THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON THE TEACHING PROCESS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

Owing to technological advancements, social networks have become an indispensable part of everyday life. Accordingly, their application has also become present in educational settings. This paper examines the use of social networks in language teaching. The first part of the paper presents a theoretical framework that analyzes the didactic application of social networks in foreign language teaching. The second part of the paper encompasses an empirical study whose subject is the examination of the attitudes of Spanish language teachers in Serbia toward this topic, as well as the extent to which social networks are represented in teaching practice. The aim of the research is to provide an overview of the current state of social network use in language teaching, as well as teachers' attitudes toward this topic. The results indicate numerous advantages and highlight the need for further research and professional training in this field.

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Introduction

In recent years, we have witnessed rapid development and numerous achievements in the field of modern technologies that shape our everyday lives. One of the phenomena with which we have become fully integrated is social networks, without which it would be difficult to imagine daily life (Trifunović et al., 2023; Hernandez, Pereira, 2024; Mihajilović et al., 2024). Their widespread presence and frequent use in everyday life have contributed to their integration into foreign language teaching. The new digital era introduces the use of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter not only for communication purposes but also for the exchange of multimedia resources (Smith, Duggan, 2023; Liu, Zhang, 2024; Miller, Saunders, 2024; Prdić,& Kostić, 2024; Stanković, et al., 2023).

The main advantages offered by social networks in foreign language teaching include the fact that they represent highly useful free platforms for interactive learning, enable conversation in a direct manner, and allow quick access without time constraints. Social networks can be accessed via various devices, provide practical and enjoyable learning experiences, and support interculturality and social connectivity (Gutjeres, 2021; Kemp, Williams, 2023; Ercegovac & Ercegovac, 2023).

The subject of this research is the presentation and analysis of the application of social networks in language teaching. The aim of the research is to examine the current situation in the teaching of Spanish as a foreign language in Serbia, as well as Spanish teachers' attitudes toward this topic. The hypothesis is that Spanish language teachers use social networks in teaching and that students are interested in this approach. It is also assumed that professional training in this area would be beneficial, given that this topic has been insufficiently researched in Serbia.

Literature Review

Social networks as a service enable individuals to create a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, generate a list of other users with whom they share content, and view content created by other users within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Gutjeres, 2021; Shepherd, 2024; Dašić et al, 2024).

According to another definition (Bartlett, 2006; Vázquez & Cabero, 2015 In García, 2016: 41), social networks are "a group of applications and collaborative spaces in which social connections and information exchange exist within an online environment."

Websites such as Facebook and Twitter represent a group of applications and collaborative spaces where social connections and information exchange occur

online (Ellison & Boyd, 2023). They host content created by social network users themselves, enabling interaction across great distances. As a result, foreign language learners are provided with opportunities to practice the language on a regular basis (Mana, 2023).

Social networks enable connections based on friendship (Facebook), professional activity (LinkedIn), the use of a specific format (YouTube, Vimeo), presentations (SlideShare), photography (Flickr), or text (Google Docs). Certain social networks have become widespread among users of a specific age group (Tuenti), while others are more open and allow unrestricted presentation of content to the entire internet (Facebook or Twitter) (Moja, 2011; Hanna et al., 2004; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2023).

Given that they are free of charge and provide easy access without time limitations, social networks represent an attractive tool for language learning, particularly for individuals with limited time or those who work extensively online (Gutjeres, 2021).

Advantages of Using Social Networks in Foreign Language Teaching

Social networks have attracted the attention of foreign language teaching methodologists due to the various advantages they can offer in the dynamics of teaching and second language learning (Sera, 2019; Olsen & Thompson, 2023).

They possess characteristics that make them appealing to learners, such as the ability to view videos or photographs. They also allow users to express their opinions and perspectives on posts with a high degree of freedom of expression, which represents a significant advantage for foreign language teaching (Ruiperes & García, 2012; Stojanović et al., 2021).

