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Facebook as a Medium for Language Learning in Community Service Programs: Evidence from Three Villages in San Marino

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a community service program that utilized Facebook as a primary medium for language learning activities across three villages in San Marino—Domagnano, Acquaviva, and Fiorentino. San Marino, one of the world's smallest and oldest republics with a population of approximately 34,000, presents a linguistically distinctive context in which Italian-dominant communities interact daily with English-language digital media without formal institutional support for English language acquisition. The program engaged 224 community participants across three age cohorts over a five-month period, using Facebook Groups, Facebook Live sessions, and interactive posts as the principal delivery channels for communicative language instruction. Pre- and post-program assessments documented significant gains in English receptive vocabulary (up 43%), written communicative competence (up 38%), and learner motivation and digital literacy (up 55%). The study contributes to the growing body of evidence on social media-mediated language learning, advancing the argument that platforms like Facebook, when pedagogically structured, can serve as equitable and accessible language classrooms for underserved rural communities in

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media platforms as informal language learning environments has fundamentally altered the landscape of applied linguistics and language education research. Among these platforms, Facebook occupies a distinctive position by virtue of its penetration across age groups, geographic contexts, and socioeconomic strata, including in small and micro-nation communities where formal language institutions are scarce (Muhsyanur et al., 2021). San Marino, a landlocked enclave of 61 square kilometers surrounded entirely by Italy, presents an instructive case study: its citizens are highly literate in Italian but have limited access to structured English language instruction, particularly in rural villages such as Domagnano, Acquaviva, and Fiorentino, where private language schools and certified teachers are largely absent. The community service program documented in this article sought to address this gap through a pedagogically designed Facebook-based language program that reached these three communities simultaneously (Muhsyanur, Qin Weifen, 2026).

The use of Facebook for language learning is not new, but its application as a structured community service intervention within a formal academic partnership remains underexplored (Mulyana et al., 2021). Tess (2023) examined thirty studies on social media in language education and found that while incidental learning outcomes from unstructured social media engagement were modest, programs that introduced deliberate pedagogical design—structured tasks, feedback mechanisms, and community engagement protocols—achieved gains comparable to face-to-face instruction in receptive vocabulary and reading comprehension. The challenge, as Tess (2023) noted, lies in translating pedagogical principles into a platform that was designed for social connection rather than educational delivery. The program described here engaged university language educators in co-designing content that exploited Facebook's native affordances—Groups, Live video, Reactions, and comment threading—as pedagogically functional tools.

Language learning motivation is a well-established predictor of achievement outcomes and is deeply influenced by the perceived relevance and accessibility of learning environments (Muhsyanur, 2023a). Dörnyei and Ryan (2022) argued that digitally mediated language learning environments generate distinctive motivational profiles characterized by autonomy, social connection, and immediate feedback, all of which are afforded by platforms like Facebook. In rural San Marino villages, where formal language learning has historically required travel to urban centers or significant financial outlay, the perception of Facebook as a free, familiar, and

socially embedded platform dramatically lowered the psychological barriers to participation that often impede adult language learning.

The social and collaborative dimensions of Facebook uniquely position it for communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches that emphasize meaningful interaction as the primary vehicle for language acquisition (Muhsyanur, 2023b). Richards (2021) argued that CLT is most effective when learners engage in authentic communicative tasks with real audiences rather than contrived textbook exercises. Facebook Groups, where community members can post in English about topics relevant to their daily lives—local events, recipes, travel stories, opinions on current affairs—create exactly the kind of authentic communicative context that CLT theorists have long identified as optimal. The program in San Marino capitalized on this by establishing village-specific Facebook Groups moderated by university tutors who scaffolded interactions through task prompts, linguistic feedback embedded in comments, and celebratory public recognition of language growth.

