

Original Research Article

Digital Communication Platforms as a tool to improve the international communication competence of Pakistani ESL learners

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Abstract

The use of digital communication technologies by English learners has changed rapidly and is changing their ways of communicating with, and learning from, others all over the world. The present study explores the possibility of digital communication networks as a tool to improve Pakistani ESL students' international communication proficiency. The present study looks at social media app, Zoom, YouTube and WhatsApp related to digital literacy, intercultural awareness, communicative confidence and language competency. The data collection was achieved by using semi-structured interviews and survey of the ESL learners at university level of Pakistan. This study aimed to investigate their experience with digital platforms, their perception of the effectiveness of digital platforms, and what challenges they have when communicating online. International communication competence should be expected to be developed through using digital platforms as meaningful opportunities for language and intercultural communication and global interaction. The results are supposed to give pedagogical implications for the use of digital technologies in the higher education context in English language education.

Keywords:

Digital Communication Platforms; International Communication Competence; Pakistani ESL Learners; English Language Learning; Intercultural Communication; Digital Literacy

Introduction

Digital communication has changed the world of language learning in the field of English language learning. Social networking and platform applications (like WhatsApp, Zoom, YouTube, and social media) have provided new opportunities for learners to engage in authentic communication outside the classroom context. These digital environments can foster interactions, support collaboration and provide access to a variety of linguistic and cultural supports, and are thus useful in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL).

According to the recent studies, digital platforms can improve learners' speaking skills, confidence, motivation and participation by offering continuous opportunities for communication and language learning (Albogami & Algethami, 2022; Naveed et al., 2025). English is increasingly being used as a medium of international communication in the era of globalization. The acquisition of linguistic competence is no longer the sole goal of language learning; acquiring intercultural communicative competence (ICC) which enables the student to communicate effectively and appropriately with the individual from different cultures is also included. Byram (1997) defines ICC as linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and intercultural competences that are necessary for meaningful communication across cultures. Recent studies also highlight the importance of fostering students' intercultural awareness and communication, equipping them to engage in global networks and multicultural settings in the field of English language learning.

Digital communication platforms are becoming a staple in university life for academic, social and professional use among university students in Pakistan. Although these technologies are widely used, there is little research that focuses specifically on how these technologies can improve the international communication competence of Pakistan ESL learners. The current research tends to concentrate on language competence, technology integration, but not on the wider aspects of intercultural communication and world involvement. This study aims to find out the contribution of digital communication platforms in improving international communication competence of Pakistani ESL learners. The study aims to expand the existing body of research on digital language learning, especially based on WhatsApp, Zoom, and YouTube experiences, in order to be able to offer numerous pedagogical ideas for the implementation of English in Higher Education.

Statement of the Problem

As the use of digital communication technologies has become more commonplace in daily life, they have had a profound effect on the ways ELLs learn and use English. The opportunities of authentic communication, collaboration and exposure to language and culture through platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom, YouTube and social media. The use of these digital environments could also improve the learners' international communication competence (intercultural awareness, communicative confidence and competence in interacting with people from other cultural backgrounds). The university students really are the most active users of digital communication platforms for academic, social and professional activities in Pakistan. Though English language instruction is prevalent in many educational institutions in Pakistan, the traditional teaching methods are still in use and these methods emphasize on grammatical accuracy and examination performance. Therefore, students may lack opportunities for effective communication skills that are needed when participating in global and culturally diverse

environments. While the effectiveness of digital technologies used in language learning has been explored in the past, there has been limited study that has focused on the role of digital communication platforms in the development of international communication competence among the ESL learners of Pakistan. Research on L2 proficiency, TAM, or online learning is the main focus of existing studies, and the other aspects of intercultural communication and global engagement are overlooked. It is important to highlight that this is a gap that is especially relevant in a context where digital communication is becoming increasingly relevant in education, in employment and in international collaboration. Hence, it is important to explore the use of such digital communication platforms to improve the international communication competence of ESL learners in Pakistan. The study provides some useful insights to the educators, curriculum designers and policy makers in the process of enhancing the English language teaching in Pakistan by understanding how the learners use those platforms and to what extent they are helpful in the development of communication skills and intercultural awareness.

Research Objectives

The study is aimed at accomplishing the following targets:

- To explore how much ESL learners are using digital communication platforms to learn and communicate in English in Pakistan.
- To examine the role that digital communication platforms play in developing competence in international communication and communicative confidence, along with intercultural awareness.
- To find out the challenges and barriers of Pakistani ESL learners in the use of digital communication platforms for the English language learning and international communication.