Social networks strengthen interconnections among learners from different countries in real time, enabling the use of language in practice in a natural and spontaneous manner and in contact with other cultures (Gutjeres, 2021; Golonka et al., 2024).

They provide a space for the development of linguistic skills, such as written production and listening comprehension, and also encourage active participation and autonomous learning (Gutjeres, 2021).

Furthermore, social networks offer learners opportunities for immersion in real communicative situations (Gutjeres, 2021; Thorne & Black, 2023). Since the essence of foreign language learning lies in the ability to participate in real communicative situations, the application of social networks provides learners with opportunities to improve language competence precisely in this way.

Twitter allows users to follow news from native speakers on topics such as politics, economics, travel, new technologies, or even weather forecasts. Given that tweets are limited to 140 characters, sentences are easier to memorize. This facilitates vocabulary acquisition and the learning of commonly used expressions specific to everyday life, as well as sentence structures. Twitter users can practice writing

concise sentences in a foreign language. Changing the interface language on Facebook is also an effective way to expose learners to foreign language input (Mana, 2023; Levy, 2024).

Interactions that take place within social network communities make them particularly suitable as supplementary learning tools. Since language on social networks is used for information exchange or social interaction, it constitutes meaning-focused language use. Additionally, situations involving clarification, correction, requests for assistance, or confirmation are frequent, thus enabling cooperative meaning construction, which should also occur in foreign language classrooms. Social networks often involve discussions on topics such as literature or gastronomy, making language use similar to that in content-based instruction (Moja, 2011).

In other words, social networks can be extremely versatile in terms of the content they allow users to share, but their true potential lies in their ability to facilitate real-time communicative situations that enable not only vocabulary acquisition and improvement but also the practice of speaking and listening comprehension (Sera, 2019; Thorne & Black, 2023). It is indisputable that social networks foster the development of communicative skills and competencies in foreign language learners, as they enable the creation of numerous real-time communicative situations from any geographical location (Sera, 2019; Mikroyannidis & Iordanou, 2023).

With regard to task-based approaches, the variety of information types and audiovisual resources that can be used on social networks is virtually unlimited. Posts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other networks may include links to documents such as books, articles, videos, and other materials (Murray, 2024; Chik & Lee, 2023). In this way, learners gain access to numerous activities through which they can practice writing, reading, speaking, and text comprehension. This range of options undoubtedly influences learners' motivation and interest in their own learning process (Tovar & Tapia, 2019; Sera, 2019).

There is also a wide variety of social networks specialized in language learning, including Twiducate, LiveMocha, Conversation Exchange/Language Exchange, Talk, Palabea, Polyglot Club, My Happy Planet, Shared Talk, English Baby, Wordsurfing, Babble.com, and Duolingo. Despite the existence of many specialized platforms, Facebook remains one of the most widely used for this purpose. This is due to the fact that most students and young people already have access to it and use it daily, and its configuration is not overly complex (Araujo Portugal, 2014; Cabero & Marín, 2014). Consequently, the simplicity of general-purpose social networks (Facebook and Twitter) remains relevant and even essential, as does the demand from certain teachers who use them for information distribution and communication (Borromeo García, 2016; Godwin-Jones, 2023).

Social networks introduce fun, dynamism, and oral interaction into foreign language learning. However, for comprehensive learning that would enable learners to internalize syntactic, grammatical, and lexical structures, social networks do not replace traditional methods such as the learning of grammatical rules (Gutjeres, 2021). Therefore, it is essential to clearly define didactic objectives and structure the information intended to be presented through social networks.

Moreover, these platforms must be used appropriately, with due consideration for privacy, digital security, and content quality, in order to maximize pedagogical benefits and minimize potential distractions or risks (Gutjeres, 2021; García & Méndez, 2023).

