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# Social media in education and foreign language teaching

## An introduction

**Abstract.** This article introduces the key concept of social media and illustrates its frequently discussed connection with education and language didactics. Applying connectivist and constructivist theories, the use of social media in education and didactics can be profitably approached from a variety of perspectives, as the contributions in this special issue demonstrate.

Although the interdependence between social media, education, and language didactics has been well established, its importance has increased in recent years not least due to the exponential growth in social media usage. This shifting communication landscape demands more research on the challenges and opportunities it produces for teachers in training. Both are duly addressed in this Special Issue, which explores the consequences of new modes of communication for teacher training, social media-induced transformations of the way we receive information and corresponding challenges to pedagogical and didactical change as well as new practices in language acquisition and teaching.

**Keywords.** Social networking sites, education, language didactics, teacher education

### Soziale Medien in Bildung und Fremdsprachendidaktik

#### Einleitung

**Zusammenfassung.** Dieser Artikel stellt das Konzept sozialer Medien vor und veranschaulicht ihren vielfach diskutierten Zusammenhang mit der Lehrer\*innenbildung und Sprachdidaktik. Auf Grundlage der Theorien des Konnektivismus und Konstruktivismus lässt sich der Einsatz von sozialen Medien beim

Lehren und Lernen aus verschiedenen Perspektiven betrachten, wie die Beiträge in diesem Themenheft zeigen.

Obwohl die Interdependenz von sozialen Medien, Bildung und Sprachdidaktik in Studien bereits gut erforscht ist, hat ihre Bedeutung in den letzten Jahren zugenommen, nicht zuletzt durch das exponentielle Wachstum der Nutzung sozialer Medien. Diese tiefgreifenden Veränderungen in der Kommunikationslandschaft und die daraus folgenden Herausforderungen und Möglichkeiten für die Lehrer\*innenbildung bilden ein wichtiges neues Forschungsfeld und bieten reichlich Material zur Untersuchung. In diesem Kontext steht dieses Themenheft, das sich u. a. mit innovativen Kommunikationsformen in Bildungseinrichtungen und deren Folgen für die Lehrer\*innenbildung, den Veränderungen unserer Informationsrezeption durch soziale Medien und deren Auswirkungen auf Pädagogik und Didaktik sowie neuen Methoden beim Sprachenlehren und -lernen befasst.

**Schlüsselwörter.** Soziale Netzwerke, Bildung, Sprachdidaktik, Lehrer\*innenbildung

## 1 The education – foreign-language-teaching – social network triangle

Arguably, the increasingly pervasive role of social media in contemporary life makes its presence in schools unavoidable. By anticipating a growing trend, teachers are well advised to explore the potential of social media supported didactics within the broader field of education. While the relationship between the field of linguistics and social media on the one hand and that of education and social media on the other has been well established (cf. Baechler et al. 2016; Manca, Ranieri 2015, 2018; Rodríguez-Hoyos, Haya Salmón, Fernández-Díaz 2015; Sützl 2012), the triangular connection between education, foreign language teaching, and social media calls for clarification.

While the teaching of digital media, including social media, and their related competences has been broadly introduced to curricula (cf. Brocca forthcoming; Brocca, Borowiec, Masia in this issue), the debate about which institutions and/or subject(s) should host such content remains ongoing (cf. Spannagel 2015). Among others, the field of foreign language didactics offers the opportunity to convey elements of social media literacy within its subject-related topics. Indeed, technologies of social media can simplify the didactical settings that educational theories like connectivism or constructivism (cf. Dron 2014, p. 34–42) as well as

the CLIL (content and language integrated learning) approach have aimed at for decades. Moreover, employing an understanding of foreign language didactics based on linguistics, researchers have focused on how social media enables a deeper understanding of language itself. A case in point is the use of social media websites as corpora for pragmalinguistic (cf. Hoffmann, Bublitz 2017; Brocca et al. in this issue), sociolinguistic (cf. Dumrukic in this issue), or digital discourse analysis (cf. Bou-Franch, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2019; Thurlow 2018), as well as Big Data research (cf. Sloan, Quan-Haase 2017, p. 27–39). Moreover, social media literacy (Alvermann 2017; Buckingham 2017), which has become an increasingly demanded topic in education, can only be genuinely and productively discussed if students and teachers use social media elements in their lessons for didactical goals.

