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Digital English as Pragmatic Repertoire: A Corpus-Pragmatic Study of Multimodal Change and EFL Pedagogy

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Abstract
Digital platforms greatly influence online communication and English use. This study uses mixed methods and corpus-based pragmatics to examine how social media changes English at the lexical, syntactic, semantic, typographic, multimodal, and discourse levels, to improve EFL teaching. Analyzing 70,000 posts from seven platforms (X, Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp, Discord, Telegram) from January to December 2025, the study examines linguistic innovations, pragmatic features, and multimodal tokens. The study also gathered data from 50 expert interviews and surveys of 160 stakeholders, including teachers, creators, moderators, and learners. Results show that abbreviations, multimodal tokens, and lexical innovations are common, while non-standard syntactic structures are comparatively rare compared with surface-level lexical, typographic, and multimodal innovations. Digital communication shifts pragmatic emphasis to lexical, orthographic, typographic, and visual features, while basic syntax remains largely unchanged. Participants highlighted benefits such as expressivity and engagement, but noted issues including register confusion, exclusion, cultural appropriation, and algorithm-driven language. The study concludes that digital

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English functions as a multimodal pragmatic toolkit and recommends including it in EFL curricula and training.
Keywords: *digital pragmatics, multimodal discourse, social media, digital literacies, EFL pedagogy*

INTRODUCTION

Human communication has always been shaped by the tools at our disposal, but in the twenty-first century digital platforms have intensified this relationship and made it more complex than ever before (Crystal, 2001; Salfin et al., 2024). Today, social media, messaging apps, and online communities play a major role in everyday interaction, creating settings where people use written and visual materials as readily and widely as spoken language. Scholars argue that this shift has produced a new kind of "digital literacy" in which understanding and producing messages involves navigating a complex array of signs, symbols, images, and algorithms (Crystal, 2011; Jones & Hafner, 2021). In these environments, although knowledge of Standard English remains essential, it is no longer enough: users must interpret and manage a wide variety of pragmatic and multimodal signals (Grewal et al., 2022).

From a corpus-pragmatic perspective, these developments call for a systematic examination of how pragmatic functions such as stance-taking, face-work, alignment, and irony are realized in large sets of naturally occurring digital discourse (Zappavigna, 2022; Lyons & Tagg, 2024). Rather than treating abbreviations, emojis, or typographic features as minor "add-ons," corpus pragmatics views them as frequent, annotatable resources that perform interactional functions and can therefore be quantified, compared across platforms, and interpreted qualitatively. This study adopts this corpus-pragmatic approach and uses an annotated multi-platform corpus to examine how digital English forms a multimodal pragmatic repertoire and how EFL teaching can incorporate it.

Research into Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) shows that platform features and social interactions shape language conventions. The internet has enabled 'networked individualism' (Zappavigna, 2022), in which people develop highly personal

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linguistic identities for loosely connected audiences. In this setting, people prioritize communicative efficiency and emotional expression over traditional rules of language use. Online writing has become more conversational, blurring the boundaries between spoken language and written text, while also promoting a 'typographic tone of voice' in which capitalization, punctuation, and spacing express one's stance and emotions (McCulloch, 2023).

Meanwhile, digital discourse is becoming more multimodal, with emojis, GIFs, stickers, and visual memes appearing alongside text and often playing a key role in conveying meaning. For instance, research on engagement with Twitter/X has found that posts that include emojis receive considerably more interaction, indicating that these elements are not merely decorative but form part of the core of communication (McShane et al., 2021). More recent studies treat emojis as illocutionary force-indicating devices (IFIDs) that shape tone, politeness, and alignment in brief messages (Uzan et al., 2025; Al-Rawi, 2025). Researchers also claim that sequences of emojis exhibit a restricted 'grammar of visual language' (Cohn et al., 2019). At the same time, research on AI-mediated communication and predictive text points to the emergence of algorithmic mediation, in which language models and recommendation systems determine which varieties of English become more visible or are considered normative (McShane et al., 2021; Martins et al., 2024).

Although interest in these developments is growing, their effects on English linguistics and on EFL teaching remain unclear. Much of the public discussion still views digital English as a threat to 'proper' language, and educational responses continue to swing between banning digital features (for example, abbreviations and emojis) and simply celebrating them without critical thought. Empirical, theory-informed research needs to treat digital English as a practical, multimodal repertoire, investigate where and how change occurs, and examine how educators can use this repertoire responsibly in language education.

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Corpus Pragmatic Perspective

Corpus pragmatics combines techniques from corpus linguistics with concepts and issues from pragmatics and discourse analysis (Kaibel, 2026). Rather than focusing solely on word frequencies, corpus-pragmatic studies examine how pragmatic functions such as taking a stance, showing politeness, achieving alignment, and using humor are realized through recurring lexico-grammatical and discursive patterns in large datasets. Researchers typically combine quantitative distributional analysis with detailed qualitative examination of concordance lines and text sections. For example, in digital environments, corpus pragmatics has shown how users indicate affiliation and disaffiliation on Twitter through quotation and irony, and how politeness strategies differ across online communities.

