
RESEARCH

SOCIAL NETWORKING SYSTEMS IN ENHANCING METACOGNITIVE AWARENESS: POST-PANDEMIC INFORMAL LEARNING AMONG IRANIAN ADULT EFL LEARNERS

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Abstract: In the current context of enhanced distance learning and reliance on technology in education, there is a greater need to investigate the linguistic and cultural resources embedded in learners' use of social networking systems (SNS) as legitimate pedagogical platforms - both in formal and informal settings. Within new and unique configurations of teaching and learning in the post-pandemic era, a more context-sensitive learning style is needed to ensure a sustainable platform of education for language learners, one that would be responsive to future challenges. This paper is a critical exploration of how Iranian EFL learners have used SNS tools to construct and develop their metacognitive awareness in response to the pressures of distant/online learning triggered by the pandemic, how it has facilitated new approaches that are more efficient than formal face-to-face classrooms, and how such learning constitutes a substantial investment into their future education. This qualitative case study involves an in-depth investigation of adult EFL (English as a foreign language) students from three English language centres in Tehran, Iran through semi-structured interviews to identify their perceptions of their metacognitive development in the last two years subsequent to the pandemic. Findings are likely to inform policymakers, school leaders, EFL teachers and students in terms of how to create a more optimised environment that will enhance both teaching and learning.

Keywords: social networking, post-pandemic pedagogy, learner identity, student investment, metacognition

1. Introduction

In the current context of the increasing use of enhanced distance learning and reliance on technology in delivering and receiving education, there is a greater need to look into the linguistic and cultural resources embedded in learners' use of social networking systems (SNS) as legitimate pedagogical platforms, both in formal and informal settings, and how learning occurs beyond the classroom. As we approach the post-pandemic era within new and unique configurations of teaching and learning, a more context-sensitive learning style is needed to ensure a sustainable platform of learning for language learners; one that would also be responsive to future challenges.

Baker (2006) sees language usage as a barometer of identity representation and growth.

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To put it another way, a person's identity may change as they learn a foreign language, which may lead to or cause changes in their motivation and attitude. A large number of existing studies in the broader literature has examined the reconstruction of English learners' identities. However, the impact of SNS on improving metacognitive awareness of the English language and on English language learning capabilities and identities remains understudied, especially in the context of Iran. According to González et al. (2016), motivation has a direct impact on metacognition. Additionally, Chatzistamatiou et al. (2013) hypothesised that learners who value an academic task (a motivating factor) will employ metacognitive or cognitive methods to achieve higher results. As a result, students' academic success will depend on their level of motivation, which will also influence their learning tactics (in this case, the use of SNS) they choose and employ (Ulstad et al., 2018).

This study seeks to investigate how SNS impacts EFL learners' English language learning capability and identities and how it can help students improve their metacognitive awareness. Although the paper explores the role of learners' metacognitive awareness in EFL in Iran, it only looks at *informal* education provided by English language teaching centres; it does not focus on formal education provided by universities. This study will answer the following questions:

1. *How do SNSs contribute to enhancing EFL learners' metacognitive awareness?*
2. *How does the use of SNS shape the identities of EFL learners?*

This article is divided into five sections: First, the context section discusses English education in Iran and how English, as a foreign language (EFL), is positioned in the school curriculum. It then discusses informal EFL in Iran, which is the context of the study, and the increasingly important role of English language centres. The literature review discusses theorisations and conceptualisations of metacognition and its various aspects (such as metacognitive awareness, adaptation, techniques), multiple intelligences, (language) learner identity and remote learning. Next, the methodology section describes the study's design including the practicalities of data collection and the process of data analysis. In the analysis section that follows, four primary themes emerge: the user-friendly nature of the SNS, the fostering of creativity through the use of SNS, SNS and the construction of learning identity, and SNS and enhanced participation in class. The final section critically discusses the study's findings in light of theories and findings from empirical studies to respond to the research questions. The article concludes with some recommendations.

2. Context

This section presents the broader context in Iran within which this study is located, especially in relation to English language learning in two contexts: formal and informal, as well as the reasons why students attend English language institutions (ELIs), often not as a substitute but as a valuable add-on.

English continues to play an essential role in the so-called Expanding Circle (Kachru, 1985), which was proposed by Kachru in the 1980s. In Iran, English is taught as a foreign language and is a compulsory subject at both middle and high schools (Organization of Educational Research and Planning, 2017). It is commonly used in education, business, and the media. As the world's international language (Graddol, 2006), English today occupies a prominent position in Iran's official education curriculum as well as in informal education, such as that offered by English language institutes, which continue to grow both in terms of numbers and scope.

Typically, in Iran, university English classes concentrate on written English, with an emphasis on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, and little or no emphasis on spoken English and spoken communication. This is the classic EFL situation, which remains predominantly test-driven (Chowdhury & Farooqui, 2011). Tests have long been seen to have a direct impact on educational processes in many ways. Such ‘washback’ plays an important role in these classes, a term used to describe how an exam influences instructional materials and classroom management (Cheng et. al., 2004). One prevalent belief is that teachers modify their teaching approach and class materials to meet the test's expectations when they know their students are preparing to take a specific exam (Taylor, 2005). Whether deliberately or inadvertently, teachers employ washback to prepare students for final exams as well as high-stakes university entrance exams, none of which have any oral or speaking assessment. As a result, the focus of their instruction is solely on reading, writing and grammar. Therefore, students who in addition to passing such exams *also* aim to improve their communicative competence and enhance their future employability go to private classes in language centres for additional lessons that focus more on in real-life use of the foreign language.