For these reasons, there is great value in seeing the outputs of the social media-linguistics relation both as ‘language didactic through social media’ and as a ‘didactic of social media-mediated language’. Fundamentally, social media offer both an object of research worth addressing in school contexts and a medium that can support didactics and education.

## **2 Social media in teaching. Definition and state of the art**

Social media have caught the interest of communication and social sciences, as well as marketing, for years (cf. Kaplan 2012; Kaplan, Haenlein 2010; van Dijck 2013). The implementation of social media in general didactics, however, is part of a more recent development (cf. Burgess, Marwick, Poell 2018; Sloan, Quan-Haase 2017; van Dijck, Poell 2018), while the link between language didactics and technology-supported social elements in foreign language classes dates further back, as was shown by Würffel (2019). In certain aspects, the international e-mail communication project „Das Bild der Anderen“ (The-picture-of-others-project), launched in 1989 for German as second language didactics (cf. Würffel 2019), pioneered the use of social media for didactical purposes by developing pair communication between learners from different locations. Such communicative elements allowed technologies to be included in pragmatics-oriented curricula, changing their previous focus from what is known as the CALL (computer-assisted language learning) approach on semantic-grammatical categories to communicative-functional categories. More recently, in addition to ubiquitous social networks, many other tools have been developed and can be used for educational and language didactical purposes. Hence, in the interest of clarity, a more precise delineation of the field of research is in order.

A widely accepted definition is offered by Kaplan and Hänlein (2010, p. 61), who regard social media as “internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content.” This definition is broad and includes multiple technologies. The table below, which is partially drawn from McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase (2017, p. 18), shows different declinations of social media and their most popular examples. The original typology was supplemented with learning platforms and MOOCS, which allow forums, group discussions, and content sharing.

Type of social media	Examples
Social networking sites (SNS)	Facebook, Academia, LinkedIn
Collaborative authoring	Wikipedia, Google Docs
Microblogging	Twitter, Tumblr
Blogs and forums	LiveJournal, Wordpress
Media sharing	Youtube, Pinterest, Flickr
Web conferencing	Skype
Geo-location based sites	Tinder
Scheduling and meeting	Doodle, Google Calendar, Microsoft Outlook
Learning platforms and MOOCS	OpenOLAT, Stud.IP, Moodle, Coursera

Table 1: Types of social media

Didactics have been particularly concerned about security and identity protection in social media (cf. Riva 2010). On the one hand, many of the services mentioned above – especially all-encompassing social networking sites (SNS) – can only partially be used in didactic situations in schools without security concerns. On the other hand, personal exposure in SNS and disclosure of personal interests can change group dynamics and positively influence cooperation, interaction, and communication. Among the first SNS to be used exclusively for didactic purposes in the early 2000s, Elgg and Ning had the highest number of users.

Numerous reports confirmed the advantages of social media such as Ning used in blended learning settings (cf. Nike, Trena 2010; Brady, Holcomb, Smith 2010; Valetsianos, Navarrete 2012) and in role-play activities to support language learning in secondary education (cf. Beach, Doerr-Stevens 2011).

