

The Impact of Social Media on the Teaching and Learning of EFL Speaking Skills during the COVID-19 Pandemic [†]

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Abstract: The shift to teaching online during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in the extensive use of social media in the English language classroom. The current study investigated the impact of social media on the speaking skills of tertiary-level EFL students during the pandemic. Adopting a qualitative framework, data was collected by using in-depth interviews with both students and lecturers. Findings generally point to the benefits of using social media in the speaking classroom. However, accounting for students' cultural differences is the most important aspect during the lessons. Implications on the pedagogical awareness of lecturers are underscored.

Keywords: COVID-19; EFL students; online teaching; social media; speaking skills



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1. Introduction

The English language is significant to the world community, especially in the 21st century. This is because English language proficiency not only encourages communication but also cooperation in aspects of everyday life, education, and employment, especially in a society that consists of members of various cultural backgrounds. In view of this, learning, understanding, and appreciating English is a long-term commitment in meeting social, employment, and educational needs, as well as individual needs [1]. English is a lingua franca as it is the most widely used language of communication in the world [2]. The importance of English has resulted in many students of other first languages learning English as a second language or as a foreign language. Learning English is a challenging process, and because of that, it requires a collaborative, massive and extraordinary effort that not only involves the students but also the educators [3]. The importance of English, especially during this era of globalization has resulted in the teaching of English in Malaysian higher education to increasingly shift from grammar translation to a communicative approach [4]. This approach has enabled students to be actively involved in the classroom and helped them improve their English, especially speaking and listening skills. There is no denying that the ability to listen, read, and write is important, but speaking competence is more important than the other skills because communication via speech often occurs in one's daily life, and in various settings.

Education plays a crucial role in the survival of a country especially in terms of economic and socio-economic aspects, as it is through education that people can be more productive. In the past two and a half years, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the education system in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia [5]. This is because millions of students were not able to attend school physically as the schools had to be closed. By the end of March 2020, more than one billion students worldwide had been affected.

During the pandemic, schools were closed in late March 2020, and this disrupted learning for all students in the country. However, to enable them to learn from home, the Ministry of Education launched an online learning platform nationwide, called the Teacher Digital Learning Community (Komuniti Guru Digital Learning). This was established with support from UNICEF. The nation-wide platform enabled three million children to learn during physical closures of schools until 24 June 2020. The schools were gradually opened after that. The approach used to teach the students in schools then was blended—both face-to-face and online learning [6]. However, with periods of total lockdown in 2021, schools were again closed, and learning continued to be conducted online exclusively.

During this period, every educational institution helped educators by introducing online learning models, and providing laptops for students, teachers, and lecturers. Despite this, there were teachers and lecturers, especially in the less developed rural areas, who were still not adequately skilled in using e-learning for the teaching and learning process. At the same time, there were also students who had a negative attitude and did not want to accept the concept of e-learning although this is one of the best options during the pandemic era [7].

As stated earlier, due to the abrupt closure of educational institutions as a result of the spread of the COVID-19 virus, students faced various obstacles in the process of learning. In particular, these events had a negative impact on language learning, including the learning of the English language. Generally, the majority of students who study English in schools have tried to enhance their speaking abilities during this trying period.

In the same vein, universities and colleges in Malaysia adopted the online mode to teach courses. Lecturers had to be creative in their delivery of these courses. The teaching of speaking skills in English was a case in point. English, being the second-most important language in Malaysia after Bahasa Malaysia, is taught in all schools locally. Due to its status, we used to refer to the teaching of English as a second language (ESL) rather than a foreign language (EFL) in the Malaysian classroom. However, EFL describes the study of English by non-native speakers in countries where English is not a native language and where it is not used as a medium of instruction [8]. Thus, based on this definition, Malaysia is now more of an EFL country rather than an ESL country. Further, the students in our classroom were from China, where the status of English is definitely that of a foreign language.

In view of the situation, it was important to find potential solutions to overcome the challenges of EFL students and improve their speaking abilities to enable them to engage in meaningful communication outside the classroom. Ideas and techniques include incorporating social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube in the classroom. This paper explores the concept and impact of e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, it investigates the challenges faced by teachers and EFL students in the teaching and learning of speaking skills respectively, and the use of social media platforms to assist them in facing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic era.

2. The Teaching of Speaking Skills in the ESL Classroom

The British Council gives ten reasons why we should learn the English language. Among the reasons that are important to students at the tertiary level are the facts that many universities teach courses in English, scientific papers are written in English, English is the language used most widely by the media industry and the Internet, and international businesses conduct meetings in English [9]. In view of these reasons, it is clearly advantageous for tertiary-level students to master the language to a proficient enough level to function adequately in their future workplace.