At the school level too, English is a compulsory subject in the Iranian public school curriculum for six years (from Grades 7 to 12). While high school textbooks deal with reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar, the other skills of listening and speaking do not have a clear place (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015; 2016). Indeed, Dahmardeh (2009, p. 9) notes further that since the majority of language tests in Iran do not assess communicative language content, teaching communicative skills remains a “neglected component in many foreign language classrooms”. Not surprisingly then, as Ghorbani (2011) puts it, the establishment of and prevalence of ELIs in Iran are a response to the formal school system's lack of spoken English training.

In addition, at both the pre-university and university levels, except for English, all other subjects are still taught in *Farsi* (or Persian). Because of this, English is generally not perceived as important to their learning, and very few students in English courses are serious about acquiring it. Furthermore, a typical English course is just 20 to 30 hours long during the academic year and is often not taught by staff from an English department, because of which students benefit little (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016).

Extracurricular English studies offered at private language institutes are thus quite popular among Iranian students. In fact, the demand for learning English in language institutes has increased rapidly in recent years in Iran, as it has in other nations where English is recognised as a foreign language, as the importance of English has been acknowledged both nationally and individually. This is exemplified by the emergence and rapid expansion of the private language institution industry in Iran (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015) and elsewhere (Kabir & Chowdhury, 2021). Aside from improving language skills, attending these English courses is also considered a fun pastime by many young Iranians.

Because of their commercial interests, private language schools provide programs that are more responsive to learners’ needs compared to those offered in formal education. These lessons are almost always student-centered and conversational, with an emphasis on oral/aural abilities (Shahriari, 2020). While public school instructors emphasise explicit grammatical instruction through a mostly structured curriculum over the development of English communication skills (Baleghizadeh & Farshchi, 2009), language teachers in private institutions place greater emphasis on communicating in real-world situations, and are also usually better qualified.

For English learners in the latter category, social networking sites have increasingly been a popular choice, which language institutes have progressively adopted in their pedagogies, especially after the Covid-19 Pandemic. As a result, only those pupils who have the opportunity to take private lessons are able to practice communicating in English (Sadeghi & Richards, 2016).

This study explores how Iranian EFL learners studying in language institutes have used SNS tools, as an alternative to formal schooling, to construct and develop their metacognitive awareness in response to the pressures of distant or online learning. In doing so it considers learners' use of social networking systems (SNS) as legitimate pedagogical platforms, both in formal and informal settings, the role of metacognition in such learning, and the impact of such learning on their learner identity.

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Positioning

Drawing on historically seminal as well as prominent recent scholarship, this literature review problematises the intricate relationships among metacognition, metacognitive adaptation, metacognitive awareness, metacognitive techniques, and learner identity. These concepts, although distinct, are deeply interconnected, collectively shaping how learners approach, navigate, and reflect upon their educational experiences. Understanding these relationships is thus essential for educators aiming to foster environments that promote self-regulated learning and adaptivity in the face of changing cognitive demands, in this case, through the utilisation of SNS outside formal classrooms, to facilitate and enhance their skills in English. The review thus explains how metacognition is related to both multiple intelligences and learner identity, and finally how this is and can be enacted in the context of remote learning and specifically through the use of SNS.

3.1. Metacognition and Metacognitive Adaptation

The notion of metacognition is not new. Integrating contemporary research, especially those that involve newer configurations of learning (such as those facilitated by technology and triggered by global events such as the recent Pandemic) into the discussion of metacognition allows a deeper understanding of these constructs. Recent studies have expanded upon the foundational work of earlier scholars, exploring the nuanced ways in which metacognitive processes interact with the digital age, multidisciplinary learning environments, and the increasingly recognised importance of emotional regulation within cognitive frameworks.

Metacognition, a term that has long been of much interest within educational psychology, refers to the awareness and control individuals have over their *own* cognitive processes. Flavell (1979), one of the earliest proponents of this concept, explained it as one's understanding and regulation of their cognitive activities in learning contexts, including planning, monitoring, and evaluating their understanding and performance. Metacognitive adaptation, an extension of this notion, involves the *dynamic* adjustments and strategies learners employ to optimise their cognitive processes based on feedback or reflection on their learning experiences (Pintrich, 2002). In the case of this study, this refers to EFL learner's spontaneous and informal engagement with SNS to facilitate language learning *outside* or *beyond* classrooms. Such adaptations are crucial for academic success (or in this case, foreign language learning), as they enable learners to become more effective and efficient in their pursuit of knowledge and skills acquisition.

The notion of metacognitive awareness specifically denotes an individual's conscious

understanding of their cognitive processes *and* their ability to reflect on the effectiveness of the strategies they deploy (Fu et al., 2023; Schraw & Dennison, 1994). This awareness is foundational for employing metacognitive techniques - strategies explicitly taught (through formal instruction in language classrooms) or acquired (through social interactions, for example, through the use of SNS) to enhance cognitive processing. These techniques, which include self-questioning, elaborative interrogation, and the use of mnemonic devices, serve to deepen understanding and facilitate the retention of information (Wolters, 1998). Learner identity, a concept that interweaves with metacognition, pertains to how individuals perceive themselves as learners and how this perception influences their engagement with metacognitive practices (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

The interplay between learner identity and metacognitive processes (both awareness and adaptation) is critical, as a learner's self-perception can significantly impact their motivation to engage in activities that require the employment of effective metacognitive techniques.

