Social Media as an Informal Space for Foreign Language Acquisition: A Sociolinguistic Review

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Abstract

The expansion of digital technology has fundamentally transformed the landscape of language learning, giving rise to informal spaces in which foreign language acquisition occurs beyond the boundaries of formal education. Social media platforms, in particular, have emerged as significant environments where learners engage with authentic linguistic input, interact with diverse speakers, and develop communicative competence through self-directed activity. This study aims to analyze the role of social media as an informal space for foreign language acquisition by examining the key patterns, mechanisms, and sociolinguistic dimensions documented in existing peer-reviewed literature. A qualitative content analysis approach was applied to journal articles and systematic reviews published between 2019 and 2024, selected from internationally indexed databases. Grounded in Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the analysis reveals three central themes: (1) social media provides authentic comprehensible input that supports incidental language acquisition; (2) social media facilitates scaffolded interaction and social participation in the target language; and (3) social media creates affectively favorable conditions—such as reduced anxiety and heightened intrinsic motivation—that accelerate foreign language development. These findings collectively suggest that social media functions not merely as a communication tool but as a sociolinguistically rich, informal acquisition environment with significant implications for multilingual education in the digital era.

Keywords: content analysis; foreign language acquisition; informal learning; social media; sociolinguistics.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has profoundly altered how individuals encounter, engage with, and acquire foreign languages. In previous decades, language learning was predominantly confined to structured classroom environments, textbooks, and formally organized instruction. Today, however, the widespread adoption of social media platforms has created a continuous, embedded landscape of multilingual communication that operates independently of any educational institution. Learners are increasingly exposed to foreign languages not through deliberate study, but through everyday digital participation—browsing content, following accounts, commenting, and interacting with communities whose primary medium of communication is a language other than their own.

This phenomenon has attracted growing scholarly attention under several interconnected frameworks. The concept of Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), defined by Lee (2022) as self-directed, informal digital language learning that takes place independently of formal contexts, has generated a substantial body of empirical research over the past decade. More broadly, Online Informal Language Learning (OILL) encompasses informal acquisition of any target language in digital spaces, not limited to English (Inayati et al., 2024). Both frameworks recognize that learners' digital behaviors—including social media use—constitute a meaningful and increasingly common path to language development.

Despite the growing volume of research in this area, a comprehensive sociolinguistic synthesis that specifically examines social media as an informal space for foreign language

acquisition—beyond English, and beyond formal pedagogical intervention—remains underexplored. Most existing reviews focus narrowly on English as the target language or on learners in specific national contexts. This paper broadens that scope by addressing the following research question: How does social media function as an informal space for foreign language acquisition, based on patterns documented in existing scholarly literature?

The objective of this study is to identify and analyze the key mechanisms and sociolinguistic dimensions through which social media supports foreign language acquisition, drawing on secondary data from peer-reviewed journals and systematic reviews. By grounding this analysis in established theoretical frameworks, this paper aims to contribute a literature-based, sociolinguistically informed perspective that is relevant to multilingual education contexts in an increasingly digitalized world—the central concern of this conference's sub-theme on Language, Communication, and Multilingual Education.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary and well-established theoretical frameworks from second language acquisition (SLA) and educational psychology.

The first is Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), which proposes that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input—that is, language that is meaningful and slightly beyond their current level of competence, described as i+1. Krashen argues that learners do not acquire language by consciously studying rules but by understanding messages conveyed in the target language. Social media provides a continuous, multimodal source of such input: authentic text, audio, and video produced by real speakers for genuine communicative purposes, encountered by learners on their own terms and at their own pace. This naturalistic exposure mirrors the conditions Krashen identifies as optimal for acquisition.

The second framework is Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the space between what a learner can do independently and what they can achieve with the assistance of more capable others. Vygotsky emphasized that learning is inherently social and mediated through interaction. Social media environments create precisely such conditions: learners interact with native and proficient speakers, receive implicit and explicit feedback through comments and responses, and participate in authentic communicative communities. This social scaffolding, even when informal and unsystematic, provides the interactional support that accelerates language development.

