

# APPLYING SOCIAL NETWORKS IN ESL BLENDED LEARNING: A CASE STUDY WITH ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS

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**Abstract:** The study analyzes and evaluates the use of social networks (Facebook, Messenger and Zalo) as educational tools as well as their influence in blended learning on ESL activities in a Vietnamese mountainous high school. In addition, the study endeavored to find out the most applicable teaching way in blended learning. The study participants included 30 students at Luc Ngan Number 2 High School divided into 2 groups (the social network classroom group and traditional classroom group) with the teaching support of a Canadian teacher. Multi-strategy design method was used to investigate and compare the results with description and statistical figures. The findings of the research suggest that social networks could be effectively and potentially used as supportive tools for Vietnamese ethnic minority students in English speaking learning. Besides, there are some challenges of ethnic minority language, physical environment, economic conditions and technology.

**Keywords:** English speaking; social networks; blended learning; ethnic minority students

## 1. Introduction

As a compulsory subject in Vietnamese General Education 2018, English focuses on developing students' communication skills,

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notably listening, speaking, reading, and writing. English equips students not only with language skills, but also with a way to exchange information, advanced science and technology, as well as cultures (MOET, 2020). However, it appears that teaching and learning English in Vietnam are not following the international standard, which is evidenced by most Vietnamese students' speaking challenges and teachers' limited interest in teaching English speaking in their classes because reading comprehension, vocabulary and structural patterns are the way to pass school exams and university entrance exams. (Hoang, 2010 in Dang et al., 2017) As a result, Vietnamese students are not good at English speaking skills despite being trained in English grammar regularly (Nguyen, 2011).

In addition, despite continued efforts to improve the educational standards, the rural education system still has issues. Inequality, particularly in terms of gaps between rural and urban regions and between ethnic minority groups and the majority population, is said to have been increasing substantially inside the Vietnamese educational system (Gaiha & Thapa, 2006 in Dennis et al., 2020). Vietnam has a linguistically diverse ethnic minority, yet Vietnamese is the official language that is being taught in Vietnamese public schools. Due to this, ethnic minority students, who often live in rural areas, have a far lower level of educational attainment compared to Vietnamese students (Dennis et al., 2020).

Like other countries around the world, the Vietnamese education system has struggled through several COVID-19 waves by closing all schools in two major periods nationwide (Tao et al., 2022). However, physical schools' closure make it particularly struggling for ethnic minority access to continue their study virtually, due to their lack of access to digital technology, health and other resources (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). At the same time, the discontinuity in the children's education, especially in the mountainous and ethnic minorities areas in

a long period caused social issues such as child marriage, giving birth at teenage or usury (Ban dân tộc tỉnh, 2020; VTV5, 2022; VTV24, 2022). The sudden closure of schools meant that education policy makers, school principals and teachers in Vietnam had to adopt blended learning, often in combination with online platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Team or Skype (Order no. 11/CT-UBND).

Blended learning is the method that combines traditional classroom learning and online learning (Dang et al., 2017; Grgurović, 2011). On the one hand, advances in blended learning technologies offer new chances and new experiences for not only teachers but also learners in designing new teaching models and delivering effective courses in order to support and enhance the teachers' role and the students' individual cognitive experiences and social environment (Dang et al., 2017). On the other hand, the absence of affordable and accessible internet connection, the unavailability of assistive technologies for children with impairments at home, and the lack of parental support for active involvement in learning at home were problems for students from underprivileged homes. Ethnic minority students did not considerably benefit from mother tongue-based online learning due to a shortage of online content in their native languages, even though some materials were given in ethnic minority languages. For this reason, their parents or grandparents could also have been unable to offer sufficient assistance. Due in part to location, there are differences in how different ethnic groups experience education. People who live in more rural places don't have access to online education, regular delivery of educational materials, or even instructor visits. (Le et al., 2022; Nguyen et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2020).

