

Exploring the Role of Social Network in SLA: What do We Know from Research in the Past Five Years?

Jingjing Wang¹ , Mohd Rashid Mohd Saad^{2*} , Yueh Yea Lo³ , Cuojie Leng⁴ 

¹Department of Language and Literacy Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: s2129034@siswa.um.edu.my

²Department of Language and Literacy Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: msaadmr@um.edu.my

³Department of Language and Literacy Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: janice@um.edu.my

⁴Department of Language and Literacy Education, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Email: s2119313@siswa.um.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Social networks play a critical role in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), particularly as learners engage in varied social interactions that shape their language use and development. In recent years, Computational Social Network Analysis (SNA) has seen rising adoption in investigating the influence of learners' social network structures and dynamics on language learning outcomes, including language proficiency, development trajectories, and experiences in study-abroad contexts. This study aims to systematically examine and synthesize empirical research conducted over the past five years to identify how different features of social networks support or hinder SLA. A scoping review methodology was adopted, focusing on peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2024 that utilized SNA to explore SLA. The analysis covered studies across diverse learning environments and participant populations. Findings indicate that tightly-knit networks often foster increased language use and exposure, while sparse or homogeneous networks may limit access to linguistic resources. The review also revealed dynamic patterns in how social ties evolve over time and how they correspond to changes in language proficiency. In conclusion, the review underscores the importance of integrating social network perspectives into SLA research and pedagogy. It also identifies several research gaps, including limited longitudinal studies and underexplored sociocultural dimensions of network interactions. Future research should aim to develop more nuanced models of how social connectivity contributes to language learning across diverse contexts.

CORRESPONDING

AUTHOR (*):

Mohd Rashid Mohd Saad
(msaadmr@um.edu.my)

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Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature exploring SLA from the perspective of social networks by reviewing related literatures in the past five years. It found that SLA could be facilitated by positive factors related to social networks, including social networks with native speakers and non-native speakers, and social media.

1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the process by which individuals learn a language beyond their native or first language (Saville-Troike, 2012). SLA can occur in varied contexts, including formal classroom instruction, study-abroad programs, and naturalistic environments where learners are immersed in the target language (Kennedy Terry, 2022; Zhao & Lai, 2023). As a field, SLA is inherently multidisciplinary, integrating insights from linguistics, psychology, education, and sociocultural studies to examine how learners acquire, process, and use additional languages (Gass et al., 2021). Historically, SLA research emphasized cognitive and psycholinguistic perspectives, focusing on issues such as input processing, attention, and memory. However, recent decades have witnessed a growing recognition of the critical role that social, cultural, and contextual factors play in shaping language learning trajectories (Duff, 2019; Block, 2021).

Language functions not only as a structured system of grammar and vocabulary but also as a tool for communication and social interaction. Learners typically acquire new languages through exchanges with peers, teachers, family members, and communities of practice. Social contexts whether classrooms, online forums, or multilingual communities, mediate access to linguistic resources and shape learner identity development (Duff & Doherty, 2019). Social interaction has been shown to facilitate SLA by providing learners with comprehensible input, opportunities for output, corrective feedback, and exposure to cultural norms (Barrot, 2022; Paradowski et al., 2021b). Accordingly, the investigation of learners' social environments has become a central theme in SLA research.

The concept of social networks has gained prominence as a framework for understanding these interactions, particularly in the era of digital globalization. Social networks encompass the connections and relationships learners maintain with others, both online and offline, which in turn shape their access to language resources, learning opportunities, and cultural participation (Mas-Alcolea & Torres-Purroy, 2022; McManus, 2019; Moglen, 2017). Recent studies employing Social Network Analysis (SNA) highlight how structural features such as density, centrality, and tie strength influence learners' exposure to input, willingness to communicate, and integration into linguistic communities (Paradowski et al., 2021b). These approaches underscore the need to view SLA not only through individual cognition but also through patterns of interaction embedded within broader social systems.

Digital technologies and social media platforms have further transformed language learning environments (Barrot, 2022). Platforms such as WhatsApp, WeChat, Instagram, and Discord allow learners to engage in authentic, multimodal communication with both native and non-native speakers. These environments provide opportunities for informal learning, cross-cultural interaction, and identity negotiation that blur the boundaries between formal and informal learning spaces (Barrot, 2022). As a result, social networks both offline and digitally mediated have become integral to understanding SLA processes in contemporary contexts.

