Using Social Media for Autonomous Language Learning in the Indian Context: What the Students Say

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Abstract

Extensive research has been done on using social media to facilitate and supplement language learning. So far, social media has been effectively used as a tool in language classrooms (Garza, 2010; Marciano, 2015), and the language teachers highly recommend it. But considering the high price of average language classes, they are beyond the reach of a wide majority of people who lack economic resources or do not have the time to spare. This is where social media comes in. It has become an inseparable part of our lives. But can social media be used as an affordable alternative for language classrooms in the Indian context? Will students be able to learn English and practice their LSRW skills? These are some questions this paper intends to answer.

The arguments are supported by quantitative data collected via a questionnaire answered by 114 English language learners. The respondents were mostly Indians, although some participants were from other countries. As far as their English competency is concerned, they were beginner, intermediate and advanced level learners. Based on the participants' responses, it can be concluded that social media provides the much-needed comprehensible input which helps them improve their receptive and productive skills.

Keywords: Autonomous learning, social media, M-learning

Introduction

If we consider the English language learning scenario in India, students, regardless of which state they live in, are introduced to English at a primary or secondary level. The emphasis is on reading and writing, and they get little to no chance to practice their spoken English. More often than not, learners struggle to read or write since the study material is uninteresting or seemingly irrelevant. That might be one of the reasons why they are extremely disinterested in reading.

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Soon enough, they realize the social and economic advantages of being well-versed in English. Speaking fluent English is the major requirement in most jobs. They despair, panic, and join a language learning class if they can afford to. It is a popular yet misleading notion that language learning is limited to the classroom. This is where social media comes to the rescue. Unsurprisingly, 93.9% of the survey participants revealed that they use social media daily. In 2022, the number of social media users all over the world is estimated to reach 3.96 billion, (Statista, 2022a) out of which India has the highest number of Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook users with over 680 million active internet users (Keelery, 2021a). And an average of 145 minutes is spent on social media daily by internet users all over the world (Statista, 2022a). 51.8% of our research participants said that they spend more than two hours on social media platforms each day. Since the internet is so easily accessible nowadays, the number of social media users in 2021 is estimated to be 639.47 million in India (Keelery, 2021b).

Overview of Social Media in Language Learning

Numerous studies have been conducted on incorporating social media in the classroom to facilitate learning. Additionally, popular social media platforms have also been proven effective in learning (Surani and Chaerudin, 2019). Social media has been found to improve students' reading and writing development (Ahmed, 2019; Wang & Vasquez, 2014). Surprisingly, it also affects the oral fluency of students (Blake, 2008). In a face-to-face classroom, students have to wait for their turn to talk, but on chat-based platforms, several participants can type in their answers simultaneously without worrying about accuracy (Blake, 2008). Not only this, but social media also provides opportunities for collaborative learning (DePietro, 2013).

But in this study, my aim is to examine whether social media can act as a language learning classroom in itself in developing countries like India, where not everyone can afford to attend language classes.

Why Social Media Can be an Effective Language Learning Tool
Comprehensible Input

Social media might not be as effective for beginners, because as Krashen puts it, the input must be 'comprehensible' (1982). But the reason why it can be successful in the Indian context is that most of the Indians are introduced to English at school. By the time they pass out from high school, they are able to read and write English quite well. Hence, the input they receive from social media is comprehensible. In language classrooms, students often have no say in what material is used, unless they are having one-on-one classes. The study material and textbook might likely seem dry and irrelevant to some students. But this is not the case with social media. Social media allows learners to follow the pages, personalities and consume the content they are genuinely

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interested in. And this is of utmost importance because input has to be meaningful and engaging (Krashen, 1982).

Cultural Awareness

82.45% of the participants stated that social media allows them to talk to people from other countries. This results in increased cultural awareness. With social media, students start using English as a means to an end, to connect with people globally, and to express themselves. They learn not to obsess over accuracy as long as their message is getting across.

Social media has created tightly-knit virtual communities. 56.1% of the learners in the survey were part of a language learning group on social media. The group members share various interests and common goals. For instance, in an online English practice WhatsApp group learners share study material, meet like-minded individuals. These virtual communities create "social obligations and entitlements" (Dron and Anderson, 2014, p. 16). The participants act as learners and teachers, providing and receiving feedback. It does not have to be a language community specifically. It could be an online vegan group wherein members interact. This way, people are learning and improving their English online, intentionally, or unintentionally.