Together, these two frameworks allow for an analysis that accounts for both the linguistic dimension of how language is encountered (input) and the social dimension of how it is co-constructed and practiced (interaction). Their integration is particularly appropriate for examining social media, which is simultaneously a source of linguistic input and a space of social participation.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative content analysis of existing secondary data, specifically peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and systematic and scoping reviews related

to social media, informal language learning, and foreign language acquisition. Content analysis was selected as the research method because it allows for systematic, transparent, and replicable examination of documented patterns, themes, and findings across a body of literature without requiring primary data collection (Krippendorff, 2018). This design is appropriate for the stated aim of synthesizing and interpreting existing scholarly knowledge on the role of social media in foreign language acquisition.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

Sources were identified through searches of Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. Search terms included: social media, foreign language acquisition, informal language learning, IDLE, OILL, sociolinguistics, and digital learning. The inclusion criteria required that sources: (1) be published between 2019 and 2024; (2) be peer-reviewed journal articles, indexed books, or systematic reviews; (3) focus specifically on social media or broader digital platforms as a context for language learning or acquisition; and (4) be written in English. Systematic reviews, scoping reviews, and empirical studies were all considered eligible. Foundational theoretical works cited extensively in the literature—specifically Krashen (1985) and Vygotsky (1978)—were also included regardless of publication date, given their status as primary theoretical sources.

Analysis Procedure

Selected sources were read in full and analyzed for recurring themes related to: (1) the nature and quality of language input that social media provides; (2) learner behaviors, strategies, and social practices in social media-mediated language learning; and (3) affective and sociolinguistic variables such as motivation, identity construction, anxiety, and community participation. Thematic coding was applied inductively, allowing categories to emerge from the data. Themes were subsequently interpreted through the dual lens of Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory to ensure theoretical coherence and analytical depth.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social Media as a Source of Authentic Comprehensible Input

A consistent and well-documented finding across the reviewed literature is that social media platforms provide learners with sustained exposure to authentic, multimodal foreign language content. This exposure is characterized by its naturalistic quality: unlike textbook input, which is typically simplified and decontextualized, social media content is produced by real speakers for genuine communicative purposes. It includes colloquial registers, contemporary vocabulary, cultural references, and prosodic features—dimensions of language that formal curricula are rarely equipped to provide.

This finding aligns directly with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985). The authentic content encountered on social media platforms constitutes comprehensible input that learners process in a low-pressure, self-paced environment. Guo and Lee (2023), in their systematic review of 103 IDLE studies using an ecological systems theory perspective, found that learners' engagement with digital content—much of it social media-based—was consistently and positively associated with language proficiency development across multiple ecological levels. Zhang and Romero-Forteza (2024), examining Chinese learners of Spanish in Spain, similarly

documented that social media use was perceived as significantly enhancing vocabulary acquisition and cultural competence, with learners attributing their linguistic gains to authentic digital exposure rather than formal instruction.

Soyoof et al. (2023), in their scoping review of 30 IDLE studies spanning 1980 to 2019, found that receptive activities—consuming target language content, a category that prominently includes social media—were the most widely documented form of informal digital language learning across the literature. This receptive engagement, in Krashen's terms, constitutes the primary mechanism through which incidental acquisition occurs: learners absorb vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatic patterns not by studying them, but by encountering them repeatedly in meaningful communicative contexts. Social media, with its algorithmic personalization and high-frequency engagement patterns, creates conditions for this kind of repeated, interest-driven exposure at a scale and frequency that no classroom can replicate.

Social Participation, Scaffolding, and Learner Autonomy

Beyond passive consumption of content, the reviewed literature documents that social media enables learners to actively participate in target language communities, receiving and providing scaffolded interaction that accelerates acquisition. This dimension of social media use is best understood through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development. Social media provides learners with access to more proficient speakers—native speakers, advanced learners, and content creators—whose language use and responses create opportunities for assisted performance and implicit feedback. Commenting on a post, responding to a story, or participating in a discussion thread are all forms of mediated interaction that support language development beyond what a learner could achieve independently.