Veenman, van Hout-Wolters, and Afflerbach (2010) have emphasised the critical role of metacognitive skills in the digital era, noting that the vast availability of information necessitates enhanced skills in selecting, evaluating, and organising information effectively. Their work delineates the expanding scope of metacognitive strategies required to navigate online learning environments successfully. Zohar and Barzilai (2013) furthered this line of inquiry by examining the integration of metacognitive instruction within science education, demonstrating its impact on fostering critical thinking and deeper understanding of scientific concepts among students. This research highlights the significance of metacognitive awareness and techniques in enhancing language learning and problem-solving skills.

Specifically, the *affective* aspects of learning have been increasingly recognised for their influence on metacognitive processes. Mega, Ronconi, and de Beni (2014) explore how metacognitive awareness is intertwined with motivational and emotional factors, suggesting that a learner's emotional state can significantly affect their metacognitive efficiency and subsequently, their learning outcomes. This highlights the importance of considering emotional regulation as part of metacognitive adaptation strategies. A study by Dweck, Walton, and Cohen (2014) on growth mindset interventions ties closely to the concept of learner identity, revealing how students' beliefs about their abilities influence their engagement in metacognitive strategies and their overall academic performance. Their work emphasises the dynamic interaction between learner identity and metacognitive processes, suggesting that fostering a growth mindset can enhance metacognitive adaptation and the effective use of metacognitive techniques.

These studies not only validate the foundational theories established by early researchers but also expand the understanding of metacognition and its related constructs by incorporating considerations of digital literacy, disciplinary integration, emotional regulation, and the psychological underpinnings of learner identity. They collectively highlight the complexity and multifaceted nature of metacognitive processes in contemporary educational contexts, such as that of the current study.

3.2. Multiple Intelligences and Metacognition

Research has established close links between learning styles and metacognition (Sadler-Smith, 2012; Steiner & Foote, 2017; Vermunt, 1996). The concept of learning styles originates from Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (MI) (1983), which has been extensively incorporated into curricula (Leshkovska & Spaseva, 2016). According to Gardner's theory, each

person contains one of the seven fundamental types of intelligence to variable degrees: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinaesthetic, visual-spatial, musical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. More recently, Gardner introduced an eighth intellect called "naturalist" which is concerned with knowledge of the natural world.

Gardner's theory's central contention is that rather than being composed of a single universal entity, intelligence takes on a *plural* form. Every single one of the intelligences exists in every person, albeit to varying degrees, and each of these can be cultivated and developed through education. If a person's dominating intelligence is utilised and employed as a catalyst to inspire further erudition, one may anticipate that person to be more open to learning. Additionally, teachers have seen that when MI is recognised in the classroom and students identify their areas of strength, they display greater pride, passion, and motivation for their work (Hickey, 2004). In other words, when Gardner's theory is put into practice, students' dominant intelligences may be used, which makes acquiring information literacy skills more engaging and meaningful (Mokhtar et al., 2008). However, in the context of formal learning, recognition of such intelligences is often overlooked due to washback and other curricular demands, as explained above.

Closely linked to learning styles, metacognition thus involves learners' awareness of their own cognitive processes and the effective use of that awareness to control those processes (Yailagh et al., 2013). Knowledge of cognition and management of cognition, according to Flavell (1985), are two components of metacognition. However, the mere employment of cognitive or metacognitive methods *without* self-regulation does not result in a high level of academic achievement, as explained by Pintrich and de Groot (1990). Self-regulated learning (SRL), as it is used in the field of education, is the process by which students actively manage their own learning. In order to maximise their learning outcomes, they actively examine their learning processes and results and have the capacity to control and adjust their behavior, cognition, and motivation as needed.

A recent study undertaken by Rover et al. (2019) about behavioral self-regulated learning (SRL) demonstrated that before selecting or combining any kind of measurement, researchers and practitioners must have a clear understanding of their research question or issue statement. Measurements may be compared to more conventional SRL measurement techniques employing self-reported questionnaire data to determine which of these techniques gives the most accurate and reliable SRL indicator. In 1998 Higgin offered a framework for comprehending the variations in motivation among language learners. According to this concept, discrepancies are caused by learners' sources of self-regulation or how they approach reaching a goal. According to Higgins' theory, individuals with distinct self-regulatory orientations, namely promotional and preventional, will exhibit variations in their motivational, emotional, and behavioural characteristics (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999). This means learners who have a promotional orientation to self-regulation (i.e., focusing on the potential gains or positive outcome), may display different motivational, affective, and behavioural traits compared to those who have a preventional orientation (i.e., focusing on avoiding negative outcomes).