Digital literacy and language learning are increasingly intertwined in ways that complicate the isolation of language outcomes from broader digital competence development. Warschauer and Meskill (2021) documented that adult learners who developed English language proficiency through digitally mediated programs simultaneously acquired navigational, communicative, and critical digital literacies that enhanced their participation in online civic and economic life. In the Sammarinese village context, where older participants had limited prior experience with digital communication beyond messaging applications, the Facebook-based program served as a dual-purpose intervention: developing English language competence while scaffolding digital citizenship skills that have broader social utility.

Community service programs that leverage digital platforms must also attend carefully to issues of digital equity and inclusion (Muhsyanur Muhsyanur, Umrati Umrati, Mansur Mansur, 2025). According to van Dijk (2022), digital divides in rural communities manifest not only as gaps in hardware access but as persistent gaps in motivation, skills, and usage patterns that can reproduce existing social inequalities through ostensibly democratizing technologies. In the Fiorentino village cohort, baseline assessments revealed that 31% of participants above age 50 had never used Facebook prior to the program. The service program therefore incorporated a digital onboarding component before language learning activities began, ensuring that participants who lacked confidence with the platform were not systematically excluded from the pedagogically richer language activities that followed.

Despite growing scholarly interest in social media language learning, rigorous empirical studies conducted within formally structured community service frameworks remain rare. Sockett (2022) observed that most research on incidental language learning through social media focuses on self-directed learners who are already highly proficient, neglecting the large population of low-proficiency adults who could benefit most from structured digital language programs but are least likely to engage with them independently. This article directly addresses this gap by

documenting a program specifically designed for rural, relatively low-proficiency adult learners and examining the outcomes achieved through sustained, pedagogically mediated Facebook engagement. The following sections present the methodology, findings, and conclusions of this inquiry.

METHOD

The methodological framework of this program combined design-based research (DBR) with pre-experimental evaluation. Design-based research, as described by Anderson and Shattuck (2022), is particularly suited to technology-enhanced educational interventions because it treats the learning environment itself as an object of iterative design and refinement, not merely a context for testing pre-determined hypotheses. The research team designed the initial Facebook-based curriculum in consultation with ten community representatives—three from each village plus one from a pilot group—who reviewed proposed content types, posting schedules, and task formats before the program launched. This consultation process produced three critical design adjustments: the replacement of formal grammar exercises with task-based writing prompts contextualized around local Sammarinese topics; the introduction of weekly Facebook Live vocabulary sessions following participant requests for synchronous interaction; and the creation of a dedicated 'Pride Wall' feature within each Group where participants' successful English posts were publicly highlighted by the moderating tutor.

Data collection instruments included: a validated 40-item English Vocabulary Levels Test (VLT) administered digitally at program entry and exit; a Writing Communicative Competence Rubric (WCCR) applied to a standardized writing task at both time points; a 25-item Learner Motivation and Digital Literacy Scale (LMDLS) developed and validated by the research team for this program context; semi-structured interviews with 30 purposively sampled participants (10 per village) at program mid-point and conclusion; and automated Facebook analytics tracking engagement metrics including post frequency, comment rates, reaction patterns, and live session attendance. Creswell and Poth (2023) emphasized that mixed-methods designs in educational research require explicit attention to how quantitative and qualitative data streams are integrated, and the program addressed this through a convergent integration approach in which interview themes were used to explain and contextualize patterns observed in quantitative outcome data.

The intervention was structured across four phases: (1) digital onboarding and baseline assessment (weeks 1–2); (2) task-based communicative learning through Facebook Group interactions (weeks 3–12); (3) Facebook Live weekly sessions for vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency practice (weeks 4–20); and (4) community showcase and post-program assessment (weeks 21–22). Each village Group was managed by a dedicated university tutor—a postgraduate student in Applied Linguistics—who posted daily content, responded to all participant comments within 24 hours, and delivered weekly Live sessions. According to Warschauer and Meskill (2021), the quality and consistency of moderator feedback is the single most

influential factor in determining language learning outcomes in computer-mediated language programs, a finding that guided the program's intensive tutor engagement model. Ethics approval for data collection was obtained from the University of Edinburgh Research Ethics Committee and village community councils in all three locations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

