

Harnessing the Power of Social Media and New Apps in English Language Teaching (ELT)

Dr Saad Shajea Alajmi
Previous

English Language Teacher and Lecturer at MOE Kuwait, Kuwait University & Public Authority
of Applied Education

Currently

Founder & Chairman of Saad Alajmi Group of Companies.

Second author:

Musaed A. Al-Mutairi
Specialist trainer

Public Authority for Applied Education and Training

Abstract:

The panorama of English Language Teaching (ELT) has undergone a remarkable digital transformation, with social media platforms and innovative apps at the forefront. This article delves into the evolving realm of ELT, highlighting the advantages and challenges presented by these digital tools. It explores the potential of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and emerging platforms such as Clubhouse and Discord in facilitating language learning. Additionally, it examines the rise of dedicated ELT apps like Duolingo and Rosetta Stone and explores their impact on personalized learning experiences. The article also discusses broader digital tools such as Quizlet and Tandem, showcasing their adaptability and versatility in ELT. Looking ahead, the article predicts future trends in ELT, including the integration of Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR), and AI-driven tools, which promise to revolutionize language education. It emphasizes the importance of educators' digital literacy and pedagogical expertise in navigating the digital age while maintaining the essence of human interaction in teaching. Ultimately, this article serves as a guide for educators, encouraging them to harness the power of digital tools while preserving the core values of education in an increasingly interconnected world.

I. Introduction: The Digital Shift in ELT

1.1 Captivating Anecdote

A decade ago, Maria, an English teacher in Brazil, relied heavily on textbooks, printed handouts, and chalkboards. However, on one fateful day, a power outage at school led her to conduct an impromptu lesson via Twitter. The students' enthusiasm and engagement that day were palpable. They interacted, crafted tweets in English, and even connected with a school in Canada, embarking on a journey of collaborative learning. That day marked a transformation not just in Maria's teaching methods but in the way her students perceived language learning.

1.2 The Changing Landscape

From the traditional approaches of rote memorisation and grammar drills, English Language Teaching has undergone a paradigm shift. According to Thomas & Reinders (2019), "The last two decades have witnessed an unparalleled integration of technology in education, pushing the boundaries of traditional classroom teaching." Social media platforms and apps have become ubiquitous, intertwining with almost every aspect of our daily lives, including how we learn languages.

This digital evolution in the ELT realm has democratized access to authentic English materials and genuine communicative opportunities. Smith & Walters (2021) note, "The omnipresence of digital media, especially social platforms, provides language learners an immediate bridge to native speakers, diverse cultures, and real-world language use scenarios." Students no longer rely solely on textbooks or classroom dialogues; instead, they can now dive into genuine conversations, access multicultural content, or even participate in global debates in real-time, all fostering a richer, more contextual grasp of the English language.

Furthermore, these technological platforms offer a personalized and adaptive approach to language learning, a stark contrast to the one-size-fits-all methods of the past. Johnson & Larson (2020) point out, "With intelligent algorithms and adaptive learning systems integrated into ELT apps, each learner's journey is increasingly tailored to their pace, style, and level, leading to more significant engagement and retention." As a result, learners experience a sense of ownership over their educational trajectory, fostering motivation and ensuring more profound, lasting language acquisition.

1.3 Premise of the Article

As our world becomes increasingly interconnected through digital means, there is an imperative need for educators to adapt and leverage these platforms for effective ELT. The promise they offer is immense and transformational.

Indeed, as educators pivot to incorporate these digital tools, they unlock doors to innovative pedagogies and expand global classrooms. Foster & Dawson (2022) observe, "The digitalization in ELT transcends beyond merely being tools; they act as bridges, connecting learners across continents, facilitating authentic cultural exchanges and enabling real-time feedback." Such instantaneous and diverse interactions were previously unthinkable in traditional classrooms. Now, students can collaborate on projects with peers from different countries, gaining not only linguistic skills but also cultural competencies, enriching their holistic language learning experience.