Inayati et al. (2024), in their systematic review of 123 OILL studies published between 2014 and 2023, identified learner autonomy and self-regulated behavior as central features of online informal language learning. Learners in social media environments actively curate their digital spaces, selecting accounts, communities, and content streams that align with their interests and language level. This self-directed behavior constitutes a form of autonomous learning that is both more personalized and more sustainable than teacher-directed instruction. Lee (2022) further emphasizes that IDLE activities—which social media use exemplifies—are characterized by learner-initiated engagement that is driven by interest, identity, and social belonging rather than institutional requirement. This motivational quality, grounded in authentic communicative purpose, is a key condition that Vygotsky's framework associates with productive learning.

Lee, Xie, and Lee (2021) found that the frequency of IDLE activity was a significant predictor of learners' willingness to communicate in the second language—a finding with direct implications for the social dimension of acquisition. When learners regularly encounter and use a language in social media contexts, they develop not only linguistic competence but also communicative confidence, which is essential for sustaining the interactive engagement that scaffolded acquisition requires.

Affective and Sociolinguistic Dimensions of Social Media Language Learning

A third major theme emerging from the literature concerns the affective and sociolinguistic conditions that social media creates for foreign language acquisition. This

theme extends beyond purely cognitive or interactional explanations to address the emotional, motivational, and identity-related dimensions of learning—dimensions that are central to a sociolinguistic perspective.

A particularly significant finding is the relationship between social media use and reduced foreign language anxiety. Guo and Lee (2023) identified anxiety reduction as one of the most frequently documented affective outcomes associated with IDLE engagement, and this relationship has been replicated across multiple contexts. The semi-anonymous, low-stakes nature of social media interactions—where learners can engage with the target language without the social visibility and evaluative pressure of a classroom—effectively lowers what Krashen (1985) calls the affective filter: the emotional barrier that impedes the processing and internalization of linguistic input. When the affective filter is low, learners are more receptive to input and more willing to attempt production, both of which are necessary conditions for acquisition.

Motivation represents a second critical affective variable. Learners who engage with social media in a foreign language are predominantly intrinsically motivated, driven by genuine interest in content, social connection, or cultural participation rather than external academic requirements. Lee, Sylvén, and their colleagues have consistently found that intrinsic motivation is associated with deeper and more durable language development outcomes than extrinsic pressure. This is consistent with self-determination theory, which situates intrinsic motivation as the most effective driver of autonomous, sustained learning behavior.

Perhaps most significantly from a sociolinguistic perspective, social media enables learners to construct and perform linguistic identities in the target language. Zhang and Romero-Forteza (2024) found that Chinese students using social media for Spanish learning developed not only linguistic skills but also cultural awareness and social belonging in the Spanish-speaking community—outcomes that go well beyond what formal instruction typically aims to achieve. This process of identity construction through language use, which Vygotsky's framework describes as socially mediated, is central to understanding why social media functions as more than a supplement to formal education: for many learners, it is the primary site of authentic engagement with the target language and, therefore, the primary site of acquisition.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined social media as an informal space for foreign language acquisition through a sociolinguistic content analysis of existing peer-reviewed literature. Three central themes were identified: social media provides authentic, multimodal comprehensible input consistent with the conditions described by Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985); it facilitates social participation and scaffolded interaction in line with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) and the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development; and it creates affectively favorable conditions—reduced anxiety, heightened intrinsic motivation, and identity formation in the target language—that accelerate and sustain informal acquisition.

These findings carry direct and practical implications for language education in the digital era. Educators and policymakers who continue to treat social media exclusively as a distraction from formal learning overlook a powerful and already active acquisition environment. Integrating awareness of informal digital learning into curricula, encouraging learners to reflect on their digital language practices, and designing tasks that bridge formal

instruction with informal social media engagement are all pedagogically sound responses to the evidence reviewed here. This recommendation is particularly relevant for multilingual education contexts, where learners may encounter target languages primarily through digital channels rather than through structured immersion.

This study is not without limitations. The focus on secondary data means that direct empirical claims about specific social media platforms or learner populations cannot be made. The majority of existing IDLE and OILL literature also concentrates on English as the target language, which limits the generalizability of findings to other foreign language learning contexts. Future research should extend the sociolinguistic lens to non-English language acquisition through social media—an area that is empirically underexplored and practically significant, particularly as digital communication becomes increasingly multilingual. The experience of acquiring a language such as Indonesian through everyday social media engagement represents one such direction: a lived, documentable case that warrants systematic empirical attention.

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