

Learning English for specific purposes (ESPs) through social media platforms (SMPs): a systematic review

Learning ESPs
through SMPs

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Abstract

Purpose – The search for new techniques to teach English nowadays has been more than ever. These techniques have to be interesting and enjoyable in order to lower the anxiety levels of students when learning English (Bakhsh, 2016). That is why many scholars and teachers look forward to integrating technology into language teaching. Social media platforms (SMPs) are among these techniques since millions of people around the world utilize them for daily interaction. Yet, teaching English for specific purposes (ESPs) relies on learners' needs and employs an eclectic approach in delivering its course content. For this reason, the current study reviewed articles that tackled the topic of teaching or learning ESP from SMPs so as to uncover their effect and the attitude or motivation of learners.

Design/methodology/approach – The researchers used the PRISMA flowchart model in order to identify, screen and include articles in the study.

Findings – The results revealed that SMPs are effective in teaching and learning ESP writing, speaking and vocabulary. Yet, the included studies showed that learners' attitude toward SMPs is positive as they believe that they are motivating and interesting.

Research limitations/implications – Some aspects of social media have turned out to be beneficial in the learning process and they need further investigation from ESP practitioners and scholars.

Originality/value – According to the study, it is crystal clear that the various social networks and platforms are beneficial and helpful for improving ESP productive skills.

Keywords ESP and online learning, Reviewing ESP and social media, Social media and ESP, Social media platforms and English, Specialized English and social networking

Paper type General review

1. Introduction

1.1 English for specific purposes

“English for Specific Purposes (ESPs) refers to the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language where the goal of the learners is to use English in a particular domain” (Johns, 2012, p. 2). Its development came as a result of World War II, a revolution in linguistics during the 1960s, the recent advancements in technology and some major drastic changes in the international marketplace (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987). Johns (2012) argues that ESP learners are mostly adults, homogeneous in terms of their learning goals and that



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the content of the course is its key feature along with the needs of the learners. Yet, [Anthony \(2018\)](#) claims that ESP employs an eclectic approach to language teaching sticking to learner-centeredness and effectively utilizes communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based learning (TBL) and project-based learning (PBL). Every course has its own name in ESP such as medical English, business English and other various scientific domains ([Fitria, 2020](#)).

People employ a number of methods while learning a language, some of which are helpful and others which are not ([Hardan, 2013](#)). [Griffiths and Soruç \(2020\)](#) highlighted that Rubin first made the term widely known in 1975, when they discussed the history of Language Learning Strategies (LLS). Since then, the attempts have been made to develop a definition that encompasses all an LLS is. L2 strategies are “specific actions, behaviors, steps, techniques [or] thoughts – such as seeking out conversation partners or encouraging oneself to tackle a difficult language task – used by students to enhance their own learning,” according to [Oxford \(2003, p. 274\)](#).

1.2 Social media and language learning theories

Social media, according to [Evans \(2014\)](#), are “web-based or personal device-based applications that link users to online resources or to one another.” [Ansari and Khan \(2020\)](#) asserted that social media encourages innovation, educational resources, editing and sharing of texts, films and audios. Thus, students of all ages can now log into Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Telegram and other applications to unconsciously create their own paths to knowledge by fusing social constructivism, a recent learning theory, with cutting-edge technologies and business communication pedagogy ([Kelm, 2011](#)). According to the constructivist point of view, learning occurs in the real world where students are free to connect socially with people who share their values and cultural backgrounds. This is where students are autonomous, involved and free to learn ([Mpungose, 2020](#)). Additionally, [Wannas and Hassan \(2023b\)](#) asserted that SMPs had some benefits for learning general English. These elements can also be utilized to teach ESP. They include language and information repetition, interaction and collaboration, connectivity, autonomy, contextuality and authenticity, attractiveness and openness, information storage, a wide range of resources and free accessibility. Consequently, learning a foreign language is heavily dependent on social interactions, which are influenced by an individual’s comprehension of the local communication and culture ([Mondahl and Razmerita, 2014](#)).

A number of theories addressed the way social media, in particular and technology in general influences people’s behavior and learning. The constructivist theory of learning, which describes the process of learning, indicates that knowledge and its acquisition are inductive, interactive and collaborative ([Ivanovska, 2022](#)). Students construct and learn new concepts based on the knowledge they already have. According to the theory, knowledge is formed through the interaction of the existing knowledge with new experiences and through interaction with the social environment ([Vygotsky, 1978](#)).

