

Teaching with TikTok: What is the future of social media in the tertiary language classroom?

New technologies and language learning platforms continue to transform the way foreign languages are taught globally. The shift to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has arguably changed education forever, and many of the technologies that tertiary educators integrated into their classrooms during the pandemic are likely to remain a key part of tertiary education for years to come. While the prospect of integrating even more technology, such as social media, into the classroom may appear a daunting prospect after such a transformative period, the pandemic has only further elucidated the fundamental role of technology in foreign language acquisition and teaching. As such, the ever-increasing importance of social media in our lives, combined with its accessibility and high functionality, presents a unique opportunity for language teachers and students alike.

This is particularly important when it comes to Asian language education and ‘Asia-literacy’. As Hamish Curry states, ‘resourcing and supporting schools to teach Asian languages has not been sustained. [...] Asian languages drop off a metaphorical cliff in secondary school, with even fewer students studying an Asian language onto Year 12.’ While engaging with social media may not accomplish the large-scale work needed, it may serve as an invaluable tool to create greater connections between Australia and Asia—motivating students to learn an Asian language, increasing students’ intercultural awareness, and even staving off further funding cuts and reduced protections for national strategic languages.

The importance of social media

There is no denying that social media has increasingly become an integral part of our everyday lives. In January 2021, almost 80 percent of the Australian population were considered ‘active’ social media users compared to just 58 percent in 2015. While Facebook remains one of the most popular platforms across Australia, others such as YouTube, Instagram and TikTok feature much more heavily with younger audiences, notably with users younger than 40. The increasing popularity of these platforms, particularly among teenagers, even prompted Australian school teachers

to create videos via TikTok during pandemic-related lockdowns as a means of connecting with students. In this, teachers became ‘content creators’ on their students’ preferred social media platforms, bridging the student-teacher gap through educational and recreational content alike. This illustrates one of the ways social media is already being harnessed by educators in formal learning environments. Yet, social media has long been viewed as a potential danger for young people due to issues surrounding security, cyberbullying and emotional validation. So, what has changed?

Younger users visit platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube ‘multiple times a day.’ This stands in stark contrast to online educational platforms that are often integrated into tertiary classroom. For example, how often do students check their email compared to their favourite social media? Or perhaps the learning management systems (LMS) through which the majority of content is delivered in a tertiary setting nowadays? A shift in pedagogy which harnesses the prominence of social media in our students’ lives is indicated; one which recognises both the increased role of social media, and the interactive nature which makes it so attractive to younger audiences in the first place. To understand what this shift may look like, it’s important to consider the current trends which exist and their viability in a tertiary classroom setting.

Social media as the emerging language learning platform

The increasing prominence of using social media as an educative tool—a phenomenon which is best described as a combination of ‘teacherpreneurship’ and ‘microlearning’—has notably resonated with private language teachers who have turned to social media as a means of promoting private lessons and language courses alongside ‘content creation’ and ‘influencing’. Microlearning, in which educational content is delivered in short chunks, offers a flexibility that pairs well with social media. In this, students’ exposure to content becomes a part of their everyday lives. Instead of being required to log on to an educational portal such as an LMS or a textbook’s supplementary content platform (which is a common feature of language textbooks nowadays where audio and video content is uploaded) educational content is made available directly via students’ smartphones as part of an everyday ‘scroll’. Importantly, students are not only accustomed to these platforms, but are predisposed to accessing them consistently.

The success of teacherpreneurship-meets-microlearning via social media cannot be denied. Popular accounts such as 'How to British', which publishes short videos on British English and culture, has amassed over 150,000 followers on Instagram and 650,000 thousand followers on TikTok since launching in May 2020. Other examples, of thousands, include '@chinesewithmia' (a Mandarin teacher with 314,000 followers on TikTok and over two million likes) and @italianmatters (an Italian teacher and PhD candidate who boasts over half a million followers who are willing to learn Italian via short video clips). YouTube also remains a popular platform, particularly for longer videos such as those by Rachel's English whose videos have attracted almost four million subscribers.

Not only is this content popular, it also provides a functionality and adaptability that is not often seen by other educational platforms. In addition to short videos, language teachers are able to create interactive content such as 'How to order a pizza in French'—in which users can read one part of a dialogue to practice their oral skills; illustrate the applications of location words in Japanese to teach grammatical content through visual, audio and text content; or even create listening activities in which Italian speakers test their English comprehension. This is further complemented by features such as Instagram 'stories' which allow language to create quizzes to test vocabulary and grammar, or even distinguish between two similar sounds. Even content delivered via stories, which are usually only viewable for 24 hours, can be saved and accessed at any time by students.

