

# WARSZTAT PRACY NAUCZYCIELA JĘZYKA POLSKIEGO JAKO OBCEGO

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## SOCIAL MEDIA IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING – A REVIEW

**Keywords:** social media, autonomy, interaction, motivation, identity management, Facebook

**Abstract.** The main purpose of this review is to present why and how social media can be applied in language teaching and learning, as seen from the point of view of practitioners. Vygotskian constructionism has provided the theoretical framework for the investigation. The wide availability of social media and their high penetration rate are seen as key advantages. The stress has been put on the fact that such platforms enable users to interact with others and acquire the target language in their own community of practice. The learning process, thus, gets enriched by both individual and collaborative dimensions. Negotiation of meaning, as well as the autonomy in creating one's new identity and customizing the study content, become crucial aspects of the experience. Assuming accountability for one's own learning results in increased intrinsic motivation to bridge the gap between the current level of knowledge and the desired proficiency level. Finally, certain features of social media that allow instructors to use them in class are discussed.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to discuss the benefits of incorporating social media in a foreign language teaching schedule and examine the affordances of such platforms, as seen by educators. As Downes (2010) suggested, we are now witnessing a social transformation that promotes communication, going far beyond the frames of a technical revolution. In the educational context, the opportunity to express

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oneself and engage into authentic interactions has been proven to have a beneficial impact on learners' performance, improving the quality of language output and overall motivation (Promnits-Hayashi 2011; Yim and Warschauer 2019). As observed by numerous instructors, social media are bound to be closely linked to the lives of neo-millennial learners (McBride 2009), who tend to be rather pragmatic and result-oriented (Mondahl and Razmerita 2014). Besides, this type of on-line interaction has a positive effect on student-student and student-faculty relationships and fosters the improvement of the learning environment (Blattner and Lomnicka 2012). Needless to say, the technological progress results in a major shift in our perceptions of education. Gaining knowledge, thus, does not need to be limited by physical, geographic, institutional or organizational boundaries<sup>1</sup>, since in the digital era "learning does not have to occur in certain buildings at certain hours in groups of 24 under the direction of people trained in only one discipline (education). Learning is becoming a 24-hour activity with tools and information available anywhere through mobile connections to everything on and off the planet" (Wood 2010).

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social-constructionists argue that the learning process is facilitated by interplay in the target language, as initially pointed out by Vygotsky. This paradigm remains one of the most influential models of CALL (computer-assisted language learning) investigation. Internalizing the input and engaging in meaningful interactions emphasizes the social dimension of learning (Snyder Ohta 2009), hence the importance of the so-called communities of practice, as defined by Wenger, who explained them as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger 2006, p. 1).

## 3. DEFINITION

Put simply, social media can be defined as "forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos)", as explained by the Merriam-

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<sup>1</sup> This statement is true in most cases. One should, however, keep in mind that some countries limit access to the internet and/or social media.

-Webster Dictionary<sup>2</sup>. It can be also understood as “Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking”<sup>3</sup> or “platforms such as Facebook and Twitter that allow people to interact on the Web or using mobile phones”<sup>4</sup>. Arguably, at the very core of these web-based services is that they allow the users to construct a personal profile that can be later revealed to the public and to articulate a list of so-called “friends” – other users with whom one is willing to share an on-line connection (boyd and Ellison 2007, p. 5).

#### 4. POPULARITY AND PENETRATION RATE

One of the reasons why so many educators turn to social media in their teaching practice is their increasing popularity. Statistically, in 2019, there are 2.77 billion social media users worldwide, with East Asia being ranked first in terms of penetration followed by North America, with rates of 70 and 61 percent, respectively<sup>5</sup>, with Facebook itself currently having 1.56 billion daily and 2.23 billion monthly active users<sup>6</sup> and its European population reaching over 307 million<sup>7</sup>. 98% of digital consumers are social media users<sup>8</sup>. With these figures being expected to grow, incorporating use of these platforms into the teaching routine seems reasonable. Social media, on which an average person spends 2 hours and 22 minutes a day<sup>9</sup>, are already present in learners’ lives. As noted by Harrison and Thomas (2009), social media are slowly replacing traditional gathering places, which is why nowadays an average person conducts their activities in three zones: at home, at work/school, and online. Thus, if both teachers and students agree to extend the classroom activities and give them a digital dimension, fast progress in learning will likely follow. Since so many learners and instructors already use it for enjoyment, applying the very same tools to more beneficial and serious endeavors may be advantageous (Moran et al. 2011, Blattner and Lomnicka 2012). As McBride (2009) points out, using the platforms induces a sense of flow and results in losing track of time

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media> [28.08.2019].