Of the four language skills, speaking is generally deemed a difficult skill to learn by most learners as it is an overtly active skill. In fact, one of the key differences between the spoken language and written language that makes the speaking skill more difficult to learn is speech is constructed spontaneously [10] (p. 4) while the written form can be revised and edited over and over. In fact, Ur [11] went further to say that speaking is the most important skill to master among the other skills. She further states that problems in

speaking were due to the students' lack of confidence and their fear of making mistakes while using the language.

According to Goh and Burn [12] (p. 53), the fundamental components of second-language (L2) speaking competence are knowledge of language and discourse, essential speaking skills, and communication strategies. Burns [10] (p. 3) elaborates that knowledge of language and discourse requires the knowledge of the phonetics of the language, the grammar and vocabulary, and knowledge of how connected speech is organized. She further states that core speaking skills enable learners to comprehend the speech quickly, and to negotiate and manage the flow of it, while communication strategies are the cognitive and metacognitive strategies learners develop to compensate for their lack in linguistic knowledge. Pedagogically, she advocates for speaking lessons to be organized as "structured and supported learning opportunities that develop these various components of speaking competence" (p. 3). It is with this knowledge of what is required to aid the L2 learner toward a proficient level of speaking competence that we believe social media platforms are the best avenue for us to teach speaking skills in the Malaysian EFL classroom during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during the periods of lockdown.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

Teaching and learning collectively is a social activity (see e.g., [13]), in particular if the environment is student-centered. Vygotsky's theory stresses the role of social interaction in the development of cognition, and language plays an important role in this development. His belief in the central role that community plays in the process of making meaning makes a great deal of sense when we anchor our study on this perspective. In such a student-centered learning situation, the teacher is a facilitator and the experience of learning on the students' part is more social constructivist in nature. In this environment, interaction and collaboration among the students is not only encouraged but a necessity. A resourceful teacher will capitalize on the students' interaction on social media platforms to aid them in the classroom. The teacher is able to disseminate the required and important information of the subject matter and tasks to be accomplished via these platforms. More crucially, students can interact, share information, learn from and discuss with each other, as well as collaborate via these social media platforms. As these platforms generally allow both speech and the written form to be communicated, the teacher could make it mandatory for students to only use the spoken form for their activities. Here, the teacher will scaffold the students' spoken language during the activities. In this way, the more proficient students will model the teacher's behavior, and the teacher could instruct the more proficient students to scaffold their less proficient friends via the social media platform(s) being used.

4. Social Media in the EFL Speaking Classroom

Social media tools enable their users to distribute and share knowledge over the Internet [14]. These tools or platforms can range from low social presence to frequent users [15]. These platforms, which include Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Tik Tok, and Instagram, allow students to connect with each other and to be able to communicate with others. The features that are of concern to us are affordances of social interaction, sharing of content, and content creation of these platforms. Crucially, students can work on their tasks outside the class which would enable them to practice English-speaking skills. This is the ideal situation during the pandemic as students were not able to meet face to face either with their teacher or with any of their course mates. The researchers view this avenue as positive because schools and higher institutions of learning were hard-pressed to go on with their job in the online mode. It was also generally acknowledged as a mode that makes language learning more engaging and perhaps even motivating (see e.g., [16]).

In fact, some past studies have used the various social media platforms to teach speaking skills and the findings have generally been positive. However, it has been found that e-learning in general can create high levels of anxiety for students due to factors such as fear of being assessed, educator teaching techniques, and student culture [17,18].

Specifically, factors that could contribute to speaking problems in an EFL classroom include lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes [11]. In a study, Al-Sobhi and Preece [19] highlighted the lack of exposure and limited knowledge of English, lack of motivation, anxiety, and lack of confidence on the part of the learners, and inefficient teaching methods on the part of the teacher, as some of the key issues that are often encountered in the EFL-speaking classroom. Yen and Mohamad [2] also found that the main problems that hinder the speaking ability of EFL students include lack of desire and self-confidence, anxiety, and lack of vocabulary skills.