In this study, a corpus-pragmatic approach is applied in two ways. On the one hand, categories such as ABB, MM, TYPO, and PRAG are clearly defined as pragmatic resources that can be searched, counted, and compared across platforms. On the other hand, the quantitative patterns derived from this kind of annotation are then explained qualitatively in terms of the interactional functions they serve—for example, how emojis function as illocutionary force-indicating devices, how abbreviations serve as markers of in-group identity, or how typographic features create a "tone of voice" that either reduces or increases the impact of face-threatening acts. This dual approach lets the analysis go beyond simply listing forms and instead explain how digital English functions as a multimodal pragmatic repertoire.

The study addresses three gaps in the existing literature. The first concerns the extent of linguistic change in digital environments. Discussions currently focus on individual phenomena—for example, slang, abbreviations, or emojis—without systematically comparing their relative frequency or examining how they interact across multiple platforms. What is needed is large-scale corpus research that treats digital English

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as undergoing simultaneous changes across multiple aspects: lexical, semantic, syntactic, typographic, multimodal, and discourse-pragmatic.

Corpus-based research on digital language has usually focused either on lexical innovation or on individual multimodal features such as emojis, including their pragmatic functions in WhatsApp interaction (Sampietro, 2019). By contrast, far less research examines several pragmatic resources simultaneously within an annotated corpus or investigates how these resources group at the post level. It is therefore necessary to adopt a corpus-pragmatic approach that treats abbreviations, emojis, typographic cues, and pragmatic markers as resources that are available together if the full range of digital repertoires is to be understood.

The second area concerns theory. Although many empirical studies of digital English draw on ideas from pragmatics and discourse analysis (Bondi & Cacchiani, 2021; Xie et al., 2021), they rarely apply an explicit pragmatic framework when constructing their categories or interpreting the data. As a result, researchers tend to focus on surface forms rather than the underlying communicative actions that make them possible. It is especially important to adopt a theoretically clear approach when examining how digital language practices allocate work among lexical items, orthography, visual tokens, and interactional routines, and how these distributions vary by platform.

In corpus pragmatics, category design is not merely a technical issue but a theoretical one, since the categories selected reflect assumptions about what constitutes pragmatic work and how it should be distributed across the various levels of analysis. Without an explicit framework, annotation risks collapsing diverse phenomena or missing subtle but frequent patterns of stance and alignment.

A third aspect concerns education. Research on digital literacies shows that it is important to prepare learners to participate in online environments, and some classroom studies indicate that activities on Twitter, Instagram, or similar platforms can increase students' motivation (López-Serrano, 2025), vocabulary (Alhajaji et al., 2020), and engagement (Prasetyawati & Ardi, 2020). Yet formal curricula and assessment systems

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still largely focus on monomodal, decontextualized texts, and many teachers remain uncertain about whether and how to include digital varieties. The practical difficulties associated with digital English—particularly politeness, alignment, humor, and avoiding offense—are seldom addressed systematically in EFL materials. Therefore, there is a need for research that links corpus-based descriptions of digital pragmatics with stakeholder-informed, contrastive pedagogical guidelines designed to raise register awareness rather than prescribe untested interventions.

From a corpus-pragmatic teaching perspective, classroom materials lack examples of these patterns: for example, concordances of emojis used to soften disagreement, sets of abbreviations found in workplace WhatsApp conversations, or groups of typographic strategies used to indicate irony. Although such resources could support explicit teaching of digital pragmatics, they do require detailed descriptive analysis of authentic corpora.

To address these gaps, the current study uses a dual theoretical framework integrating digital pragmatics and digital literacies. Digital pragmatics views features such as abbreviations, emojis, hashtags, typographic patterns, and discourse markers as resources for carrying out illocutionary acts, managing face, and negotiating stance during interaction. This approach highlights how users modify their language according to their audience, the platform, and the situation, as well as how pragmatic work is distributed across words, symbols, images, and orthographic strategies. Digital literacies offer a complementary educational perspective, emphasizing that learners need not only the technical skills to use digital tools but also a critical awareness of how meaning is created across different modes and how power and inequality are perpetuated through online language choices.

In this approach, the researcher treats features such as abbreviations, emojis, typographic conventions, and discourse markers as pragmatic resources that can be searched in a corpus, and interprets their distribution and co-occurrence using corpus-pragmatic methods.

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In this framework, the study examines three research questions. The first concerns how digital communication affects linguistic change in English, broadly defined as changes in lexical forms, meanings, sentence structures, typographic conventions, and multimodal practices. The second seeks to determine which of the components—lexical, syntactic, semantic, typographic, multimodal, or other—is most affected by this influence. The third investigates how EFL instruction can integrate the multimodal features of social media sites—focusing specifically on X as a pedagogical case study due to its public, text-anchored, multi-turn reply structure—to foster critical register awareness and pragmatic competence without compromising formal academic writing skills.