Nowadays, constructivist approaches are constantly found through the use of technologies and social media. Using social media during the process of teaching allows instructors to apply the constructivist learning theory efficiently. According to the constructivist point of view, learning occurs in the real world where students are free to connect socially with people who share their values and cultural backgrounds. This is where students are autonomous, involved and free to learn ([Mpungose, 2020](#)). Consequently, learning a foreign language is heavily dependent on social interactions, which are influenced by an individual’s comprehension of the local communication and culture ([Mondahl and Razmerita, 2014](#)). Social media proved to be a collaborative environment that is used to help learners interact with one another, enhance peer learning and connect outside of the classroom ([Flynn et al., 2015](#)).

The activity theory, which has connections to ESP learning and social interaction, centers around activity systems. It aims to simultaneously consider individual cognition and social context by taking into account the learner's history, motivations and the mediating role of artifacts (such as language and tools) within a community. In the most recent model of activity, the activity is characterized as a system that includes six inter-related components: The subject, who is performing the activity; the object, responsible for the results of the activity; the tool, which facilitates the activity; the rules, which allow certain actions; the community, which the subject is involved in; and the division of labor among the subject and the community in eventuating the activity (Engeström, 2001). Therefore, the activity theory has been applied in analyzing technology-facilitated learning activities (Lee *et al.*, 2021). Lee *et al.* (2021) observed the university students learning through mobile applications from the views of the activity theory focusing on the students' interactions, smart devices and evolving learning processes. The study found that the students' actions and learning activities were highly correlated with the six elements of the activity theory.

Connectivism, another renowned learning theory, asserts that interaction and networking are fundamental components of learning (Siemens, 2005). Through technology applications, learning becomes a collaborative activity in which students are exposed to a variety of materials. Through this process, students gain broad knowledge as well as analytical and decision-making abilities. Heutagogy is also an approach that places the student in the middle of the learning process. In this theory, social media can be an enhancing environment supporting elements of this approach as it provides opportunities for the learner to access information and skills, share thoughts and improve their learning skills and engage in group collaboration. Research on the use of social media and its role in supporting heutagogy is limited, however, indicating that this is an area for further investigation.

1.3 SMPs drawbacks and most favored ones

Researchers attempting to comprehend the reasons individuals choose to use particular platforms or even specific aspects within a platform, encounter substantial difficulties due to the ongoing growth of both the user interfaces and capabilities of social media platforms as well as users' behavior (Weller, 2016). Furthermore, social media platforms lead to some mental problems, if not used wisely. These problems include inadequacy about your life or appearance, fear of missing out (FOMO) and addiction, isolation, depression and anxiety, cyberbullying and self-absorption (Robinson and Melinda Smith, 2023).

According to a survey conducted by Vogels *et al.* (2022), YouTube is the most popular and preferable one by teenagers in the United States of America, TikTok comes second and then Instagram and Snapchat followed by Facebook and Twitter. The least preferred ones by teenagers were Twitch, WhatsApp, Reddit and Tumblr. Furthermore, several research studies, though not many, have been carried out to explore the effect of SMPs (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, TIKTOK, WhatsApp etc.) on learning ESP and the attitude of learners toward using them. This topic has not been tackled by many researchers and is under-researched. For this reason, the current review is an attempt to evaluate these studies' outcomes to conclude whether SMPs are effective for learning ESP or not and to determine the attitudes of various types of students whether they are motivated to learn from social media or not. Also, to grasp the methods by which SMPs can be utilized in the ESP learning process and whether they can be incorporated in the university classes. The study purports to find answers to the following questions:

RQ1. What is the effect of social media platforms (SMPs) on learning ESP?

RQ2. What is the general attitude of learners toward social media platforms (SMPs) in learning ESP?

RQ3. What are the aspects of social media that are considered helpful in learning ESP?