This theory (Higgins, 1998) also suggests that an individual's attitude toward self-regulation can influence various aspects of their learning, including their goals, emotions, and actions. For example, a student with a more proactive, growth-oriented perspective on self-regulation may be more inclined to seek out new knowledge and tools to assist them in reaching their objectives – even *outside* the classroom; whereas one with a more reactive, risk-averse

perspective may be less likely to do so. Furthermore, a student with a promotional attitude may experience positive emotions like excitement and enthusiasm towards their academic work, while a student with a preventional attitude may experience more anxiety and fear of failure.

A study by Papi and Teimouri (2014) was conducted to discover types of second language (L2) learner motivation using the L2 motivational self-system as a framework. The results of this study showed that the interaction of several motivational elements can produce learner groups with motivational configurations that are related to qualitatively and quantitatively distinct motivational, emotional, and linguistic patterns. Academic self-efficacy is the term used to describe students' attitudes and ideas about their potential for academic achievement, as well as their confidence in their capacity to complete academic tasks and successfully learn the subject (Bandura, 1997).

As Yailagh et al. (2013) noted, achievement goals and self-efficacy are two motivating elements that have an impact on students' metacognition. Hayat et al. (2022) carried out a study to find out how metacognitive learning techniques might moderate the connection between academic achievement, positive learning-related feelings, and self-efficacy. Findings showed that more metacognitive learning techniques were employed by students who felt confident in their skills and experienced more positive emotions, which led to improved academic performance.

Pekrun (2006) similarly noted that pleasant, happy feelings, including pleasure, had a favorable impact on academic ability. On the other hand, unpleasant deactivating feelings like boredom can lower a learner's desire and interfere with data processing, highlighting the detrimental impact of such emotions on academic success. These feelings affect both the motivation and metacognition of learners, which are considered in this study and can be seen to feature prominently in the findings below.

In designing the questions for the semi-structured interviews, we considered Cooper et al.'s (2008) across method and time tool and the Metacognitive Activities Inventory (MCA-I). In their study Cooper et al. compared responses that students provided in the MCA-I by creating their own problem-solving strategies. Their study found that students who engaged in more online metacognitive strategies scored better than those who did so less frequently. Cooper et al. (2008) identified a convergence between their self-report instrument and students' conduct in the online environment, which highlighted the relationship between this finding and the ongoing process of (learner) identity construction.

3.3. Learner Identity

The concepts of identity and self in studies on second or foreign language learning have received a lot of attention from SLA researchers in recent years (Gao et al., 2015; Miller & Kubota, 2013; Norton, 2013). According to social identity theory, a person's sense of self and affiliation with a specific group or community determine who they are and how they see themselves (Nematzadeh & Narafshan, 2020). People feel like they belong in the social sphere when they are a part of groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004).

A number of studies have been conducted on learner identity in the Iranian context. For example, in a study of an analysis of the relationship between the attitudes of Iranian EFL learners toward native English speakers and their reported identity change by Mokhtarnia and Ghafar-Samar (2015), two questionnaires were utilised to explore statistically significant differences for the attitude subtype of ethnocentrism. Findings from this study revealed that participants who majored in English showed a stronger correlation between total attitude and

the variables of productive identity change, split identity change, and total identity change; however, participants who did not major in English only showed a statistically significant correlation with the variable of subtractive identity change in terms of online and offline identities. This is an indication of the status of English as a foreign language in Iran, and the cultural capital deeply associated with its learning.

Another aspect of identity research in virtual spaces was conducted in a recent mixed methods study by Rezaei and Latifi (2020) which explored the identity construction of Iranian EFL learners in a critical reflective online course. This study demonstrated that the participants did not change their perceived identities, however it did end up assisting them in being aware of concerns that they had not previously considered consciously. The study also revealed that despite the participants' sentiments regarding the Persian and English languages and cultures being unchanged as a consequence of their participation in the online course, their ability to recognise the similarities and differences between the two did improve. Additionally, it was found that rather than being distinct from each other, their online personas were connected to their offline personas.

Another study by Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) similarly showed how the online and offline selves are intertwined. Although the offline self may be altered to highlight, minimise, or even deny some elements, the online self is ultimately rooted in the offline one. Using technology to facilitate distance language instruction is thus becoming more popular worldwide (Collins & Halverson, 2010; Guichon, 2010; Inozu et al., 2010; Lai et al., 2014; Wang & Chen, 2009; White et al., 2016).

In particular, social media and social networking sites (SNS) have altered how people interact and live in many facets of contemporary life, including education (Carpenter et al., 2019). Social media primarily creates new opportunities but also difficulties related to the identities that people (re)construct online. Through their profiles, interactions, relationships, networks, and reputations, people may define and reinvent who they are (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). As a part of this study, we thus investigate how social media, including SNS, affects the identity of language learners in Iran, where English is a foreign language.

Wei (2005) explains that language serves as both a medium of communication and a bearer of cultural identity. For learners, English has expanded beyond *just* being a subject in school and has evolved into a tool for people to broaden their intercultural perspectives, communicate challenging feelings and experiences, and share experiences and knowledge via travel, email, phone, and video conferencing (Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011). An imagined community presupposes an imagined identity, as stated by Norton and Gao (2008), and learners put time, money, and effort - in other words, invest - into the target language (TL) in such a situation.