Apart from providing ample opportunities to interact with others in English, social media is a; "valuable source of cultural information for L2 learners, as through various applications they gain access to literature, video, and online media which provide information about customs, lifestyles, or cultural representations experience" (Wach, 2015, p. 22). In a study conducted on Polish and Romanian ESL students, Wach found that using technology encourages learners to explore other cultures and get familiar with the English culture (2015). Overall, social media can be used to get information about the culture of English-speaking countries, but also enhanced interest in other cultures, openness to cultural differences, and willingness to communicate with foreigners.

Context and Interest-Based Learning

To this day, grammar-translation is widely used in classrooms lacking resources, especially those in developing countries such as India. Context-based lessons are not so common in a lot of classrooms. At most, the learners are given a vocabulary list or asked to role-play. But with social media, students get to learn and practice in context. Which language class prepares you to post a video of your cat with a catchy caption in English? Social media gives students opportunities to speak English. Unlike in typical language classrooms, where students have to wait for their turn to speak and can get by without speaking much English, social media forces you to use English. Although social media is available in other languages as well, English is the most popular language on the internet and social media (Johnson, 2021). 56.1% of the participants use social media

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exclusively in English, 38.6% use it in English and their mother tongue and 5.3% use it only in their L1. In addition to that, 44.7% of the respondents watch YouTube only in English, 48.2% use it in both their L1 and English, and 7% use it only in their mother tongue. 95.61% of the learners claimed that they learned new words and phrases on social media.

In language learning classes, all the students are taught the same lesson. Unless a student takes personalized one-on-one lessons, which are too expensive, they do not get lessons based specifically according to their interests. On the other hand, since the content on social media is recommended based on the user's interests and previous activity, the user is much more interested.

Collective Learning and Near Peer Role Models

Learners no longer have to learn in a vacuum. There is no doubt that in a language classroom, the learners have peers to interact with, but unlike on social media, they do not have round-the-clock access to them. On social media, language learners can find like-minded people and be a part of virtual communities. There is no denying the fact that people learn relatively faster and better while learning collectively (Agrawal, 2011). As Bandura's Social Learning Theory points out, people learn more from their near-peer role models. Based on his experiment with a girl who was terrified of dogs and then overcame her fears by observing a near-peer, Bandura (1969) proved that learners can perform intimidating tasks by observing near peers, such as talking in their target language. Similarly, on social media, learners come across other language learners, who are non-natives but still try to use the target language. Moreover, social media also reinforces learners' use of target language, by likes and comments on whatever a learner posts.

In a traditional classroom, the learner might feel separated from the learning process, (Agrawal, 2011) but social media allows them to be an active part of the learning process. "Knowledge occurs through shared activity, through community engagement, dialogue, and communication in a community of shared activity" (Schrader, 2015, p. 29).

Lifelong Learning and Immersion

Not every person desirous of learning a language or improving their language can afford a language class or go to a foreign country for immersion. Social media allows students to immerse in the target language, no matter when or where they access it. What's even better, social media is designed in such a way, that as one of the participants puts it, "does not feel like studying".

For the people who can never afford to travel to the country where their target language is spoken, social media is as close as they get to immersion. In most Indian households, learners often never get an opportunity to speak or immerse themselves in English. Lamb (2013) suggests that 'because of its capacity to reach across national borders, [online] social networking appears to

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legitimate the use of English when in more local domains it may be considered pretentious' (p. 25). Social media allows learners to get speaking partners, and they can start using their target language as a tool to communicate with like-minded people without worrying about accuracy.

Short and Easy to Consume Content

In fact, one of the major reasons why most of the students are unable to comprehend the English accents of natives is because it is daunting to sit through an hour or two long movie that they can barely understand, but they are happy to watch short videos on TikTok and Facebook. Before they know it, they gradually start to understand foreign accents.

Digital natives (people who have been exposed to technology since birth) do not do well with the outdated teaching methods of digital immigrants (people who were exposed to technology at an older age). The digital natives speak a different language. They prefer short communication and engaging content. Teachers often complain about reduced attention spans, but the digital natives glued to social media and games for hours on end would beg to differ. "Is it that Digital Natives can't pay attention, or that they choose not to? Often from the Natives' point of view, their Digital Immigrant instructors make their education not worth paying attention to compared to everything else they experience" (Prensky 2001a, p. 3). He contradicts the popular belief that the attention span of people is becoming increasingly shorter, saying that since we have numerous engaging platforms competing for our attention, we have lost patience for conventional learning methods. Prensky goes on to argue that students in this day and age want to learn something that they can apply in their life (2010).

