Digital Culture and Using Social Media Posts in Foreign Language Learning

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Abstract: The purpose of the paper is to show how technology can be used to make attractive the learning of a foreign language. Social media posts about vocabulary in various foreign languages, for instance, as well as short conversational phrases, could be used to replace the traditional drill types of exercises. Videos that are present could be used to replace the traditional listening exercises. The social media posts could be used as additional material to what is used during class. It is assumed that social media is part of students' lifestyle, and that learning foreign languages is adapted to modern life.

Keywords: Youtube, videos, technology, vocabulary, drills

1. Introduction

Nowadays, foreign language learning resources are a frequent presence all over the Internet. We can find sites with audio and video files, therefore the pronunciation of the words in the respective language is not impossible to find. Access to audio and video resources can include spoken language in Youtube videos and videos posted on social media, together with social media posts. We have access to the culture and spoken, as well as academic language of the foreign language we wish to study, as well as to communication with people using the respective language. Interactivity is the key word when it comes to the study of a foreign language, which is especially made possible nowadays through our technology. Interactivity in foreign language learning is only natural, since we use language, especially to communicate with the others. We communicate with our peers, and we wish to keep in touch by forming social relationships. This is a usual need of human beings.

On top of this need to communicate and socialize, we can feel the need of using technology. We could claim that "Technology is not a product of human beings. It is

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a precondition of their existence." We use it as a tool for various purposes, from learning, studying, sharing research, establishing collaborations, getting help with translation, to communicating for personal reasons and for entertainment. Technology is also a means for human beings to progress, and to develop further inventions, which is a characteristic distinguishing humans from other beings. Humans are creative, and with their imagination they can create art or inventions based on science and technology. Through technology, humans can be perceived as clever beings: "It is technology that has enabled humans to be clever, or at least to think of themselves as such" (Gere 2009). We can notice "the increasingly rapid development and complexity of technology that is making things change so rapidly" which is specific to our contemporary age. Thus, "within the last twenty to thirty years of hominoid and human tool use", change started to occur at a faster rate, meaning that "within the last twenty to thirty thousand years, developments started to pick up pace" (Gere 2009).

Since nowadays technology is part of our everyday life, we can conclude that "Human and digital information behavior are forever linked, merging real and digital life and art" (Giannini and Bowen 2019, 2). We can see this in foreign language learning, which should be adapted to the needs of the learners in all occasions. Communication on social media nowadays is a reality, both personal and business-related. Both persons and official businesses have Facebook or other social media pages, including research conferences and universities. Every activity should adapt to the current trends in communication and self-presentation. Our identities are very much influenced by social media communication, to the point that "Seeing ourselves as digital is embodied in the ever-present selfie" (Giannini and Bowen 2019, 3).

Technology means much more than being part of our environment, therefore. It is a tool we use in everyday life at school, at work, for presenting ourselves. Professional social networks such as LinkedIn exist where we can build a professional, business-like image for ourselves. We can, nowadays, build our image on the Internet, not just in real life.

All of these aspects of today's use of technology is part of the digital culture (Miller 2020) that we live in. Within digital culture, "the term digital can stand for a particular way of life of a group or groups of people at a certain period in history" (Gere 2009). What is more, "Digitality can be thought of as a marker of culture because it encompasses both the artefacts and the systems of signification and communication that most clearly demarcate our contemporary way of life from others" (Gere 2009). From this point of view, we can understand social media teaching and learning experiences of foreign languages as tied up to our specific way of communication and technology possibilities of today's life.

We nowadays participate with comments on social media and reactions. The English language learning becomes adapted to the new environment in a natural way. We not only have platforms with resources available online, but we also have communication between teachers and students made easier.

In what ways does the Internet social media change the foreign language learning and teaching experiences?