2. Methodology

This is a systematic review to evaluate the research studies conducted to use SMPs in learning ESP. The researchers used the PRISMA model to include the valid studies and to exclude the invalid one (see [Figure 1](#)). Articles were searched on four databases: Scopus, Google Scholar, ProQuest and ERIC. The article selection criteria included peer-reviewed articles with no more than five years and relevant to the point of integrating social media in the instruction and learning of ESPs. The PRISMA model was utilized to find and filter out the most pertinent articles. The selection criteria were established in advance. PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) is an evidence-based minimum set of items designed to assist scientific authors in reporting a wide range of systematic reviews and meta-analyses, which are primarily used to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of a healthcare intervention ([Page et al., 2021](#)). The reporting quality of systematic reviews is anticipated to improve as a result of using PRISMA ([PRISMA, 2023](#)). PRISMA promotes transparency in the selection of articles for systematic reviews.

The article selection process went through three stages. The first was the identification process through which the researchers identified the articles in famous databases and other resources. The second stage was the screening. Articles in this stage were excluded relying on their titles and abstracts based on criteria determined by the researchers. The last stage before the final inclusion of the selected articles was the eligibility screening. In this stage, the full text of the articles was read to reach a final decision on the choice of the most appropriate articles for the review. These are the PRISMA model stages.

It was a rigorous process implemented by three researchers to ensure objectivity. The only known limitation of the study is that it covered four search engines: Scopus, Google Scholar, ProQuest and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) as more search engines should have been included in this review. The researchers remained objective as they distributed the work of article selection among them and reviewed each other's works according to the article selection criteria. Following their agreement, the researchers started reading the full text of the selected articles so as to extract the necessary information for investigation.

As demonstrated in [Figure 2](#), articles were found through regular research in the previously mentioned databases after the application of the five-year and social media in teaching English criteria. Then, the duplicated articles were removed minimizing the number

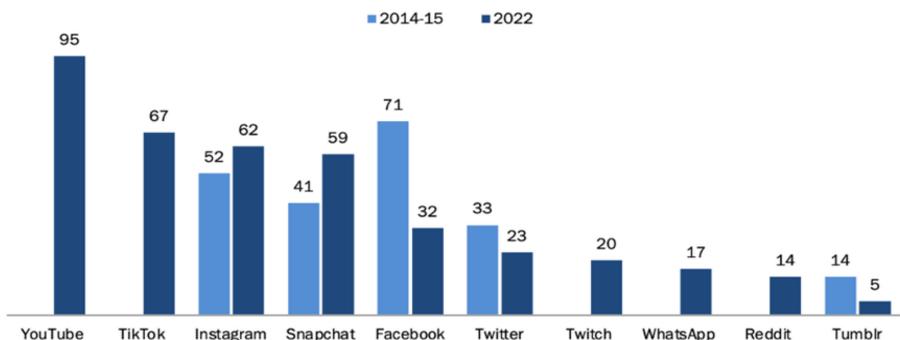
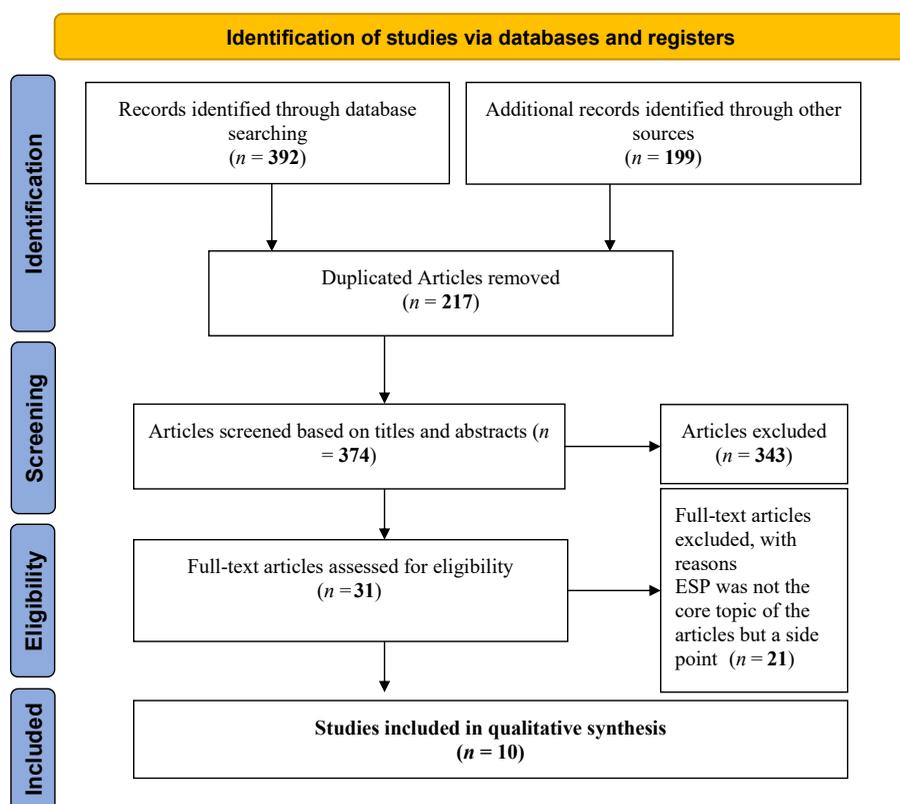