In these contexts, an empirical study that could focus on marginalized students' experience and evaluate the efficacy of blended learning methods is necessary to improve the quality of ESL teaching, but also addresses educational inequalities in Vietnam.

## **2. Literature Review**

### ***2.1. Theories of blended learning***

Grgurović's study (2011) defined blended learning as a combination of face-to-face teaching and learning and an online CALL component delivered through a learning management system (LMS). The main findings of the study indicate that all language skills can be successfully integrated into both modes. These results can inform the design and implementation of new blended learning models as well as the comparison with the existing models. The study still has some limitations. Although all of the participants were originally from China and Korea, they had to learn English to live and study in the US and they also had an English practice environment daily. Moreover, students did not have to face technical difficulties.

Graham's study (2005) demonstrated that blended learning is the combination of instruction from traditional face-to-face learning systems and distributed learning systems including face-to-face learning, self-study learning and online collaborative learning.

In this research, I used blended learning as the combination of face-to-face learning and online learning through social networks to create an environment for ethnic minority students to practice English skills.

### ***2.2. Current research in Vietnam***

Several studies have examined the role and effectiveness of blended learning in ESL in Vietnam. In terms of using technology in ESL, Thuy and Yukawa's study (2021) integrated technology into teaching to enhance self-studying EFL among two groups of English learners in Vietnam and Japan. The study demonstrates that collaboration and autonomy of non-native learners with mobile devices' assistance as supporting language self-learning tools should be encouraged. However, the study has a small sample size, short-

term learning activities and a lack of investigation into socio-cultural differences between Japan and Vietnam, which might result in limitations of the findings.

In terms of using social networks in ESL, the study by Dang et al. (2019) integrated Facebook into teaching to enhance English pronunciation among two groups of English major freshmen in a Vietnamese university. The study illustrates that Facebook retains outstanding features to offer a professional online course for English pronunciation learning such as live lectures, group discussions, schedule events and allows teachers to manage students' learning autonomy so that the teacher is likely to grasp the ability of individuals in a short time. However, the study has a small sample size, short-term learning activities. Besides, it only focuses on English pronunciation of participants who are English major students with certain English skills. The study also has a lack of investigation into ethnic groups between the experimental group and the traditional group.

In terms of the gamified blended classroom, Le's study (2020) incorporated gamification into the whole journey of an ESL blended learning course in a Vietnamese private university. The study represents a deeper engagement of ESL learners in a gamified blended classroom, behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. However, the result was limited by the small sample size and the specific time and context. This was a purely qualitative study to explore learners' perspectives and reflections on their experiences. Besides, learners still struggled with the regulations of games, the lack of confidence in a competitive environment, the sense of isolation in the e-learning process, and the reduction of motivation in learning. Moreover, designing a gamified blended classroom is an enormous challenge for high school teachers because of their programming ability.

Learning by using social networks is one of the concepts that best meets the concept of anytime and anywhere education (Donmus, 2010). As Jiang and Tang (2010) pointed out, social networks enhance

learning efficiency. Zaidieh (2012) later discovered that social-networking sites offer a student the opportunity to connect with other students, educators, administrators, alumni, both within and outside his current institution. From the previous study, it can be concluded that social networks have potential for ethnic minority students and teachers in improving and developing education.

While the current body of research offers diverse, multi-locational insights into Vietnamese students' experience with ESL blended learning, very few studies examine specifically the experience of marginalized students, especially ethnic minority students who would have less privilege and more challenges to learning English than the majority because of their ethnicity, socioeconomic status and geography (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2021). My research will contribute original understandings of ethnic minority students' experience with ESL blended learning by engaging them exclusively in the study, presenting their voice and contexts with care and criticality.