Research Questions

The following research questions will be addressed:

1. What are the uses of the digital communication platforms by Pakistani ESL learners for learning and communication in English?
2. What role does digital communication platforms play in the development of international communication competence of ESL learners in Pakistan?
3. What are the problems faced by ESL learners in Pakistan to use digital communication platforms for learning and communicating in English?

Theoretical Framework

The major theory on which this study is based is the theory of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) of Michael Byram (1997), where the ability to communicate in the world in a manner that is inter-cultural requires more than language skills. Byram (1997) argued that the students need to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, and critical cultural awareness to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultures. ICC is a complex of skills, including linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, awareness of intercultural competence, and interpretation and negotiation of cultural meaning in the process of communication. For digital communication, these abilities allow learners to interact with people from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds in a meaningful manner via online communication.

Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory also contributes to the study as it sees learning as a socially mediated process and that learning takes place when people interact and collaborate. Vygotsky believes that learning is a process that is achieved by interacting with others and by engaging in social processes. Digital communication technologies, including WhatsApp, Zoom, YouTube, and social media, provide interactive learning spaces for learners to interact, collaborate, share information and get feedback from other learners and international audiences. The interactions help children develop language and are opportunities for children to communicate beyond the traditional classroom setting.

When the two theories are combined, it will give a holistic outlook of the role of these digital communication platforms in the process of English language learning and in the competence of international communication among English language learners from Pakistan. The Intercultural Communicative Competence Theory emphasizes the need for intercultural and communication competence in global interaction, while the Sociocultural Theory focuses on the importance of social interaction and digital engagement in learning. These theories provide a foundation for understanding how digital communication environments can help improve learners' linguistic skills, intercultural competence, communicative competence and readiness for intercultural communication.

Conceptual Framework

Digital Communication Platforms

(WhatsApp, Zoom, YouTube, Social Media)

↓

Social Interaction and Collaborative Learning

(Vygotsky, 1978)

↓

English Language Development

(Speaking, Listening, Writing, Vocabulary)

↓

Intercultural Communicative Competence

(Byram, 1997)

↓ International Communication Competence

(Global Communication, Cultural Awareness, Communicative Confidence)

Methodology

Research Design

The present study is a mixed methods research design that uses quantitative and qualitative methods to gain an overall picture of the role of digital communication platforms in improvement of international communication competence among the ESL learners of Pakistan. The quantitative component investigates the patterns of learners' use of digital platforms and their perception of how these platforms affect their communication skills, while the qualitative component provides a deeper insight into learners' experiences, perceptions, and challenges.

Population and Sample

The study's target population consisted of the undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in English language classes in the public and private universities in Pakistan. These students are using digital communications technologies (DCCTs) like WhatsApp, Zoom, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms regularly for educational and communicative purposes.

In the quantitative phase a sample size of 300 ESL learners was taken conveniently from the universities of Pakistan. Krejcie and Morgan (1970) suggest that 300+ is a good number for educational and social science studies as it enables meaningful statistical analysis. The number of 15–20 respondents was purposively selected from the survey participants for the qualitative phase of the study for semi-structured interviews.

The participants were selected based on their active use of digital communication platforms and their ability to share their experiences in detail about digital language learning and international communication.

Research Instruments

Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data. The questionnaire consisted of four sections:

Section A: Demographic Information

- Age
- Gender
- Educational level
- University type (public/private)

Section B: Digital Platform Usage

- Frequency of using WhatsApp, Zoom, YouTube, and social media
- Purpose of usage (academic, social, professional)

Section C: English Language Development

- Speaking skills
- Listening skills
- Vocabulary development
- Writing skills

Section D: International Communication Competence

- Communicative confidence
- Intercultural awareness
- Global communication skills
- Digital communication literacy

Responses were measured using a **five-point Likert scale** ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15–20 participants to explore their experiences of using digital communication platforms for English language learning and international communication. The interview protocol included questions related to:

- Benefits of digital communication platforms
- Opportunities for intercultural interaction
- Challenges encountered during online communication
- Perceived impact on communication competence

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was approved by the institutions and distributed online via Google Forms and the institutions' networks after their informed consent. After the survey, the respondents were chosen and interviewed via Zoom or Google Meet. Interviews were conducted with the consent of the participants and audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

SPSS was used to analyze quantitative data. Data was summarized with descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percent, mean and standard deviation. A Pearson correlation analysis was used for exploring the relationship between usage of digital platforms and international communication competence. Thematic analysis within the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the qualitative interview data. New trends in the field of digital learning experiences, intercultural communication, communicative confidence and challenges were recognized and analyzed.