If we look at the way teachers of the Japanese language, such as Silvia Pătraşcu, and of Turkish language, such as Sheilla Iaia, use Facebook groups and pages, as well as Instagram and, on some announced occasions, Zoom for demo lessons, for these languages, we can say that they present the image of teachers that are living in their own times, with a digital image and personality, good with using the tools provided by technology and comfortable with them, familiar and comfortable with the digital medium, friendly with their students, providing a relaxing and pleasant atmosphere for learning, encouraging their students, sharing their interests in the popular cultural products associated with the languages they teach, such as anime, for Japanese, and specific music for Turkish. Teaching with technology is adapted to the Internet, with its tools and opportunities. Students are offered an attractive learning environment, which is based on the social media that is a frequent presence in their lives. A certain type of communication on social media also leads to a certain type of communication and relationship between teachers and students. We could compare the approach used for the selection of free lessons videos to the videos of the tutorial and reviews types, for films, books, cosmetics, and others, where the focus is on an enthusiastic presentation style that captures the audience's attention, invites to interaction through prompting an emotional reaction and through giving rise to a wish to start discussions for the viewers. Public speaking has very much been influenced by social media types of talks. When the author of the paper was taking the public speaking class within the Project Management MA programme in the academic year 2019-2021 at the National University of Political and Administrative Studies, she has noticed how, while the class was held on Zoom during the pandemic, her colleagues presented taking over the style of social media influencers and reviewers. This style uses animations and sequences reminding of PowerPoint presentations with special effects, alongside a speech making use of enthusiastic attitude and of transmitting it to the audience, as well as of what has been called *pathos*. The term *pathos* refers to the "emotional connection to the audience" (Dlugan 2010, 1). The attitude of the teachers using social media prompts and encourages a similar one on the part of the students. Thus, students and teachers share a similar background formed by digital culture.

This is beneficial since it encourages interactivity and placing the student at the centre of the teaching process. The active student has been an ideal in teaching and learning if any subject, not just foreign languages. What is more, this medium and communication type encourages students to speak the language. Often, as teachers, we hear students say that they can understand the language, but they are not good at speaking it. Thus, social media communication type solves the issue of exercising speaking skills. At least for a certain segment of students' ages, this is a convenient solution. Other solutions have been sought for speaking anxiety, in the past, when social media was not so popular: the author of the paper has heard about English as a foreign language lessons speaking practice at a café, around 2005-2006, based on a contest found online, which ensured by winning it receiving a voucher for starting a complete course there. The course was based on establishing a relaxed environment, likely familiar to the students, and where they could practice real language conversations in the foreign language. Otherwise, in the real-life classroom setting, students can feel inhibited when it comes to speaking exercises. In this case, we can

encounter, on the part of the student, "speaking anxiety" (Chou 2018, 611) in the setting of the foreign language classroom. They can feel anxious if they feel judged by colleagues and teachers, as well as corrected for pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary mistakes. As a result, having an understanding and friendly teacher that organizes activities in a pleasant way can be beneficial for students to gain confidence and practice their speaking skills. Yet, speaking is not the only skill present in the posts with exercises shared on social media. Vocabulary exercises are shared using posts containing pictures and photographs along with the term in the foreign language. Here we can notice the presence of visual materials and of the teaching with pictures method. Using visual materials has been recognized as a practice that can help students being active during class and to communicate easier: "The use of visuals in the classroom makes the students more interested, more attentive to the topic presented as they are provided with a more meaningful context. Thus, they become more participative and communicative" (Pateşan et al 2018, 356). Therefore, visual materials can be understood as prompting motivation to answer during the exercises.

Reading materials can also be presented briefly on social media, under the form of very short stories. Sheilla Iaia posts on her Facebook account her videos of her free demo lessons, where she taught, in the first Turkish language lesson, all skills, speaking, reading, listening, and vocabulary. For reading, she used a short text about Nasreddin Hoja, a character present in both Turkish and Romanian culture. Sheilla Iaia posts visual materials with words similar to those in the Romanian language. By underlining that the Romanian learners already know several words in the Turkish language, she paved the way to a familiar environment and language, which would also generate the curiosity of the beginners. One approach to encourage learners is to show them that they are already familiar, to some extent, with the foreign language they have started studying, through presenting common or similar words with and to those in their own language or in the other foreign languages that they know.