### 3. Research questions

This study aims to develop a better understanding of the influences of social networks on English learning activities and ethnic minority students' learning attitudes at Luc Ngan Number 2 High School. The research questions are:

- *What are the influences of using social networks on English teaching and learning activities at Luc Ngan Number 2 High School?*
- *What are students' attitudes towards using social networks in learning English?*
- *Based on research findings, what learning and teaching methods are potential to improve English study outcomes for ethnic minority students?*

#### 4. Methodology

The mixed-method study involves quantitative and qualitative data collected from the developed questionnaires and interviews sent to 15 participants in the experimental group after the social networks application. The questionnaires were developed through students' sharing in my classes during the social distancing period while the interviews were made to enlighten the ways that my students use social networks to enhance their marks in English tests, especially speaking skills. Student's pre-treatment test (pre-test) and post-treatment test (post-test) were participants's Mid-term tests and Final tests at school, which are used to compare the participants' results.

There is an introduction conversation for the first week plus 16 topic lessons for the next 8 weeks, described as follows:

- Week 1:
  - o Introduction to the application of social networks to speaking blended-learning ESL of the classroom;
  - o Pictures and words to introduce participants (2 parts: yourselves and family);
- Week 2 - 9:
  - o Instructions and discussion by using social networks (Facebook, Messenger and Zalo): topics include food, language and learning, sports, and transportation;
  - o Discussion of learning and dealing with any difficulties or problems via social networks;
  - o While discussing with the native teacher twice a week, participants also were required to record videos to review their talk in 1 minute. Instead of giving feedback or comments as usual, the teacher asked students to give comments about their classmates' video. To encourage them, teacher gave stars and used social networks' functions including: creating groups, scheduling events, sending

messages, sharing multimedia, posting class notes and assignments, providing communication with the teacher or native English teacher, facilitating classmate connections, brainstorming, sharing and pinning interesting things (websites, apps, etc.), polling, live-streaming and making groups' calls.

- Week 10:
  - o Results and comparisons
  - o Feedbacks and comments

#### ***4.1. Research participants***

Luc Ngan Number 2 High School (LN2 School) is one of the Northern mountainous high schools in Bac Giang province with 940/1480 students from ethnic minority groups (63.5%), in which 207 students live at disadvantaged condition areas (14%) and 3 students are disabled children (0.2%) (Luc Ngan Number 2 High School, 2023). There are 30 10-grade students from a class at LN2 School volunteering to be the subjects of the study. All of them are in ethnic minority groups (Nùng, Tày, Hoa, Sán Dìu, Cao Lan). They were divided into two groups: the experimental group and the traditional classroom group. Moreover, there were 15 students for each group including both male and female (the table below).

Among 15 students from the experimental group, 86.7 percent of them confirmed that they have experienced “blended-learning” before, especially via using social networks like Youtube. The average pretest score of 30 students was 6.71, though the experimental group scored a bit lower on average than the traditional group.

100% of the students are under 18 years old and all of them took part in the course voluntarily. They hope to enhance their English speaking skills because of their regular tests. They also signed the agreement for their participation in this study. Besides, participants' parents also knew their participation at the first online



Parents' meeting with the formal teacher. Students had the right to withdraw from research at any given time. As their English teacher myself, I am aware of my power in the teacher-student relationship which might put students in a coerced position to participate. To address this, I attempt to build trusting and respectful relationships with my students and be transparent in the voluntary nature of the study, that whether they join the learning activities or not will not have any consequence on their study. Lastly, any personal identification information related to students was anonymised to protect their privacy.