According to Burns [10], speaking is related to “social and functional motivation.” In speaking, a distinction is made between the notion of interpersonally and pragmatically motivated speech [20]. The latter involves exchanging information or goods or services while the former, also known as interactional speech, is used in creating and maintaining social relationships. Speaking for interaction and communication makes this activity in an EFL classroom a daunting prospect for students. Furthermore, speaking is an overtly productive skill and the language produced is here and gone. Unlike the written form, students would not have the opportunity to correct what had been said. In writing, students could revise and edit what has been written as the writing task progresses. As such, teachers or lecturers of speaking skills in an EFL classroom have a great challenge, in that they have to incorporate activities by using various techniques that would involve students in interactions and communication in order to produce the language. It was during the pandemic that we found the application of social media to be most fruitful in the teaching of speaking skills in the EFL classroom.

Generally, studies have shown that improvement in speaking skills are possible if there is a decline in speaking anxiety. Teachers are able to integrate social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Tik Tok, YouTube, Instagram, WeChat, and Telegram, and others to give their students an opportunity to practice beyond the confines of the physical classroom. The studies that investigated the use of WhatsApp have shown that the application was able to increase communication away from the physical classroom [21,22]. Instagram, a popular social media platform among the students, was also shown to be useful for improving speaking even with students who are not proficient in English [23,24]. Overall, the studies have yielded positive results in that students do improve in their speaking skills and with higher confidence and increased motivation. A key element that contributed to improvement is social interaction [25,26]. In the latter study, Sevy-Biloon and Chroman [26] showed that chat functions in the video led to students practicing their speaking skills in authentic and meaningful communicative activities. Yet another study revealed the positive effect of social media integration (Telegram and You Tube) for teachers to make amends for the insufficient teaching time in the class and for its affordance in out-of-class practice in the teaching of pronunciation [27]. Such integration of social media seemed to have enhanced the teaching procedures in the online mode.

However, as EFL teachers, we have to be judicious in the introduction of these platforms in our speaking classroom. If students are too young, for example, they could be inexperienced, and these tools may have more of an adverse effect than what was intended [28]. In the study by Teoh and Yunus [28], the primary school participants were young and lacked the experience in using the social media platforms to learn English, although they had access to and the competence to use the tools. The participants in our study are young adult university students, so they would not have any issue incorporating social media in the learning of EFL speaking skills. However, the lecturer would need to structure her lessons and activities in such a way that these platforms could be used optimally.

5. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design. The aim of the study is to investigate the impact of social media in the teaching and learning of speaking skills of EFL students during the pandemic. The study examines how social media was utilized by lecturers to

enhance the speaking skills of EFL students. It also elicited the perspectives of students on how social media was useful to enhance their speaking skills and the difficulties faced by them. The paper also highlights the implications of using social media to enhance EFL students' speaking skills. The focus is to explore and give descriptive details of the data collected, and hence adopting a qualitative method is deemed appropriate. As Lancy [29] observed, "every aspect of one's work as a qualitative researcher demands more writing than would be the case for a quantitative scholar. Writing is to qualitative research what mathematics is to quantitative researcher" (p. 234).

The researchers selected three lecturers teaching EFL students at the intermediate level. These lecturers were selected based on the criteria that they have been teaching EFL courses for more than five years. This criterion was important as they are experienced in teaching EFL students. In-depth interviews were conducted with these lecturers and the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were informed of the analysis to confirm the data (member-checking). The interview followed a protocol [30]. The researcher confirmed the findings with them, and further interviews were conducted for clarifications. In determining the number of participants, the researcher adopts the view contended by Patton [30] who recommends that we identify a minimum sample size "based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study" (p. 186).

For the selection criteria of students, a total number of 20 of them were identified to be interviewed. These students were selected because they were EFL students and because they had been using social media for their intermediate English programs. The interviews focused on the speaking classes, as that is the only component being investigated. The students did a total of 10 h per week of speaking classes over a period of seven weeks. The interviews were conducted to get their perceptions on the difficulties they encountered in speaking classes, and their views on the problems encountered on the use of social media in EFL classes. The researchers conducted further follow-up interviews with the students for clarification and confirmed the findings with them. The results are discussed in the following section.

6. Result and Discussion

6.1. Cultural Differences as a Major Factor

In response to the difficulties they faced in learning speaking skills, one main theme that emerged in the discussion pertains to the cultural differences that accounted for the difficulties in mastering speaking skills. The spread of social media is beyond one culture and hence accounting for the cultural differences is deemed as one important finding of this study. Students posited that in China, eye contact is avoided as much as possible, whereas in classes they were required to have eye contact to establish the connection with the other listeners. In this class, students also had to pass the speaking test at the end of the seven weeks for their assessment. Topics were given to them by the lecturers, and they had to produce a speech outline and submit it to the lecturer. After the feedback given to them, they had to improve on the speech outline and deliver the speech as a form of assessment. Another factor relates to the learning environment, the learning context as well as the perseverance of the students. One student, Fan, whose band level is 5.5, said that, "English speaking skills are very important and we need to learn many words". However, "some of my group mates are not willing to communicate in English and hence it is difficult for us to practice".