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/social\\_media](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/social_media) [28.08.2019].

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/social-media> [28.08.2019].

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/> [28.08.2019].

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/> [28.08.2019].

<sup>7</sup> <https://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/#statistics> [28.08.2019].

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.globalwebindex.com/hubfs/Downloads/Social-H2-2018-report.pdf> [28.08.2019].

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.globalwebindex.com/hubfs/Downloads/Social-H2-2018-report.pdf> [28.08.2019].

as one gets fully engaged<sup>10</sup>, which is why implementing this practice into the learning process results in increasing motivation and spending more time on studying the language.

## 5. SOCIAL DIMENSION AND DYNAMICS OF INTERACTION

The main feature of the media in question is that people utilize them to socialize, and express themselves: it is to be present in a community of users. Given that that is, broadly speaking, why we use a language, finding a common ground between this technological phenomenon and FL acquisition is easy. Once content is pushed outward, it becomes an invitation for interaction with others (Moran et al. 2011). A language output does not always need to be written on a piece of paper, marked by the teacher, and returned with little or no chance for feedback. The world out there is big enough for each student to establish his or her own community of practice and get attention from others, which is stimulating and rewarding in itself. Besides, it provides an individual with a sense of belonging and connectedness (Willging 2008).

This is not to diminish the importance of teachers' tasks and impact; this is to shift some of the burden away from them. Imagine you are responsible for training writing skills to a hundred students on a weekly basis. Every month or so, you assign them an essay to write on a given topic, which they do, however, in most cases without seeing the point in it. You do give them a written feedback, which costs you many hours of work each time (and because of your busy schedule, you actually do it at home on a Sunday afternoon). Students still do not understand how this applies to their daily life and future needs, while you may occasionally struggle with anxiety and feel undervalued. In a case like this, promoting interaction with an online group of learners or well-intended experts should turn out beneficial for all sides involved, as someone else's reaction to your student's post can raise their interest in writing more, with the learning process becoming "both individual and collaborative" (Mondahl and Razmerita 2014). Once again, thanks to social media, whatever is posted has the potential to grow in size from a single utterance to an engaging discussion, with individuals bringing in their own knowledge, experience, and outlook: "This is social media's most distinctive aspect: the potential to transform from a way of pushing content outward to a way of inviting conversation, of exchanging information, and of invoking unparalleled individual, industry, societal, and even global change" (Moran et al. 2011, p. 8). Thus, it is not necessarily the process of writing that matters most at this point. It

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of flow and its relation to happiness has been elaborated by Mihály Csikszentmihályi (1991).

is rather the fact of publishing what once has been written that outweighs other aspects: once the thought is sent out, it is available for public view and feedback (McBride 2009; Yim and Warschauer 2019). Given that every single minute on Facebook 510,000 comments are posted<sup>11</sup>, even a skeptical observer may agree that an instructor can benefit from having such a platform as backup.

Another factor contributing to their usefulness in language learning is that social media become a scene of intense negotiation of meaning, understood as the efforts of two or more people engaged in some sort of interaction to maintain the flow of communication (Erben et al. 2008). If users want to understand someone else's intentions (in terms of linguistic tokens, cultural codes or interactional patterns), they often need to explicitly discuss them (Huang et al. 2016), which, in turn, has been proven to foster linguistic and pragmatic competence.

In addition, McBride (2009) notes that on-line engagement today translates into one's success tomorrow, because if a student demonstrates his or her eagerness to connect with others through social networking platforms in the target language, he or she is likely to create a habit of establishing new relationships in the future and become a fully autonomous, life-long learner, knowing how to gather and manage information and participate in creating new knowledge – skills very desirable in a knowledge-based economy (Austin, Anderson 2010). It is not uncommon for classmates to bond only via network sites (especially in cultures that do not encourage face-to-face interaction) and use them for discussing the tasks and assignments, resulting in better performance. The correlation between social media and grades has been recently studied by Gilbert M. Talaue (2018), who claims that students who collaborate with their peers succeed in class.