#### **4.2. Data collection**

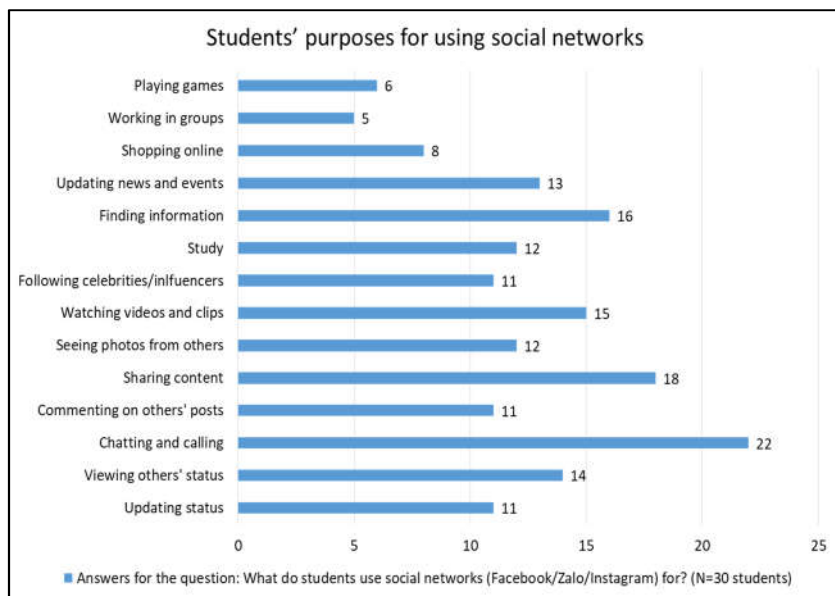
The pre-tests and post-tests were the English speaking entry exams and the final tests scored by English teachers at Luc Ngan Number 2 High School. First, the questionnaires were designed through Google forms and given to students in both experimental and traditional groups. Second, the semi-structured interviews were done one by one with 4 students in the experimental group who had the highest and lowest improvement in test scores.

### **5. Findings**

#### **5.1. Research question 1**

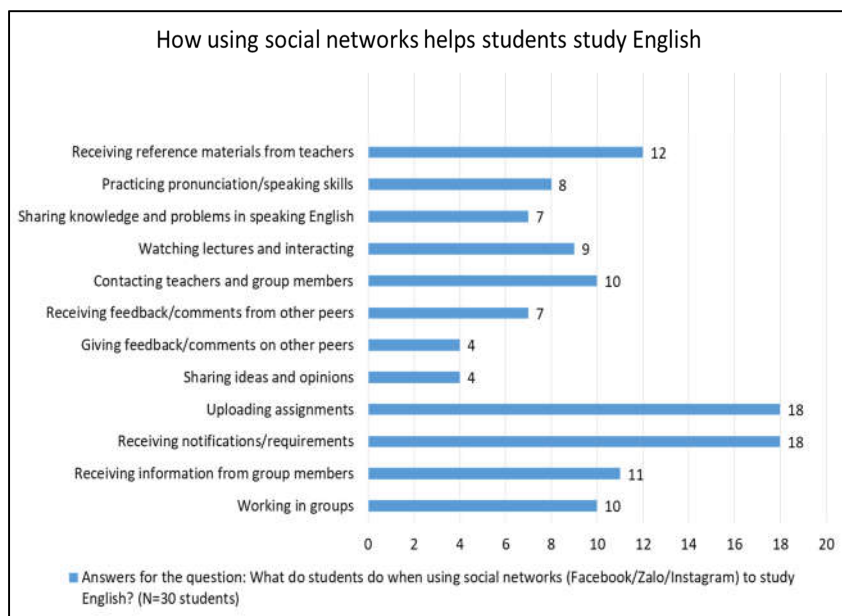
##### **5.1.1. Students' engagement with social networks**

Data from the questionnaire (Figure 1) reveals that students were very familiar with using social networks for different purposes. Most students used them for online communication (22/30 students), sharing content (18/22 students) and finding information (16/22 students). When it came to using social networks for studying English specifically (Figure 2), the most common activities were uploading assignments and receiving notifications/requirements. It is interesting to note that there were 12 students responding that they learned English by receiving reference materials from teachers and the figures of receiving information from group members was 11 participants.