The idea of a SNS dedicated to language learning became popular through Livemocha (2007). This SNS was directed to self-learning adults in informal contexts and proudly affirmed to be the largest language learners community at the time, with more than 350,000 active users daily (2011) and 12 million registered members from more than 200 countries. Livemocha combined the feedback from native speakers to learners with gamification concepts. Here, natives or self-rated experts were motivated to give feedback by receiving credits in exchange (cf. Liaw 2011; Nuzzo 2013). Since Livemocha's closing in 2016, many other sites have attempted to follow in this direction by stressing the motivational factors connected to profile matching functions, as the following example from *lingua.io* clearly shows:

With Bilingua, you can find native speakers who share your interests and have interesting conversations. You can find not only language learning partners, but real new friends from all over the world and learn about different cultures! (Bilingua 2019)

Matters of internet security and privacy also drew schools' and users' attention to alternative models of learning platforms and learning management: Edmodo (2008) and Schoology (2009) developed a design similar to Facebook, explicitly intended to serve didactic purposes and the secure exchange of information between the school, students, and their families. Study groups, homework and corresponding evaluations, exams, calendars, explanatory videos provided on the platform SchoolTube, and the representation of schoolbook publishers were just some of the possible implementations of such technologies (cf. Trust 2012 for Edmodo; Mchichi, Afdel 2012 for Schoology; Casey, Evans 2011; Valetsianos, Navarrete 2012). Fakebook or Twiducate are respectively Facebook- and Twitter-based social media with pronounced didactic and pedagogical features (cf. Greenhow, Gleason 2012; Alvermann 2017).

With increasing attention on the use of video clips in flipped-classroom contexts, the learning platform EdPuzzle introduces the possibility to adapt didactic videos to individual goals and integrate this function in didactic analytics tools. Students and teachers can modify videos, thereby creating their own teaching material, and share it with their class online.

The opportunity of virtually connecting classes has been captured – among others – by the EU’s Comenius programme. The use of the portal eTwinning (2005) (cf. Scimeca 2012, 2013) has allowed schools across the entire European Union (and beyond) to join in virtual classes, encouraging international exchange and promoting the use of foreign languages in authentic situations. Since the enforcement of the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in 2018, an increasing number of services have begun to translate well-known social media sites into apps applicable in school settings for didactic purposes. On this front, Frankowsky and Krohn’s case study in the present issue introduces schul.cloud, a messenger and data storage service marketed as “the collaborative WhatsApp alternative for schools” (schul.cloud 2019).<sup>1</sup> Such closed online platforms integrate aspects of social media, such as the possibility to create a personal profile and to network, for educational purposes. Due to their didactic potential, these platforms are spreading rapidly in school contexts, substituting the traditional class register and facilitating the communication between teachers, students, and parents. Most of them offer an additional set of instruments like the opportunity to share material in a cloud, simultaneous writing on a shared sheet, chat channels, and other tools that boost social learning and make synchronic working possible even when students are not in the same place.

A more recent phenomenon is the growing cooperation of state schools with big companies like Samsung, Google, and Apple, which offer access to hardware and software. In most cases, the company ensures data security, offering to use their programme suites (with social media functions such as, e.g., shared calendar, messaging services but also search engines, analytics tools, etc.) and to store data on a school-based server. Although such solutions comply with GDPR, ethical doubts exist about the exclusive use of sponsored instruments in state schools (cf. Knuth, Ehrenhauser 2019).

While many social media tools used in school settings allow teachers to keep control over the composition of the groups, mainstream social media like Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram enable open access to external users. Despite security issues, they have also attracted the attention of language didactics in view of their popularity in the everyday life of (school) students (Gray, Smyth 2012; Wampfler 2016; Zink 2019; Strasser in this issue). One of the advantages of using such open models is the opportunity to merge formal and informal learning approaches and thereby integrate components of daily social interaction into the learning process. This hybrid of formal and informal approaches, however,

<sup>1</sup> schul.cloud also produces its own teaching material and lesson plan (cf. #unterrichtskonzepte at schul.cloud/blog).

poses significant didactic challenges (cf. boyd, Heer 2006; Manca, Ranieri 2015; Ranieri, Manca 2013, p. 41–66; Turkle 2012; Gonsch, Santelmann in this issue). In order to face these concerns and to enable students to develop a more responsible, critical, conscious, and productive attitude towards social media, research in didactics has steadily focused on the support of ‘digital literacy’ (cf. Buckingham 2017; Celot, Tornero 2009; Calvani et al. 2012; Hobbs 2010; Jenkins 2010; Meyers et al. 2013; Brocca, Borowiec, Masia in this issue).