Figure 1. Most popular social media platforms for teenagers in 2014–15 and in 2022 in the USA, according to [Vogels et al. \(2022\)](#)



Source(s): Page *et al.* (2021)

Figure 2. PRISMA of the selected articles on using social media for learning ESP

of articles to 374. Following that, the researchers added the other limiting criteria: teaching ESP and peer review and filtered the articles manually based on their titles and abstracts. Through the application of these filters and the screening of titles and abstracts, the number of articles has been reduced to reach 31. The final stage was to implement a full reading process to the remaining articles so as to extract the articles in which social media and ESP was the core topic of the articles. Only ten articles were found to be valid for investigation.

Table 1 presents the research questions answered by the selected articles of social media and teaching or learning English for specific purposes. Only two articles tackled social media platforms in terms of their effect as a teaching or a learning technique for specialized language terminologies, one article tackled the effect solely while the rest, six articles, investigated learners' attitude or motivation toward social media as a tool to learn ESPs. One article provided an overview of the aspects of SMPs that are assistive in the learning process of ESP.

3. Results

The results part illustrates the characteristics of the selected articles in terms of their participants' numbers, methods of data collection, years of publication and their results. About ten articles were fully and rigorously read and included for the systematic review (see Tables 1 and 2).

No.	Article	Research Question 1 (Effect)	Research Question 2 (Attitude and motivation)	Research Question 3 (Aspects of SMPs)
1	Rizaldi and Adnyayanti (2021)		✓	
2	Mandasari <i>et al.</i> (2022)	✓	✓	
3	Nugroho and Rahmawati (2020)	✓	✓	
4	Rodríguez-Peñarroja (2022)		✓	
5	Elverici (2021)		✓	
6	Beyranvand and Rahmatollahi (2021)	✓		
7	Nugroho <i>et al.</i> (2022)		✓	
8	Saienko <i>et al.</i> (2020)		✓	
9	Wannas and Hussein (2023a)		✓	
10	Rahman <i>et al.</i> (2019)		✓	✓

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 1.
An overview of the articles and which research questions they answer

Table 2 demonstrates the characteristics relevant to the selected studies. The articles covered several SMPs: YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and video conferencing tools. Although the core of these articles was social media networks, they came along with a few technological tools such as Google classroom, Adobe Connect, web-blog, Kahoot, Canva and Edmodo. These tools promote computer-assisted and mobile-assisted learning as well as encourage individuals to be autonomous ESP learners. They, additionally, list the universal features of social media that enthuse the engagement of fruitful conversations and the way these platforms foster ESP learners' self-confidence and spontaneity.

Regarding the TikTok platform and its effect on the improvement of speaking, Mandasari *et al.* (2022) concluded that 70% of the selected participants (35 learners) scored between 80 and 90 in the post-test which proves the great significance of TikTok on ESP learners speaking performance. This comes alongside their positive attitude toward TikTok usage. Similarly, Instagram was examined on the improvement of writing skills through a study that included 36 ESP students with a pre-/post-test design and a questionnaire (Nugroho and Rahmawati, 2020). Students confirmed the usefulness of Instagram and its meaningful way of learning ESP. Another study on Instagram and accompanied by Adobe Connect, Beyranvand and Rahmatollahi (2021), tackled the vocabulary mastery of 60 ESP Iranian students with a pre-/pos-test for an experimental and a control group research design. The results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of the test results.