(Source: data from the questionnaire)

**Figure 1:** Students' purposes of using social networks



(Source: data from the questionnaire)

**Figure 2:** How social networks support students in learning English

5.1.2. Statistical analysis of test scores

**Table 1:** Pre-test and post-test score summary

	Social network classroom group (N=15 students)	Traditional classroom group (N=15 students)
<b>Pre-test average score</b>	6.62	6.81
<b>Post-test average score</b>	7.33	7.03
<b>Average improvement in test score</b>	0.71	0.22
<b>Lowest improvement</b>	0.2	-0.2
<b>Highest improvement</b>	1.5	0.6

(Source: data from the questionnaire)

As can be inferred from Table 1, students from the traditional classroom group had higher pre-test average scores than ones in the experimental group. However, students in the experimental group increased their post-test average score to 7.33/ 10 compared with 7.03/ 10 scores reported in the traditional group. The experimental group has improved their score by 0.71 in average, tripling the improvement in the traditional group. All students who joined the experimental classroom witnessed improvements in their score, the most significant recorded improvement being 1.5 points.

**Table 2:** Correlation between social networks' using time and improvement in English test score

	Social network classroom group (N=15 students)	Traditional classroom group (N=15 students)
Correlation between the amount of timespent on social networks and improvement in test score	0.023	-0.023

(Source: data from the questionnaire)

Meanwhile, the correlation between the amount of time spent on social networks and improvement in test score for the experimental group is only 0.02 and for the traditional group -0.02. This proved that the time spent on social networks does not have significant correlation with participants' results in this research. To further comprehend how the experimental group could improve their English speaking score, I did some interviews with four students having the highest and lowest improvement in the experimental group to compare and investigate results that I could not see in the quantitative research.

### 5.1.3. Student interview results

To search for more information related to students' score improvement in social network classroom groups and find their difficulties in blended learning, I made four interviews with four students having the highest and lowest improvement. Through our conversations, four students confirmed that using social networks as the tools in blended learning helped them enhance their English speaking skills. However, they also gave some different feedback about their engagements with social networks.

Two students having the highest improvement confirmed that although social networks helped them a lot, they still had to struggle with the unstable Internet and the lack of technology devices as well as archive abilities:

*“You know, I live in Gia Sang and my condition is not good so I had to watch videos and practice at my close friend's home. Besides, I also downloaded all the videos we practiced with the Canadian teacher to use the implication technique that you offered at the first time of the course. Besides, following my idols allowed me to use shadowing techniques. Now I have a lot of quotes to use in my presentations at school. Last but not least, preparing for the talk with the teacher and giving comments to*

*my friends forced me to look for more new words and check my grammar. These helped me have better talks in the test” (T, interview)*

It is interesting to note that students could not only use social networks to practice planned communication, they also could add other techniques and find out topics related to their interests:

*“My internet was extremely bad, so it was quite hard for me to connect when watching the livestream but I really love group meetings. The [Canadian] teacher was super nice, he did not complain about my bad connection and I could ask him directly instead of typing. I think direct communication with [the Canadian teacher] twice a week enhanced my speaking skills. Social networks are good but I would like to interact with the teacher more, such as using some functions to write on the teacher’s screen or giving reaction icons. Social networks also do not have a recording function, so I could not rewatch the group meeting.” (D, interview)*

Despite improving student’s speaking skills, unstable internet and physical environment forced student D to borrow internet services from the neighbors.

On the other hand, despite recognizing the benefits from social networks in learning English speaking skills, two students having the lowest improvement gave insightful remarks about their struggle to learn because of social networks’ distracting factors and their disadvantages as ethnic minority students in the low-connection area:

*“Although I did not play games on social networks, I could still play other things when using my smartphone or computer. This interrupted my learning while I struggled with my Vietnamese, so of course my English could not improve a lot. It is also hard for me to find and download the document you gave on Zalo when it*

*just allows me to keep it for a month and I could not upload the large file on Facebook.” (L, interview)*

Social networks could let students themselves be seduced into playing games on the technology devices. Besides, coming from one of the ethnic minority communities makes student L meet some difficulties to broaden their knowledge in both Vietnamese and English.

*“.” “I felt under pressure when I still had to prepare the same amount of homework for our class and the contents that I have with [the Canadian teacher]. Although the topics you gave us related to our daily lives, I hoped to have the topics related to the lessons in class because the questions in the tests asked me to discuss generation gaps or relationships” (A, interview).*

The content of the present learning program is quite heavy for students who just need to have high school diplomas to work after graduating. This may lead to psychological problems such as academic motivation or inferiority complex.

