drawn his attention on social media is its accessibility. Ikal mentioned that he enjoyed learning about English on social media because it provides many interesting contents. Therefore, when he found some questions on social media, he tended to check on his social media for further explanation. The flexibility of time has made social media accessible at any point of time for its users.

*Nia.* The fourth participant, Nia, illustrated that she spent seven to eight hours to access social media. The social media platforms included the contents that she enjoyed included beauty, fashion, celebrity news, and travelling. She mentioned that the social media platform that she accessed included Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. She admitted that she used both Indonesian and English as a medium of communication in those platforms.

Several aspects of her English that she felt improve includes her pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. She felt her English improved both intentionally and incidentally. In several posts related to daily life, she felt more comfortable expressing herself in English since she felt that the meaning might have different nuance when expressed in Indonesian. She also mentioned that expressing herself in English is one of her strategies to practice her English. Therefore, she sometimes checked her grammar before publishing a post. Another factor that made her consider social media as an interesting and fun place to learn

was its interactivity. As it enables many post formats to be shared, and its users to comment, she felt the language that she used is for real purpose to communicate with other people.

*Tama.* The fifth participant, Tama, mentioned that social media has been an inseparable part of his life. Accessing social media was the first thing and the last thing he did in a day. Social media platforms that he frequently visited included Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. The contents that he enjoyed included celebrity news, humor, and travelling. Those contents were in Indonesian and English.

Tama remarked that accessing social media in English brought some benefits such as increasing his linguistic knowledge (pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary). He mentioned that social media provided interesting contents on linguistic features. He felt that since he found the knowledge incidentally within a short time length, the learning that takes place did not bore him. Additionally, he also mentioned that the interactivity aspect of social media make it an interesting place to learn. He further elaborated that in social media, he could ask the content maker about grammar without being afraid to be judged as incapable as in real classrooms. He noted that he even had another anonymous account which he used to access more contents and commented or asked questions. The anonymity allowed him to express himself more comfortably without worrying about being judged negatively.

Besides consuming contents, Tama also used social media to interact with his friends in English. He also made new friends with native speakers of English to practice his English. The flexibility that it offered was considered as a vast space to practice his language. He also noted that observing his friends' use of English on social media has encouraged him practice the language more frequently.

*Anti.* Noting herself as an avid user of social media, the sixth participant, Anti, used social media to learn languages. Using English as a medium of communication, she learned Turkish through a social media platform, Hello Talk. In this platform, she made friends with native speakers of Turkish, and shared daily things while learning other languages. Her new friend would usually use Turkish and she would use English. The automatic translation feature enabled her to know the English translation while also knowing the Turkish version of what her friends have said. This has allowed both her and her friends to learn each other's' languages.

In addition, she used social media to express herself through posts that she shared. She further noted that she considered social media as a place to practice her English without worrying about being judged. She admitted that several English terms such as 'quotes' would be best expressed in English since when it was translated into Indonesian, the nuance could be different. The posts that she consumed include posts on food, beauty, and travelling. She also used English when commenting her friends' posts. Several aspects of English that she learned from social media included grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary.

## V. DISCUSSIONS

All participants admitted that SNS has become an integral part in their daily life. They use their SNS to interact with their friends, read celebrities' updates and find information. In addition to employing Indonesian language in their interaction, all participants admitted that they accessed contents in English. Furthermore, they claimed that SNS played a significant role in their English language development. There are six roles of SNS as admitted by six participants. The roles include intensifying exposure to English, facilitating authentic interaction, providing linguistic knowledge, providing a comfortable space to learn, facilitating students' need to express themselves, and facilitating students' need to express themselves.

*Intensifying Exposure to English.* One of the role that social media played as observed in participants' experiences is that their active use of social media has intensified their exposure to English. Being in an EFL context, they have limited access to English in their real life. SNS has provided the unlimited chance to expose themselves to English. All participants remarked that they spent a lot of time actively engaging in social media. One participant, Sari, even claimed that she spent 65% of her time being engaged in social media. Another participant, Ana, stated that she was always on social media as long as she has internet access.

Participants' use of SNS include various authentic purposes, such as watching videos for fun, getting updates and information about their favorite celebrities, connecting with their friends and expressing themselves. They tended to use their social media to seek enjoyment and to have some fun. They consider social media as a place to spend their leisure time and to relax. Contents that they access are in English and Indonesian language. Their habits of exploring contents in English enhanced their opportunities to practice their language [8] which include their receptive skills, listening and reading, and their productive skills of speaking and writing. As stated by J. Richards [4], "Social media plays an important role in the daily lives of most people including language learners and can also be used to support language development." In addition, G. Blattner and M. Fiori [15] argued that the use of social media can provide exposure to the target language which is provided through the interaction in the social media.