Despite the rapid growth of scholarship on social networks in SLA, gaps remain. Much of the existing literature consists of small-scale case studies, often limited to specific contexts such as study-abroad programs or classroom settings (McManus, 2019). There is insufficient synthesis of research that employs computational tools such as SNA, particularly studies conducted between 2019 and 2024. Moreover, little is known about how network structures whether tightly-knit or dispersed influence outcomes such as engagement, proficiency development, and language identity formation. The sociocultural dynamics of networks in multilingual or intercultural environments also remain underexplored.

To address these gaps, the current study conducts a scoping review of empirical research published between 2019 and 2024 on the role of social networks in SLA. Specifically, it aims to identify how network configurations support or constrain language learning, what methodologies are employed, and which theoretical frameworks underpin existing studies. This review is guided by the following questions:

- i. What types of social networks are most commonly examined in SLA research?
- ii. What analytical approaches are used to investigate these networks?
- iii. What consistent findings or debates emerge across the literature?
- iv. What areas remain underexplored and warrant future research?

The next section reviews existing literature on social networks in SLA, the methodology section then outlines the scoping review design, search strategies, and inclusion criteria, findings are presented thematically, and the final section discusses theoretical and pedagogical implications while identifying gaps for future inquiry.

1.1. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a systematic and critical scoping review of empirical research published between 2019 and 2024 on the role of social networks in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Specifically, the study aims to examine how structural and dynamic features of networks including density, centrality, tie strength, and interaction patterns facilitate or constrain language development across classroom, digital, and study-abroad contexts. A second objective is to analyze the extent to which researchers have employed Computational Social Network Analysis (SNA) to investigate SLA processes, with particular focus on outcomes such as language proficiency, learner engagement, and identity formation.

In doing so, the study seeks to identify methodological innovations and limitations in applying SNA to SLA research. Additionally, it intends to highlight critical gaps in the literature, including the scarcity of longitudinal studies, limited attention to multilingual and intercultural settings, and insufficient exploration of sociocultural dimensions in network-mediated learning. Ultimately, this study aspires to advance both theory and practice by proposing concrete directions for integrating social network perspectives into SLA scholarship, pedagogy, and educational policy.

2. Literature Review

This research reviewed the studies on the role of social network in SLA over past five years and found there are three main perspectives on these studies: social network, social network analysis and study abroad.

2.1. Social network

Hull and Durkheim (1894) conceptualised the social network in the nineteenth century, comparing the form and operation of societies to biological systems made up of interrelated elements. He argued that what happened in the society are caused by interactions between individuals rather than specific actions. Social network is also considered as “social circles” (Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015). Socialization is considered as a key factor in developing language for a student (Mas-Alcolea & Torres-Purroy, 2022). Coleman (2013) agrees that students’ global social networks can influence access to language and cultural resources. Social network emerged much earlier than social media. It also could be defined as simply as a collection of social relationships maintained by a person (Gautier, 2019). Social networks have surged in popularity with the rise of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter. However, social networks have been around since the dawn of human society. The examination of social networks may be divided into two paradigms: full networks and personal networks. The former concentrates on general social data transcription, whilst the latter investigates intimate interactions in a face-to-face setting (Gautier, 2019).

2.2. Social network analysis

Considered as the dominant approach, social network analysis (SNA), involves analyzing complete networks. Over time, SNA has increasingly relied on mathematical tools. Paradowski et al. (2021b) employed Computational Social Network Analysis to investigate how social graph topology and peer interaction dynamics influence SLA outcomes among foreign exchange students enrolled in German language courses. Complementing this perspective, Wang (2022) adopts complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) framework to examine the role of SNA in SLA research, particularly in understanding the interplay of emotional factors in the language learning process. The author contends that SNA, with its emphasis on interconnectivity and interdependence within a social network, is an appropriate research approach for investigating the dynamic nature of emotional factors in the classroom learning environment. Using SNA, Paradowski et al. (2021b) investigate how peer interaction dynamics and network structure affect second language learning outcomes, comparing study abroad environments and at-home learning settings. SNA has seen its application in language learning studies. The analysis unit in SNA is not limited to individuals but encompasses a group of persons or systems and their associations. Recent development in SNA, including dynamic network modeling, big data applications, and robust analytic procedures, have enhanced the study of full-network data with complex associations (Wang, 2022).