Figure 1
Participants who follow English language learning pages and channels on social media

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Usage of English Language Learning Pages and Channels

No
19.3%

Yes
80.7%
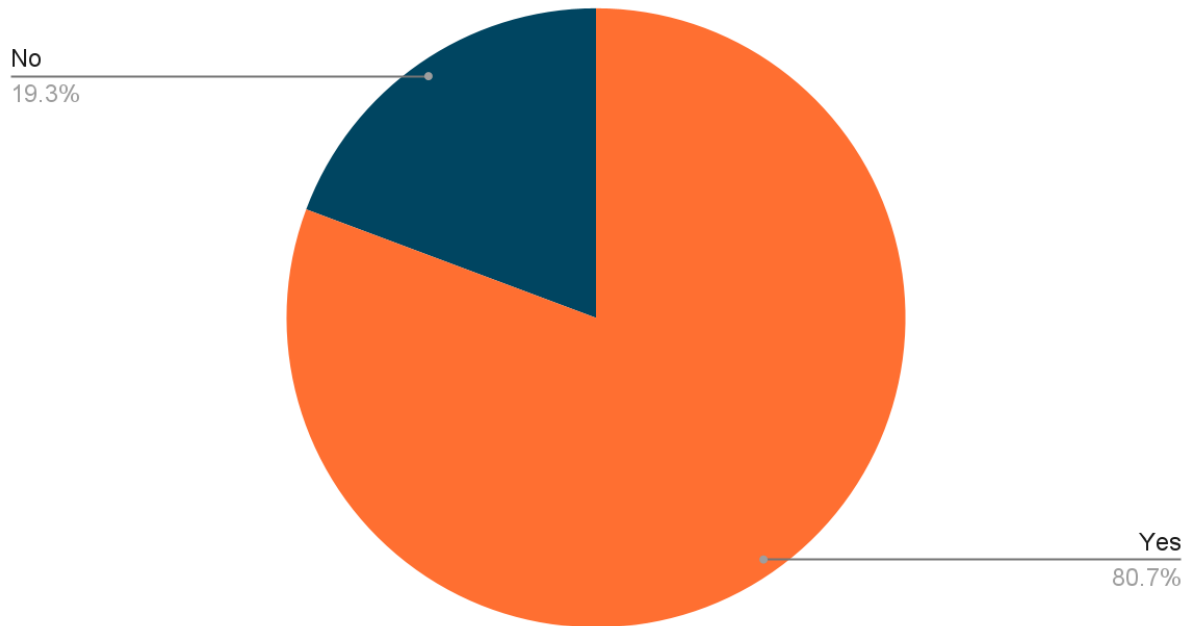
Figure 2
How often do participants watch English videos on YouTube?

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Frequency of Watching English Videos on YouTube

Sometimes
25.4%

Daily
47.4%

A few times a week
27.2%
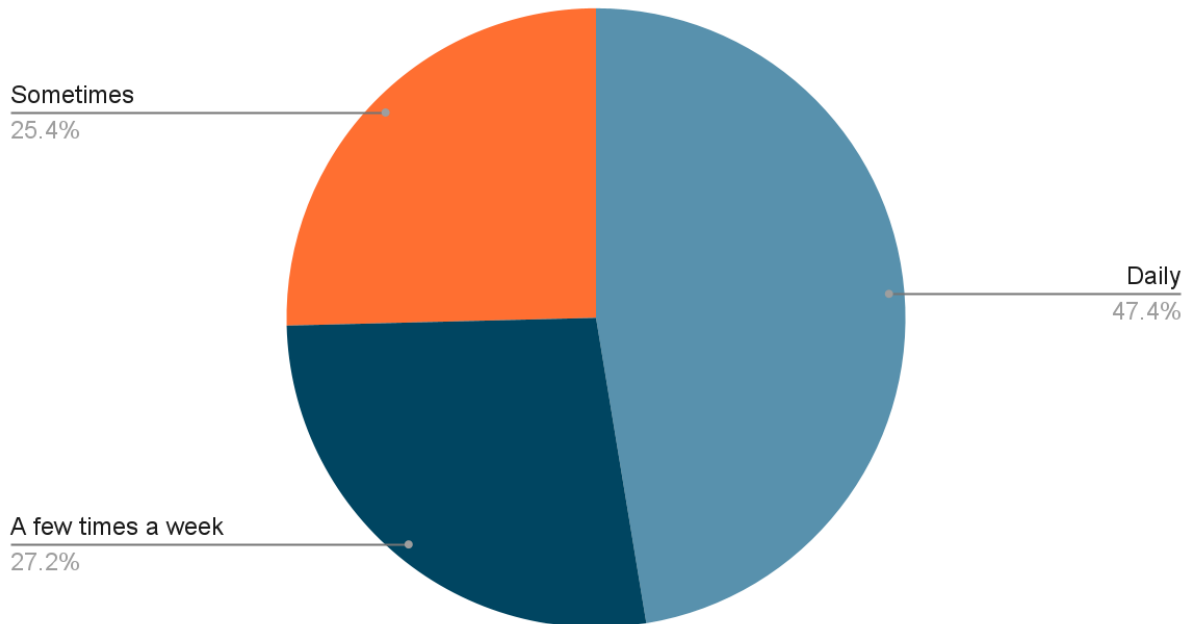
As Prensky puts it; "the single biggest problem facing education today is that our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language" (2001a, p. 3). Most students have a negative perception of textbooks, and they consider them outdated. They love to learn from videos and interactive platforms. The best part is that anyone can upload videos and shorts. 92.98% of the participants shared that they post content on social media. This is a strong motivator for some of my students who wanted to improve their spoken English just so that they could upload content on social media.