*Facilitating authentic interaction.* Besides consuming contents, all participants used social media as space to have an authentic interaction with their friends and content providers. This authentic interaction can happen through commenting each other's posts, and chatting. These spontaneous interactions happen as a respond to posts in their feeds. As suggested by J. Richards [4], wider exposure of English that internet provided may promote authentic interaction among its users.

One participant, Iqbal, gave an example of his authentic interaction on Instagram. When one of his friends on Instagram made a video through the so-called feature of instastory, he would comment on the video by sending a message in English. According to J. Richards [4], one of the roles of social media is developing communicative skills through using English as a medium of interaction. Exemplifying chat rooms, he further noted that social media may provide a stress-free environment which may lessen

learners' fear of making mistake when interacting in English. In line with this, K. McBride [5] argued that if students can socially interact using English with their peers in SNS, more authentic exposure of English can add up their in-class language experience.

Besides interacting with their peers, SNS can also be used to make new acquaintance. One participant, Anti, mentioned that she made acquaintances during her experience of learning a new language through her SNS. Anti's experience is in line with G. Blattner and M. Fioris' [15] study. They mentioned that SNS may provide a space for learning collaboration both with native speakers and non-native speakers.

*Providing linguistic knowledge.* Another role that social media plays is providing linguistic knowledge. Social media, which allows its users to post contents, which can be accessible to users in any convenient time, has provided a potential space to learn English. Several contents, which include short lecture on linguistic knowledge such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, which are readily accessible, have become an unlimited source of knowledge. Four out of six participants mentioned that they enjoyed posts that provide them with linguistic knowledge. One participant, Nia, claimed that she considered her pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary improved through utilizing SNS.

This finding resonated with M. Yoshii's [23] findings. His findings on the effectiveness of L1 and L2 glosses on incidental learning suggested that explanations on vocabulary has helped enhancing incidental vocabulary acquisition. Another study finding, I. U. Khan, M. Ayaz and M. Faheem [19] showed that the use of social media can facilitate the development of users' vocabulary size.

*Facilitating students' need to express themselves.* Interestingly, all participants shared similar experiences in which they occasionally felt more comfortable expressing themselves in English in comparison to Indonesian language. When it comes to writing posts for everyday habits, such as eating drinking, or going out with friends, they preferred to use English. One reason for this, as mentioned one of the participants, Anti, was that the use of Indonesian language can make the post appear to be "too formal" for her social media mates. She added that it felt "weird" to see posts saying, "I've got two cats" in Indonesian language, but did not feel so when the post was in English. In addition, she suggested that several terms, such as quote of the day, could be considered as casual when it was expressed in English as opposed to in Indonesian language. She concluded her explanation by mentioning that in social media, each person has freedom to use any language, including English and none will be able and dare to prevent others from doing so; thus, making her comfortable to express herself in English. As suggested by W. M. Al-Rahmi, M. S. Othman, L. M. Yusof, and M. A. Musa [8], SNS can provide a space to express themselves through their posts that they shared.

The other reason for this, as mentioned by another participant, Tama, was that the use of English for his posts can make his posts perceived as cool. Several people may perceive him to be cool when he used several slang words which may not be familiar to them. In line with this, other

participants, Tria and Iqbal shared similar views. They believed that as students in an English language department, they are demanded to be able to express themselves in English fluently. One of the channels to show this fluency is through social media. According to J. Richards [4], one of the roles of social media is developing communicative skills through using English as a medium of interaction. Exemplifying chat rooms, he further noted that social media may provide a stress-free environment which may lessen learners' fear of making mistake when interacting in English. In line with this, B. Bickner [23] affirmed that the sprung of SNS may provide a space to use the target language through interaction within the online communities. In conclusion, the online communities that could be afforded through the use of SNS may facilitate students' need to express themselves.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The aim of this research was to investigate the role of social media in developing EFL university students' English skills. Through in-depth interviews with six senior students, four findings emerged from the data. The findings indicated that social media played significant roles in developing participants' English skills. The roles included intensifying participants' exposure to English, facility authentic interaction, providing linguistic knowledge, and facilitating the participants need to express themselves.

Despite not generalizable, the findings indicated that the use of social network sites offers a potential space for EFL learning. Acknowledging the potential roles that SNS play in developing students' language skills, teacher educators may consider integrating SNS into their language classrooms. To add up to the plethora of empirical studies on SNS, future quantitative research on other contexts with may offer more insights to the phenomenon under investigation.

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