Even though identity struggles in EFL learning may not be as intense as they are in ESL learning (Pishghadam & Sadeghi, 2011), they nevertheless provide students with a chance to critically evaluate their own culture. As a reflexive process, language learning thus aims to help students gain fresh perspectives on their own society and examine various facets of their native culture (Osler & Starkey, 2000; Gao, 2008). It also enables them to critically discover what was previously assumed to be good or bad, interesting or boring, in their society. According to Mernagh (2018), due to the dynamic nature of language, culture, identity, and difference, the interdependence and complexity of these parts of society will continue to evolve and be dependent on one another.

In such discussions, complexity, flexibility, and dynamism are also factored in and

acknowledged as cultural cores and identifiable cultural limits in the subjective realm of identity development (Gao, 2010). Norton's (2001) notion of "imagined community" examines how language learners construct identities within a sociocultural context, with a specific focus on language practices, interactions, and power dynamics. Although most of Norton's theory's empirical evidence comes from ESL situations, the concept of "imagined community" may also explain how EFL learners, such as those in Iran, learn about themselves and their cultures in the context of globalisation (Gao, 2010). Since English is the language of globalisation, EFL students prefer to belong to an "imagined global community" than just to integrate with the community of their target culture (Ryan, 2006).

For example, as a type of social and intercultural practice, movies and videos can inspire a variety of social interactions. They may also aid in improving participants' self-awareness as L2 learners. This was successfully established by Nematzadeh and Narafshan (2020) as they sought to determine if using intercultural movie clips might enhance participants' personal identities and L2 identities in the EFL context in Iran. In addition, their findings show that the individuals' personal and second language identities resulted in significant improvements. Learning, after all, according to Norton (2000), is an experience of identity, since it changes perceptions of who we are and what we are capable of.

The possibility of developing multiple and hybrid identities has expanded as a result of technological advancement and globalisation (Block, 2008; Kanno, 2003). Ryan (2006, p. 31) notes that "whether the culture accompanying the language of globalization subtracts from or adds to the individual's existing cultural identity is crucial in determining the learner's willingness or unwillingness to acquire that culture's language". In addition, Gholaminejad (2017) introduced the notion of *reverse* conceptual transfer (RCT) to explain if and how L2 learners' worldviews and ideologies can change - or at least be affected - by learning any second or foreign language. As we will see, findings of this current study demonstrate that most of the participants felt they had partly experienced such reverse conceptual transfer. After all, most EFL students in Iran do not view the mission of learning English beyond its ability to enable them to learn a language, although it also transforms their identities, whether they want it or not.

As individuals participate in a variety of social groups, they adapt and transition between identities, assuming various roles (Wu, 2011). Their self-definition is an ongoing process that is influenced by the active aspect of their identity. People can 'play' with their languages and identities by purposefully switching from one language or variety to another, signaling a transition from one identity to another, if they become aware of the dynamic process and numerous identities inside them (Byram, 2006).

3.4. Remote Learning and Metacognition

Even long before the Covid-19 Pandemic, Minnaar (2012) argued that as part of open distance learning (ODL), online education has the potential to reach a far larger number of students than was previously thought possible. Minnaar noted that advancements in technology had made distance education more practical in developed countries and that shifting focus from instructors to students had been essential in online educational environments.

Online education may be supported by the availability and dependability of technology, standards for course design, and teacher training (Vovides et al., 2007). We have progressed past the idea that 'online learning' consists just of preparing a few PowerPoint slides and uploading the presentation online. Instead, there is need to develop standalone and multimodal

online learning material that enables the matching of desired learning outcomes with metadata, which may include information that describes other data. It outlines various characteristics and properties of the primary data, thereby facilitating its organisation, management, and comprehension that supports more capable and robust online course management systems. This would facilitate learners' understanding of their metacognition and apply it in online learning contexts (Minnaar, 2012).

Carter et al. (2020) argue that when studying remotely or online, students need to use metacognitive techniques to evaluate their progress and decide how to adjust when objectives diverge from their original aims. Online students can benefit from education and be motivated to continue using cognitive skills by using metacognition (Minnaar, 2012). In order to reflect on what they *already* know and what they want to learn, and to increase their personal engagement in defining objectives for the monitoring and evaluation of their language learning process, learners' metacognitive techniques must be activated (Teng, 2019). As Shang (2016) puts it, online metacognitive methods are a good predictor of students' desire for learning, which in turn affects how well they do in online reading.

4. Methodology

This qualitative case study involves an in-depth investigation of EFL learners from three English language centers in Tehran, through semi-structured interviews to identify participants' perceptions with regard to their metacognitive development during the three years of the pandemic (2020-2022) as a way to inform their learning of English.

Specifically, the study involved five adult EFL learners who were studying English for more than two years in three language centres; none had traveled abroad or had any opportunities to speak English outside school or at work, apart from in the language centres. These learners all had the same English proficiency level. In order to make sure that all the participants had the same level of English, the Longman Placement Test (LPT) was applied at the first session of the project.

Table 1

Participants of the Study

Participant	Age	Gender	Informal English learning	Occupation
Nazi	22	Female	4 years	Lawyer
Ati	18	Female	3 years	Student
Hyam	30	Male	2.5 years	Engineer
Soroudeh	22	Female	2 years	Architect
Sami	21	Female	Never	Pharmacist

A single round of semi-structured interviews was conducted with the participants. The general purpose of the study was explained to the learners, that their participation was voluntary, and that they were free to leave the research project at any time. Eleven components made up the semi-structured interview that was employed in this investigation. All interviews were conducted in English, and when they were unable to comprehend, it was instantly rendered

into *Farsi* (Persian) to facilitate clear understanding.