The increasing availability of apps for mobile devices marked another big leap for the didactic implementation of social media: Particularly worth mentioning in this regard are the Facebook application Hot Dish (cf. Robelia, Greenhow, Burton 2011) and LinguaCuisine (cf. Seedhouse 2018). Accessing social media from mobile devices (e.g. tablets or smartphones) increases the technical possibilities of multimedia communication and allows different communicative competences to be trained (cf. Strasser in this issue). Moreover, personal mobile devices make it possible to join the social components of social media with informal and mobile learning. They aim for edutainment and inductive language learning, with a special focus on meaning and the simulation of immersive learning environments (cf. Kalz, Bayyurt, Specht 2014). When applying a CLIL approach in this way, apps are particularly effective.

### **3 Social media and learning theories**

Authentic materials (e.g. texts in natural context, not generated for a specific class situation) can be extremely useful for teaching, especially in the case of foreign language classes. They support communicative approaches in foreign language teaching, especially in the phase of global understanding. For example, open SNS offer a significant amount of authentic material that could function as input for further language production and analysis. It is worth noting that the learning theory that best describes the prospects of social media for didactic uses is connectivism. Social media can boost the realization of a connectivist learning model (cf. Siemens 2009, 2005) according to which practical knowledge does not necessarily need to exist within the individual but can be externalized (in form of external storage or databases or social networks). Learning, therefore, consists of the retrieval and connection of certain sets of information. Here, the capability to draw connections between partial knowledge is more important than internal

knowledge itself. In this logic, a learning group could solve a task by dividing it into smaller segments and putting one student in charge of a part.<sup>2</sup>

Enabling the connection and interaction with the real world, as other online learning-teaching settings do, social media offer the opportunity to work within a constructivist framework. In this theoretical model, knowledge is understood as an adaptation of previous knowledge to new environments (cf. Montada 1970). This makes the learners responsible for the construction of their own knowledge. According to this approach and its development by Vygotsky (cf. Reiser, Tabak 2014), scaffolding by an individual's peer group and teachers is paramount for learning. Social media apply perfectly to this frame since they open the classroom to real world challenges, motivating learners to apply their knowledge to real communicative settings. Both connectivism and constructivism stress the social component of learning (cf. Siemens, Weller 2011): Scaffolding by peer-groups combined with cooperation in an emotionally positive learning setting are important elements in this theoretical terrain (cf. Greenhow 2011, p. 5). Such elements can be found frequently in social networks interactions, as feedback practices or social grooming clearly show (cf. boyd 2009). Here, learning platforms (such as Stud.IP, eTwinning), MOOCs, or closed social messenger services appear to be limited when it comes to establishing long-term relationships between learners due to their relatively small communities. According to Greenhow (2011), this would be a reason to welcome the didactic use of open social media, where cooperation can be based on a larger community and longer lasting relationships. Collaborative authoring sites like Wikipedia, which can be corrected by community members, or media sharing sites such as YouTube, where the video repository is created by the users and each video can be commented on by the public (at least in the default setting), are examples of how people create their knowledge, share it openly, reproduce it, and then create a final product based on (or boosted by) mutual cooperation and feedback.

Moreover, many scholars (Greenhow 2011, p. 5) regard social media as a way to improve what is known as the 'student voice' approach. This approach (cf. Blau, Shamir-Inbal 2018) aims at empowering students to take a more active role in shaping or changing their learning process and environment. This, in turn, can foster critical thinking and raise motivation. In other words, social media can promote (at least in theory) students' voices in decision-making, thereby involving students in shaping their own learning environment (cf. Manca, Grion in this issue) and facilitating parental participation (cf. Frankowsky, Krohn in this issue).

2 Indeed, this happens in many informal learning settings where social media users ask for help from their contacts in the network.