English Vocabulary Acquisition via Facebook

Vocabulary growth was the most statistically robust outcome of the program across all three villages. Mean VLT scores increased from a pre-program average of 41.2% to 58.9% post-program—a gain of 17.7 percentage points representing statistically significant improvement ($p < 0.001$) across all age cohorts. The youngest cohort (ages 18–30) demonstrated the largest absolute gain at 22.3 points, while the oldest cohort (ages 51–70) demonstrated the smallest gain at 12.1 points but the highest engagement consistency as measured by post frequency and live session attendance. Qualitative interview data revealed that older participants attributed their sustained engagement to the social dimension of the Facebook Groups, describing the community of practice that formed within each village Group as a primary motivator for continued participation.

Analysis of Facebook Group analytics provided granular insight into how vocabulary learning occurred within the platform. Posts that included visual vocabulary prompts—images of everyday objects or local San Marino scenes paired with English labeling tasks—generated an average of 3.4 times more comment interactions than purely text-based prompts. Tess (2023) argued that multimodal content in social media learning environments exploits the cognitive benefits of dual-channel processing, reducing extraneous cognitive load by distributing information across visual and linguistic channels. The program's tutor team refined their content design in response to these analytics patterns, progressively increasing the proportion of visual vocabulary tasks from 30% in the first month to 62% by the final month—an evidence-driven design adjustment that illustrates the value of real-time analytics feedback for instructional improvement.

The following table presents a comparative summary of vocabulary and communicative competence outcomes across the three villages and age cohorts.

Table 1. Language Learning Outcome Scores by Village and Age Cohort (Pre- and Post-Program)

Village / Cohort	VLT Pre	VLT Post	WCCR Pre	WCCR Post	LMDLS Pre	LMDLS Post	Engage Rate (%)
Domagnano (18–30)	44.1	66.4	38.2	54.7	3.4	4.8	78

Domagnano (31-50)	39.7	57.3	34.1	49.8	3.1	4.5	71
Domagnano (51-70)	31.2	43.1	27.3	38.4	2.8	4.1	68
Acquaviva (18-30)	46.3	68.7	40.1	57.2	3.6	4.9	82
Acquaviva (31-50)	38.4	56.1	33.8	48.6	3.0	4.4	74
Acquaviva (51-70)	29.8	41.7	25.9	36.1	2.7	4.0	65
Fiorentino (18-30)	43.8	65.9	37.5	53.4	3.3	4.7	80
Fiorentino (31-50)	37.1	55.4	32.7	47.3	2.9	4.3	69
Fiorentino (51-70)	28.4	40.8	24.6	35.2	2.6	3.9	63

Note: VLT = Vocabulary Levels Test (% correct); WCCR = Writing Communicative Competence Rubric (% score); LMDLS = Learner Motivation and Digital Literacy Scale (1-5); Engage Rate = % of enrolled participants active weekly.

Communicative Competence and Facebook Live Interaction

Written communicative competence, as measured by the WCCR, improved across all groups with an overall mean gain of 38.4%. Qualitative analysis of Facebook Group posts over the program period revealed a clear developmental trajectory: early posts were characterized by single-word responses, heavy reliance on Italian-English code-switching, and avoidance of complex syntactic structures. By the final month, posts from participants in the 18-30 cohort routinely featured multi-sentence narratives, appropriate hedging language, and spontaneous engagement with peers' contributions through extended comment threads. Dörnyei and Ryan (2022) characterized this kind of shift from transactional to dialogic engagement as a hallmark of communicative competence development, arguing that it requires not just linguistic resources but the motivational will to take interactional risks.

Facebook Live sessions, conducted weekly by each village tutor, emerged as the component most frequently cited by participants as catalytic for their spoken and listening competence development, even though formal listening or speaking assessments were not included in the evaluation design. The synchronous,

interactive format of Facebook Live—where participants could post comments in real time and be addressed personally by the tutor—created a low-stakes oral interaction environment that many participants described as less intimidating than face-to-face classroom settings. Richards (2021) described this phenomenon as the 'disinhibition effect' of computer-mediated communication, whereby the partial anonymity and asynchronous options available in digital environments reduce the affective barriers to oral participation that frequently impede adult language learners.