The study advances our knowledge in three main respects. First, it produces one of the largest currently available annotated corpora of English digital discourse, covering seven major platforms and systematically identifying lexical, semantic, syntactic, typographic, multimodal, and pragmatic features. Second, it develops and applies a clear coding scheme grounded in pragmatic and multimodal theory, enabling a detailed analysis of how specific resources are used across platforms. Third, it combines corpus results with perspectives from experts, teachers, content creators, moderators, and learners, linking descriptions of digital English to issues in pedagogy and practice.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study used a mixed-methods approach, combining large-scale corpus analysis with input from a wide range of stakeholders (see Table 1). For the quantitative part, a multi-platform corpus of English digital discourse was created and annotated. In the qualitative part, data were gathered via interviews with experts and questionnaires administered to teachers, content creators, moderators, and learners (see Appendices D and E). Both the quantitative and qualitative components addressed the same research questions and were integrated during the interpretation phase. The quantitative analyses are corpus-based and corpus-pragmatic, examining how pragmatic and multimodal features are distributed

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across platforms and linking these patterns to the qualitative interpretations of discourse functions.

Table 1. Breakdown of the qualitative participants by role and region (N = 160)

Role	N	%	Major Regions Represented
Academic researcher	40	25	UK; US; China; Brazil
EFL teacher (K–12)	40	25	Spain; Indonesia; Mexico
EFL teacher (Higher ed)	24	15	Saudi Arabia; Sudan; Yemen; Egypt
Curriculum designer/materials writer	12	7.5	Global
Content creator/influencer	20	12.5	US; Nigeria; Philippines
Community moderator/platform practitioner	12	7.5	Global
EFL learners (varied proficiencies)	12	7.5	Multiple L1s
Total	160	100	

Table 2. Participant qualifications and practitioner status (N = 160)

Category	N	%
PhD / equivalent (academia)	40	25
MA / MEd / CELTA-qualified teachers	56	35
In-service teachers (no advanced degree)	36	22.5
Industry professionals (platform/edtech)	12	7.5
Active content creators/moderators	16	10
Total	160	100

As shown in Table 2, 25 percent of the participants hold doctoral degrees, and 35 percent have advanced teaching qualifications. The remainder consists of in-service teachers, industry professionals, and active content creators or moderators. This variety of backgrounds ensures representation of both academic and practical viewpoints (see Appendix E, Tables E1–E4).

Corpus construction and sampling

The corpus was constructed and validated across sequential, methodologically distinct datasets to separate codebook development from main-corpus analysis: First, *Exploratory Schema-Induction Dataset (N = 10,000 tweets from X):* In the initial developmental phase, 10,000 English-dominant posts were retrieved from X via its official API using targeted Boolean queries for common digital discourse markers. This preliminary dataset was used exclusively to inductively refine the coding categories and build the annotation manual (see Appendix C); it was completely excluded from the final 70,000-post main corpus.

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Second, *Main Multi-Platform Corpus (N = 70,000 posts):* In the second stage, the main corpus was compiled across seven platforms: X, Instagram, TikTok, Reddit, WhatsApp, Discord, and Telegram (10,000 public posts per platform, collected between January and December 2025). Unlike the exploratory dataset, the main corpus was gathered using time-stratified sampling across weekly windows *without* feature-based Boolean filtering to prevent artificially inflating innovation rates.

To ensure cross-platform comparability despite structural and API differences, shared inclusion criteria were strictly enforced: posts had to be primarily in English (verified via automated language identification while permitting localized code-mixing), contain at least three lexical words or one word plus a multimodal token, and represent original posts or direct replies rather than unedited reposts. For video- and image-centric platforms (TikTok and Instagram), where API endpoints and layout architectures prioritize visual media and brief captions, sampling targeted English text captions and top-level comment threads meeting the minimum token threshold, excluding media-only or standalone emoji reactions.

Regarding messaging platforms (WhatsApp and Discord), ethical and privacy protocols strictly prohibit harvesting private dyadic or closed-group conversations without individual consent. Consequently, data from WhatsApp and Discord were collected exclusively from public, opt-in community servers and public broadcast/discussion channels. The subcorpora explicitly represent public, *community-facing group discourse* rather than private interpersonal messaging. Accordingly, cross-platform statistical comparisons (e.g., chi-square tests and mixed-effects regressions) were interpreted as reflecting differences across *publicly accessible platform communicative environments and affordances* rather than essentialist platform traits.

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Finally, to examine highly visible viral phenomena without biasing baseline corpus frequencies, an auxiliary high-engagement subgroup ($n = 3{,}500$; 500 posts per platform above the 95th percentile of platform interaction metrics) was sampled separately. In all statistical reporting, baseline corpus frequencies (see Table 6) are derived strictly from the unweighted time-stratified main corpus ($N = 70{,}000$), while engagement is modeled as a covariate in regression analyses; comparing unweighted and engagement-weighted estimates revealed a mean category shift of less than 1.8%, confirming that baseline distributions are not driven by viral outliers.

Pre-processing and validation

Automated natural language processing tools were used for initial corpus indexing, URL stripping, and Unicode-aware tokenization so that emojis and clipped characters were segmented as distinct tokens. Crucially, stop-word removal was applied exclusively to automated lexical-frequency indexing and macro-level topic profiling; all human annotation and corpus-pragmatic analyses—particularly for pragmatic markers (PRAG), syntactic structures (SYN), hedges, and discourse particles—were conducted on the intact, unedited post texts alongside their surrounding conversational threads. The automated preprocessing steps (language identification and token normalization) were validated on a separate stratified subsample of 2,100 posts (300 posts per platform) manually verified by three coders. Language identification accuracy exceeded 90%, and abbreviation expansion and emoji mapping reached 92%, with adjudicators resolving ambiguous cases (see Appendices A, B, and C).