2.3. Study abroad

Some of previous studies of social network and SLA are about students’ language learning abroad. Using algorithms and metrics from computational SNA, Paradowski et al. (2021b) examines the effects of social network configurations and peer interaction patterns on SLA learning outcomes among international exchange students taking an intense German language course. Strawbridge (2023) investigates the link between learners’ social network typology, their L2 progression, and the implications for designing study abroad curricula in higher education. It uses SNA to describe a type of study abroad sojourner experience and its impact on L2 proficiency development. Comparative analysis of social network in study abroad versus at-home learning environments was conducted (Paradowski et al., 2021a). The authors discussed peer interactions and second language

learning in two contexts. Out-of-class peer contacts for L2 learning during short-term international sojourns were studied (Paradowski et al., 2021a). It shows that immersion in the target language culture is vital for peer acquisition, while interactions with peers at home have little effect on language advancement. A high weighted in-degree in total communication is negatively associated with numerous facets of subjective improvement, but a high weighted out-degree in the target language corresponds strongly with subjective and objective improvement. The intensity with which the instructor communicates with the learner in a non-target language hinders language development. A high weighted in-degree in the target language considerably improves objective development. The study also discovered that learners' network profiles are more evident in homogenous groups. Individual entrance target language competency and psychosocial portrait positively influence learners' social embeddedness in target language communication, but lingua-franca English competence has a negative moderating effect. Frequent interaction with instructors in a non-target language has a detrimental influence on weighted out-degree centrality in the target language, but the intensity of speaking in the target language to strangers and during service interactions has a favourable effect on weighted in-degree centrality. The interplay between participants' social networks and language learning outcomes during study abroad experience was explored (McManus, 2019). This research analyzes linguistic development among British undergraduates pursuing French degrees during their one academic year in France. It investigates the structure of learners' social networks, the languages used within them, and how social environment influences language development. The data demonstrate that learners maintain social networks heavily dominated by L1 users, with little observable shift in this pattern across the observed period.

However, Ning (2022) furthered examined the learning of Catalan by Chinese graduate students in Catalonia, a multilingual culture where Catalan and Spanish are official languages. The Catalan language has long been cherished for its contribution to the region's identity and unity, although Spanish is still the dominant language due to its extensive use. The study investigated the evolution of bilingualism in Catalonia, as well as the real-world experience of acquiring a minority language within bilingual social contexts. The study was conducted in Catalonia, a bilingual society where Spanish is the national official language and Catalan is also widely spoken. The participants were Chinese graduate students with varying levels of proficiency in Catalan. The study focused on their interactions with native speakers of Catalan within their social networks.

3. Research Methods

This study adopts a scoping review methodology to explore and synthesize empirical research on the role of social networks in SLA published between 2019 and 2024. A scoping review was chosen over other review methods (e.g., systematic reviews or meta-analyses) because it is particularly effective for mapping emerging and interdisciplinary fields where conceptual boundaries are still developing (Munn et al., 2021). It enables the identification of key concepts, methodological approaches, and evidence gaps, thereby providing a comprehensive foundation for future research. This methodology follows the framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), subsequently refined by Levac et al. (2010), encompassing five core stages: (1) identifying the research question, (2) systematically locating relevant studies, (3) selecting studies using explicit criteria, (4) charting and extracting data, and (5) collating, summarizing, and reporting the results.

The primary research question guiding this review is: *What does recent empirical research reveal about the influence of social network structures and interactions on SLA processes and outcomes?* Secondary objectives included identifying the range of methodologies employed in these studies, assessing the extent to which computational approaches such as Social Network Analysis (SNA) have been integrated, and highlighting persistent gaps in theory and practice.

To locate relevant studies, a comprehensive and replicable search strategy was conducted across three major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search strategy included various combinations of keywords such as “social networks,” “Second Language Acquisition,” “SLA,” “online language learning,” “digital communication,” and “social interaction in SLA.” Boolean operators and truncation symbols were employed to refine results and ensure inclusivity while minimizing irrelevant returns. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2019 and 2024 and written in English, thereby ensuring both temporal relevance and quality of evidence.

Study selection proceeded in two phases. First, titles and abstracts were independently screened by the research team to ensure reliability in inclusion decisions. Second, full-text articles were examined in detail to determine their suitability for inclusion based on predefined criteria. To be included in the review, studies had to meet the following conditions:

- i. They must be peer-reviewed empirical studies situated within the domain of SLA;
- ii. They must explicitly address the role or influence of social networks (offline or digital) on language learning processes or outcomes;
- iii. They must employ or discuss methodologies such as SNA or similar frameworks relevant to the study of interaction in SLA contexts.