## **5.2. Research question 2**

### **5.2.1. Questionnaire results**

Statistical analysis from the questionnaire shows that both the experimental and traditional classroom groups agreed that social networks let them have more time for reflection and they could approach the information and learning resources easily. Moreover, the experimental group has a tendency to agree more strongly with the benefits of studying English via social networks. Enabled communication is the benefit that the experimental group agreed the most while the traditional group agreed the most with social networks' abilities to archive learning content and provide broader access to learning resources.

**Table 3:** Perceived benefits of studying English via social networks (Average point on a scale of 1 to 5. 1: Strongly agree, 5: Strongly disagree)

	<b>Both groups(N=30 students)</b>	<b>Social network classroom group(N=15 students)</b>	<b>Traditional classroom group(N=15 students)</b>
Ease of access	2.17	2.07	2.27
Archive of learning content	1.93	1.93	1.93
More engagement with teachers and students	2.00	1.80	2.20
More comfort with discussion	2.00	1.87	2.13
More time for reflection	1.90	1.67	2.13
Excitement with livestream study	2.57	2.33	2.80
Ease of information update	1.90	1.73	2.07
Broader access to learning resources	1.83	1.73	1.93
Enabled communication	1.93	1.60	2.27
More direct feedback	2.00	1.87	2.13

(Source: data from the questionnaire)

**Table 4:** Perceived challenges of studying English via social networks  
(Average point on a scale of 1 to 5. 1: Strongly agree, 5: Strongly disagree)

	<b>Both groups (N=30 students)</b>	<b>Social network classroom group (N=15 students)</b>	<b>Traditional classroom group (N=15 students)</b>
Disrupting Internet connection	2.33	2.27	2.40
Distraction by social media content	2.47	2.53	2.40
Inability to join scheduled classes	2.70	2.73	2.67
Typing difficulty	2.77	3.07	2.47
Inconsistent attention due to physical environments	2.40	2.53	2.27
Technical difficulty in document upload	2.03	1.93	2.13

(Source: data from the questionnaire)

Both groups still agreed that social networks also bring them some challenges, especially technical difficulty and physical environment.

**Table 5:** Students' attitudes to blended learning approaches in studying English (Average point on a scale of 1 to 5. 1: Strongly agree, 5: Strongly disagree)

	<b>Both groups (N=30 students)</b>	<b>Social network classroom group (N=15 students)</b>	<b>Traditional classroom group (N=15 students)</b>
More knowledge consolidation	2.33	2.33	2.33
More practice	2.23	2.13	2.33
More confidence	2.40	2.27	2.53



	Both groups (N=30 students)	Social network classroom group (N=15 students)	Traditional classroom group (N=15 students)
More time saved	2.23	1.87	2.60
Complementary communication environment	2.10	1.87	2.33
More engagement with peers	2.37	2.33	2.40
Preference for blended learning in practicing English speaking	2.13	1.93	2.33
Better improvement via blended learning than traditional learning	2.07	1.87	2.27

(Source: data from the questionnaire)

The same results with the two above tables can be seen in students' attitudes to blended learning, both groups agreed that it creates an effective environment for English communication, especially in the experimental group. Members in the experimental group also strongly agreed that they could save time in blended learning. The interviewed students said that they would use social networks in English speaking learning beside their traditional classes in the future if their teacher gave some learning techniques and did not make pressure. Furthermore, it would be great if their difficult condition were solved.

## 6. Discussion

### 6.1. Research question 1

Students at Luc Ngan Number 2 High school usually use social networks to upload assignments and receive notifications/requirements from the teachers when learning English.

The research makes three key contributions. Firstly, students' English speaking skills were markedly enhanced by the use of social networks in English speaking teaching and learning through blended learning. This is the evidence to prove that the popularity of social networks among students, particularly ethnic minority groups, lead to familiarity with social networks as a learning tool. As for teachers and schools, instead of restricting students, they should positively encourage students to use social networks in classes.