According to Higgins' theory, described earlier, students who have a promotional vs. preventional attitude toward self-regulation, will exhibit variations in their motivational, affective, and behavioral traits (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999). Therefore, in the analysis, these three items are considered. An analysis of the interview conversations, on the other hand, led to identifying four overarching themes: the user-friendly nature of the SNS, the fostering of creativity through the use of SNS, SNS and the construction of learning identity, and enhanced participation in class, which are discussed below.

5. Findings and Analysis

The core of the study's analysis is based on data from the interviews with the participating EFL learners. They were asked a variety of questions to help get an understanding of how Iranian EFL learners have used SNS tools to construct and develop their metacognitive awareness in response to the pressures of distant/online learning during the pandemic, how this enhanced (or disrupted) the ways that are more efficient than in formal face-to-face classrooms, and how this may have constituted a substantial investment into their future education as they transitioned beyond the confines of the pandemic.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006) the following stages were used to evaluate the data using thematic analysis: familiarisation with the data; inductively generated initial codes based on the complete data collection; naming and outlining the topics; and reviewing and elaborating on the themes. The following four key themes emerged from the analysis.

5.1. *The User-friendly Nature of SNS*

Time, cost, ease of use, and location considerations all appeared to be major considerations. Most participants stated that they appreciate using online platforms and SNS even after the pandemic is over and that they are eager to keep doing so because they are available to everyone, which means they can use them wherever they are, without any restrictions like time, location, or even costs. Time, according to Nazi, is crucial while using social networking sites:

SNS have a very important role in our lives to save time because we can use them in our house and learn instead of going out and wasting a lot of time in the heavy traffic.

As Minnaar (2012) explained, global advancements in technology have increased the viability of online learning in developed countries, and the unique characteristics of such online learning settings have driven the need for a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered methods. These changes are also reflected in the current context of Iran. Nazi explained the ease with which she can use SNS:

People today understand that it's a great opportunity to use these social media platforms everywhere and that doing so does not require you to leave your current location; instead, you can carry on with your professional work with just a click on your smartphone.

Since SNS and online learning were thought to meet participants' perceived requirements in Iran, this factor appeared to be a common one that all participants agreed on.

5.2. *Fostering Students' Creativity and Metacognition*

In addition to time, cost, ease of use, and geographical considerations, the use of SNS also affords various ways of learning and self-monitoring, including ways that foster creativity and the development of higher-order cognitive skills. The interviewees admitted that with SNS,

they are free to choose a preferred method of learning without being constrained by a framework because it allows them to search for an appropriate method of learning that is more compatible with their personalities and various learning styles. They are also not required to adhere to any predetermined methods of learning, such as in the school or university classroom. This makes the process of learning more enjoyable for them, and they can learn in a more creative way.

Sorudeh, for example, explained that she was able to better remember the idioms and phrases by using a variety of mnemonic strategies and tools that were provided in SNSs, so that they “flowed” more “naturally” from her head whenever she needed to utilise them. She was also able to improve her retention and grasp of the idioms and phrases by combining various elements via multiple strategies and tools. Such active participation and information blending are indicative of higher-order thinking and innovative problem-solving skills as they foster learner autonomy, active engagement, and higher-order cognitive skills such as synthesis:

In social media, I can use a lot of methods and tools at once, such as pictures, idioms, or special parts of different movies where I can see the practical use of those idioms and words, and even people leave interesting comments regarding the post.

In pointing out an important advantage of SNS, Sami, a pharmacist by profession, explained: "I see a lot of sites that each teach with a specific method, and finally you can find the one that matches your needs." She found such a variety of approaches to learning “fascinating”, and it gave her the “freedom” to pursue her own learning style most effectively by mixing and matching.

Ati, who is an experienced language learner and the only student in the participant cohort, said: "I started to learn English in a compatible way that satisfied me, so I chose Duolingo and YouTube among the available options, as they offered flexible suggestions". She explained that she had quite successfully learnt Korean in this way; she felt that having access to a variety of SNSs allowed her to choose the method that worked best for her and that, unlike in school classrooms, she was never pushed to do anything against her will.

Interviewees also frequently noted that using AI-powered language-learning applications make them more motivated to monitor their own progress - an important characteristic of developing metacognitive awareness - since they are actively involved in *self-selected* training techniques. Through a variety of teaching techniques, González et al. (2016) discovered a direct link between motivation and metacognition. Research by Chatzistamatiou et al. (2013) also suggests that students who find *intrinsic* value in an academic task are more likely to use metacognitive or cognitive strategies in order to improve their performance. Indeed, according to research conducted by Ulstad et al. (2018), students' motivation is a major factor in *both* their academic success and the strategies they use to study. Based on her skills and personality, Ati thus favored certain applications because she felt they would better serve her needs and allow her to track her development. She explained that before knowing these platforms, she did not know there were artificial intelligences through which she could monitor her progress and the process of learning better without help from teachers or instructors:

For monitoring myself, I selected Tandem (an exchanging language application) so that I could exchange languages with my language partner, teach her Korean, and learn English instead. In this way, I could figure out my own progress in learning.