During the COVID-19 crisis, numerous institutions searched for alternative methods for education due to the great lockdown of cities and prevention of interaction for safety purposes. Rizaldi and Adnyayanti (2021) observed 69 ESP students in two classes (34, 35 students) the impact of online platforms such as YouTube, Google Classroom, Video Conference and WhatsApp on the improvement of their performance. The study resulted in discovering the most preferred platform for the selected sample of participants. WhatsApp was, by far, the most favored. Likewise, Nugroho *et al.* (2022) tackled various platforms: Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram with some web-based materials such as web-blog, Kahoot, Canva and Edmodo. The difference in this study was its sample. About 14 ESP teachers were interviewed to find out whether these platforms and web devices assist them in their online teaching practice or not.

YouTube and Facebook were also examined solely in two separate studies. The first, Rodríguez-Peñarroja (2022), explored correlation between students' intrinsic motivation toward the ESP project and their performance with the use of YouTube. The study employed

Article	Method(s)	Participants no.	Results
Rizaldi and Adnyayanti (2021)	Observation and interview	69 participants 2 classes (34 and 35)	Children affected by the COVID-19 epidemic are familiar with websites like YouTube, Google Classroom, Video Conference, and WhatsApp. WhatsApp is the learning platform of choice for students
Mandasari <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Pre-/post-tests	35 participants	The TikTok app aids ESP students in developing their speaking abilities. There was a noticeable improvement; 70% of students received scores between 80 and 90. The usage of TikTok by ESP students led to positive responses and a sense of motivation
Nugroho and Rahmawati (2020)	Pre-/post-tests Questionnaire	36 ESP students	The writing scores of the students varied significantly between the pre-test and the post-test. Instagram, in the viewpoint of ESP students, is significant and provides a variety of advantages for studying in the 21st century
Rodríguez-Peñarroja (2022)	Intrinsic motivation questionnaire	79 undergraduate bachelor students	The degree to which students were driven to complete the ESP assignment and how well they performed were significantly correlated. Students have viewed the project tasks and the utilization of YouTube favorably in accordance
Elverici (2021)	Questionnaire and semi-structure interview	202 university students	The findings show that students have positive views toward social media and that majority of their opinions favor using social media in English teaching
Beyranvand and Rahmatollahi (2021)	Pre-/Post-tests	60 ESP Iranian students	The findings showed that while both of the experimental groups – Instagram and Adobe Connect – made growth in terms of language knowledge, Instagram did better than its counterpart
Nugroho <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Semi-structured interview	14 ESP teachers	The findings also show that ESP instructors use web-based tools including blogs, Kahoot, Canva and Edmodo to support their digital teaching practises. These tools include social networking sites like Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram

(continued)

Table 2.
Characteristics of the
included studies

Article	Method(s)	Participants no.	Results
Saienko <i>et al.</i> (2020)	A survey for students and another for teachers	170 energy-saving students and 60 lecturers of English for Engineering	Social networks may be utilized effectively in ESP training, and these cutting-edge tools can raise students' ESP skill, increase their desire to learn other languages and serve as corpora of real-world content
Wannas and Hassan (2023a)	A questionnaire and a semi-structured interview	210 healthcare providers (nurses, technician and doctors)	Social media tools help non-native healthcare professionals acquire medical English vocabulary and improve their independence in language learning. The benefits of social media include its ease of use, accessibility for free, capacity to edit, copy, and distribute content, ability to save data indefinitely, emoticons for expressing emotions, option to join private chats and option to participate in public discussions and debates
Rahman <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Online questionnaire	120 students	Facebook groups may help learners develop their self-confidence to communicate and answer informally in English, something they would not get the chance to do in traditional sessions

Table 2. Source(s): Authors' own work

a questionnaire, and the results were positive as students liked using YouTube in the project. [Rahman *et al.* \(2019\)](#), the second study, investigated the use of Facebook groups on the improvement of spontaneity and self-confidence of interaction of 120 students. Data were collected through an online questionnaire and the results revealed that Facebook groups can greatly enhance ESP learners' self-confidence which may not happen in regular traditional ESP classes.

In terms of medical English and the features of social media, [Wannas and Hassan \(2023a\)](#) explored the attitude of 210 healthcare providers toward social media platforms in acquiring medical English vocabulary and the enhancement of medical English learning autonomy. The study, in addition, disclosed the aspects of social media that encourage doctors, nurses and technicians learn medical English smoothly. These features included easiness of usage, free-of-charge availability, ability to edit, copy and share, ability to store data forever, emoticons to express feelings, choice to join private conversations and choice to join public discussions and debates.