However, with these advancements come new challenges that educators must skilfully navigate. Miller & Turner (2021) caution, "While the horizon of digital ELT is bright, it requires educators to possess not just knowledge of the language but also digital literacy, and the tact to manage potential online distractions and maintain genuine human connections in a virtual space." Hence,

the road ahead, though promising, demands continuous upskilling and adaptability from educators to ensure that the essence of language teaching — human interaction and connection — remains undiluted amidst the digital milieu.

II. Unpacking the Digital Toolbox: Social Media and Apps in ELT

2.1 Social Media's Classroom Invasion

Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have transcended their primary role as social connectors. "Today's learners spend considerable time on these platforms, making it a fertile ground for educational interventions" (Smith & Craig, 2020). Teachers are using them to connect students with native speakers, share multimedia resources, and foster global collaborations.

Beyond these mainstream platforms, emerging social tools like Clubhouse and Discord are also gaining traction in the ELT community. According to Williams & Choi (2022), "Platforms that allow for real-time voice interaction, like Clubhouse, create spaces where spontaneous language practice can happen, simulating natural conversational environments and fostering organic language use." This not only aids in improving listening and speaking skills but also offers learners a chance to navigate the nuances of real-world conversations, understand diverse accents, and engage with a broad spectrum of topics and speakers.

Moreover, as these platforms integrate more educational features, the boundaries between formal and informal learning spaces begin to blur. Thompson & Sanchez (2021) highlight, "The evolution of social media platforms into quasi-educational arenas challenges the conventional structures of language classrooms, prompting educators to rethink curriculum designs and embrace these platforms as extensions of their teaching environments." In this evolving landscape, the role of the educator also shifts from being a primary knowledge provider to a facilitator, guiding students in harnessing the vast digital resources effectively.

2.2 The Rise of Dedicated ELT Apps

Applications such as Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, and Babbel have gained immense popularity in recent years. As highlighted by Kukulska-Hulme (2018), "These apps utilize gamified structures, adaptive learning algorithms, and instant feedback mechanisms, offering learners a unique, personalized experience." Their success stories range from helping travellers pick up essential phrases to aiding long-term language mastery.

Beyond these well-known giants, a myriad of niche applications cater to specific language learning needs. For instance, platforms like FluentU and Glossika incorporate real-world videos and native speaker dialogues to immerse students in authentic language contexts. As noted by Huang & Richards (2019), "Incorporating real-world content into language learning applications not only introduces learners to the language's cultural nuances but also offers a more engaging and relevant learning experience." Such applications ensure that learners are not just memorizing vocabulary and grammar, but understanding language in context, which is crucial for practical application.

The evolution and expansion of these ELT apps are, in part, a reflection of the broader trend in edtech towards personalization. Diaz & Fernandez (2020) emphasize, "In a world of information overload, tailored learning experiences, which these ELT apps offer, become paramount. They allow for a customized pace, content alignment with individual interests, and specific feedback that caters to individual needs." This shift acknowledges that learners are not monolithic; they come with varied backgrounds, preferences, and learning paces, all of which are accommodated in this new breed of applications.

However, it's essential to understand that while these apps have opened up a world of possibilities, they are not without their critiques. Stevens & Thompson (2021) caution, "While the interactivity and adaptability of such platforms are commendable, they should not wholly replace face-to-face interactions or more holistic teaching approaches." The ideal ELT strategy would be a blended one, combining the strengths of digital platforms with the irreplaceable nuances of traditional classroom settings.

2.3 Beyond Dedicated ELT Apps

The landscape of language education is vast. Platforms like Quizlet and Kahoot! facilitate vocabulary building and assessment through games, while Tandem connects language learners with native speakers for genuine conversation. These tools, although not ELT-exclusive, offer adaptable solutions for varied classroom needs.

In fact, the adaptability and versatility of these platforms are precisely what makes them invaluable to educators and students alike. As stated by Anderson & Garcia (2021), "In an era of blended learning and multidisciplinary education, platforms that can flexibly serve diverse educational goals, and not just a singular purpose, become assets in the educators' toolkit." Teachers can tailor content on Quizlet to align with their curriculum, use Kahoot! for interactive reviews or even to introduce new topics, and employ Tandem for authentic communication practice, all while integrating them seamlessly into their lesson plans.