By choosing Tandem, Ati took an *active* approach to monitoring her progress and ensuring that she is making meaningful strides in her language learning journey. By exchanging languages with a partner, she believes she can receive feedback on their language skills, track

their progress, and identify areas that need improvement. Her statements suggest that she is committed to improving her language skills and is taking a *proactive* approach to monitoring their progress, using a language exchange application to facilitate her learning journey.

5.3. SNS and the Construction of Learner Identity

Most of the participants said that learning idioms from native speakers and watching video clips gave them a sense of a new identity, one that was distinct from the one they have always carried since birth, and metamorphosed through formal schooling. According to Paechter (2013), members of online networks develop identities that are distinct from their real-world selves and are less in their control. The process of identity-building in such networks has thus become progressively more communal.

Participants also stated that after learning through the SNS, they were able to talk with a clearer and more intelligible accent, something they had never been able to do before. Additionally, they asserted that by doing this, they were more confident in their communication abilities. The ability to participate in conversations and practice their newly acquired dialect on social networking sites substantially improved their fluency and pronunciation.

Sami believed that in SNSs she is free to be “a new person”, and no one can judge her: “I think in these platforms you can have a new personality; in a virtual world you can be whoever you want”. For her, the virtual world is a place where she can freely assume a new identity, make errors without fear, and adopt a personality that makes her feel more confident. Individuals can also use the virtual world as an escape from reality and experiment with various identities or personas, as suggested by the speaker's assertion that one can establish a new identity online. Depending on the context and the individual's intent, this could be viewed as a positive or negative aspect of online platforms.

5.4. SNS and Enhanced Participation in Class

It has been presumed that social media can improve connection and involvement in both the classroom and outside of it (Al-Khalidi & Khouni, 2021). Several participants reported that SNS and online learning helped them feel more engaged in their learning while increasing their involvement in the classroom in their language centres. Participants asserted that they were motivated to participate in the classroom tasks with a greater amount of eagerness, while also feeling more at ease participating in class activities using their knowledge and what they had learned, with greater confidence. As Sorudeh pointed out, the opportunities for engagement and advancement afforded by SNSs allowed her to leapfrog her classmates, and she was getting more interested in the class:

I now love speaking up in class debates and interacting with the instructors and other students because sometimes I think I know more than them, and it gives me a feeling of confidence.

This implies that she takes pleasure in contributing to classroom discussions and finds that doing so also boosts her self-esteem. In fact, Sorudeh, an architect by profession, went on to claim that sometimes they even have a tendency to feel superior to their classmates intellectually.

Similarly, Hyam, an engineer by profession, explained that through utilising SNSs he became increasingly confident in his pronunciation of words and phrases, so he can now use them without hesitation; and that this manner of learning has made him more active in the class than ever before. He said that he is very much satisfied with his learning through SNS, as he is able to use new sentences and grammatical structures in class “properly” and “fearlessly”. Ati

too stated that learning with pleasure increased her motivation and excitement to apply what she had learned during the SNSs, and her instructor had even noted that she was better prepared to speak more about the topics in the class.

Sami, a pharmacist by profession, thought the language skills she was acquiring through SNS were more applicable to her professional work than to the learning she had obtained in formal classrooms. SNS's focus on what is really useful made its lessons easier to retain and put into practice than the theoretical knowledge she had gained from her formal education. From this point of view, SNS content seemed tailored to the needs and interests of its users. Overall, Sami believes that she has immensely benefited from learning through social networking sites as these sites value the practical application of knowledge - a view shared by all other participants.

6. Discussion

The data analysis presented above sheds light on the multifaceted impact of social networking systems (SNS) on various aspects of language learning as enacted in the varied experiences of these participants, and with a particular focus on the user-friendly nature of these platforms, their role in fostering creativity and metacognition, their influence on the construction of learner identity, and their contribution to enhanced participation in the language centre classroom. This critical discussion aims to scrutinise the implications of these findings within the broader context of language education, in Iran and globally.

Firstly, the user-friendly nature of SNS emerges as a pivotal factor influencing participants' preferences for online platforms - even in the post-pandemic era. The accessibility of these platforms, irrespective of time, location, or cost constraints, is highlighted as a key advantage. This aligns with the global trend in education, emphasising a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered methods, as observed in both developed countries and the current context of Iran. The emphasis on time, especially, highlights its critical role in shaping the participants' experiences, resonating with the broader discourses on the efficiency and convenience offered by online learning environments facilitated by SNS.

The analysis further delves into the role of SNS in fostering students' creativity and metacognition. Participants expressed a sense of freedom in choosing learning methods compatible with their personalities and learning styles. The diverse approaches available on SNS enable active engagement, autonomy, and higher-order cognitive skills, as evidenced by the integration of various strategies and tools in the learning process. The connection between motivation and metacognition is emphasised, aligning with existing research linking intrinsic value to the adoption of such metacognitive strategies. The participants' testimonies point to the transformative potential of SNS in providing tailored, learner-centric experiences that extend beyond traditional pedagogical frameworks in formal classroom environments.

The analysis also explored the impact of SNS on the construction of learner identity, revealing that participants perceive a distinct identity shaped by learning idioms from native speakers and engaging with diverse content. The virtual space of SNS is thus seen as a realm where individuals can experiment with and assume new identities, suggesting both opportunities for self-expression and potential challenges in identity control within online networks. This aligns with Paechter's (2013) assertion that online network members develop identities that can be less under their control.