## **4 A multidisciplinary topic in seven contributions**

This issue discusses the changes and challenges of the implementation of social media in schools and language didactics in order to tap into the ways in which teacher education could approach the topic. The polarizing debate around the digitization of education gives rise to considerable optimism on the one hand and noticeable skepticism on the other. This special issue engages in the controversy by showcasing concrete research findings and best results to propose a blueprint for the critical reflection of social networks as a part of education and teacher training.

More specifically, Thomas Strasser (Vienna) shows teaching/learning activities conducted with the use of open social media in teacher training courses. Strasser's findings give evidence to multiple micro-learning/teaching tasks in a blended and mobile learning context, focusing on productive and receptive skills in the EFL classroom within a strong motivational value.

Michael Krause (Potsdam) analyses the learning platform Campus.UP, used by students and teacher trainees at the University of Potsdam, to show how peer-activities can encourage cooperative learning settings. Campus-UP fosters privacy and communication competences in SNS in order to respond to challenges posed by an increasingly computer-mediated educational setting. Krause's contribution also shows how Campus.UP can be useful in reinforcing learning analytics while offering an innovative tool for teachers and researchers in education.

Nicola Brocca (Innsbruck), Ewa Borowiec (Krakow) and Vivana Masia (Rome) introduce their project on pragmalinguistic competences through the analysis of political language on Twitter. A pilot study conducted with students of linguistics in Poland showed positive results in detection rate by students. The authors recommend a pragmalinguistic-based didactic intervention in order to enhance social media literacy and participative citizenship.

Nina Dumrukic (Cologne) reports research data on translanguaging in social networks. Via a sociolinguistic survey, she illustrates how SNS communication is changing the perception on language normativity. Given the role of English as lingua franca in SNS exchanges, Dumrukic questions if the common and widely accepted use of multiple languages within the same interaction on social media could instigate a change in how languages are taught in school.

Valentina Grion (Padua) and Stefania Manca (Genova) report about the use of SNS for participatory practices that allow formal and informal learning and social

participation. The authors refer to an experimental research intended to show students' participation in school-related discussions supported by a popular social networking site. The results show that a deeper educational scaffolding is necessary to benefit from the technical potential of social media as a way of improving participation and developing democratic values in the student voice framework.

In the section *experiment*, Sven Frankowsky and Wiebke Krohn (Osnabrück) present self-organized learning classes at a German comprehensive school. This innovative teaching/learning environment is supported by the learning and organization platform *schul.cloud*, which allows for the information flow between teachers and students, students and students, and teachers and parents. The analysis from the point of view of two teachers shows the integration of social media in the school students' everyday life.

Finally, the section *conversation* presents an interview with two experts in digital transformation: Verena Gonsch, journalist from Hamburg, and Cord Santelmann, teacher from Tübingen, discuss the challenges and opportunities of social media in formal and informal educational settings.

## 5 Conclusion

In the emerging fields of media literacy and media didactics, social media play a dominant role. In recent years, the debate about digitization in schools has been featured prominently in German popular media. Public opinion is polarized: Some perceive social media as a potential threat while others see it as largely beneficial to our modern learning environment. Yet, innovative didactic concepts and data are under-reported, leaving the debate largely shackled to ideological stances. The current issue values the connection between practical and theoretical aspects of didactics as well as of contemporary needs in education generated by technological transformations. The contributions show that language education can benefit from the changes and challenges offered by innovation in social media. Language didactic research benefits from social media data (for example learners data in corpus based research), offering an enduring positive transfer in didactic practices. School and university structures are changing their own interaction with their users, and learners increasingly auto-organize their educational experiences via social media. In the present age that is characterized by a cognitive surplus (cf. Greenhow 2011, p. 5) and in which the goal of formal education has to adapt to required soft skills (such as cooperative learning, autonomous learning and critical thinking, curiosity, etc.), the informal learning happening in

social media represents a clear outpost of education. This issue is dedicated to all educators and teachers who work with students on a daily basis to meet the challenges of a digital world.

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