An error analysis revealed that most misclassifications occurred in very short posts (one or two tokens) and in cases with heavy code-mixing. These cases were also pragmatically complex, often involving posts that expressed only reactions, such as a single emoji or interjection, where the main intent relied on multimodal and contextual cues. Consequently, posts with low confidence were manually

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reviewed and either corrected or excluded from the quantitative analysis. Sensitivity tests were conducted both including and excluding these items (see Appendix C, Sections C.8 and C.9).

Coding scheme and annotation

Each post served as the unit of analysis and was coded for up to seven categories: lexical innovation, semantic shift, syntactic or grammatical change, typographic grammar, multimodal tokens, abbreviations or clippings, and pragmatic or discourse features. Appendix A lists the 60 most frequent slang and abbreviation items. The annotation manual specified category definitions, inclusion criteria, subtypes, and illustrative examples (see Appendix C). Lexical innovation encompassed new or repurposed lexemes, often associated with particular communities, while semantic shift captured established words used with new meanings. Typographic grammar covered meaningful patterns of capitalization, spacing, and punctuation. Multimodal tokens included emojis, GIFs, stickers, and reaction images that contributed to meaning, whereas pragmatic features included vocatives, disclaimers, tone tags, and other resources for managing interpersonal relations and stance.

The coding scheme linked each category to its potential pragmatic functions. Lexical innovations were examined as possible markers of identity and community alignment, and semantic shifts as instances in which shared pragmatic inferences had become conventionalized. Syntactic variants were assessed for their contribution to informality and emphasis, while typographic grammar was treated as a written representation of prosody. Multimodal tokens were analyzed as illocutionary force-indicating devices (IFIDs), evaluative resources, or stance markers. Abbreviations were considered both efficiency devices and signals of group membership. The pragmatic category (PRAG) covered explicit face-work, mitigation, and stance-taking constructions.

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Coders did not assign fixed meanings to multimodal tokens. Instead, they interpreted their situated pragmatic functions in relation to the surrounding co-text and thread context. Annotation therefore captured conventionalized interactional cues that readers could reasonably infer, rather than claiming access to users' internal psychological intentions. A strict contextual validation rule distinguished functional uses from surface occurrences, such as decorative or habitual repetition of emojis and abbreviations. A functional role was assigned only when the co-text or conversational uptake provided evidence of stance, mitigation, or another relevant interactional function. Otherwise, the item was recorded solely for its surface presence or flagged as ambiguous (see Appendix C.6).

Twelve bilingual and multilingual applied linguistics researchers conducted the annotation. The team represented diverse cultural backgrounds, included L1/L2 speakers of Arabic, English, Spanish, Mandarin, and Malay, and had extensive familiarity with platform-specific subcultures. Following training with the annotation manual, the coders applied the scheme to an independently drawn, multi-platform pilot sample of 7,000 posts, comprising 1,000 posts from each of seven platforms. The pilot preceded annotation of the 70,000-post main corpus. Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha, yielding an overall value of $\alpha = 0.98$. Category-specific values ranged from 0.78 for syntactic change to 0.89 for pragmatic features (Table 3). A senior coder adjudicated disagreements, and the team subsequently refined the boundary rules for the syntactic and pragmatic categories.

Table 3. Annotation Team and Reliability Pilot

Item	Value/Result
Annotation team size	12 annotators

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Pilot sample size	7,000 posts (1,000 per platform × 7 platforms)
Inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff's alpha) overall	0.98
Alpha by category – Lexical	0.85
Alpha by category – Semantic	0.81
Alpha by category – Syntactic	0.78
Alpha by category – Typographic	0.80
Alpha by category – Multimodal	0.86
Alpha by category – Abbrev/Acronym	0.88
Alpha by category – Pragmatic	0.89
Reconciliation protocol	Double annotation + adjudication by senior coder

Note. Low-confidence posts accounted for less than 3.2% of the corpus. Sensitivity analyses compared three conditions: (1) retaining all flagged posts with their original, pre-adjudication codes; (2) excluding all flagged posts; and (3) retaining flagged posts after senior-coder adjudication and recoding where necessary. The adjudicated dataset was used for the primary analyses. Posts with overlapping functions were reviewed against the category definitions during adjudication, and the same category-assignment rules were applied throughout. Category rates were recalculated using the eligible denominator for each condition.

Category rates varied by less than 1.1 percentage points across the three conditions. This variation supports the stability of the reported distributions under alternative treatments of uncertain coding, but it does not rule out systematic bias. Reliability for pragmatic features ($\alpha = 0.89$) exceeded the 0.80 benchmark, whereas reliability for syntactic change ($\alpha = 0.78$) fell slightly below it. Accordingly, the pragmatic–syntactic comparison should be regarded as robust only if its direction remains unchanged across all three sensitivity-analysis conditions.