Additionally, the analysis highlights the positive correlation between SNS use and enhanced participation in the classroom. As we have seen, participants reported increased

engagement, confidence, and active involvement in class activities, with some noting that SNS content is more applicable to daily life than traditional classroom education. This echoes the presumption that social media can improve connection and involvement *both* inside and outside the classroom.

The in-depth data analysis highlights the transformative impact of SNS on the various dimensions of language learning, from user-friendly accessibility to the construction of learning identity and enhanced classroom participation. While celebrating the benefits, it is still imperative for language educators and learners alike to recognise the complexities and potential challenges associated with identity construction in virtual spaces. While the study contributes valuable insights to the ongoing discourses on the integration of technology in language education, advocating for pedagogical approaches that harness the user-friendly and creative potentials of SNS to optimise language learning experiences, this should be done with caution and in a context-sensitive manner.

7. Conclusion and Implications

The qualitative case study, involving in-depth examinations of adult EFL learners in Iran, presents a range of insights related to the contrastive interfaces of formal and informal learning in relation to the use of SNS and the role of metacognition in such learning. The participants' perceptions of metacognitive development over the past three years, shaped by the challenges and opportunities presented by the pandemic, provide varied experiences.

Specifically, this study reveals the nuanced interplay between metacognitive adaptations and learner identity in the new teaching and learning configurations of post-pandemic pedagogies within Iranian informal English language education. The investigation delves into the intricate dynamics of learners' individualised and idiosyncratic utilisations of social networking systems (SNS) as legitimate pedagogical platforms, navigating the informal educational landscape in the context of enhanced distance learning and technological reliance, and provides new insights into understanding the trajectory of future teaching and learning.

As we stand on the cusp of a post-pandemic era, characterised by distinctive configurations of both formal and informal education, the imperative for a context-sensitive and learner-oriented pedagogy becomes pronounced. The results of this study emphasise the necessity of crafting a sustainable educational platform that is not only responsive to the exigencies of the contemporary milieu, but also anticipates and addresses future challenges. Through a critical exploration of how Iranian EFL learners harness SNS tools to cultivate metacognitive awareness in response to the exigencies of distant/online learning, the study reveals the efficiency of these methods in comparison to traditional face-to-face classrooms. This efficiency, coupled with a forward-looking investment in future education, highlights the transformative potential inherent in adapting to the evolving landscape of education beyond the constraints imposed by the pandemic.

These findings, poised at the intersection of theory and practice, offer actionable insights for policymakers, school leaders, EFL teachers, and students. By informing the creation of optimised environments that enhance both the process of teaching and the experience of learning, the research contributes to the ongoing discourse on the transformative potential of metacognitive adaptations in the post-pandemic educational landscape.

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HỆ THỐNG MẠNG XÃ HỘI TRONG VIỆC NÂNG CAO HIỂU BIẾT VỀ SIÊU NHẬN THỨC: NGHIÊN CỨU TRƯỜNG HỢP NHỮNG NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH KHÔNG CHÍNH THỨC Ở IRAN SAU ĐẠI DỊCH

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Tóm tắt: Trong bối cảnh giáo dục từ xa ngày càng phát triển và sự phụ thuộc vào công nghệ trong giáo dục ngày càng lớn, nhu cầu điều tra các nguồn lực ngôn ngữ và văn hóa gắn liền với việc người học sử dụng hệ thống mạng xã hội (SNS) như một nền tảng sư phạm hợp pháp - cả trong môi trường chính thức và không chính thức, càng trở nên cấp thiết hơn. Trong những hình thức dạy - học mới và độc đáo sau đại dịch, cần có một phong cách học “hợp thời” để đảm bảo một nền tảng giáo dục bền vững cho người học ngôn ngữ, một nền tảng có thể đáp ứng những thách thức trong tương lai. Bài viết này là một khám phá quan trọng về cách những người học tiếng Anh ở Iran đã sử dụng các công cụ SNS để xây dựng và nâng cao hiểu biết về siêu nhận thức nhằm đối phó với áp lực của việc học tập từ xa/trực tuyến do đại dịch gây ra, cũng như cách nó tạo điều kiện cho các phương pháp tiếp cận mới hiệu quả hơn so với cách học chính thức “mặt giáp mặt”, và việc học tập như vậy có thể tạo nên sự đầu tư đáng kể như thế nào cho giáo dục của người học trong tương lai. Nghiên cứu định tính này bao gồm một cuộc điều tra chuyên sâu về sinh viên học tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ (EFL) từ ba trung tâm tiếng Anh ở Tehran, Iran thông qua các cuộc phỏng vấn bán cấu trúc nhằm nhận diện sự hiểu biết của họ về việc nâng cao siêu nhận thức trong hai năm vừa qua sau đại dịch. Những phát hiện này có thể cung cấp thông tin cho các nhà hoạch định chính sách, lãnh đạo nhà trường, giảng viên và sinh viên EFL về cách tạo ra một môi trường tối ưu hơn nhằm nâng cao hiệu quả việc dạy và học.

Từ khóa: mạng xã hội, dạy và học sau đại dịch, bản sắc người học, đầu tư vào học tập, siêu nhận thức