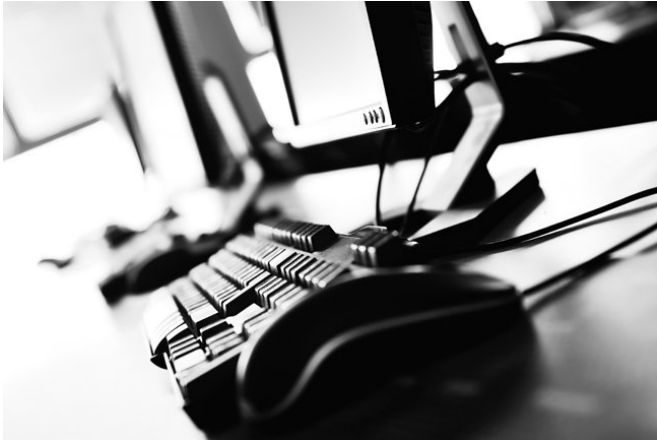


Social media's impact in an English language classroom

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Credit: University of Minnesota

Somali refugees from the civil war had access to very few functioning schools during wartime, followed by long waits in refugee camps before resettlement in the United States. This has resulted in a high incidence of low print literacy among many Somali adolescents in Minnesota.

As Minnesota is home to the largest Somali population in the United States, helping this population of students increase their English literacy skills is an important focus for many educators.

To address this issue, researchers from the University of Minnesota's College of Education and Human Development examined the potential of [social media](#) to support English as a Second Language (ESL) and literacy development among recently arrived Somali youth in the Twin Cities.

The study—published in the *Journal of Language, Identity and Education*—aimed to find new ways to leverage youths' social [media](#) practices to strengthen their engagement in classroom activities by providing compelling opportunities for

writing about themselves in a relevant, familiar medium.

The research team piloted a social media unit where students shared images, reflections and aspirations via social media and traditional classroom media. They learned that:

- the students' online posts were affirmed by their peers, which served as positive reinforcement for their writing in nondigital formats;
- instructors noted that this resulted in more complex use of language on both digital and nondigital formats than previously seen from their students;
- writing and sharing in a safe, familiar online space resulted in more extensive use of written English and richer and more interactive learning experiences in the group compared to offline alternatives.

"Findings from this research are relevant to all classroom teachers in our region," said Kendall King, an author of this study and professor of Second Language Education in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction. "While many refugee-background youth do not have a wealth of experience in formal academic writing, many are highly competent communicators and writers using social media. Students had mastered the technical aspects of using Facebook and also understood that social media is a powerful communication tool and connector."

"Overall, our research underlines the power of social media in providing a space for students to meaningfully practice writing skills," said Jen Vanek, recent Ph.D. graduate and currently director of Digital Learning and Research at the EdTech Center @ World Education.

"We need to leverage youth-mediated pedagogies to teach literacy," said Martha Bigelow, a professor

in the Department of Curriculum & Instruction. "The powerful attraction of social media in classrooms can help students connect who they are in and out of school among peers and with their teachers."

Provided by University of Minnesota

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