Disadvantages of Using Social Networks in Language Teaching

The use of social networks for educational purposes requires a high level of caution and self-regulation if their benefits for language learning are to be fully exploited (Johnson et al., 2020). Additionally, the volume of information that students receive through social networks is immense and varies in quality; therefore, learners must be able to identify, filter, and process information in order to access appropriate resources for their learning needs (Vu & Kang, 2023; Thompson, 2022).

However, there are obstacles to their use, including the knowledge and skills required for information technology use, institutional policies, implementation planning, and social differences between teachers and learners (Borromeo García, 2016). One of the greatest barriers is the lack of training or competence among some teachers in using new technological advancements.

Research Method and Results

In order to examine the current status of social network use in Spanish language teaching in Serbia, a study was conducted among Spanish language teachers. The research method employed was a survey. The research instrument was an anonymous questionnaire created using Google Docs and administered to respondents via email. The questionnaire consisted of ten open-ended and closed-ended questions. The sample comprised 19 respondents (n = 19).

The study provides indicative information regarding teachers' attitudes toward the use of social networks in language teaching and is intended to encourage educators to apply this innovative tool, as well as to stimulate further research on the topic. The hypothesis was that Spanish language teachers use this tool and that both teachers and students are interested in it.

Statistical data processing and analysis were conducted using IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), version 25. Descriptive statistics were applied to describe the sample, and the chi-square test was used to examine differences. The significance threshold was set at 0.05.
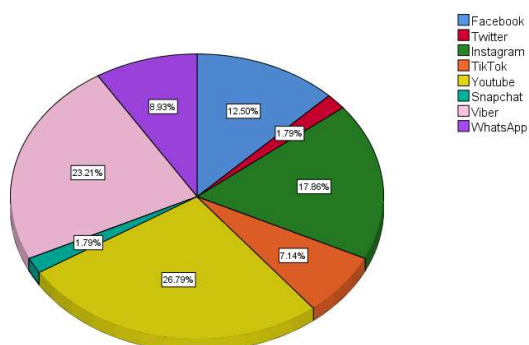
The study included 19 Spanish language teachers, predominantly working in primary schools (63.2%), with teaching experience ranging from 16 to 25 years (68.4%) (Table 1). The majority of teachers (68.4%) reported using social networks in foreign language teaching, most often several times per month (46.2%) (Table 1). Based on the results presented in Figure 1, it can be concluded that teachers most frequently use YouTube (26.79%), Viber (23.21%), and Instagram (17.86%).

Table 1. General characteristics of Spanish language teachers

		f	%
Where do you teach Spanish?	Primary school	12	63.2
	Secondary school	3	15.8
	University	2	10.5
	Language school	1	5.3
	Private lessons	1	5.3
Years of teaching experience	5 years or less	1	5.3
	Between 6 and 15 years	5	26.3
	Between 16 and 25 years	13	68.4
	More than 25 years	0	0
Do you use social networks in foreign language teaching?	Yes	13	68.4
	No	6	31.6
How often do you use social networks in teaching?	Daily	2	15.4
	Several times a week	4	30.8
	Several times a month	6	46.2
	Rarely	1	7.7

Source: Author's illustration based on the research

Figure 1. Which social networks do you use?

Source: Author's illustration based on the research

The majority of respondents (79%) believe that students are interested in this type of instruction. Likewise, most respondents (79%) believe that the use of social networks enhances the process of acquiring Spanish. As many as 63.2% of respondents believe that the use of social networks in teaching fosters learner autonomy. Overall, 68.4% of respondents stated that a seminar or training on the use of social networks would be beneficial (Table 2). The main advantage of using social networks in Spanish language teaching is student motivation and the encouragement of autonomy (38.9%), while the main disadvantages are distraction of students' attention (38.9%) and content monitoring (22.2%) (Table 3).

