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### **Educational potential of social media in foreign language teaching**

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The present paper deals with the benefits of using social media as a computer-mediated means of communication in education. Although the idea of social media assisted language learning (SMALL) is attracting more attention, studies relevant to the use of social media in education, and foreign language teaching in particular, are still scarce.

There is no longer a strict divide between online and offline worlds. Harry Dyer emphasizes that “we all exist in multiple realms at any given time”, meaning that modern people are always both offline and online and are able to adapt and communicate effectively within any environment [2, p. 213]. The fact that offline and online realms of interaction do not merely coexist but are currently merging together requires teachers to accept the situation and take advantage of it with the aim of modernizing the educational process and widening a range of instructional tools. Harry Dyer says that keeping educational institutions purely offline means depriving students of the chance to boost their creativity, digital and communication skills as

well as other skills related to self-presentation and identity building. At the same time, learners are more willing to study what they are expected to if an educational environment is comfortable to them. Obviously, today's students, being "digital natives", derive much satisfaction from working in the "safe zone" of social media they are perfectly accustomed to.

Obviously, social media can effectively be used to *optimize communication and information exchange within an education institution*. Channels can be created for students to get latest campus news or announcements regarding upcoming academic events. Education institutions can support, motivate and connect with students through group interactions or live videos held online via any appropriate social networking platform, which leads to a stronger students' involvement in what is happening around them. Social media, with their potential to reach millions of people, can be used *when doing research and conducting surveys* by both teachers and students who may create an online questionnaire and address their followers asking them to complete it. Moreover, social media give every opportunity to read newest information published by leading experts, find out about opportunities to study abroad or distance learning courses. Obviously, an important role of social media belongs to the issue of *internationalization of education*. The use of social media allows teaching professionals and students to connect with other universities and organizations, researchers or learning groups with the aim of getting brand-new content, exchanging information and experience, following experts from all over the world and, consequently, getting to know them, working together on research projects, raising their own intercultural awareness, which creates great opportunities to establish beneficial connections for teachers' current and students' future careers.

Sibel Ergün Elverici and Şirin Karadeniz consider "social media in education [...] to be a tool that would help to reach the aim of the lessons while supporting students' social presence" [3, p. 175]. Guiding students through social media allows *building a trustworthy image* and social credibility online, which can positively influence their reputation, employability and networking. We believe that the same is

true not only with regard to students but also teachers and education institutions in general, so Khanyie Dlamini is right to claim that it is essential for education institutions to boost their social media presence because this “helps create better student training strategies and shapes student culture” [1].

What is more, bringing social media to the classroom can favour students’ intellectual and moral development as it has a profound effect on students’ skills (especially their high-orders skills and 21<sup>st</sup> century skills), digital, communication and professional competences as well as their socio-cultural awareness.

Texting, e-mailing, using social networking websites and chat-rooms greatly affects students’ literacy, written communication and reading skills. Therefore, all the above-mentioned mediums of online interaction should be wisely used to teach vocabulary, spelling, grammar and punctuation as well as to enhance reading and writing skills. Growing popularity of voice messaging and abundant use of recorded and live videos can help students improve their speaking and listening skills. Admitting the fact that students read articles, messages, commentaries and news posted online more willingly than textbooks can dramatically change the ways teachers give materials for independent study. Social media can be used as online classrooms for posting assignments, lecture materials, answering students’ messages. Such a virtual classroom may serve as a “bonus” to the standard curriculum.

