

The Role of Social Media in Developing EFL Learners' Speaking Fluency, Pronunciation, and Confidence in an Exam-Oriented Context

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Abstract

In exam-oriented schools, students often lack the chance to practice speaking English in a meaningful way; however, social media has become an important space where learners engage with the language independently. This study investigates how social media helps students develop their speaking skills in these exam-focused settings, with a focus on fluency, pronunciation, confidence, and exposure to diverse English styles. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study collected data through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of EFL students in Guangxi, China. The findings show that social media supports personalized learning by allowing students to practice at their own pace and engage with content they prefer. In particular, participants reported higher confidence and better pronunciation through repeated exposure and the imitation of various English accents. Ultimately, the study concludes that social media acts as a helpful resource that fills the gap left by classroom teaching, offering context-specific strategies to bridge the digital usage gap between urban and rural learners.

Keywords: *EFL Speaking Development; Exam-oriented Education; Mixed-methods Study; Personalized Learning; Social Media-mediated Learning*

Introduction

Sustainable English is largely a test preparation subject in school systems that emphasize exams. As a result, reading, grammar, and writing are typically the focus of teaching. While these skills are important for grades, students often have very few chances to actually speak English in class.

At the same time, digital technology has created new ways to learn outside of school. Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have become popular places for informal learning. By using these apps, students can practice listening to native speakers and copying their pronunciation in a more relaxed environment.

As students move between these two contrasting environments, this research explores social media as a practical tool for oral development. Surveys and interviews provided the data, and they helped the research capture both general feelings and specific personal stories.

Background of the Study

The Gaokao strictly directs English education in China. Classrooms focus heavily on reading and grammar. Speaking practice simply receives less time. This leads many students to achieve high written scores while still struggling with actual conversations. Many learners respond by going online for the practice they miss in class. They frequently use apps like TikTok and YouTube and rely on pop culture to hear real-world English.

As Wardani (2022) and Muh et al. (2023) observe, this move to digital platforms is constantly growing. Following this trend, this research examines how students use these tools to develop their oral skills away from exam-focused instruction.

Review of Related Literature

This study is grounded in theories of second language acquisition and situated within the realities of exam-oriented English education in China. The review first examines how traditional teacher-centered approaches, particularly grammar-translation practices shaped by high-stakes examinations, influence speaking development. It then discusses relevant SLA theories—including input-based and interaction-based perspectives—that help explain how social media may support informal oral practice. Finally, the section considers personalized digital learning and identifies gaps in research concerning speaking development within exam-driven secondary education contexts.

Exam-Oriented Education and Speaking Development

The demands of the Gaokao heavily shape secondary English classes. Teachers often rely on the Grammar-Translation Method just to manage the strict syllabus. The result is that students tend to view English as a set of rules rather than a real communicative tool. Since speaking is excluded from high-stakes testing, teachers allocate almost all class time to written exercises.

Viewed through the lens of Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, this exam-oriented approach clearly restricts comprehensible input. The high pressure also increases the affective filter (Krashen, 1985), meaning students actively avoid oral practice. Communicative autonomy is severely limited to (Ding & Shen, 2022). When schools ignore oral skills, learners simply look for alternative language applications online (Liu, 2025).

Social Media-Mediated Language Learning

While traditional classrooms often confine students to rigid grammatical instruction, Zhai and Razali (2021) emphasize that effective language acquisition relies on exposure to meaningful, authentic discourse. In this context, digital platforms may provide sustained exposure to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985). Applications such as TikTok and YouTube provide learners with continuous access to authentic English and diverse accents. Kusumah et al. (2025) and Pham et al. (2023) demonstrate that by engaging with and imitating these multimedia inputs, learners acquire natural phrasing and intonation patterns that are frequently absent from standardized test preparation materials.

Beyond receptive exposure, viewed through the lens of the Interaction Hypothesis, Çolak (2024) and Men (2023) assert that participating in digital interactions—such as leaving comments or recording short videos—provides the low-stakes practice opportunities that formal classrooms often lack. These environments also serve a clear psychological purpose. They easily lower the students' Affective Filter (Parent, 2023; He, 2024).

Heavy exam pressure dominates the traditional classroom, but social media provides a clear alternative. This digital environment completely changes the learning dynamic. Anxiety drops, and learners communicate much more freely.

