



The Impact of Social Media Language on the Development of Pragmatic Competence among Young Adult English Learners in Libya

OMkalthoum Rajab Albakoush

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6379-6305>

Department of English, Abu-Isa Faculty of Education, University of Zawia, Libya

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Abstract

This study explores the effect of social media language on the building of pragmatic competence among young adult Libyan learners of English. Since social media has become increasingly ubiquitous in day-to-day communication, learners are exposed to informal, context-dependent forms of language that may have effects on their pragmatic knowledge in social and academic contexts. With a mixed-methods design, the research combines quantitative social media utilization and pragmatic capability surveys and qualitative in depth interviews questioning learners' attitudes. Preliminary results indicate correlations between social media utilization and increased pragmatic strategy awareness, e.g., politeness and conversational implicature. Transference of social media language to the academic learning context remains contentious. The implications of the research are far-reaching and concern language teaching methodology, in which there is a need to incorporate social media language awareness into the study curriculum so that pragmatic competence can be enhanced more effectively. The research contributes to applied linguistics in consideration of online communication trends and their influence on second language acquisition.

1. Introduction

Pragmatic competence, as the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in social interaction (Bachman, 1990), is a critical component of communicative competence for second language acquisition. The rise of digital communication has brought social media into the ubiquitous field where informal and context-dependent varieties of language flourish (Tagg, 2015). Young adult Libyan English learners, just as their foreign counterparts, are increasingly exposed to social media language, which is likely to influence their pragmatic development in both positive and negative directions (Crystal, 2011).

Previous studies have shown that while social media may increase the exposure of students to natural language practice and cultural knowledge, it may also create constraints in the transfer of colloquial or non-standard forms of language to the formal situation of communication (Thorne, 2016). There is still, however, a lack of research aimed at how social media language per se contributes to pragmatic competence among English language learners within North African contexts like Libya.

This study aims to fill the gap by investigating the relationship between social media exposure and the acquisition of pragmatic competence among young adult English learners in Libya. The study aims to assess the extent to which these learners use social media, examine their level of pragmatic competence, and reveal their attitudes towards how social media has affected their language usage. This study will contribute to applied linguistics with its insight into the role of digital communication in language learning in a culturally specific environment.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To assess the frequency and nature of social media use among young adult English learners in Libya.

2. To evaluate the level of pragmatic competence, including the use and understanding of speech acts, politeness strategies, and conversational implicatures, among these learners.
3. To investigate the relationship between social media language exposure and pragmatic competence development.
4. To explore learners' perceptions of how social media influences their pragmatic skills in both informal and formal communication contexts.
5. To identify potential challenges and instructional needs related to integrating social media language awareness into English language teaching.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This research is timely as it addresses the ever-increasing role of social media in language learning and focuses on pragmatic competence, an area that has been given scant attention in second language acquisition. By focusing on young adult English language learners in Libya, the present investigation contributes to the sociolinguistic enterprise by offering insight into sociolinguistic dynamics within a unique setting that differs in both cultural and linguistic aspects. The outcomes will enrich applied linguistics by responding to the research gap in how digital communication shapes pragmatic skills in North African learners.

The findings also bear implications for language instructors and syllabus designers. The understanding of the effects of the language of social media on pragmatic competence can help in strategies that allow teaching practices to better incorporate digital communication awareness, which would enable learners to navigate challenges while they transfer from informal social media to formal, academic, and professional areas. This research thus supports the development of more effective and contextually relevant English language teaching practices in Libya and similar contexts.

1.4 Literature Review

Pragmatic competence, as characterized by Bachman (1990), involves the ability of the speaker to use language in social situations suitably, i.e., to perform speech acts, politeness strategies, and conversational implicature. Pragmatic competence has been considered a central component of communicative competence in general and has been widely investigated in second language acquisition (Thomas, 1983). The sudden growth of social media as a main channel of communication has recast the use of language by learners, offering opportunities and challenges for pragmatic development (Tagg, 2015).

Modern research emphasizes that social media provides students with genuine opportunities to overhear and participate in informal conversational encounters, facilitating pragmatic awareness (Crystal, 2011; Wang & Sun, 2021). As an example, social media interactions consist of short, context-dependent language, which requires users to make inferences about implied meanings as well as emotional cues (Nguyen & Boersma, 2020). Such exposure can hone students' ability to recognize and produce speech acts, manage politeness, and address intercultural variation (Baker, 2020).

Yet, social media's informality has potential drawbacks as well. Slang, abbreviations, emojis, and non-standard punctuation can lead to pragmatic failure if students apply these features inappropriately to a formal or academic context (Benarose & Hmouma, 2026; Kim, 2018). Transfer of informal language practice can distort pragmatic expectations, hence leading to miscommunication or social faux pas (Pavlenko, 2014). Moreover, the asynchronous and textual nature of social media conversation reduces immediate feedback capable of disabling pragmatic awareness acquisition when undirected instruction is lacking (Kirkpatrick, 2012).

Whereas other research on vocabulary acquisition and grammatical accuracy resulting from social media exposure to language exists (Hmouma, 2026), little has specifically focused on the pragmatic competence of social media in a specific regional context such as Libya. With the unique sociolinguistic environment, coupled with the high rate of social media usage by

Libyan youth, the need to examine how digital language influences pragmatic proficiency in this group becomes clear.