Table 2. Usefulness of social networks in Spanish language classes

		f	%
Where do you teach Spanish?	Primary school	12	63.2
	Secondary school	3	15.8
	University	2	10.5
	Language school	1	5.3
	Provate lessons	1	5.3
Years of teaching experience	5 years or less	1	5.3
	Between 6 and 15 years	5	26.3
	Between 16 and25 years	13	68.4
	More than 25 years	0	0
Do you use social networks in foreign language teaching?	Yes	13	68.4
	No	6	31.6
How often do you use social networks in teaching?	Daily	2	15.4
	Several times a week	4	30.8
	Several times a month	6	46.2
	Rarely	1	7.7

Source: Author's illustration based on the research

Table 3. Advantages and disadvantages of using social networks in Spanish language classes

		f	
Advantages of using social networks in Spanish language classes	Motivates students and encourages autonomy	7	
	More efficient acquisition of course content	3	
	Better listening comprehension	4	
	Better accessibility of teaching materials	2	
	Other	2	
Potential disadvantages of using social networks in Spanish language classes	Internet safety	1	
	Content monitoring	4	
	Students' loss of focus	7	
	Excessive screen time	2	
	Other	4	

Source: Author's illustration based on the research

The study examined whether there were statistically significant differences in the use of social networks in Spanish language teaching, students' interest in this type of instruction, the improvement of Spanish language acquisition through this approach, the promotion of learner autonomy, and the usefulness of seminars and training for this type of instruction in relation to the type of Spanish language teaching. The chi-square test was applied to examine the stated differences.

Based on the results of the chi-square test presented in Table 4, it can be concluded that a statistically significant difference exists with regard to the usefulness of seminars and training for this type of instruction in relation to the type of Spanish language teaching. On the basis of the numerical and percentage distribution shown in Table 5, it can be concluded that primary school and university teachers predominantly believe that training is necessary, whereas teachers who provide private lessons consider such training unnecessary.

Table 4. Differences with respect to the type of Spanish language instruction

		f	%
Advantages of using social networks in Spanish language classes	Motivates students and encourages autonomy	7	38.9
	More efficient acquisition of course content	3	16.7
	Better listening comprehension	4	22.2
	Better accessibility of teaching materials	2	11.1
	Other	2	11.1
Potential disadvantages of using social networks in Spanish language classes	Internet safety	1	5.6
	Content monitoring	4	22.2
	Students' loss of focus	7	38.9
	Excessive screen time	2	11.1
	Other	4	22.2

*Statistical significance at the 0.05 level
Source: Author's illustration based on the research

Table 5. Do you believe that training or a seminar would be beneficial for improving the use of social networks in Spanish language teaching?

			Yes	No	Other	Total
Where do you teach Spanish?	Primary school	f	10	1	1	12
		%	83.3	8.3	8.3	100
	Secondary school	f	1	0	2	3
		%	33.3	0	66.7	100
	University	f	2	0	0	2
		%	100	0	0	100
	Language academy	f	0	0	1	1
		%	0	0	100	100
	Private lessons	f	0	1	0	1
		%	0	100	0	100

Total	f	13	2	4	19
	%	68.4	10.5	21.1	100

Source: Author's illustration based on the research

The study also investigated whether there were statistically significant differences in the use of social networks in Spanish language teaching, students' interest in this type of instruction, the improvement of Spanish language acquisition through this approach, the promotion of learner autonomy, and the usefulness of seminars and training for this type of instruction in relation to teachers' years of experience. The chi-square test was used to examine these differences.

An examination of the chi-square test results presented in Table 6 indicates that a statistically significant difference exists with regard to the improvement of Spanish language acquisition through the use of social networks in teaching. Based on the numerical and percentage distribution shown in Table 7, it can be concluded that teachers with less than five years of experience believe that social networks do not enhance Spanish language acquisition, whereas teachers with more than five years of experience believe that social networks contribute to improving Spanish language acquisition.