Dimensions of Speaking Development

In large classes, institutional assessment demands that prioritize standardized, easily graded formats may result in instructional time being devoted primarily to written exercises and structural drills, with limited opportunities for oral production. Students master structural rules but cannot perform basic communicative tasks (Ding & Shen, 2022). This strict focus on accuracy causes fear. It creates a 'freeze effect' and raises the Affective Filter, which stops language learning (He, 2024).

To avoid this stress, learners naturally look at social media. Textbooks often feature stiff dialogue, so students use social apps to hear natural daily speech and slang (Zhai & Razali, 2021; Mudhofar (2023). Long (1996) argues that actual communication is necessary for speaking development. Since traditional, Exam-focused classrooms rarely provide this, digital platforms act as a necessary backup. By leaving comments and making videos, students easily find the low-pressure interaction they need.

Personalized Learning in Digital Environments

Digital platforms may facilitate forms of personalized learning that are less feasible within rigid classroom structures. Instead of following a one-size-fits-all curriculum, students can select videos and materials that match their specific interests. Dewi et al. (2023) highlight this advantage, viewing these online spaces as a practical way for students to take control of their own learning. This is an important shift because, as (Ding & Shen, 2022) point out, students are much more likely to practice speaking when they are genuinely interested in the topic they are discussing.

Conventional classroom structures often require uniform pacing and standardized materials. However, social media provides a different approach. It allows learners to replay a short video as many times as they need or follow content that keeps them engaged. Furthermore, Fan (2023) and Muh et al. (2023) note that this kind of freedom naturally increases student motivation and effort. Such alignment between learning activities and individual interests may enhance learners' motivation and engagement.

Research Gap

Prior research shows that social media supports learning, but high-stakes exams continue to limit actual speaking. This leaves an unresolved gap that this study needs to fill. Since scholars like Aloraini and Cardoso (2020) and Dewi et al. (2024) primarily focus on the university context, their findings reflect learners with high levels of autonomy. However, these patterns may not apply to teenagers struggling under the pressure of the Gaokao. Consequently, the high school environment—where exam pressure is much more intense—is often overlooked. Currently, there is limited empirical evidence showing how these applications actually affect a teenager's fluency and confidence when their daily schooling is strictly focused on test preparation. Even though Liu (2025) and Li et al. (2018) suggest that digital platforms can fill in this missing speaking practice, more direct research is needed to understand exactly how secondary students integrate these tools into exam-oriented learning contexts.

Research Questions

A key concern is that speaking practice remains secondary in exam-oriented high schools. Since the Gaokao primarily tests reading and grammar, teachers typically allocate classroom time to test preparation. Wardani (2022) notes that digital apps support independent practice. However, such studies frequently focus on university students with flexible schedules. This reveals a clear gap in the existing literature: it remains unclear whether these digital tools effectively help teenagers who operate under intensive exam demands. Additionally, as Liu (2025) explains, students' locations often impact their access to online resources. Therefore, mobile apps do not offer a universal solution for everyone. Driven by these realities, this study aims to determine whether mobile applications can supplement the limited speaking opportunities in strict, test-driven classrooms.

Therefore, this study focuses on two main questions:

- How does social media influence the speaking skills of English learners in exam-focused high schools?
- In what ways does social media act as a tool to fill the gaps left by classroom instruction?

Methodology

This study employed a structured mixed-methods approach to examine how social media influences EFL learners' speaking development and how it compensates for limitations in exam-oriented classroom instruction. The methodological design was aligned closely with the two research questions to ensure both analytical depth and contextual relevance.

Research Design

The study applied a concurrent mixed-methods approach, collecting quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) describe mixed-methods research as an approach that integrates numerical patterns with personal experience. Speaking development involves both measurable change and individual perception. Survey data provided quantitative patterns of reported improvement, while interview data offered qualitative explanations for these patterns.

Research Question 1 is answered using the survey data on fluency, pronunciation, and confidence. To address Research Question 2, the interviews explore social media as an out-of-class support. These two methods naturally cover each other's blind spots. Because the survey and interviews support each other, the final analysis becomes much more complete. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in Guangxi, China, a region heavily driven by the Gaokao exam system. Ninety students aged 13 to 18 took the survey. Most of these participants had studied English for more than four years. After the survey, five students attended the interviews. They were purposively chosen to represent different school backgrounds (urban and suburban) and different social media habits. The Gaokao primarily tests reading and grammar skills. This range allows the study to present varied experiences rather than a single perspective.