Content can also recognise the obstacles that students face on their language acquisition journey. For example, a relatable video by 'Takeaway Chinese' exemplifies some of the difficulties students may face with Chinese vocabulary (and their strong feelings about it). In addition to resonating with students' own perceptions of language learning, it further indicates the ways social media can also function as a platform to provide useful advice on for language acquisition; identifying the common obstacles encountered and how to overcome them.

It's interactive, accessible, and boasts high functionality.

Social media content also offers a unique insight into cultural phenomena that are not always reflected in language textbooks. For example, elementary Chinese students may be able to increase their cultural competence by learning three alternatives to the (not so) common Mandarin greeting '你好吗?' (nǐ hǎo ma - How are you?) or by gaining insight into emerging social media trends by Chinese TikTokers; and even learning more about most popular C-Dramas to boost their

language input outside of class. By engaging with the highly ‘current’ nature of social media—which offers real-time insight into emerging cultural phenomena compared to printed resources which may take years to publish—social media allows students to better understand the contemporary cultural aspects that are associated with their language studies.

These examples highlight just a few of the ways in which social media platforms are revolutionising language teaching. While more traditional educational platforms such as Italki, or apps such as Duolingo, Babbel and Rosetta Stone (to name a few) have existed for many years, and may have even gained even more users during the COVID-19 pandemic, the combination of the popularity of social media and its increasing usability indicate social media is arguably the future of language teaching.

Existing social media practices

This is not to say that social media isn’t already being used to assist in language acquisition, in fact, platforms such as Twitter, Pinterest, blogs and Facebook have been used for over a decade to both learn and teach languages. Research into computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) has demonstrated that platforms such as WeChat have pedagogical implications for students and for teachers alike, and YouTube can be used to publish teacher-produced content or even used to keep students engaged during times such as pandemic-related lockdown. Nevertheless, as TikTok was identified as the fastest growing social media company in Australia in 2020, further attention is required from language teachers to harness the potential of emerging platforms.

From this, several questions remain, particularly: how can social media—predominantly Instagram and TikTok which offer high functionality and are relatively popular with tertiary students—be integrated into the language classroom at the tertiary level, and what are the potential limitations?

Integration or creation?

Two main pathways emerge when considering the applications of social media in the tertiary language classroom, namely: integration or creation?

Integration would involve dedicating classroom time to training students to

effectively access and use social media to their advantage. While students are already predisposed to engage daily with these platforms, teachers may be better placed to guide students towards reliable and appropriate resources for their current language level. This strategy would align well with existing practices in additional language classrooms in which multiple forms of digital media, audio, video, graphics and text, are made available online to aid language teaching, yet are carefully curated by educators to ensure curricula alignment. The integration of this content would primarily serve as increased input for students—increasing their exposure to topics such as vocabulary and grammatical concepts, but also providing insight into cultural content and advice on overcoming language acquisition obstacles.

However, integration is not without its obstacles, particularly with regard to the specific intended learning outcomes (ILOs) tertiary language educators are likely to have. Despite the increased additional language input to which students will be exposed, teaching staff cannot be held responsible for the scope and reliability of content that is posted. Ultimately, teachers may find themselves fielding questions from any number of videos or posts that students view on social media, even if students are guided towards resources deemed most suitable by teaching staff. Nevertheless, integration remains a viable option, notably for students of higher levels who are better able to self-direct their learning, to support students' learning beyond the language classroom and their studies, and as a supplementary tool with which educators can engage.

Creation, on the other hand, would require tertiary educators to become the content creators—augmenting their curricula with microlearning content. While time-consuming and requiring a higher-level of technical literacy which has previously impeded the integration of other technology, this allows educators to ensure content is reliable, aligns well with the subject's ILOs, and still harnesses the potential of social media.

Ultimately, both strategies are viable options for language educators who wish to engage popular social media platforms in their language teaching and learning. More broadly, this may also provide an avenue for further developments in curricula; allowing students to engage with their favourite platforms to complete assessment tasks; assisting with language acquisition (and cultural competence) beyond the classroom; and supporting students' own self-directed learning in line with data-driven learning.

As technology continues to grow, researchers must continue to adapt to integrate technology into the classroom and connect with students. This is even more important as further funding cuts loom, and numbers continue to decline prompting universities to cut programs. Yet, perhaps social media is one part of the solution, and not only in the language classroom.

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