2. Materials and Methods
For the methodology section of the paper, we can use an interdisciplinary approach, by combining foreign language teaching theories, such as the communicative approach and teaching with technology, digital cultures and social media research, the three public speaking pillars (*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*) developed by Aristotle (Dlugan 2010, 1) as representing the secret for giving speeches that will impress emotionally and persuade the listeners, and netnography.

One of the reasons why using teaching foreign languages with technology has been popular for students and also considered as a motivation is that "The students like using technology all the time, if possible" (Pateşan et al 2018, 356). In the context where "Keeping them motivated and actively participative in class has become a challenging task" (Pateşan et al 2018, 356), teaching foreign languages with technology can be regarded as a solution. In the case of the two teachers, Silvia Pătraşcu and Sheilla Iaia, we can say that teaching with technology has been taken to a completely new level. Their teaching approach combines teaching with technology

with communicative language speaking in a very fresh approach, since they use social media means of teaching and communication, video materials with themselves, Zoom platform sessions to meet new possibly interested students in taking part in their classes, face-to-face classes and online classes. Additionally, they both provide plenty of online materials for studying. Sheilla Iaia also provides books with known stories in all cultures to be read in the Turkish language for beginner and intermediary levels. Those interested can choose to buy them from her. While other social media teachers presenting free online lessons for beginners in various foreign languages only have a Youtube channel and do not extend the relationship with their students in real life, or with discussions on platforms such as Zoom, Silvia Pătrașcu and Sheilla Iaia offer the possibilities of communicating in real time now and then with possibly interested persons in their friends lists on Facebook.

Encouraging communication with the students is, thus, extended beyond encouraging them to use the communicative method of foreign language learning in live online classes and in the face-to-face classroom.

The communicative approach to foreign language teaching is actually quite old: "Communicative language teaching was introduced at the beginning of the 1970s by British and American scholars to promote the teaching of usable communicative skills in L2 instruction" (Dörnyei 2009, 33). The communicative method, back then, was about "the learner's participatory experience in meaningful L2 interaction in (often simulated) communicative situations," and which led to "less structured and more creative language tasks." At the time, the communicative approach meant replacing "scripted dialogues," as well as "pattern drilling," through the use of "games, problem-solving tasks and unscripted situational role-plays" (Dörnyei 2009, 34).

The teacher is considered extremely ready available for questions and additional explanations, if needed, in the case of the two teachers on social media. Communication also becomes part of their showing sympathy for their students and in sharing their approach to foreign language teaching and studying, and, precisely, of Japanese and Turkish languages. The communication extends to the practice of the two teachers' creating virtual communities for their learners.

Kozinets (2010) has proceeded to studying virtual, online communities, similarly to the way any community in the face-to-face environment can be studied from a cultural and anthropological point of view. Netnography refers to "the conduct of ethnography over the internet" and it is understood as "a method specifically designed to study cultures and communities online" (Bowler 2010, 1270). Such research has been prompted by the following situation: "With many people now using online communities such as newsgroups, blogs, forums, social networking sites, podcasting, videocasting, photosharing communities, and virtual worlds, the internet is now an important site for research" (Bowler 2010, 1270). Social media usage and creation of learners communities by these two teachers can be researched from this perspective.

From a netnographic research perspective, the author of the paper can claim that she has done participatory observation as she has enrolled during the demo lessons offered for free by the teachers holding the Japanese and Turkish language classes, Silvia Pătrașcu and Sheilla Iaia. She has also been a member of a workshop group offered for free by Silvia Pătrașcu for the Japanese language, where she has solved