Based on the questionnaire and interview results, the study also reveals the efficacy of social network blended learning when teachers could focus on pedagogical design, students' attitude, students' use of social networks and contextual factors.

Furthermore, despite a conspicuous expansion in access to basic education for ethnic minority students, the majority-minority gap in educational achievement persists (Truong, 2011). For ethnic minority students in Vietnam, to ensure equal access to education services during online learning, the government and non-government organizations need to focus on ethnic minority language, infrastructure and economic conditions. Moreover, the habits and culture of mountainous children need to be emphasized in education because this combination makes sense for educating students' rights and obligations. (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Nguyen, 2017).

## **7. Conclusion & Implications**

The current study adds to existing research on social networks' use in English speaking teaching and learning among Vietnamese students, especially ethnic minority students. Social networks are essential for helping ethnic minority students enhance English speaking skills in a more effective and time-saving manner.

As for English teachers, social networks should be positively encouraged in classes by pedagogical skills and techniques. It is noticed that this approach will be boosted efficiency when educators add more techniques such as shadowing or implication techniques for

teaching speaking and starting to engage students' attention. Besides, the government and non-government organizations need to focus more on improving disadvantaged people's conditions.

Based on the physical environment and technical difficulties, changemakers should focus more on infrastructure development in mountainous high schools and economic conditions while harmonizing ethnic culture with English deployment in Vietnamese General Education 2018.

The limitations of this research are a relatively small sample size as well as short-term learning activities. Because the study used the experimental method, the study needs more time to thoroughly make use of other functions of social networks for English speaking learning in order to collect the data sufficiently. Besides, the research did not include a detailed analysis of participants' gender and sexuality, among other identity categories. This prevents us from making inferences about efficiency or a long-term program. In conclusion, further studies should take these limitations into consideration to achieve more success and the researcher might follow the suggested direction.

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**APPENDIX A: SURVEYS**

(1) *Length of time using social network in a day*

- 1-5                       6-10                       11-20                       I live on it

(2) *What do you often use social networks for?*

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Playing games                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Watching videos and clips |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Working in groups                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Seeing photos from others |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Shopping online                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Sharing content           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Updating news and events              | <input type="checkbox"/> Commenting others' posts  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Finding information                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Chatting and calling      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Studying                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Viewing others' status    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Following celebrities/<br>influencers | <input type="checkbox"/> Updating status           |

(3) *What do you do when using social networks to study English?*

- Receive reference materials from teachers
- Practicing pronunciation/ speaking skills
- Sharing knowledge and problems
- Watching lectures and interacting
- Contacting teachers and group members.
- Giving feedback/comments on other peers
- Receiving feedback/comments from other peers
- Sharing ideas and opinions
- Uploading assignments
- Receiving notifications/requirements
- Receiving information from group members
- Working in groups

**APPENDIX B: SURVEYS**

*I. Could you please let me know how much you agree or disagree with these following perceptions concerning the use of social networks for learning English speaking?*

Perception	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
<b>Benefits</b>					
Ease of access					
Archive of learning content					
More engagement with teachers and students					
More comfort with discussion					
More time for reflection					
Excitement with livestream study					
Ease of information update					
Broader access to learning resources					
Enabled communication					
More direct feedbacks					
<b>Challenges</b>					
Disrupting Internet connection					
Distraction by social media content					
Inability to join scheduled classes					
Typing difficulty					
Inconsistent attention due to physical environments					
Technical difficulty in document upload					

*II. On a scale from 1-5, to what extent do you agree or disagree about blended learning approaches in studying English?*

Perception	Strongly agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly disagree
More knowledge consolidation					
More practice					
More confidence					
More time saved					
Complementary communication environment					
More engagement with peers					
Preference for blended learning in practicing English speaking					
Better improvement via blended learning than traditional learning					