Students’ writing and reading skills can be greatly enhanced if *blogs* are implemented in the process of teaching foreign languages. Foreign language teachers can use blogs to meet two basic educational goals: develop students’ receptive skills through reading and boost students’ writing skills by means of asking them to create various blog posts. Therefore, other people’s blogs (in case they are carefully selected by the teacher with regard to students’ language proficiency, official curriculum and learners’ individual interests) can be effectively used as reading materials, vocabulary boosters and discussion points as well as for text analysis (for example, to check whether the style of the post is formal or informal, to look for slang expressions or neologisms) and teaching of English for specific purposes (which means helping

students get acquainted with real-life expressions and terminology used in their future professional field). Students get more motivated to do a writing task better when its product is displayed online and can be accessed, read and evaluated by anyone else than when a piece of writing is simply submitted for the teacher to check. Such an approach to organizing writing changes the whole learning perspective: now students focus not only on the form and compliance of the work with the requirements set by the teacher but also pay much attention to the content of their piece of writing and meaningful language use as they know that many people may read it. Getting students to read and comment on each other's blog posts can lead to strengthening their relationships and learning more about each other as even shy and introverted students tend to open up in writing.

*Social networking sites* (including less formal ones such as Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, Skype, Twitter and the ones used for professional and academic purposes like LinkedIn, ResearchGate, LabRoots, Ning, Academia.edu, etc.) can meet educational requirements in a number of ways. For example, foreign language teaching can greatly benefit from using social networking websites as an extension to the classical classroom because they can help see real English and get plunged in the atmosphere of this language as a means of global communication.

Nowadays, more and more attention of educators and learners is drawn to *Wikis*, which are becoming an increasingly powerful form of technology use in education since Wikis enhance and facilitate interaction between learners, creating better conditions for students to work together on a project or problem that needs solving. Christopher Pappas defines Wiki as “an online application that allows users to contribute to or edit its content” [4], with Wikipedia being the most widely known example of a Wiki website. Wikis can be used as instructional tools for research projects, e-portfolios, debates, various discussion activities, story-telling, solving riddles through group discussions online, peer reviewing, book and film reviewing, sharing ideas and materials, etc. Grammar, spelling and vocabulary can be much improved if students are asked to use Wikis to edit texts containing different

mistakes, turning the process of practicing grammar into an interesting and close-to-life activity. More and more universities are beginning to use Moodle (a free open-source learning management system), with Wikis being inbuilt there, which means they are recognized by the educational community as a tool for collaborative work.

One more computer-mediated tool of foreign language teaching is *podcasting*. A podcast, being a topic-related digital stream of audio files that can be downloaded to a computer or any other media device, provides an opportunity for teachers to broadcast engrossing audio content which students may listen to at any time convenient. Lectures can be recorded and presented as podcasts giving students a chance to go through the material again or to listen to a lecture in case it has been missed. In education there are recognized *authentic podcasts* (which are not specifically created for language learning so they become a precious source of authentic listening material), *teacher podcasts* (the ones that are made by teachers with the aim of facilitating language acquisition), and *student podcasts* (produced by students). Both authentic podcasts and teacher podcasts may be found on YouTube which is a great source of listening materials. As creating a podcast needs learners merely to have a digital device, a microphone, the Internet connection and an engaging topic to speak about, podcasting may beneficially be used in foreign language teaching. Students can be asked to create a podcast in which they give a tour around their city, town or education institution, speak about cultural events and traditions, share the latest news in any sphere they are interested in or depending on the topic, conduct an interview with each other, their friends or even strangers, give presentations. Recorded and live videos can also be made and streamed via YouTube, Vimeo and Instagram, enhancing learners' listening, speaking, creative thinking and digital skills, raising their cultural awareness and boosting their online presence.

In conclusion, it is worth saying that the use of social media in education performs a number of important functions: it helps develop high-order thinking skills and communication skills, improve digital literacy, build a strong social presence, as well as improve interaction among and between students, teachers and universities.

Implementing social media in the process of foreign language teaching and learning promotes and facilitates language acquisition and stimulates natural development of language-related skills.

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### **Towards Multilingualism in the European Education Area**

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The European Union considers multilingualism as one of the important priorities. It funds a number of programmes and projects in order to promote multilingualism as an aspect of Europe's competitiveness [7]. The role of foreign language competence in present day world is reflected in a number of documents prepared by the EU institutions.