Numerous studies, with Promnits-Hayashi (2011) among them, emphasize the positive impact of incorporating different platforms into the curriculum. For instance, using Facebook in class resulted in (1) increasing participation, (2) written output being actually longer than required, (3) multiple replies to questions, (4) gaining confidence, and (5) higher engagement in off-line tasks. Another benefit was that some of the more introverted individuals became much more active in class and, overall, the target language was being used far more frequently than before the experiment (Promnits-Hayashi 2011). Participants in a study conducted by Blattner and Lomnicka (2012) reported feeling more comfortable training their writing skills outside of the classroom, thanks to the atmosphere of Facebook being casual and pressure-free<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://zephoria.com/top-15-valuable-facebook-statistics/>

<sup>12</sup> This is often the case in the Asian context, where students tend to be quiet in class but active on the Internet. One of the participants in a graduation project that I am currently supervising reported using social media over 200 times without having a single face-to-face conversation on that particular day. This number is not exaggerated as the informant had a clear record in her iPhone. Besides, it is not uncommon for Taiwanese students to spend 5 hours daily or even more on Instagram and Facebook. Around one third of the participants in the study declared doing so.

## 6. USER MOTIVATION AND IDENTITY

The way in which learners see themselves today and how they want to see themselves after a certain educational goal is achieved are often two different pictures. A self is not necessarily fixed and established once forever; it may be seen as a dynamic process in which we constantly recreate ourselves or, as Dörnyei and Hadfield (2014) suggest, a configuration of different, sometimes even opposing, fluid images of who one is and can be. The desire to bridge the gap between who a student is today (the present self) and who they want to become (the ideal self) often provides the stimulus for progress in learning. This new paradigm, to which Dörnyei refers as to the Ideal Future Learning Self, provides a cornerstone for new understanding of motivation in language acquisition.

Another useful model of understanding of students' identity is the one of a fractal (as opposed to fragmentation), literally understood as a shape that can be repeatedly divided into numerous parts, each one being simply a smaller copy of the original figure. This concept has been widely employed as a metaphor for the multiplicity and complexity of functions a single language learner needs to perform. With social media in use, a new dimension is added: a single person's identity is no longer strictly fixed, for one can have numerous identities and manifest oneself at different levels, depending on the context (McBride 2009). Besides, as observed by Rivers and Houghton (2013), one's self-image will be constantly rediscovered and renegotiated as one inevitably compares oneself to others: "Identity can be formed, regulated, and maintained through relational processes of social interaction and social comparison. That is, the knowing of oneself is only possible when given the opportunity to compare oneself to others, and differentiate oneself from others" (Rivers and Houghton 2013, p. 6). To give a few examples, assessment and self-evaluation may include one's advancement level, as compared to others, overall fluency and knowledgeability. As long as it adds impetus for further studies, it is beneficial for the learner.

The FL learning process has been proved to impact on students' overall personal growth. With social media in use, this process has been significantly facilitated, for the teacher is no longer the only point of reference that a student can turn to. At a certain stage, a learner should mature beyond expecting the instructor to be the only source of information and start to critically evaluate and integrate the newly acquired knowledge, which he or she gains from interacting with others. This enables him or her to "rewrite the self" and gives the sense of "self-authorship" and directly translates into increased time and interest on the task (McBride 2009, p. 42).

Technically speaking, on-line identity management has a very practical dimension too, because users create their profiles from scratch. One can specify what image one wants to construct and define the degree to which one wants to

make it public (*impression management*). Next, one can decide whom to keep in touch with (*friendship management*) and what activities to undertake (*network structure*): will one be passive and refrain from expanding the activity beyond the close network of friends, or actively build up new friendships, create new groups, and post messages? Finally, one may choose to draw connection between one's on-line and off-line activities and interact with other users in real life (*bridging*). These four areas are closely related to who one becomes when using social media and how one's learning process occurs (boyd and Ellison 2007, p. 5). Going through all these stages, students literally "write themselves into being" or "have to type themselves into being" (McBride 2009, p. 38). Experimenting with multiple identities might seem easier online than offline, especially when it comes to the fear of losing face if one's linguistic performance is weak, while one's position in the real world is one of an authority figure.

Arguably, social media enable users to take charge of their own learning, thus encouraging them to become autonomous and self-reliant learners. The traditional hierarchy has been redefined by shifting some of the power and authority to the students (Royal 2011). They themselves become responsible for taking decisions and implementing them, which results in a higher engagement. As noted by Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2010), helping students realize their accountability for what they are learning is actually among the most valuable educational strategies. It is so because people tend to take training far more seriously when they feel responsible for it. The key capacity is within the particular human, no longer within their learning situation (Promnits-Hayashi 2011). It also leads to personalization of learning, which is valuable since the old "one-size-fits-all" approach to language acquisition may not meet either individual or societal needs (Conole 2010). Besides, one can work at one's own pace, without the risk of being teased or wasting time if the task has already been completed.