exercises and received feedback from the Japanese language teaching team. She has also followed the activities made public on social media organized by Silvia Pătrașcu, who has started her own business as Japanese language teacher and has an entire team of assistants. Silvia Pătrașcu has held various workshops related to the Japanese culture, and even taken her students on trips and camping where the activities included language-learning workshops with attractive and interactive activities, where her students, children, were given an active role. They would learn through playing, through activities adapted to their age. Pătrașcu holds lessons for students of all ages, and adapts to their needs. She even holds workshops related to the Japanese culture itself, including learning how to draw anime. We can see how she promotes for herself the image of a teacher passionate about the Japanese language and culture, as well as a good communicator, and a person preoccupied since her university student days about finding and then creating herself teaching resources which are friendly to students and easy to use. The image the Japanese teacher creates for herself in this case is one that can be associated with the pillar of ethos of public speaking, which refer to the "credibility (or character) of the speaker" (Dlugan 2010, 1). She uses especially verbal language, as well as the language of gestures together with facial expressions, and her voice tone and verbal flow to communicate visually on video materials posted on her YouTube channel. She also shares on Facebook some of her demo Zoom sessions sequences to convey this image for herself.

She has had experiences with various textbooks which were difficult to use for herself as a beginner, some of them only in the Japanese language. She shows herself as sympathetic to learners since she has once gone through the learning process herself, she knows what she needed and searched for, and now she shares with us, beginners, her experience of seeking a useful and helpful method of learning Japanese. She deals with questions regarding whether or not we should start with learning and memorizing the Japanese alphabet at first. She tells us during her online free workshops that we should not be kept on the spot and hesitate to start learning Japanese only because we have not yet mastered the Hiragana or Katakana, as Japanese students themselves learn throughout entire years of school the Kanji characters. In showing the way she is knowledgeable about the teaching and studying process of the Japanese language, Silvia Pătrașcu exemplified the third component of a convincing public speech, that of *logos*, which is the "logical argument" (Dlugan 2010, 1). Through sharing her knowledge and experience, backed up by her studies and her own experience as a student with the Japanese language, as well as combining it with presenting her ideas on efficient teaching and learning of Japanese through presenting participants in workshops offered for free and demo lessons, Pătrașcu makes use of *logos*. She presents viewers with the experience of previous students and with their feedback on her helpful method. The method, thus, has been experienced and verified, and now it is recommended by previous students. She has made real efforts in working out an efficient teaching and learning method, which includes interaction with her as a teacher, with her team of teaching assistants, and with other learners. She has also set up resources on a platform which are very efficient tools for learning, since she has especially created them based on her own experience as learner and afterwards as teacher. She is a likeable and communicative

person, and learners perceive her as friendly and helpful. She encourages beginners to form brief dialogues right from the first lessons, and tells them that they can already speak a little Japanese, related to greeting someone, saying their name, age and where they are from. While this may not be much, it seems a lot and an encouragement for beginners not to feel stopped and overwhelmed by the three alphabets of the Japanese language, and to begin learning and talking right from their first lesson. This part shows the pathos side of the image of Silvia Pătraşcu as both public speaker and teacher.

Sheilla Iaia follows the same image of the teacher present on social media and borrowing social media communication strategies in establishing her relationship with her students. She is also passionate about the language and culture, knowledgeable about the topic, and eager to connect to her learners. She is also showing good public speaking skills, therefore, from the point of view of ethos, pathos and logos both while advertising her classes and while teaching her learners. Her use of *logos* can be seen, just as in the case of the Japanese teacher, in the explanations she offers regarding various issues in the foreign language she teaches. Sheilla Iaia also holds a provate business, through her Avicenna Personal and Professional Development Centre.

As a comparison, other Facebook pages can include German language lessons, or English as a foreign language lessons, some of these can include video and grammar explanations, held by a real-life teacher. Yet, the image of other teachers is not as active as those of Silvia Pătraşcu and Sheilla Iaia, from those observed in the online medium by the author of this paper, from the point of view of active participation through enrolling in their courses. Other pages and groups on Facebook also offer posts with drills and fill-in or multiple choice exercises, which have an element of interaction when it comes to the comments that can be posted below. They can also check their answers with other learners, and discuss them.