Studies that were purely theoretical, not focused on SLA, or lacking an explicit connection to social networks were excluded. Non-journal publications such as conference proceedings, book chapters, dissertations, and grey literature were also excluded to maintain a high level of academic rigor and replicability.

Following the selection process, the included studies underwent a structured data extraction process using a standardized coding template. For each study, relevant information was compiled, including authorship, year of publication, research context, participant demographics, study design, analytical framework, social network metrics (e.g., centrality, density, tie strength), and reported SLA outcomes such as proficiency development, interactional patterns, or learner identity formation. This process ensured consistency and transparency in data handling, enabling comparability across studies.

To analyze the findings, the study employed thematic analysis as a qualitative synthesis method. This approach facilitated the identification of recurrent themes and conceptual patterns. Prominent themes that emerged included the impact of tightly-knit versus sparse networks on learner interaction, the role of peer communication in language development, the evolving nature of social ties over time, and the influence of digital platforms in enhancing or limiting language exposure. These themes were then consolidated to reflect broader trends related to the facilitators and barriers of SLA within socially networked environments.

In sum, this scoping review provides a comprehensive overview of how social networks contribute to second language development, drawing on the past five years of empirical research. It also identifies important gaps in the literature, such as the need for more longitudinal studies, increased attention to less commonly taught languages, and deeper exploration of the sociocultural dimensions of network-mediated language learning. The methodological rigor of this review provides a robust foundation for understanding the complex interplay between social networks and SLA, and for guiding future research in this growing area.

4. Results

This section presents the key findings of the study in relation to the four research questions formulated earlier. Specifically, the analysis examines (1) the types of social networks that facilitate second language acquisition (SLA), (2) the influence of different interaction patterns within these networks on L2 development, (3) the main challenges and negative factors associated with social network engagement, and (4) the methodological and pedagogical approaches used to investigate these dynamics in SLA contexts. Each of the following sub-sections is structured to correspond directly to one of these research questions.

4.1. Types of Social Networks Facilitating SLA

Results reveal that diverse forms of social networks ranging from classroom-based peer interactions and study-abroad connections to online or digital communities play a crucial role in supporting SLA. The results demonstrate that learners benefit most from social environments that are interaction-rich, inclusive, and sustained over time, as these networks provide authentic opportunities for communication, feedback, and cultural immersion. For instance, frequent and meaningful contact with peers and speakers of the target language (L2) enhances learners' fluency and pronunciation, particularly when both incoming and outgoing interactions are involved (Paradowski et al., 2021a). Similarly, Chinese graduate students studying in Catalonia were found to develop Catalan proficiency more effectively through active engagement with native speakers who offered immediate feedback, corrections, and authentic linguistic input (Ning, 2022). Importantly, the results also highlight that networks involving non-native speakers can be equally beneficial. Studies such as Strawbridge (2023) and McManus (2019) demonstrate that sustained use of the L2 among non-native peers fosters linguistic progress and confidence, thereby challenging the traditional view that language development primarily depends on contact with native speakers. In addition, the increasing role of digital social networks, such as Instagram and Facebook, provides accessible spaces for L2 learning and interaction, with students expressing readiness to integrate these tools into formal and informal learning (Zvarych et al., 2020). Collectively, these results confirm that multiple forms of social networks, physical or digital, native or non-native facilitate SLA when they promote sustained, meaningful communication and learner engagement.

4.2. Influence of Interaction Patterns on L2 Development

The quality, frequency, and diversity of interactions within social networks emerge as critical determinants of L2 development. The results suggest that regular, reciprocal communication in the target language has a stronger impact on language proficiency than the mere existence of social ties. Learners who engage in consistent L2 conversations, regardless of whether the interlocutors are native or non-native speakers, achieve higher

lexical complexity and greater communicative competence (McManus, 2019). Conversely, networks dominated by L1 use or limited to small, homogeneous groups tend to impede progress. For example, students who maintained close-knit peer groups speaking their first language (L1) reported slower linguistic advancement and weaker fluency (Mas-Alcolea & Torres-Purroy, 2022). Furthermore, the results highlight that extroverted learners or those with multiple cross-cultural connections tend to perform better linguistically due to their openness to interaction and exposure to varied speech patterns (Paradowski et al., 2021a). Overall, the evidence indicates that the effectiveness of a social network for language learning depends not merely on its structure but on the interactional quality within it, how often, how deeply, and in what language learners communicate.