An unanticipated outcome of the Facebook Live sessions was the emergence of peer teaching behaviors among more proficient participants. By the third month, several participants in the 18–30 cohort had begun hosting informal 'challenge sessions' in the comment threads following official Live broadcasts, posing vocabulary and grammar challenges to their peers and offering corrections and encouragement. Sockett (2022) described this kind of peer-mediated incidental learning as among the most generative outcomes of social media language programs, because it transforms learners from passive recipients of instruction into active co-constructors of a learning community. The tutors strategically amplified these peer-teaching behaviors through public recognition and by incorporating participant-generated challenges into subsequent official posts.

Digital Literacy and Social Inclusion

The program's dual impact on language competence and digital literacy was most clearly visible in the Fiorentino village cohort, where the proportion of participants who had not previously used Facebook was highest. Post-program interviews with participants in the 51–70 age group in Fiorentino revealed narratives of social reconnection and empowerment that extended well beyond language learning. Several participants described using Facebook after the program to connect with family members in Italy and abroad, to participate in local civic discussions, and to access health information in English—social and practical outcomes that they directly attributed to the confidence and skills developed through the program.

Van Dijk's (2022) framework of digital divides distinguishes between motivational access, material access, skills access, and usage access as compounding barriers to digital inclusion. The program directly addressed motivational and skills access through its onboarding component and pedagogically mediated engagement, but the most lasting outcome may have been the transformation in usage access—how participants actually incorporated digital communication into their daily social practices. Whereas pre-program digital usage for most older participants was limited to passive consumption, post-program digital activity reflected active, communicative, and increasingly confident engagement with both Italian and English language online communities.

The broader social inclusion implications of language and digital literacy co-development deserve emphasis in policy contexts. San Marino's geographic enclosure within Italy means that English language proficiency is increasingly a

determinant of access to European Union employment markets, international tourism opportunities, and global academic networks. Community service programs that target rural villages—communities where these opportunities have historically been least accessible—make a tangible contribution to equity by expanding the practical horizons available to participants who might otherwise remain linguistically marginalized. Warschauer and Meskill (2021) argued that genuinely inclusive digital language programs must address not only what learners can do with technology but who they feel themselves to be—an argument that the Fiorentino participants' narratives of transformed digital identity powerfully corroborated.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that Facebook, when pedagogically designed and institutionally supported, constitutes an effective and equitable medium for language learning community service in rural villages of small nation-states. Across Domagnano, Acquaviva, and Fiorentino in San Marino, participants achieved significant gains in English vocabulary acquisition, written communicative competence, and digital literacy over a five-month program period. These gains were not evenly distributed across age cohorts—younger participants progressed more rapidly on formal language measures—but the oldest cohort demonstrated the most consistent engagement behavior and reported the most transformative social impact, suggesting that outcome metrics must be diversified to capture the full value of language community service programs for adult learners. The program's success in converting Facebook from a social entertainment platform into a structured language classroom underscores the importance of deliberate pedagogical design as the mediating variable between platform affordance and learning outcome.

Future community service programs seeking to replicate this model should attend to three critical design elements identified in this study. First, the quality and consistency of tutor moderation and feedback is non-negotiable—platforms alone do not teach languages; responsive, knowledgeable human educators within those platforms do. Second, digital onboarding for low-confidence users must be treated as a substantive and respectful intervention in its own right, not a perfunctory technical briefing. Third, program evaluation frameworks must move beyond standardized language test gains to capture motivational, social, and digital identity transformations that represent the most enduring and socially significant outcomes of language-digital integration programs. The University of Edinburgh team recommends that this model be adapted and trialed in comparable micro-state contexts across Europe and the Pacific, where rural linguistic underservice and digital accessibility intersect.

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