Following pilot validation, the entire main corpus of 70,000 posts was annotated. To monitor reliability and guard against coder drift throughout this phase, a randomly selected, platform-stratified subsample comprising 15% of the main corpus underwent blind double-coding. This subsample contained 10,500 posts, with 1,500 drawn from each platform. Ongoing inter-coder reliability was $\alpha = 0.81$, and the senior coder resolved discrepancies (see Appendix C.7).

Data Collection Tools

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The qualitative component comprised two distinct, parallel data-collection strands designed to capture both theoretical/curricular expertise and frontline classroom/platform experiences: First, *Expert Interview Strand (N = 50):* Semi-structured online interviews (see Appendix G) were conducted with 50 PhD-holding academic specialists in linguistics, applied linguistics, and digital media communication (see Table 4).

Second, *Practitioner and Stakeholder Survey Strand (N = 160):* A separate mixed-item questionnaire (see Appendices D and E) was completed by a broader cohort of 160 stakeholders across seven roles: academic researchers, K–12 and higher-education EFL teachers, curriculum designers, content creators, community moderators, and EFL learners (see Tables 1, 2, and 5).

Participants in both strands were recruited via purposive sampling through institutional and professional networks. While the 40 academic researchers in the survey strand (see Table 1) represent an international cohort of survey respondents, the 50 interview experts (see Table 4) formed a dedicated interview panel recruited to evaluate theoretical and curricular implications in depth.

Table 4. The demographic distribution of the academic experts (N = 50)

	Experience			**Ranks**			**Affiliation**	
Linguistics experts (n = 31)	5–10 years	10–15 years	> 15 years	Assistant Professor	Associate Professor	Professor	Host Institution	Other
Linguistics experts (n = 31)	11	15	5	14	10	7	20	11
Digital media experts (n = 19)	5	9	5	6	7	6	6	13

All 50 interview experts hold PhDs, comprising 31 linguistics specialists and 19 digital media specialists, with most possessing 10 to 15 years of experience. Slightly over half of the linguistics experts and one-third of the media specialists are affiliated with the host institution (anonymized for review), while the remainder represent external universities, balancing local curricular familiarity with broader

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academic perspectives. Because the qualitative phase prioritized educators, curriculum designers, and specialists responsible for pedagogical decision-making, EFL learners formed a smaller consultative subgroup (n = 12; 7.5% of the survey cohort), a sampling limitation when interpreting learner-level perceptions.

Table 5. Participant experience, teaching context, and platform familiarity (N = 160)

Experience	Count	Teaching/Practice Context	Average Platforms Used
< 5 years	24	Secondary classrooms / private schools	3.8
5–10 years	56	University; language institutes	4.2
> 10 years	80	National curriculum; teacher training	3.7
Total/Mean	160		3.9

Table 5 shows that half of the participants have more than 10 years of experience, and respondents, on average, regularly use about four platforms, indicating both a great deal of professional experience and wide digital engagement.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to determine frequencies and rates for each category by platform and overall. Cross-platform comparisons were conducted to identify patterns, for example, which features were particularly associated with specific platforms. Responses to the questionnaire were summarized using means, standard deviations, and percentages of agreement, and the open-ended responses were analyzed thematically. The interview transcripts were coded to identify recurring pragmatic themes (for example, stance, politeness, alignment, offense, and register awareness). The findings from the corpus and the qualitative themes were then combined in a corpus-pragmatic interpretation that connects the distributional patterns of ABB, MM, TYPO, and PRAG to their functions in interaction and to the participants' perceptions (see Appendix E, Tables E1–E4).

In addition to the descriptive statistics, certain inferential tests were conducted. Chi-square tests were used to compare the prevalence of ABB, MM, and SYN across platforms, and mixed-effects logistic regressions were applied to model the probability of each feature as a function of platform, post length, and engagement, including random

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intercepts for user ID where available. For count data, such as emoji frequencies, negative-binomial models with offsets for post length were estimated. Time-trend analyses were performed on the quarterly aggregates (see Appendix F, Table F1) to determine whether ABB usage showed significant upward or downward trends across platforms.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The Results and Discussion sections are presented together to facilitate interpretation. The first section examines how the coded categories are distributed across the different platforms and answers the first two research questions about how and where digital communication affects English. The second section examines stakeholders' views and discusses the implications for EFL teaching in light of the theoretical framework.

Cross-platform patterns of digital pragmatics

Table 6. The distribution of features by platform (number of posts per platform = 10,000)

Platform	ABB count	ABB/100 posts	MM count	MM/100 posts	SYN count	SYN/100 posts
X	6,200	62.0	2,400	24.0	420	4.2
Instagram	4,300	43.0	5,000	50.0	330	3.3
TikTok	3,800	38.0	4,900	49.0	410	4.1
Reddit	2,400	24.0	1,200	12.0	540	5.4
WhatsApp	5,600	56.0	3,700	37.0	600	6.0
Discord	3,900	39.0	3,100	31.0	450	4.5
Telegram	4,000	40.0	2,800	28.0	320	3.2
Total	30,200	43.1	23,100	33.0	3,070	4.4

**Note that ABB stands for abbreviations, acronyms, and clippings; MM refers to multimodal tokens; and SYN denotes syntactic or grammatical change. The rates are given on a per-100-posts basis. The categories are not exclusive since a post may include more than one of these features.*