Questionnaire Development

Scholars such as (Aloraini & Cardoso, 2020) and Zhai and Razali (2021) evaluate digital language learning through core dimensions, including fluency, pronunciation, confidence, and learner autonomy. They identify these elements as critical factors for successful language learning. The questionnaire was developed based on these four dimensions. It targeted the influence of social media on speaking skills in contexts characterized by exam-focused instruction.

For the question format, Fauziah and Sutrisno (2024) present a simple Likert scale as the standard tool. In their view, it reliably measures how students feel about their progress. A five-point Likert scale was employed for data collection. The questionnaire underwent expert review to ensure clarity and comprehensibility prior to distribution.

Interview Sampling and Procedure

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) argue that exploring survey data requires participants from diverse backgrounds. Based on this idea, five students were selected for the interviews to capture a broad range of experiences. The participants included a student from a top city school, one from the suburbs, and others who use English apps primarily for recreational purposes.

For the interview format, Dewi et al. (2023) recommend a semi-structured style. They recommend a flexible conversation format to capture detailed personal experiences related to online learning. A semi-structured format was employed for the interviews. Each session lasted between 20 and 30 minutes. The discussions not only addressed changes in pronunciation and confidence but also examined students' experiences using English-learning applications in comparison with traditional exam-focused classrooms. All sessions were recorded and fully transcribed for analysis.

Data Collection Procedure

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) argue that survey results should guide the follow-up interviews. The study followed this sequence in data collection, beginning with the questionnaire. It was distributed online, enabling the collection of 90 responses from students who frequently use mobile devices.

Once the main survey trends emerged, five students were invited to the interviews. These 20-minute sessions were scheduled during lunch breaks and weekends to accommodate students' preparation for the Gaokao. All participant information was kept completely private. This secure setup allowed students to feel safe discussing their actual experiences. They talked about their school stress very honestly, and they openly shared how they use these platforms.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics from the 90 survey responses were analyzed to track frequency patterns related to pronunciation and confidence. an analytical approach that aligns with Fauziah and Sutrisno (2024).

Interview data were analyzed through manual thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Repeated readings of the transcripts moved the focus from general answers to specific student realities. The integration of quantitative survey results with qualitative

interview themes provided a comprehensive account of students' speaking development and daily learning experiences.

Findings and Discussion

An initial review of the survey data shows a broadly positive pattern across all 90 students. Most participants linked their social media use to better spoken English. These shifts are detailed in Table 1, with a strong focus on fluency and pronunciation awareness. The data also reveals a higher general interest in learning.

Table 1 Students' Perceptions of Social Media on Oral Proficiency

Categories	Survey Items	%Agreed/Strongly Agreed
Usage & Preference	Use social media to practice speaking	72.22%
	Prefer social media over textbook drills	67.78%
Fluency & Skills	Social media helps improve pronunciation	75.56%
	My speaking speed has improved	69.00%
Affective Factors	I pause or hesitate less when speaking	62.22%
	I feel more confident online than face-to-face	70.00%
	I feel less nervous in class after online practice	65.56%

Social Media as an Informal Speaking Extension As shown in Table 1, 72.22% of the participants use social media to practice speaking, indicating a noticeable change in how they study daily. Digital platforms—like short videos and interactive clips—frequently replaced traditional textbook exercises for speaking practice. Although digital apps are popular, they haven't completely replaced traditional materials. Some students simply prefer sticking to their textbooks.

This mixed picture makes sense alongside recent literature. Wardani (2022) and Pham et al. (2023) suggest that digital platforms enhance learner autonomy; this aligns with the current finding that students attribute their increased confidence to the freedom of selecting their own content. Also, Zhai and Razali (2021) emphasize the need for meaningful communication. For these specific learners, social media clearly offers that vital communicative practice to balance out standard, exam-oriented classroom routines.

Repetition and Implicit Pronunciation Training

The interview transcripts help explain the high survey numbers. During the sessions, participants reported that speaking to a phone screen was less intimidating than speaking to a teacher who constantly looks for mistakes. Many students described these apps as an alternative space separate from the structured demands of school schedules. They also reported picking up slang and real-world accents that rarely appear in traditional classrooms. Despite differences in technological access, almost all interviewed students found ways to maintain this daily practice.

These personal accounts connect directly to existing research on learning anxiety. He (2024) and Parent (2023) observe that a lowered "Affective Filter" helps students relax and start speaking. The interview data reflects this effect, as the digital environment

removes the immediate fear of correction. Also, Mudhofar (2023) and Wardani(2022) argue that informal practice naturally leads to better conversational skills. The students' exposure to slang and authentic accents supports this idea. While Liu (2025) points out that technical resources vary among learners, the motivation to practice remains consistent. Ultimately, these findings indicate that students actively engage in meaningful communicative practice beyond exam-focused instruction.