Two other studies tackled social media networks in a general sense: [Elverici \(2021\)](#) and [Saienko *et al.* \(2020\)](#). The former included 202 university students and employed a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The latter included 120 energy-saving students and 60 lecturers of English for engineering deploying two surveys, one for the students and the other for the lecturers. Both the studies revealed that positive attitude toward the usage of social media in learning ESP. Additionally, [Saienko *et al.* \(2020\)](#) added that SMPs may be used as corpora of authentic materials for ESP learners.

4. Discussion

It is evident in today's world that the utilization of technology in language education is never an option anymore. This requires a succinct search for the potential effective technological devices or applications that can be incorporated in the teaching and learning process of English. Since the inception and emergence of social media at the beginning of the 21st century and the revolution in information and communication technology (ICT), people started to get indulged in communication platforms such as social media along the last 20 years, thereby scholars started to research the effect of social on various matters among which was education and language acquisition, particularly. This is because of its essential role in the communicative interplay among the different cultures participating and invited on such platforms.

Social media is thought to be a significant tool, if utilized appropriately, in different ways. Since new generations are used to it, psychologically, they feel safe and comfortable as it falls into their acquired skills circle and opens their minds to new trends which keeps them updated and informed. The new generation spends most of their time on the internet either searching for information or communicating with family, friends and other people, sometimes from a far corner of the world. Making use of such a feature would make a significant impact on learning not just English but also any other language. Creating groups to learn on Facebook, WhatsApp, telegram would enhance learning and magnetize language learners strongly to acquire a language since they will be able to employ the skills they acquired through making voice notes, comments and exercise writing posts and practice having discussions with people from all over the world. YouTube can be used for the acquisition and development of receptive skills such as listening as it is considered a tremendous repertoire of English videos, movies and courses. Instagram enhances picture discussions in which learners use a language that contains many detailed information sometimes.

Having said that, technology does not come without hazards. [Wannas and Hassan \(2023b\)](#) argued that some issues protrude when using technology in general, not only in language education. These problems include safety, privacy, identity preservation and leakage of personal data. Safety must be ensured by educational institutions to avoid falling into such problems as this could discourage learners from continuing their education and therefore dropping out of language classes. Supervision and guidance are a necessity for the usage of social media in the language educational process so that learners would not get exposed to harmful content or face any psychological or mental problems. One final negative thing is the lack of clear pedagogical techniques or methodologies that enable teachers and instructors to use social media effectively.

5. Conclusion

The current study is a systematic review on learning ESPs from SMPs. According to the included studies, it is crystal clear that the various social networks and platforms are, to a great extent, beneficial and helpful for improving ESP productive skills ([Nugroho and Rahmawati, 2020](#); [Mandasari et al., 2022](#)). Furthermore, they can significantly improve learners ESP vocabulary ([Beyranvand and Rahmatollahi, 2021](#)). Yet, learners felt motivated and had a positive attitude toward social media in improving ESP skills and vocabulary ([Rahman et al., 2019](#); [Nugroho and Rahmawati, 2020](#); [Saienke et al., 2020](#); [Elverici, 2021](#); [Rizaldi and Adnyayanti, 2021](#); [Mandasari et al., 2022](#); [Rodríguez-Peñarroja, 2022](#); [Nugroho et al., 2022](#); [Wannas and Hussein, 2023a](#)). Also, social media provides some assistive features that enhance learners' confidence and language proficiency, lowers anxiety and improves learning autonomy.

This review suggests that ESP practitioners should incorporate SMPs into their teaching methods to enhance the interest of their learners and encourage effective ESP learning.

However, they should also be mindful of the drawbacks of SMPs and their impact on ESP learners' performance. Also, stakeholders can leverage SMPs as a cutting-edge technological approach to language instruction. By creating customized platforms and mobile applications that include professionals from the same field, newly-employed individuals can benefit from the expertise and language skills of their more experienced counterparts. These platforms can serve as valuable references for those intending to work in a specific field, helping them acquire knowledge, become familiar with field-specific language and connect with like-minded individuals. Moreover, scholars are encouraged to delve deep into this topic since it is under-researched and needs to be investigated properly with references to the other skills (listening and reading) and language functions. Corpora can be constructed for the creation of authentic materials in reference to the field of ESP.

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