Chi-square tests of independence confirmed significant cross-platform variation in the prevalence of ABB ($\chi^2(6, N = 70{,}000) = 3{,}412.8$, $p < .001$), MM ($\chi^2(6, N = 70{,}000) = 4{,}895.4$, $p < .001$), and SYN ($\chi^2(6, N = 70{,}000) = 142.6$, $p < .001$). Mixed-effects logistic regression models controlling for post length, user random intercepts, and engagement similarly indicated that public messaging and microblogging architectures (X and WhatsApp) significantly increased the log-odds of ABB use ($\beta = 0.68$, OR = 1.97, $p < .001$), whereas visual-first environments

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(Instagram and TikTok) strongly predicted MM deployment (β = 0.84, OR = 2.32, p < .001).

From a corpus-pragmatic perspective, Table 6 shows that abbreviations, acronyms, and clippings are the most common phenomena, appearing in 43.1% of posts, especially on X and WhatsApp. This aligns with the colloquialization/conversationalization of online writing (Salfin et al., 2024; Crystal, 2011) and non-syntactic changes (Ovsiienko et al., 2025). Appendix A includes a list of frequent slang and abbreviations with glosses, including standard abbreviations like “LOL”, “BRB”, and “IDK”, as well as numeronyms and creative clippings. Brevity and efficiency are widespread in digital interaction (Joseph & Devi, 2025; Ekayati et al., 2024), especially on X and TikTok. Abbreviations also signal in-group membership but can create comprehension challenges for those unfamiliar. Teachers and learners report benefits and difficulties, noting that while many understand full forms, some struggle with less clear items like “IYKYK” or “POV”, echoing Al-Rawi (2025), where heavy abbreviations can widen the digital divide.

On X, it says, "brb, meeting rn, ttyl" (be right back, right now, talk to you later) — in this case, ABB simplifies the process of taking turns in conversation and indicates a temporary withdrawal while at the same time maintaining good interpersonal relations.

WhatsApp: "Please send the report by EOD thx" — "EOD" (end of day) is a workplace abbreviation that reflects a commitment to efficiency and common professional standards; "thx" (thanks) makes the request less direct. Discord: "gg, that was wild fr" — the terms "gg" (meaning "good game") and "fr" (meaning "for real") both signal alignment and a positive evaluation within the gaming community. In these cases, abbreviations not only save keystrokes but also signal attitude and indicate membership in a particular group. Beyond abbreviations, the remaining five categories similarly operate as compact pragmatic resources across

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the corpus, fulfilling social, prosodic, and interpersonal functions rather than merely altering surface form:

- LEX (TikTok): "This lesson is bussin, no cap" — in this case, youth slang items ("bussin" meaning excellent, and "no cap" meaning no lie) index in-group identity and express an emphatic positive stance.
- MM (Instagram): "Clean your room rn 😭🙏" — the emoji string softens the directness of the imperative and adds humorous mitigation to preserve face.
- TYPO (X): "I am SO tired..." — strategic capitalization and trailing ellipses simulate spoken prosodic stress and signal emotional exhaustion.
- PRAG (Reddit): "No offense, but that argument makes zero sense /s" — the prefatory disclaimer and the "/s" (sarcasm) tone tag explicitly guide pragmatic interpretation and prevent conflict in anonymous discourse.
- SYN (X): "Skipped class today because mental health" — a rare instance of structural variation where subject ellipsis and the prepositional "because + noun" construction compress causal explanation in casual recounting.

Across these categories, digital innovations consistently prioritize pragmatic efficiency, affective alignment, and interpersonal management over structural reorganization.

Lexical innovations account for 29.6% of coded cases and are particularly common on TikTok and Discord (Wan Mohd Muzani & Mohammad Lotfie, 2024; Liu et al., 2024). This includes slang and neologisms such as "bussin", "rizz", and "sus", many of which have originated in specific communities or varieties, such as African American English, gaming culture, and fandoms. The rapid spread of these expressions across platforms shows how digital environments enable bottom-up lexical change (Lyons & Tagg, 2024). Nevertheless, experts and teachers raise concerns about this slang's instability, which can become outdated quickly, and about the unrecognized appropriation of forms from minoritized communities into global English. From a pragmatic perspective, lexical innovations function as

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indexical markers of identity, solidarity, and stance, but EFL learners do not always understand their meanings and sociocultural implications. Appendix A lists items that are dual-coded as LEX or SEM, in addition to ABB, to show these overlaps.

Multimodal tokens, including emojis, GIFs, and stickers, appear in 33.0 percent of the coded cases, with the highest concentrations on Instagram and TikTok and significant use on X, WhatsApp, and Discord (McShane et al., 2021). These visual elements are regularly used for various pragmatic purposes, such as softening imperatives, strengthening evaluations, expressing sarcasm, signaling that everyone finds the situation amusing, or showing the writer's position relative to others (Uzan et al., 2025; Al-Rawi, 2025). The corpus includes numerous instances in which emojis replace or supplement words, functioning as lexical or grammatical items. At times, emoji sequences form narrative strings, consistent with the concept of a visual grammar (Cohn et al., 2019). Appendix B lists the most common emojis in the pilot subset and notes the main pragmatic meanings associated with them, which in turn shaped the MM role attribute in the annotation scheme (Appendix C.3.5). All stakeholders emphasized the importance of these resources for conveying tone, but learners also reported confusion about context-dependent meanings. For instance, some users interpret the skull emoji as indicating extreme laughter, while others are puzzled by its literal connection to death. In corpus-pragmatic terms, these multimodal tokens function as recurring, patterned resources that play roles similar to those of discourse markers and IFIDs in spoken interaction.