Some students opine that it is good to learn English for 1 to 2 h a day. It is convenient to have conversations with lecturers via social media and students like platforms such as WeChat and Zoom, which make it convenient for them to practice more often. Hence, the lecturer must be able to understand their hesitancy to participate in class as cultural awareness is related to language learning. As Tomalin and Stempleski [31] posit, sensitivity to the impact of culture on language use and communication is important as they are interwoven. Moreover, they argued that language could not be taught without a reflection

of the associated culture. In response to the concept of cultural mediation propounded by Vygotsky, the lecturers used topics related to China for an effective learning environment as the students would be more familiar with the context. Topics such as places of interest and food were picked up for speaking practice for a more rewarding experience. Some students also cited the benefits of the choice of social media platform. A majority of the students loved using Tik Tok videos for practice sessions.

Nevertheless, the aspect of good communication between the lecturer and the student cannot be overlooked. Sharing videos with others in class was beneficial as they had the opportunity to listen to others and correct their own pronunciation. Past studies have also indicated the positive aspects of using social media for teaching activities related to speaking skills. Ainun et al. [32] also point to the optimistic views on using WhatsApp to improve students' oral skills.

6.2. Usage of Social Media for Speaking Classes

Most of the students interviewed opined that the use of social media enhanced their speaking skills. Zoom and MS Teams were the most used platforms. Sometimes they were also given YouTube videos to watch, and the students then have a group discussion based on the given topic. A majority of the students preferred watching YouTube and interacted well on the Zoom and Teams platforms. Students viewed Zoom and Teams as useful platforms for class participation, as they liked to interact with other students on the chat groups and they also liked the break-up room functions in the Teams platform. However, there are some students who have negative perceptions in terms of participating in the activities. This hinders their progress, as it leads to lack of practice sessions. As another student, Wang, said "We are very conscious of having to speak in English and the other students listening to us. While we like to the use of social media and sometimes, we use it for entertainment but shy away from speaking in class".

This inhibition on the part of the students stems from their own lack of vocabulary and knowledge of the content related to the topic. Ilyas and Putri [33] reinforce that using YouTube to teach speaking skills lends a positive learning attitude among the learners. A majority of the students indicated an increased confidence as it allowed them to view the same video multiple times, enabling them to enhance their memory of a given word in the process. Using Facebook was not an option, as most of the students in China do not have access to it. As Boyd [34] postulates, the unprecedented spread of social media around the world indicates its importance in helping students to improve fluency and understanding in the target language. Social media can have beneficial impact on students' language skills, teaching practice, and student learning when used appropriately [35].

6.3. Willingness of Students in Class to Communicate

As speaking requires interactions with other classmates and developing social skills, lecturers were interviewed on how they ensured participation in class and structured the activities to ensure effective participation in class. The lecturers cited that creating interesting teaching activities stimulated the interest of the students. According to them, they tried to create a language environment that approximated the actual lives of the students, such that the target language plays a crucial role in their interaction [13]. Based on this constructivist theory, which contends that learning takes place while engaging in social experiences, students were given opportunities to work as a team to internalize their speaking skills. To this effect, role plays were incorporated during online classes and the situational context was given to them. This helped to a certain extent to train their communicative ability. The lecturer Tand said, "The activities were used as a starter to get the students talking. They would indicate their topic in the WhatsApp group so that no students repeated the same topics".

The other lecturers also opined that they ensured participation in class by integrating social media together with their main text. Some lecturers awarded participation marks to ensure students participated. The feedback from the students was that they really enjoyed

the class, and the shy students were also keen to participate in the activities. Though such integration was beneficial to students, the lecturers' role in structuring the lessons is deemed important. Reinders and Wattana [36] also support integrating technology in the teaching and learning process, as this encourages learners to use the target language freely. Otherwise, the objective of the lesson could be easily lost with random talk. On what facilitated participation in class, the lecturers viewed that the classroom was a friendlier place and that was a great feat because online classes tended to be more impersonal. In this case, the classes were conducted in a hybrid mode. The effectiveness of participation in class also was based on the good choice of the materials. This finding also points to the need to have strong pedagogical knowledge and the capacity to deliver the content effectively on the part of the lecturers. Students thought that setting expectations and boundaries in terms of class participation ensured that everyone had a fair chance to speak on the given topic. They were in favor of this practice adopted by the lecturers. This clearly points out the strength of the pedagogy of the lecturers and their awareness of how the activities should be structured. Lecturers should be proficient to ensure the efficiency and the interest of the class. It requires a lot of coordination on the part of the lecturer to create a good learning environment. This finding further supports the idea of "structured and supported learning opportunities" that develop the various components of oral skills, as advocated by Burns [10].