Table 6. Differences with respect to the length of teachers' experience

	χ^2	p
Do you use social networks in foreign language teaching?	4.759	0.093
Do you think that pupils/students are interested in this type of teaching?	2.338	0.674
Do you think that the use of social networks in Spanish language classes can improve the acquisition of Spanish?	20.462	<0.0005*
Do you think that the use of social networks encourages learner autonomy?	3.021	0.554
Do you think that a seminar or training related to this topic would be useful to you?	1.068	0.899

Source: Author's illustration based on the research
*Statistical significance at the 0.05 level

Table 7. The use of social networks improves the acquisition of Spanish

			Yes	No	I don't know	Total
Gde predajete španski	Up to 5 years	f	0	1	0	1
		%	0	100	0	100
	Between 6 and 15 years	f	5	0	0	5
		%	100	0	0	100
	Between 16 and 25 years	f	10	0	3	13
		%	76.9	0	23.1	100
	Total	f	15	1	3	19
		%	78.9	5.3	15.8	100

Source: Author's illustration based on the research

Finally, the study examined whether there were statistically significant differences in students' interest in this type of instruction, the improvement of Spanish language

acquisition through this approach, the promotion of learner autonomy, and the usefulness of seminars and training for this type of instruction in relation to the use of social networks in Spanish language teaching. The chi-square test was applied to examine these differences.

Based on the results of the chi-square test presented in Table 8, it can be concluded that no statistically significant differences exist in teachers' responses with regard to the use of social networks in Spanish language teaching.

Table 8. Differences with respect to the use of social networks for teaching Spanish

	χ^2	p
Do you think that pupils/students are interested in this type of teaching?	0.796	0.672
Do you think that the use of social networks in Spanish language classes can improve the acquisition of Spanish?	4.807	0.090
Do you think that the use of social networks encourages learner autonomy?	1.644	0.440
Do you think that a seminar or training related to this topic would be useful to you?	0.398	0.819

Source: Author's illustration based on the research
*Statistical significance at the 0.05 level

Conclusion

Social networks have also found their place in foreign language teaching. Due to their characteristics, they represent a practical and effective tool for information exchange, thereby enhancing productive and receptive language skills. Through appropriate implementation of social networks in teaching, learners' linguistic, sociocultural, and pragmatic competences can be improved (Godwin-Jones, 2023; Murray, 2024; Kostić, 2023).

Didactic preparation is essential when working with social networks. While social networks constitute valuable support for foreign language learning, they cannot replace formal language courses (Mana, 2023).

Based on the conducted research, it can be concluded that the majority of respondents use social networks several times per month. The most commonly used platforms are YouTube, Viber, and Instagram. Most respondents express a positive attitude toward the use of social networks in language teaching and believe that students are motivated. Distraction of students' attention is identified as a potential drawback. Furthermore, the research results indicate a need for professional training in this area, which could contribute to increased use of social networks in teaching and enhance the effectiveness of the learning process.

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UTICAJ DRUŠTVENIH MREŽA NA NASTAVNI PROCES UČENJA JEZIKA

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Apstrakt

Zahvaljujući napretku tehnologija, društvene mreže su postale nezaobilazni deo naše svakodnevnice. Shodno tome, njihova primena je prisutna i u nastavi. U radu se razmatra upotreba društvenih mreža u nastavi jezika. Prvi deo rada podrazumeva teorijski okvir koji se bavi analizom didaktičke primene društvenih mreža u nastavi stranih jezika. Drugi deo rada obuhvata spovedeno istraživanje čiji je predmet ispitivanje stava predavača španskog jezika u Srbiji prema ovoj temi i zastupljenost društvenih mreža u nastavi. Cilj istraživanja se sastoji u sagledavanju trenutne situacije primene društvenih mreža u nastavi jezika, kao i stava profesora prema ovoj temi. Rezultati ukazuju na brojne prednosti i potrebu za daljim istraživanjem i obukama u ovoj oblasti.

Ključne reči: *društvene mreže, komunikacija, učenje stranih jezika, nastavni proces.*