Semantic shifts are evident in the corpus and are especially noticeable on websites where formal and informal language converge, for example, on Reddit and WhatsApp. Words like "ping," "bandwidth," and "ghost" take on extended meanings related to messaging, cognitive capacity, and disengagement. The pragmatic use of intensifiers such as "literally" in a non-literal way exemplifies semantic bleaching. These changes show that meanings develop through frequent use and common

contexts, but such shifts can also cause misunderstandings if participants interpret the words in their more traditional senses.

Typographic grammar and pragmatic markers appear across all platforms. The study treats these typographic patterns as a distinct annotation category (TYPO) to enable corpus-pragmatic analysis, showing how users systematically use written form to perform pragmatic functions. Users employ capitalization, punctuation, and spacing to convey a typographic tone of voice (McCulloch, 2023; Han, 2024). All-caps sequences often signal shouting or excitement; multiple exclamation or question marks convey strong emotion or incredulity; deliberate omission of capitalization can signal informality or irony. Pragmatic markers such as “no offense but,” “girl…,” and explicit tone tags like “/s” and “/j” are commonly used to mitigate potential face threats and to indicate whether a message is intended as a joke or as serious. These resources enable detailed pragmatic analysis in brief texts, but they require a shared understanding of the conventions and can be difficult for learners to interpret. The PRAG category in the annotation manual (Appendix C.3.7) includes such mitigation and stance devices, while the TYPO attributes (Appendix C.3.4) record their pragmatic functions.

In contrast, grammatical or syntactic modifications are quite rare, making up just 4.4% of the cases in the coded data. When present, they usually manifest as ellipsis, omitted subjects, fragmentary 'Because X' structures, or unusual shifts in part-of-speech. This suggests that, in the 2025 corpus, the core clause structure remains largely stable, with most innovation happening in how resources are distributed around that structure. This aligns with the idea that digital English isn't characterized by a widespread breakdown of grammar but rather by a redistribution of pragmatic functions to the lexicon, orthography, and multimodal resources (Ovsiienko et al., 2025). The classification rules for patterns labeled as SYN require recurrence across users and contexts (see Appendix C.3.3 and C.5).

Mitigation and politeness.

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On different platforms, users often combine lexical choices, typographic features, and multimodal elements to reduce the risk of embarrassment. For instance, requests on WhatsApp often use ABBs or shortened forms such as 'pls' and 'thx,' along with emojis (for example, 🙏) and hedging adverbials like 'maybe' or 'if you don't mind.' On X and Instagram, people usually soften criticism with disclaimers such as 'no offense but...' and make it less severe by adding laughing or smiling emojis. These combinations function as sophisticated pragmatic packages in which no single element bears the full illocutionary force; corpora can detect the repeated co-occurrence of such patterns.

Irony and sarcasm.

Irony and sarcasm are usually signaled by specific words (for example, "sure, Jan"), typographic cues (such as quotation marks and capital letters), and emojis (for instance, 🙃 or 😏); in some cases, these are reinforced by clear tone tags like "/s". On Reddit, sarcastic replies often use bland lexical material alongside typographic highlighting, while on Discord users place greater reliance on emojis and GIFs. The corpus indicates that explicit tone tags remain relatively uncommon compared with implicit signals, implying that readers must infer ironic intent from the distribution of these pragmatic indicators.

Affiliation and alignment.

On platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, where commenting features highlight replies, expressions of alignment—for example, using "this" as a standalone comment or words indicating agreement like "same" or "so true"—are especially noticeable. The corpus shows that simple tokens such as "same" often appear alongside certain emojis (for instance, 😭 or 🤝), creating multimodal sequences that indicate strong affective alignment.

Offense and conflict.

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Although online aggression is not the main focus of this study, certain patterns of disagreement and offense did emerge. For example, the combination of all caps and repeated punctuation with negative words can escalate a situation, while the inclusion of a laughing emoji or "jk" ("just kidding") can serve as a kind of retroactive softener. Both content creators and moderators said misinterpreting these combinations often causes disputes, especially when users are unfamiliar with the community's pragmatic norms.

Participants' perspectives and pedagogical implications

Information from academic researchers, teachers, content creators, moderators, and learners, gathered through the questionnaire and interview, shows how digital English is experienced and assessed. The academic participants generally agreed that digital communication affects English at multiple levels beyond vocabulary and advocated considering multimodal resources as part of digital grammar (Salfin et al., 2024). Several believed that a specific digital English register can be described and that EFL learners should receive explicit instruction on its features, provided this is done in contrast to formal academic norms to maintain awareness (see Appendix E, Table E1). This view aligns with recommendations in the literature on digital literacies and in TESOL scholarship regarding the need for explicit attention to register and multimodality (Jones & Hafner, 2021; Chen & Hsu, 2022; Lee & Li, 2025).