Ethical Considerations

Participants were told about the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. All participation was voluntary and confidentiality and anonymity was respected throughout the research process. The information gathered was used only for educational purposes.

5. Results

5.1 Participant Profile

There were 59 ESL learners from Pakistan who took part in the survey. The participants were from different age groups, academic levels, and universities, which helped to give a varied perspective on the use of digital communication platforms for English language learning. A majority of the respondents said they used either WhatsApp or YouTube or Zoom or social media at least once a week for academic or communication needs.

5.2 Digital Communication Platform Usage

The descriptive statistics showed that digital communication platforms were used often to assist students in learning English. Agreement was highest for statements which described that digital platforms offer opportunities to practise English outside the classroom ($M = 4.21$), opportunities for improving listening skills ($M = 4.20$) and opportunities for vocabulary development ($M = 4.19$). These results indicate that learners see digital platforms as useful extra learning environments for practicing their language outside the classroom.

Table 1
Perceived Benefits of Digital Communication Platforms

Statement	Mean
Opportunities to practise English outside class	4.21
Improved listening skills	4.20
Vocabulary development	4.19
Increased intercultural awareness	4.07
Preparation for global communication	4.03

5.3 English Language Development

Overall, participants' attitudes were generally positive with regard to digital communication platforms as a positive aid to their English language learning. Learners' confidence in everyday communication was enhanced by frequent interaction in digital media as they practised receptive and productive language skills. These findings suggest that authentic online interaction is a useful and supportive tool to classroom instruction, giving opportunities to students to be exposed to and practice language throughout the course.

5.4 International Communication Competence

The findings show that digital communication platforms can be used to enhance international communication competence. The participants agreed that they were more aware of various cultures as a result of the online interaction and were more confident in their ability to communicate with people who speak different languages. The findings indicate that digital environments are effective in developing language competence but also intercultural competence which is necessary for use in a global context.

5.5 Challenges in Using Digital Platforms

Participants reported favorable attitudes towards digital learning, but there were some barriers mentioned. Mean scores for items regarding communication anxiety ($M = 3.60$), using WhatsApp very often in school ($M = 3.63$), and using Zoom or Google Meet very often in school ($M = 3.78$) were lower. The results suggest that the use of technological limitations, limited institutional guidance and communication anxiety still exists in students' engagement with digital platforms.

Table 2
Challenges Reported by Participants

Statement	Mean
Communication anxiety in English	3.60
Frequent use of WhatsApp for English	3.63
Regular use of YouTube for learning	3.75
Lack of institutional guidance	3.76
Use of Zoom/Google Meet	3.78

5.6 Qualitative Findings

The survey results were corroborated by information from interviews, which produced four interrelated themes.

Theme 1: Authentic Opportunities for Language Practice

Digital communication platforms were consistently reported by all participants as facilitating the use of English language in real world situations outside the classroom. Frequent contact with people via WhatsApp, Zoom and social media boosted their ability to use English in their daily lives.

"I find that using WhatsApp groups and Zoom meetings allows me to practice English as it is spoken in real life more than lectures in the classroom. (Participant 4).

Theme 2: Development of Intercultural Awareness

Communication with people from other countries helped participants to learn about other cultures and communications. Exposure to international content on YouTube and social media increased awareness of cultural differences and improved intercultural sensitivity.

"Watching international content helps me understand different cultures as well as different ways of speaking English." (Participant 11)

Theme 3: Increased Communicative Confidence

The majority of the participants indicated that with regular online activity, they were not as hesitant as they would be when speaking English, and they were more confident. Regular discussion on the internet led to an increase in the fluency and willingness to participate in discussion.

"I am much more confident speaking English online because I get opportunities to communicate regularly." (Participant 7)

Theme 4: Challenges in Digital Communication

However, some participants also pointed to some difficulties, such as the unreliable internet connection, restricted opportunities for structured interaction and ongoing anxiety when speaking with people who are fluent in English.

"I sometimes don't participate because I am afraid of doing something wrong in front of people". (Participant 15).

Qualitative results overall corroborate the quantitative results as the findings suggest that digital communication platforms lead to improved English language development and to competence in international communication in addition to offering learners practical and psychological challenges.