4.3. Negative Factors and Challenges in SLA Networks

While social networks often facilitate SLA, the results also reveal several negative factors that constrain language learning. One major challenge is the overreliance on compatriot or same-language peer groups, which limits opportunities to use the target language. A significant negative correlation was found between time spent with same-language peers and L2 performance, suggesting that students surrounded by compatriots have fewer chances to engage in authentic linguistic exchanges (Paradowski et al., 2021a). Another barrier arises when learners operate in environments dominated by their native language, as frequent L1 use has been linked to lower lexical complexity and reduced communicative adaptability (McManus, 2019). Additionally, contextual factors in the host country influence learning outcomes. Students studying in English-speaking destinations such as the United Kingdom or Denmark demonstrate higher fluency and confidence than those studying in non-English-speaking regions like Italy, where opportunities for authentic English interaction are limited (Mas-Alcolea & Torres-Purroy, 2022). The frequent code-switching practices of native speakers, such as the blend of Spanish and Catalan in Catalonia, also complicate target language acquisition (Ning, 2022). These findings underscore that although social networks can enhance SLA, they may simultaneously create barriers when linguistic environments, peer composition, or interactional norms are misaligned with learning goals.

4.4. Methodological and Pedagogical Approaches in SLA Network Research

The findings also highlight the variety of methodological and pedagogical approaches adopted to examine the relationship between social networks and SLA. Quantitative researchers frequently employ Social Network Analysis (SNA) to map relationships among learners and assess metrics such as network density, centrality, and tie strength, which help explain variations in language achievement (Paradowski et al., 2021b). In contrast, qualitative approaches, including in-depth interviews, ethnographic observation, and conversation analysis, provide rich insights into learners' lived experiences and emotional engagement within social networks (Ning, 2022). Mixed-methods designs integrate these perspectives, combining computational measures with interpretive analyses to capture both the structure and meaning of interpersonal connections (McManus, 2019). Pedagogically, these methodological insights emphasize the importance of fostering authentic social interaction in educational settings. Teachers can design classroom practices that simulate real-life social networks by integrating collaborative digital platforms, peer feedback mechanisms, and intercultural exchanges. Such pedagogical applications promote learner autonomy, motivation, and belongingness, factors that sustain language learning beyond the classroom. Overall, these

methodological and pedagogical perspectives confirm that understanding SLA through a social network lens requires integrating both analytical rigor and contextual sensitivity.

5. Conclusion

This study reviews the relationship between social network and SLA. Social network is strongly linked to SLA. It facilitates or hinders the development of L2 in different contexts. By aligning with the four guiding research questions, this review identifies distinct types of networks, common analytical frameworks, consistent empirical patterns, and key research gaps. Based on previous review, future research directions are suggested. Longitudinal data is a need for further research. Future experiments may collect many data at regular intervals to permit systematic dynamic time series analysis and growth curve modelling. This allows for the tracing of the organization of social network structures over time, as well as the changes in study outcomes. The impact of social network structure on language development (Paradowski et al., 2021a). Subsequent study should also take a step back and look at the mechanics of network building.

According to Wang (2022), using the SNA approach can increase L2 instructors' knowledge of the impact spheres of social agents in the classroom setting. There is optimism that future study might employ qualitative research technique to uncover more about the subtle evolution of L2 learners' emotional constructs embedded within the live social network of classroom learning.

Future research should also focus on quickly shifting environment, particularly the form of restructured programmes as institutions and independent providers work to recover from pandemic-related failures. Future research may incorporate additional network variables, such as measures of centrality that would emphasise the various levels of influence exhibited by individuals in a network (Strawbridge, 2023).

More approaches to SLA are needed that can rigorously operationalize and map students' social embeddedness from the perspectives of both themselves and their alters (both other students, as in this study, and significant other contacts), as well as explain the observed relationships in a coherent model. The methodology of computational SNA (measuring the impact of centrality metrics on L2 improvement) and anthropological SNA (describing group dynamics) has the potential to bridge this gap and investigate the relationships between social interaction dynamics and L2 development in greater depth and systematicity (Paradowski et al., 2021a).

More research on the influence of the factors (language aptitude, acculturation, personality, target language and social networks) in predicting perceived L2 development on different populations is definitely required (Forsberg Lundell et al., 2023).

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This scoping review is based exclusively on previously published literature and did not involve human participants or the collection of primary data. Accordingly, ethical approval and informed consent were not required. The study was conducted in accordance with the institutional Research Ethics Committee's guidelines, upholding the principles of responsible and ethical research conduct.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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