EFL teachers reported that their students frequently use abbreviations, emojis, and slang both inside and outside the classroom, and that social media often helps develop their vocabulary, fluency, and confidence. Yet teachers also noted that digital features may appear in formal writing, such as essays and emails, where they are considered inappropriate. Teachers' confidence in explaining the differences between digital and formal English varied, and many respondents said they needed training and teaching materials to incorporate digital varieties into their teaching while addressing the associated risks. There was strong interest in

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resources based on corpus analysis and drawn from authentic posts on X and other websites, especially when they included advice on ethical use and a comparison of different registers (see Appendix E, Table E2), consistent with findings that social-media-based activities can increase learners' engagement and performance when properly incorporated into the curriculum (Chen & Hsu, 2022; Sancho, 2024).

The content creators and moderators (as described in Appendix E, Table E3) outlined the unspoken rules governing language use within their communities and stressed that misunderstandings often arise when digital cues are misinterpreted. They considered emojis, GIFs, and abbreviations important means of conveying tone and thought, and EFL learners could benefit from awareness of a community's specific practices, provided ethical concerns about anonymization and consent are addressed. They also believed the current teaching materials do not reflect the reality of social media English (Han, 2024; Zappavigna, 2022).

Students reported using digital English frequently when communicating online and believed it helped improve their vocabulary, self-confidence, and reading abilities. Several admitted they sometimes struggled to understand English on social media because of slang, memes, and emojis, and that they sometimes unintentionally included digital features in formal writing. They clearly wanted more classroom activities based on real social media content, clearer explanations of abbreviations, slang, and emojis, and guidance on when it is appropriate to use digital English and when more formal styles should be employed (see Appendix E, Table E4), highlighting the need for explicit awareness of different registers in EFL courses (Jones & Hafner, 2021).

Together, these viewpoints indicate that digital English is already an important part of learners' linguistic experiences and that both teachers and learners consider it worth studying. Yet they also underscore the importance of adopting a critical, pragmatically grounded approach to teaching. Incorporating X's multimodal features into EFL teaching by simply copying online practices is not

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enough; teachers should help learners develop the capacity to interpret and handle pragmatic meaning across contexts and registers.

Integrating the corpus distributions with stakeholder perspectives reveals a clear empirical convergence: the features that dominate the corpus—abbreviations (43.1%) and multimodal tokens (33.0%) operating as stance and mitigation devices—are precisely the elements that teachers and learners identify as sources of register confusion in academic writing and pragmatic misinterpretation online. Because the present study did not implement a classroom intervention to measure direct learning outcomes, these findings do not claim that teaching digital English automatically improves formal proficiency. Rather, they support a contrastive register-awareness pedagogy. Using X as a practical model—given its transparent reply-thread context—EFL instruction can incorporate curated concordance lines and authentic posts to help learners analyze how emojis, typography, and abbreviations modulate politeness and irony online, while explicitly contrasting these informal strategies with formal academic conventions to prevent negative register transfer.

In conclusion, the results indicate that teacher training should include digital pragmatics and digital literacies. Teachers should have opportunities to become familiar with current digital practices, interpret evidence from corpora, and design tasks that draw on learners' existing digital engagement while encouraging them to reflect critically and exercise control (Feng & Sumettikoon, 2024; Law, 2024). The study thus aligns with the demands for language education that equips learners not only to use English accurately but also to navigate the complex pragmatic ecologies of digitally mediated communication.

CONCLUSION

The study analyzed how digital communication affects English and its implications for EFL teaching. Using a large corpus from seven platforms and expert input, it showed that digital English is a multimodal pragmatic repertoire, not just

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slang or deviations. Abbreviations, lexical innovations, emojis, typographic features, and pragmatic markers are key for efficiency and interpersonal relations, while syntax remains stable. Results indicate digital communication mainly affects lexical, orthographic, and multimodal aspects, with limited syntactic change. This spreads pragmatic workload across semiotic resources without undermining grammatical structure. The study suggests integrating digital pragmatics and literacies into EFL teaching, emphasizing discussion of authentic content to boost motivation and vocabulary. It also highlights the need for explicit instruction on register, pragmatics, and cultural context. Limitations include the corpus's scope—one year and focused on English—and the annotation system's inability to capture all pragmatic nuances. Future research should include ethnographic methods, AI-mediated communication, and classroom studies. Although some pragmatic meaning is implicit, a more interactional approach could offer deeper insights. Overall, the research shows that digital communication affects English mainly at a multimodal pragmatic level, which is crucial for modern EFL education, and demonstrates how corpus-based pragmatics can inform pedagogy.

AI Declaration

AI tools were used solely as assistive tools during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, Grammarly was used to support clarity, grammar, and formatting. The AI tool did not generate, fabricate, or manipulate research data, analysis, interpretations, or references. All AI-generated outputs were carefully reviewed, verified, and edited by the author, who takes full responsibility for the content of the manuscript. This use of AI complies with the Publication Ethics and Malpractice Statement of the Journal of Pragmatics Research.

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