6. Discussion

The study investigated the contribution of digital communication tools toward the improvement of English language skills and international communication skills among ESL learners of Pakistan. The results show that students consider digital platforms useful learning spaces for learning English, gaining intercultural knowledge and building confidence in communicating in English. The results are in line with findings from a number of studies that have indicated the usefulness of digital technologies in enhancing language learning outside the classroom in authentic ways to interact and collaborate (Albogami and Algethami, 2022; Naveed et al., 2025).

The survey results indicated that the digital platforms were very useful to participants in developing listening skills, vocabulary, and opportunities to practice English apart from the classroom. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that the use of online language communication and multimedia was beneficial for the learners, as they need to be exposed to the authentic language regularly. The digital environments offer a continuous interaction

with English in academic, social and professional situations, where students' communicative confidence and their linguistic competence are strengthened rather than conventional teacher-centered instruction.

The qualitative results also showed that digital communication platforms facilitate intercultural learning through their ability to provide access to various language and cultural viewpoints. The participants said that the interaction on YouTube, Zoom, WhatsApp, and social media helped them to know more about different cultures and communication styles. This result is in line with the study of Byram's (1997) Intercultural Communicative Competence that includes the knowledge of culture, openness and appropriate interaction in an intercultural context. The present results indicate that digital environments offer concrete possibilities to build and foster these skills in an authentic intercultural context.

The findings also corroborated Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory of learning that sees learning as a socially mediated process. The participants were always dealing with digital communication platforms as places for collaboration and interaction, and not only for transferring information. Learners actively built-up language knowledge and became more confident in the use of English through engaging in online discussion and collaborative tasks. This emphasizes the significance of social interaction in digital language learning and underscores the capacity of online learning environment to support classroom learning.

While these positive results were found, the study also outlined some challenges of digital learning. Anxiety about communicating in an online environment, inconsistent participation in online discussions, lack of institutional support, and limited internet access were reported by participants. The results show that digital communication platforms need not only be available but also be perceived as effective by the learners and should be connected to their self-confidence, their digital skills, and the support they receive in the institution. In order to meet these challenges, it is necessary to incorporate structured digital communication tasks in English language programs at the university and offer students more opportunities for planned online communication.

The findings in general show that digital communication platforms can help learners to develop their competence in English language learning and in international communication by integrating the authentic use of the language with intercultural engagement. These platforms don't replace classroom instruction, but they do serve as supplementary learning spaces to keep communication going outside of the classroom. Based on this study, it can be concluded that using digitally mediated communication in learning process is becoming more and more significant in preparing Pakistani ESL learners to participate in the global academic and professional community.

The study utilized a convergent mixed methods design where quantitative and qualitative data was collected in the same phase and analyzed independently and then combined in data interpretation. The results of the survey indicated a general picture of the perception of the learners concerning the use of the digital communication platforms and the results of the interview were used to gain deeper insights into the experiences and explanations of the participants. The integration of both datasets allowed triangulation of the findings and further the overall interpretation of the role of digital communication platforms in the development of international competence in communication.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of digital communication platforms on the development of English language skills and international communication competence of ESL students of Pakistan. The results suggest that platforms like WhatsApp, Zoom, YouTube, and social media offer great opportunities for authentic

language lessons, group learning, and intercultural contact outside the classroom. Participants felt these platforms worked well in enhancing their listening skills, word knowledge, confidence in communicating, and understanding of the culture which all lead to effective international communication.

It was also found that educational value of digital communication depends on the confidence, digital literacy and institutional support of the learners. While there were some difficulties noted by the participants, such as communication anxiety, lack of support, and technical limitations, the results indicate that digital communication platforms can be very useful in supporting traditional English language teaching.

This study is an attempt for integrating quantitative and qualitative evidence, which helps in the growing body of literature on digital language learning that emphasizes the contribution of online communication environment to the enhancement of language learning and intercultural competence of ESL learners in Pakistan. The results underscore the need to design meaningful digital interaction into the field of English language learning to better equip students for involvement in academic and professional worlds in the global context.

Practical Implications

The results imply some practical implications for English language instruction in Pakistan. In the first place, universities need to adopt digital communication platforms as part of language teaching and learning by building a collaborative online environment for students to foster genuine communication. Second, teacher training programmes should prepare teachers to be effective users of digital technologies for language teaching and intercultural learning. Lastly, educational institutions need to enhance students' access to digital materials and create planned opportunities for international online engagement to encourage students to cultivate the communication skills needed in our hyper-connected world.

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