Methodology and Participants

The data was collected through a questionnaire which was posted on the language learning groups on WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook. The researcher included language learners of different age groups and levels, and not just the digital natives so that the results would be comprehensive. As far as the level of the respondents is concerned, 56% of the participants identified their level as intermediate, 41% as advanced, and 3% as beginners. 96.49% of the respondents were from India, 2.50% were from other countries.

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Discussion

When asked if their English had improved by using social media, 91 out of 114 participants responded in affirmative.

Figure 3

Participant responses to whether their English improved since they started using English

Has Social Media Improved your English?

No
20.2%

Yes
79.8%
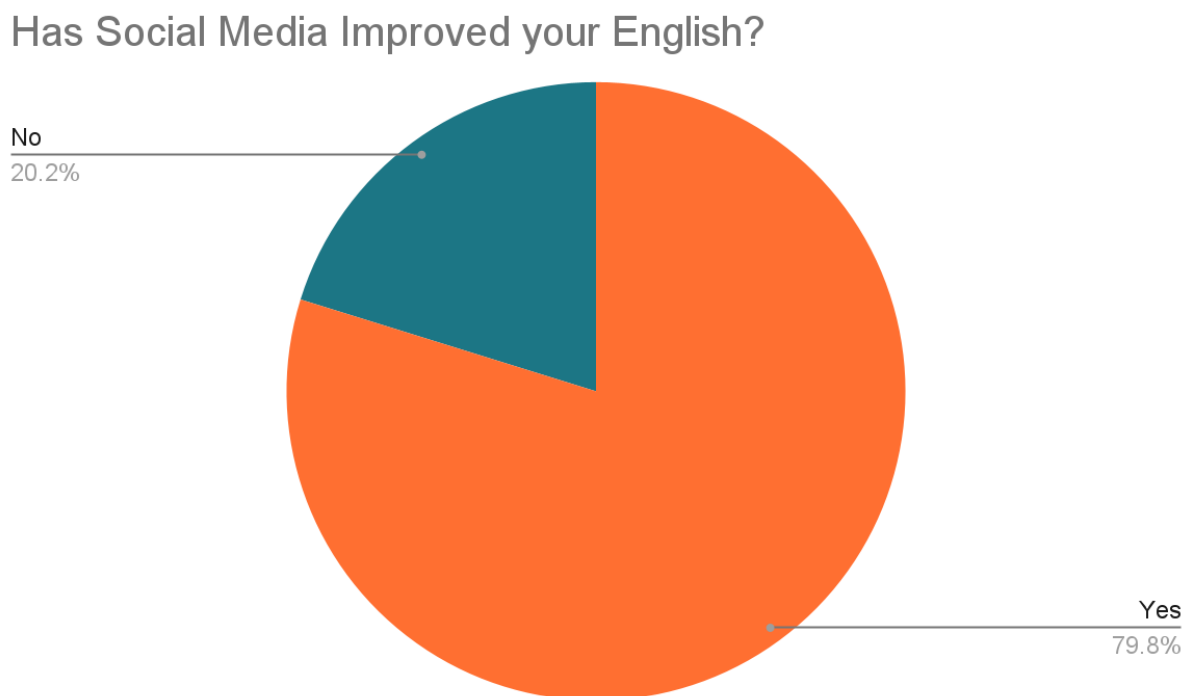
As far as the question of how English has improved their English, the participants made several claims. A majority of the participants stated that they acquired new vocabulary, especially domain-related vocabulary and jargon, by following various pages, channels, and people. Social media not only advanced their knowledge of idioms, slang, phrasal verbs but also taught them how to use words and phrases in various contexts. The participants confessed that social media provided them access to language learning groups, fellow language learners, and even native speakers whom they would never have met otherwise. One of the participants mentioned that social media taught him how to use language creatively. News and speeches have proved to be a perfect way to learn how to present their thoughts in the target language. Social media gave them exposure to how various people use language, different accents all over the world, which in turn, improved their speaking, pronunciation skills, and accent. Participants also pointed out that social media gave

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them the opportunity to use the words they already know. One of the participants stated that social media has completely changed the way he interacts with others in English.