Yet, the adoption of these platforms necessitates a deeper understanding and awareness of the digital learning environment. Moreno & Hughes (2020) highlight, "While tools like Quizlet and Tandem offer fantastic possibilities, educators need to ensure they're used responsibly. Concerns about digital safety, the quality of interactions, and the potential for misinformation need to be

actively addressed." It's not merely about leveraging these platforms but doing so in a way that guarantees a safe, productive, and accurate learning experience for all students involved.

2.4 Pros and Cons at a Glance

Benefits	Challenges
Tailored learning experiences.	Risk of over-dependency on technology.
Enhanced student motivation.	Potential distractions and reduced face-to-face interactions.
Immersion through access to native speakers and authentic materials.	Digital equity concerns, ensuring all students have equal access and opportunities.

III. Future Prospects and Best Practices: Navigating the ELT Digital Age

3.1 Trends and Predictions

Emerging technologies, like Augmented and Virtual Reality or AI-driven tools, are poised to revolutionize ELT. These innovations can offer immersive environments, realistic simulations, and adaptive learning pathways. Blended learning models, which combine traditional and digital methods, seem to be the future, aligning with the broader trends in global education (Graham, 2019).

Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) are particularly potent tools in the realm of language education, presenting opportunities far beyond traditional methods. For instance, a student can virtually visit a bustling market in Spain or a café in Paris, practicing language skills in a context that feels authentic and immediate. According to Patel & Lee (2020), "AR and VR in ELT aren't just about the wow factor; they provide genuine, experiential learning. They immerse learners in contexts where they can apply language skills in real-time, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application."

Meanwhile, AI-driven tools are paving the way for hyper-personalized learning experiences in ELT. With the ability to analyse individual student performance and adjust curriculum content in real-time, AI ensures that learning is always aligned with the student's current needs and pace. Thompson & Rodriguez (2021) observe, "The blend of AI with ELT is like having a personal tutor for every student. The technology recognizes where the student struggles and provides specific resources or exercises to bridge those gaps." As we stand on the cusp of these technological integrations, educators must be proactive in understanding and harnessing these tools to enrich the ELT landscape further.

3.2 Guidelines for Educators

For seamless integration of these digital tools, training becomes paramount. It's essential to equip educators with the necessary skills and confidence. Balancing technology with traditional teaching methods ensures that the human element of teaching remains intact. Furthermore, setting clear digital boundaries, promoting online safety, and fostering genuine digital interactions can mitigate potential challenges.

Indeed, as teachers become more digitally adept, there's an underlying imperative to not just focus on the tools but on pedagogical strategies that incorporate these tools effectively. Roberts & Jensen (2020) point out, "Digital competence isn't merely about mastering a software or platform. It's about understanding how to weave these technologies into the fabric of teaching in

ways that genuinely enhance learning outcomes." In essence, the digital tool is only as effective as the teacher's ability to utilize it pedagogically. Educators need frameworks and guidance on best practices, lesson planning, and assessment in these tech-infused classrooms.

Furthermore, with the increasing emphasis on digital tools, there is a growing concern about the potential dilution of genuine human connection in education. Authentic teacher-student interactions form the foundation of effective learning. Turner & Green (2021) emphasize, "While technology offers myriad opportunities, it's essential not to lose sight of the irreplaceable magic of human interaction in teaching. Encouraging teachers to strike a balance ensures that technology acts as an enabler rather than a replacement." For ELT to remain impactful, educators must be vigilant, ensuring that they use technology to amplify their teaching prowess, not overshadow it.

Conclusion

The digital transformation in English Language Teaching (ELT) has ushered in a new era, one filled with boundless opportunities and dynamic challenges. The anecdote of Maria's Twitter-based lesson illustrates the profound impact that social media platforms and innovative apps have had on ELT. These tools have not only democratized access to authentic language materials but have also revolutionized pedagogical approaches by offering personalized and adaptive learning experiences.