3. Results

For teachers to create a community for students online on social media and to use them becomes more than simply making available online resources for foreign language learning, which can be found, after all, everywhere on the Internet. What is needed for students can be more than just the availability of the resources. They need interaction with speakers of the language, but that is not enough either. They need to be able to communicate with teachers that are, just like them, users of the same technological tools. The use and availability of social media for everyone who wishes to start an account, including foreign language teachers, can help students to perceive access to these lessons as a means of being on almost equal terms with the teachers. The teachers and the students interact in the social media environment, as well as on platforms, where the only rules are the ones established by mutual understanding. The teacher needs to work harder in order to attract students. The subject they teach needs to be taught in a very creative way in order to attract the students. The lessons they give can be understood as private, since they are not part of the school curricula. The students need to have personal, intrinsic motivation for learning as well. Their

motivation may be, however, also related to their need to learn the foreign languages in order to succeed in passing various examinations, including, in some cases, the examination for being accepted to university studies. At the same time, the way the two teachers, of Japanese and Turkish, genuinely feel about the subjects they teach can influence many students to begin liking these languages and cultures. The attitude of the teacher towards the subject he/ she teaches can matter for students of all ages. The two teachers can be compared to influencers in their attitude or to various reviewers or famous users doing tutorials on various topics. Their attitude is moulded on the way we are nowadays used to find communication on social media and YouTube channels.

The model of social media behaviour and public speaking skills are very catchy and successful for people in the online medium, since their attention is caught right away and their interest is sparked.

We could claim that in this approach, of teaching foreign languages using social media, all previous skills become embedded in communication. Reading becomes a communicative skill, as students are invited to read phrases and paragraphs out loud for the other participants in the Zoom meeting to hear. Vocabulary becomes a skill used communicatively, since we, as students, can be asked to pronounce the words and use them in sentences. Drills become communicative skills since we can do them orally and use them to build further dialogues with other students online. We can also discuss about them in the comments section on Facebook posts. Grammar is merely a tool to use for building dialogues and for communicating in the foreign language. Listening can similarly become an embedded skill in other skills, such as watching a video of explanations related to grammar, vocabulary, or elements related to culture, as well as listening to the teacher or to other students reading a text. In the online medium we can notice this all the more than in a face-to-face classroom, especially due to the availability of recorded video materials.

Social media, if used efficiently, can be a means of efficient communication between teachers and students. It can also be a means of establishing interactive foreign language classes, or classes on other subjects.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

We could claim that the Internet and social media, especially, have led to a democratization of access to various teaching materials and to offering participation possibilities. Teaching foreign languages can now be understood in parallel with practices such as writing and reading popular science articles on topics such as medicine, health, and technology. We can see the effort of the two teachers the present paper has focused on to present the topics as clearly as possible so that any absolute beginner can not only understand but also be able to start using the notions right away for communication purposes.

In the past, only noble families could afford to hire for their children private tutors of foreign languages. In the meantime, schools have offered the possibility for everyone to study foreign languages, and, in time, the Internet and social media have evolved to the extent that not only are materials for listening available, but there is

also the possibility for live interaction, for free, as if for a casual conversation with a friend, with the teachers on social media. Making videos for social media and YouTube channels enable anyone to become famous nowadays. This technological possibility can also enable teachers to teach users of the Internet from all over the place, not just in their classes at school or in their foreign languages centers. The teachers can gather students at certain times for Zoom meetings for demo sessions, but also for classes. They do not limit themselves only to posting videos for being watched later.

The social media foreign language teaching can bring up a fresh perspective on the traditional types of exercises and the way that the skills were practiced. Studying social media foreign language learning communities shows that communication becomes more and more natural, and closer to the real-life communication possibilities. We no longer bring a cassette recorder or CD player for practicing listening, and only listen to a dialogue in which learners cannot intervene. With social media interaction, they can talk in live sessions with the teachers. In some cases, the teachers can even be native speakers.

Yet, students need to be patient and search for the foreign language learning possibilities that they find suitable for themselves. It is often just a matter of luck if they happen to find an active and interactive foreign language learning community online.

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