Low-Stakes Practice and Confidence Development

Both the survey and interviews point to social media as a safe, low-pressure space. Most of the 90 surveyed students felt much more confident practicing behind a screen because there is no formal grading. And importantly, this online comfort later improved their actual classroom performance. The specific interview sessions really unpack this change. Watching "imperfect" English videos on Douyin shifted Hui's focus from grammatical perfection to actual communication. Similarly, digital platforms helped Lin see the language as a practical skill instead of just another exam requirement.

These personal stories show exactly how a low-stakes environment helps students build a stronger "English-speaking self." This practical observation aligns with He (2024) and Fauziah and Sutrisno (2024). The digital screen provides a safe buffer, and this clearly cuts down the fear of public failure. For students in a strict exam system, the digital environment provides opportunities for risk-free practice. As Parent (2023) suggests, this newfound confidence eventually provides the courage needed for real-world situations. Overall, these platforms enabled focus on authentic communication rather than accuracy alone.

Personalized Learning Within Exam-Oriented Systems

The survey and interview results show that while Guangxi's classrooms remain highly exam-focused, social media provides opportunities for practice outside exam-focused classrooms. A majority of the surveyed students reported that these platforms helped them start thinking directly in English, rather than translating every word from Chinese in their heads. However, a noticeable group remained neutral about these benefits. The interview sessions provided clarity on this gap, revealing that a little teacher support makes a major difference. Xiang's experience provides an example. She mostly used Redbook (Xiaohongshu) for entertainment until her teacher shared specific pronunciation videos on the app. Once she knew what to look for, the ability to hit "replay" and learn at her own pace was associated with more effective self-paced learning compared with classroom lectures.

Evaluating these practical results alongside existing research highlights a key limit of digital learning. The neutral students prove that social media does not automatically work for everyone; students still require some direction to use it well (Ding & Shen, 2022). Xiang's story adds specific context here, which aligns with Fan (2023) and Men (2023), who found that teacher validation is crucial for personalized learning. These findings simply suggest that a small amount of teacher guidance makes social media a much stronger supplementary tool.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings indicate that social media holds considerable potential; however, its actual impact appears to vary depending on students' regional contexts. Even where hardware is available in rural schools, a persistent usage gap remains because, as Liu (2025) and Li

et al. (2018) suggest, students often have the devices but don't know how to use them for more than just games. Therefore, the study prioritizes context-sensitive and practical strategies that can be realistically implemented in schools.

Instructional Practice: Adapting Tasks to Local Realities

Findings indicate that task design should consider school technology, as Dewi et al. (2023) suggest. For classrooms lacking individual devices, the main projector serves as the central learning tool. Teachers can introduce "Choral Dubbing." Instead of asking one student to speak alone, the entire class repeats a short video clip collectively. This collective practice effectively lowers speaking anxiety. It allows students to test pronunciation and rhythm without the pressure of individual performance.

In schools with better technology access, the main challenge is moving students from passive watching to active production. A 'Creative Output' approach works well for these specific classrooms. Students record 'contrastive role-play' videos to practice speaking. They first act out a common English mistake, and then they show the correct phrase. This specific task brings Çolak's (2024) theory into actual classroom practice. It forces learners to be creators, so they carefully check their own language before speaking.

Curriculum Reform: Aligning Exams with Digital Literacy

The curriculum should connect formal exams with actual online communication. Achieving this requires a shift from static text to multimedia resources. Linking pop culture to the Gaokao syllabus offers a simple, practical bridge. Students analyze movie clips to find specific test phrases, and this easily replaces the endless memorization of rules. This simply shows that real-world English and high-test scores can go hand in hand.

For students in rural areas with limited resource access, the curriculum should provide structured guidance. Li et al. (2018) notes that explicit direction works better than independent searching for these students. Putting QR codes in standard textbooks easily solves this problem. These codes can link directly to high-quality educational accounts. This official inclusion guides students to use their phones productively. As Muh et al. (2023) suggest, such integration turns a potential digital distraction into a valuable tool. It helps students balance their daily online habits with formal schoolwork.