As one of the respondents puts it, "I get to learn the language while speaking since at school we had just spoken English as bookish people. Of course, the more you get exposed to the language , the more confident you will be. It helped me to see how English is actually used in informal speech and writing and in different English-speaking communities."

Apart from millions of songs in the target language, social media has videos on numerous grammatical concepts or phrases which come in handy. The participants argued that on social media, their reading skills have improved without actually feeling like they are reading. One of the participants goes on to say that by prolonged exposure to English via social media, he feels like it is his mother tongue instead of L2. Some argued that all of their LSRW skills have improved, others said that it improved their receptive skills. Overall, the participants shared the view that social media has allowed them to immerse themselves in the language, and use language as a tool to communicate with people from all over the world.

To quote a participant who aptly sums it up "I'm still learning English and make many mistakes, but Social media has helped me to learn new words and phrases in different areas: for example, I have learned how to talk about relationships, high fashion and street fashion, specialized books, novels, movies and other things that aren't included in a regular or formal course. Some YouTube channels help me to improve my listening skills and post on Instagram help me to improve my reading skills in just a few minutes when I don't have much time for studying."

Twenty participants said they didn't notice any changes in their language skills caused by social media. A respondent confessed that his English skills degraded by constantly using abbreviations and ill-formed sentences.

Implications and Conclusion

This research lends support to the claim that social media is an effective tool for out of the class learning. Further research is required to investigate whether social media can make a lasting change in a learner's language skills. The practical implication of this study is to erase the negative notions associated with social media as an unproductive way to kill time. In fact, social media can prove to be one of the most convenient and economical ways to ensure consistent practice and progress in a learner's language learning journey.

It is an undeniable fact that the way we learn languages is changing. Language learning classes, especially lecture-based, are becoming increasingly obsolete. Bored by the high ratio of

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teacher talking time in the classroom, students tune out (Prensky, 2010). "The classroom will not be as primary in our future as in the past—with learning occurring "on the go" via mobile technologies…" (Schrader, 2015, p. 33). If learners are assigned a reading or writing task in class, they might ignore it or skip homework. On the other hand, the entertaining nature of social media allows the learners to read, listen and write as much as they want. Social media is also known for its interactive nature as compared to a traditional classroom. "Traditional schooling provides very little of this compared to the rest of their world (one study showed that students in class get to ask a question every 10 hours)" (Prensky, 2001b). ".... with technology, the classroom is broader and participation more equalized" (Schrader, 2015 p.28). The key is to use social media to our advantage.

In spite of the aforementioned advantages, social media has its own limitations. Learners often do not receive corrective feedback, which in the long run might fossilize language learners' errors. Another downside could be the lack of consistency. Since social media is based on the learner's convenience, one day they might learn for two hours and not at all for the next two days.

Replacing language classrooms is not an option. But the goal of this research is to promote autonomous learning through social media.

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Appendix

What would you say is your level of English?
Beginner
Intermediate
Advanced

What country are you from?

India
Other

How often do you use social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, and so on?

Daily
Two or three times per week

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Weekly
Monthly
Rarely

How much time do you spend on social media (including YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, etc.)?

Half an hour every day
An hour every day
Two hours every day
More than two hours every day

Do you use social media in English or your mother tongue?
English
Mother Tongue
Both

What about YouTube? Do you prefer to watch videos in English or your mother tongue?

English
Mother Tongue
Both

Are you a part of any English Language Learning Group on WhatsApp, Facebook, or any other social media platforms?
Yes
No

Do you talk to people on social media?
Yes
No
Sometimes

Do you get to talk to people from different countries or native speakers of English on social media?

Yes
No
Sometimes

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Do you learn new words and phrases on social media?

Yes
No

Do you post on social media in English?
Yes
No
Sometimes

Do you follow English Language Learning pages or channels on social media platforms?
Yes
No

How often do you watch English videos on social media?
Daily
A few times a week
Sometimes

Do you feel that your English has improved since you started using social media?
Yes
No

Please explain how social media has helped you learn and improve your English.

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