## 7. SOCIAL MEDIA IN PRACTICE

The following section aims to discuss some of the affordances of social media that allow teachers to utilize them in FL instruction. To begin with, they offer a wide variety of functions that can satisfy different individuals' needs, from instant messaging to shooting pictures or videos and posting them online. A learner can engage in one-to-one or one-to-many written exchanges that include chatting, participation in forums, and writing on virtual message boards. They can create their own image by updating the status or improving the profile. Interestingly, one of the studies reports that the ways in which students were willing to use Facebook for school and privately varied significantly (Blattner and Lomnicka 2012). Academically-oriented activities might include participation in groups and chats,

while viewing and sharing videos, posting to others' walls, and checking what their friends were currently doing could be, in students' view, more suitable in a private context. This, however, does not necessarily mean that all students think in the same way. Others can equally enjoy posting pictures and giving/reading comments or watching videos containing spoken samples of the target language. (It may be useful to indicate how long a single utterance should be and how/if such output will be graded.)

On a deeper level, social media can be helpful in promoting the more sophisticated cognitive skills required by contemporary, information-oriented economy, listed here after Austin and Anderson (2010):

- a) working safely in teams (whose members may be in different locations);
- b) self-reliance and self-management;
- c) collaborative problem solving;
- d) creativity and innovation;
- e) high-level reasoning, analyzing, and conceptualizing;
- f) communicating and understanding within multi-cultural environments; and
- g) autonomous learning.

The list above can provide guidance for task-design and get incorporated into the syllabus, if applicable. With so much emphasis being recently put on so-called problem-based learning (PBL), many educators can find this solution highly practical.

Finally, on the most basic level, a group can benefit from employing a platform for enhancing the course management. Supplementing the course with the use of a chosen platform can help students to:

1. keep in touch with classmates;
2. contact the teacher outside the classroom;
3. check class notes or homework posted by the teacher;
4. ask for help about homework assignments;
5. check for class-related information and notices;
6. discuss different topics with classmates;
7. post writing assignments;
8. access links to resources provided by the teachers;
9. read articles and prepare for the next class;
10. review or edit writing assignments.

Cannot this be done without social media as a facilitator? It probably can, but many teachers and students will be eager to implement the idea of using networking sites as learning management system in their day-to-day practice (Wang et al. 2011).

## 8. CONCLUSION

The paper aimed to present the unique features of social media that make them a highly useful tool in the educational context, especially in foreign language learning. Given their wide availability, platforms like that are already present in many students' lives. Thus, using them in the realm of FL learning may significantly facilitate the process of language acquisition. The social dimension that remains inextricably linked both with the use of media and language *per se* provides a framework within which the learner may establish his or her own community of practice. Equally important, they can take accountability for their own improvement and enjoy a certain autonomy in terms of gathering information and knowledge management. This, in turn, is highly correlated with one's intrinsic motivation to progress towards higher FL proficiency levels. Finally, selected practical aspects of implementing the platforms into the curriculum were examined.

Can one keep teaching well without the use of social media? One certainly can. However, students are quite likely to pay more attention to well-balanced and diversified instruction in which the learning content and strategies remain related to their interests and values (Wlodkowski and Ginsberg 2010; Newland and Paefthimiou 2010). It is up to the teacher how he or she designs the space for the students to flourish.

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**MEDIA SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWE W NAUCZANIU JĘZYKÓW OBCYCH  
– PRZEGLĄD PRAC**

**Słowa kluczowe:** media społecznościowe, autonomia, interakcja, komunikacja, tożsamość, Facebook

**Streszczenie.** Celem powyższego artykułu jest ukazanie, dlaczego i w jaki sposób media społecznościowe okazują się przydatnym narzędziem w nauczaniu języków obcych. Za ramę teoretyczną przyjęto konstrukcjonizm społeczny i badania Vygotskiego. Jedną z kluczowych zalet tego typu mediów jest ich szeroka dostępność. Uwagę zwrócono także na społeczny wymiar zachodzących tam interakcji, co pomaga w nadaniu nauce języka obcego charakteru współpracy w obrębie określonej wspólnoty. Konieczność częstego, samodzielnego negocjowania znaczeń oraz daleko idąca swoboda (autonomia) w tworzeniu własnego wizerunku i dostrajaniu nauczanych treści do własnych potrzeb wzbogacają proces nauki języka obcego i owocują większą motywacją. W ostatniej części artykułu wyliczono przykłady praktycznego zastosowania mediów społecznościowych w nauczaniu.