Policy Advocacy: Formalizing Informal Digital Learning

Policy makers should do more than just approve digital learning. Since rural students often lack personal devices, converting current computer rooms into 'English-Speaking Labs' is a highly practical step. This approach follows Li et al. (2018), who argue that institutional resources are essential for supporting under-resourced learners. By opening these labs every week, schools give students a safe space to practice, which offers a low-cost method to improve digital access.

Departments of education should also develop a 'cloud library' filled with micro-learning clips. Since long lectures are easily ignored today, these official resources need an influencer-like style. For example, a school platform could post simple 2-minute grammar 'hacks.' This method delivers the exact same curriculum, so students actually watch and learn. As Bu, Pan, and Wang (2025) note, instructional clips should balance entertainment with academic accuracy. As Liu (2025) warns, without an official "content bank," rural students face a continuous disadvantage compared to urban peers who possess greater

resource access. Therefore, providing targeted digital content is likely to help narrow the educational gap.

Limitations

The data highlights a clear shift in student confidence, but the context remains highly specific. As the findings come entirely from rural Guangxi, they reflect a specific environment with limited resources. Urban learners typically have stronger digital support at home, so their online learning habits might look completely different. Also, a one-semester study mainly reveals short-term motivation. This short window captures the initial excitement of using social media, but it cannot tell us if these speaking habits survive the actual pressure of the final Gaokao.

Self-developed Instrument

The study utilized a self-developed questionnaire tailored to secondary schools in Guangxi. This design aligns with Li et al. (2018), who emphasizes the need for research tools that fit the reality of rural classrooms. While an expert review helped refine the initial questions, time and logistical limits prevented a formal pilot study.

Omitting this step left the survey without a preliminary reliability test. Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) observe that smaller studies frequently face this exact compromise. Still, without a trial run, certain items might have remained confusing for the students. A proper pilot study would have identified and resolved these hidden ambiguities prior to the main data collection.

Convenience Sampling and Sample Size

Relying on a convenience sample of 90 students represents a notable limitation of this study. Although the group included both urban and rural learners, the small sample size cannot fully represent the broader student population across Guangxi. In addition, voluntary participation introduces an inherent self-selection bias. Students who opted to join were likely not typical learners; they tended to be more comfortable with digital platforms and exhibited higher intrinsic motivation to practice English.

(Aloraini & Cardoso, 2020) and Men (2023) identify this inherent self-selection bias as a pervasive challenge in digital learning research. Due to this bias, the positive findings might appear more optimistic than the reality of the general student body. Ultimately, these participants reflect the most active learners rather than the average student.

Regional Focus

Focusing exclusively on Guangxi limits the study to a highly specific linguistic and economic setting. The students' Zhuang or Cantonese backgrounds often caused them to mix up /n/ and /l/ sounds. Beyond pronunciation, Liu (2025) highlights the economic limits of southwestern China. Classroom observations often revealed groups of four or five students sharing a single borrowed smartphone to practice speaking. These exact technology and pronunciation issues differ from wealthier cities like Shenzhen, where students typically use personal devices and face different linguistic hurdles. The findings primarily apply to other under-resourced areas where strong local dialects and restricted screen access influence language acquisition outcomes.

Reliance on Self-reported Data

Rather than conducting objective speaking tests, the study based its findings entirely on self-reported data. Fauziah and Sutrisno (2024) and Pham et al. (2023) note that this is a common challenge in this type of research. As a result, reported gains in fluency and speed depend entirely on student perception. Students often feel they have improved significantly once they gain speaking confidence. But this increased confidence does not automatically guarantee better grammar (He, 2024). Many participants became more fluent in class, and they still made basic errors. Without baseline pre-tests, true language development remains unmeasured. The findings simply highlight a boost in confidence, not verified linguistic progress.

Conclusion

Social media clearly acts as a practical tool in Guangxi. It connects exam prep to real communication, and this low-pressure practice reduces student anxiety. As a result, the classroom “freeze effect” was significantly mitigated. A distinct usage gap also appeared. While urban students use these tools to create their own content, rural students mostly remain passive watchers. Since giving out devices is not enough, teachers need to show students how to use them productively.

Looking ahead, future research must move beyond self-reported feelings. Due to the limited timeframe of the current research, it remains unclear whether this confidence persists during actual examinations. Finally, comparing developing regions like Guangxi to wealthier urban centers like Shanghai would provide valuable insights into how family income and home environments shape digital learning. In the end, the main goal goes beyond pushing technology into classrooms. It is about making sure geography no longer limits speaking opportunities.

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