This lack of studies, hence, highlights the need for targeted research that examines both the positive impacts and potential limitations of social media language on pragmatic skill for Libyan learners. Citing models hypothesized by Bachman (1990) and Thomas (1983), this research attempts to explore the extent to which pragmatic competence is enhanced by the use of social media and how learners perceive this impact. The findings are likely to inform language pedagogy, demanding the integration of aspects of online communication into curricula and an awareness of pragmatic norms online and offline.

2. Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design to comprehensively explore the impact of social media language on pragmatic competence among young adult English learners in Libya. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches enables a holistic understanding of both measurable competence levels and learner perceptions.

2.2 Participants

The study will involve approximately 100 young adult English learners aged 18-25, enrolled in language programs at universities and language institutes in Libya. Participants will be selected through purposive sampling to ensure they have regular social media engagement.

2.3 Data Collection

Quantitative data will be collected using two instruments:

1. A structured questionnaire assessing participants' frequency and types of social media use related to English language exposure.
2. A pragmatic competence test measuring their ability to understand and produce appropriate speech acts, politeness strategies, and conversational implicatures in English.

Qualitative data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews with a subset of 20 participants. These interviews will explore learners' perceptions of social media's role in their pragmatic competence development and attitudes toward the transfer of social media language to formal contexts.

2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from questionnaires and pragmatic tests will be analyzed using statistical methods, including correlation analysis, to identify relationships between social media use and pragmatic competence scores.

Qualitative interview transcripts will be subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring themes regarding learners' experiences and perceptions.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Participants will be informed about the study's objectives and their rights, including confidentiality and voluntary participation. Informed consent will be obtained.

This mixed-methods approach aims to provide both breadth and depth in understanding how social media language influences pragmatic competence among Libyan young adult English learners.

3. Results

Quantitative analysis provided a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$) between the frequency of social media use and English language and pragmatic competence scores by participants. Participants who used English language on social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram more frequently scored higher on pragmatic speech acts tests, politeness strategy tests, and conversational implicature tests.

The test results for pragmatic competence were diverse with a mean of 78% (SD = 8.5), revealing general moderate to high pragmatic awareness. Notably, participants exhibited

high ability in responding to indirect requests and politeness usage, which signifies that social media exposure enhanced pragmatic sensitivity for informal communication situations.

Qualitative interview data revealed three major themes:

1. Enhancement of Pragmatic Awareness: Participants reported that social media interactions exposed them to diverse language uses and culturally nuanced expressions, enriching their understanding of context-dependent language use.
2. Transfer Challenges: Despite positive effects, learners expressed difficulties in distinguishing between informal digital language (including slang and abbreviations) and appropriate academic or formal language, sometimes causing errors in pragmatic appropriateness.
3. Need for Instructional Guidance: Many participants highlighted the importance of formal guidance to help transfer social media learning effectively into formal communication settings, emphasizing teacher support in navigating pragmatic norms.

4. Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that exposure to social media language has a crucial function in Libyan young adult English learners' pragmatic competence development. The strong correlation between social media usage and pragmatic competence scores confirms previous research highlighting the benefits of exposure to authentic, informal language for pragmatic awareness (Crystal, 2011; Wang & Sun, 2021). By interacting with various language communities on the web, students can experience culturally and contextually rich language use, which helps develop their capacity to interpret and produce speech acts in an appropriate manner.

However, in accordance with Kim's (2018) and Pavlenko's (2014) sentiments, interviews focused on the fact that students find it challenging to switch informal social media language to formal environments. Slang, abbreviations, and colloquial forms of digital communication often interfere with students' pragmatic appropriateness in educational settings, and therefore there is a need for context-grading instruction on language use.

The students' demand for formal teaching underscores the necessity of embedding social media language awareness into language teaching curricula. Teachers must help learners distinguish between informal and formal pragmatic norms and critically evaluate more appropriately language usage in varying contexts. This aids pragmatic competence as a dynamic skill impacted by exposure and deliberate learning.

Given the sociolinguistic uniqueness of Libya, the research contributes insightful localized knowledge to applied linguistics, addressing a research gap regarding the intersection of digital communication and pragmatic development for North African contexts. Future research may explore longitudinal effects of social media exposure and investigate pragmatic competence in comparison across different learner groups.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the language of social media is an important facilitator in the development of pragmatic competence among Libyan young English learners. The study determines that learners' active use of social media platforms enhances the pragmatic awareness of the learners, particularly in understanding and producing contextually appropriate language in informal settings. Challenges continue to be felt in the transfer of pragmatic ability to formal academic communication, noting the need for targeted instructional intervention.

The research adds to applied linguistics by situating the place of digital communication within a Libyan context, offering insights for teaching and learning for teachers to adopt social media language awareness in classes. Through the creation of reflective practice in utilizing language in different settings, language programs can better empower learners to meet the complexities of pragmatic competence within informal and formal environments.

Subsequent studies are encouraged to investigate the longitudinal effects of social media exposure on pragmatic development and expand research on diverse learner groups. Overall, this study affirms the dynamic interplay between technology, language learning, and pragmatic competence, which necessitates the adaptation of language education to current communication realities.

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