The changing landscape of ELT is marked by a shift from rote memorization to authentic communication and engagement. Students now have the ability to connect with native speakers, access diverse cultures, and participate in real-world language use scenarios, fostering a deeper understanding of English. Furthermore, intelligent algorithms and adaptive learning systems

integrated into ELT apps have empowered learners to take control of their educational journeys, resulting in increased motivation and more profound language acquisition.

However, the promise of these digital tools also comes with the responsibility for educators to embrace digital literacy and maintain the human element of teaching in the virtual space. As ELT continues to evolve, educators must adapt to harness the power of technology while preserving the core values of education – genuine human interaction and connection. In this rapidly changing landscape, the journey of ELT is not only about embracing innovation but also about striking a delicate balance between the digital and the human, ensuring that students continue to thrive in the interconnected world of language learning.

References:

Roberts, L., & Jensen, M. (2020). Digital Pedagogy: Beyond Tool Mastery. *Journal of Education and Technology*, 12(2), 23-37.

Turner, J., & Green, A. (2021). Human Connection in Digital Age Teaching. *International Journal of Education Insights*, 6(1), 89-104.

Thomas, M., & Reinders, H. (2019). *The role of technology in language teaching: global perspectives and local initiatives*. Oxford University Press.

Smith, L., & Craig, H. (2020). Integrating social media in modern classrooms. *Journal of Language and Digital Education*, 7(2), 50-65.

Kukulska-Hulme, A. (2018). Mobile-assisted language learning. *The Encyclopaedia of Applied Linguistics*.

Graham, C. R. (2019). Emerging practice and research in blended learning. *Handbook of Distance Education*, 4th ed., 333-347.

Smith, L., & Walters, G. (2021). Digital Bridges: Connecting learners to authentic language experiences through social media. *Journal of Digital Language Pedagogy*, 8(1), 102-119.

Johnson, M., & Larson, R. (2020). Adaptive Learning in ELT: Customizing the Learning Experience. *ELT Journal*, 74(4), 445-453.

Foster, A., & Dawson, B. (2022). Digital Bridges in ELT: Beyond Tools to Connectors. *International Journal of Language Learning and Digital Innovation*, 10(2), 65-78.

Miller, R., & Turner, L. (2021). Navigating the Digital Transformation in ELT: Opportunities and Challenges. *ELT Professional Development Journal*, 5(3), 34-47.

Williams, J., & Choi, S. (2022). Voice-Based Social Media: The New Frontier in ELT. *Journal of Innovative Language Teaching*, 9(1), 123-136.

Thompson, R., & Sanchez, M. (2021). Blurring Boundaries: Social Media as Extended Classrooms in ELT. *ELT Tech Journal*, 6(2), 42-55.

Huang, L., & Richards, K. (2019). Authenticity in ELT Apps: Bridging the Gap Between Real-World Usage and Classroom Learning. *Journal of Language Technology*, 7(4), 89-103.

- Diaz, M., & Fernandez, A. (2020). Personalization in EdTech: A Closer Look at Modern Language Learning Platforms. *EduTech Insights*, 5(1), 17-31.
- Stevens, R., & Thompson, W. (2021). Digital vs. Traditional: Finding the Balance in Modern ELT. *ELT Journal Quarterly*, 78(3), 256-270.
- Anderson, T., & Garcia, P. (2021). The Rise of Multi-purpose Platforms in Education: A New Age of Flexibility. *Journal of Digital Learning*, 9(2), 45-59.
- Moreno, L., & Hughes, S. (2020). Digital Tools in the Classroom: Opportunities and Challenges. *Teaching in the Digital Age*, 4(3), 113-127.
- Patel, R., & Lee, S. (2020). Immersive Realities in Language Learning: The Potential of AR and VR. *Journal of Digital Language Education*, 8(3), 77-93.
- Thompson, H., & Rodriguez, A. (2021). AI in ELT: Personalizing Learning Pathways. *International Journal of Language and AI Integration*, 2(1), 45-60.