6.4. Effects of Using Social Media to Enhance Speaking Skills

The lecturers were interviewed about the effects of using social media to enhance the speaking skills, and they responded that it had both positive and negative aspects to it. Using social media was popular with students as they liked engaging with the technology. It is already a norm for every student to have laptops owing to the online or hybrid classes. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift to the online platform has encouraged educators to turn to social media to motivate learners to participate in speaking classes to compensate for the lack of physical classes. Students who were shy to speak in conventional classes were readily participating in online platforms. As mentioned earlier, studies conducted by Sevy-Biloon and Chroman [26] also point out the chat functions that act as a platform to provide authentic and meaningful communication which are purposeful for the students. However, the lecturer points out that the negative aspect is that some of the students were not willing to switch on the cameras while they spoke, which made it difficult for the lecturer to ascertain if they were referring to some notes or a Google translation. As the teacher Ling said, "the positive aspect is that we were able to watch the videos we posted, and that helped them a lot with the pronunciation". The students were able to practice and listen repeatedly and thus gained confidence to speak. Some students preferred to use social media in the classroom as they perceived the environment to be friendlier whereas some others preferred online class as it was less threatening. This is also highlighted by Ghoneim and Elghotmy [25], who find that social interaction helps to improve speaking skills. They opined that with the online platform, the pressure to perform on the spot was less intense, as they could refer to other resources for vocabulary and sentence structures. Using social media enhanced their speaking skills, as they received materials from the instructor in advance, and this enabled them to go through the materials before the lesson. Students related positively to the fact that participation by all students was ensured by the lecturer and each student was responsible for their own learning. Some group discussions ensured that every member had watched the videos posted and that was an avenue as a starting point for the discussion to take place.

6.5. Implications of Using Social Media for Speaking Classes

The findings indicated that the students gained a lot of confidence and motivation by using social media for the speaking classes. The materials used were considered less formal, as most students perceived books to be formal whereas videos and other materials were

less formal and hence less threatening. They could relate to the materials and the content and hence participated enthusiastically. This implies that the lecturers should be selective in choosing the content for the lesson and also choose materials that will engage the students in meaningful interactions. The implications according to the lecturers also point to the versatility of the use of social media and its immediate reach with the students. Using social media just makes it convenient for us to connect with other like-minded people in a harmonious manner [37]. It helped to develop the interpersonal skills of the students, and they were able to connect with their classmates. The usage of social media enabled a relaxed environment for the students, and they were not apprehensive of making mistakes in the class. On the negative aspects relating to social media, students cited connectivity as one of the issues during the online learning process. Some students did not really engage with the activities, and they only spoke for a few minutes. This duration was more of a restraint as the lecturer could only give feedback based on the input. The lecturers also noted that students were still shy and produced limited utterances, thus limiting the speech. One of the lecturers commented, “No matter which medium I used, the students only spoke for a few minutes, and it was quite difficult to motivate them to speak up”. The solution might be that students require more scaffolding, and the lecturers also need to strengthen their pedagogical approaches towards online teaching and using social media. As the lecturer Jia noted, “we try some of the approaches we are familiar with. However, a proper training on pedagogy to use social media will be beneficial in the long run”.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study points to the positive impact and the benefits of using social media for speaking classes despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the study underscores the implication on the training needs of the lecturers and the pedagogical awareness using social media to teach speaking skills. The students also will have to learn to utilize social media platforms for a specific purpose other than entertainment purposes. The limitation of the current study is that it only investigated a small sample from one private university, and further studies should be carried out with a bigger sample to consolidate the results of this study. Lecturers should also be able to incorporate text materials that cater to the cultural context of the students. Providing them with appropriate reading materials will stimulate their interest and participation in class. The implication that emanates from this is that lecturers should be given enough time to plan and to integrate social media in language teaching. It requires a considerable amount of time to plan according to each level of the students as well as to diversify their use of social media and not just resort to one platform.

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