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Using Online Social Media to Understand Culture

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Abstract: One significant part of Foreign Language Teaching is related to teaching culture and civilization. Culture and civilization notions may be related to history or to present-day culture, and they can help learners better understand the mindset of the culture whose language they are learning and studying. Once we learn a language, we have in mind using it to communicate with members of another country and culture. Online social media facilitates the presentation of cultural aspects, and learners may benefit from following Facebook pages related to various cultures. Pictures and information related to cultures can be used as supplementary materials.

Keywords: active participation, foreign language learning, ideology, communication

1. Introduction

The importance of culture in language learning has always been beyond dispute. Learners, as well as teachers, cannot help, psychologically, to associate a language they are learning with a country they would like to visit or have visited, and to which they are attracted due to its history and its present-day culture. The present-day culture can be understood based on the culture identity manifestations grid devised by Baciu (2012, 32), and which includes the following elements: symbols, values, traditions, rituals, practices, and personalities. Learners and teachers use symbols that identity a certain country and culture right away. The way language is used at a certain time shows the specific cultural particular features of a society with which learners are expected to interact. Foreign language learning classes are supposed to help learners understand the cultural frame of mind of the country they wish to visit in order to adapt to their particular communication patterns. Foreign language teaching and learning is concerned not only with linguistic proficiency, but also with

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intercultural competence, leading to an awareness of and sensitivity to the beliefs, practices, and worldviews of the members of other cultures.

Traditionally, culture in the language classroom has been taught through textbooks, works of literature, films, and the lessons about it were structured focusing on customs and historical events. While these materials provide basic knowledge about the traditional culture, they may fail to reflect the fast-paced, constantly changing contemporary culture. In contrast, online social media platforms offer a present-day connected perspective, presenting true-to-life, common life aspects from the day-to-day life of users living in the respective country. Online social media offer a more engaging view than textbooks regarding how people live, communicate, and express their identities today. Social media offers a dynamic tool to understand culture, engage learners, and bring additional material to the foreign language teaching classroom. At the same time, online social media does not focus on present-day culture only. While learners may understand how everyday life is like in the country whose foreign language they study based on the interests of various users close to their age, they may also have access to curiosities, animated short clips and attractive materials about the history of the respective country. While the materials related to history on online social media is very short, it does serve to spark further interest and gain the attention of the students to start researching in more detail on a topic of their choice.

Foreign language learning follows the trends of the present-day culture and mindsets of the students since it needs to address their specific needs and to make them actively involved. This is because the act of teaching and learning is always related to the everyday living context and to the skills society asks of students. Teachers need to adapt to the present-day living context, and the teaching and learning process needs to reflect the present-day lifestyle. Language is itself very adaptable to the present-day needs of its users, allowing, as an example, newly created words and borrowings to enter the dictionary. Technology is a large part of our everyday life context currently (McGann 2005, 179-189) and it permeates all areas of life, including the field of education and vocabulary. The word *selfie*, for example, is a freshly introduced one in the dictionary, and it is used in countries all over the world in its original, English version. Going live and watching a live from an online social media user is also a frequent phrase used nowadays, and it is also part of our lifestyle. Thus, it makes sense to see online social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, Tiktok, and others as including materials for foreign language learning and also for a more attractive look at culture and civilization.

The objective of this paper consists in exploring how online social media can be used to enhance cultural understanding in foreign language teaching. The author of the present paper relies on her considerations of online social media use in foreign language teaching at university level, as she has experiencing teaching students at this level at the Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok provide learners with access to real-time cultural content, ranging from popular trends in everyday life, to political life and opinions on

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it, as well as local humour. By analyzing posts, based on their text content, comments to it, and visual media, students can gain insight into how culture is constructed and shared in online spaces.

2. Materials and Methods

Online social media platforms reflect, after all, just like foreign language teaching and learning, as well as the entire education process itself, our present-day lifestyle, together with aspects which are part of this lifestyle, starting from various activities, values, symbols, practices, and other elements which can be found in the culture identity manifestations grid, devised by Baciu (2012, 32). Online social media platforms present us with teaching and learning material for foreign language classes

What aspects related to social media and foreign language teaching are the most important ones? The author of the present paper believes that we need to take into consideration the fact that language is also part of the culture of a certain country, and that the two of them are intertwined, not separate. The way we use language is related to the culture of a certain time.

2.1. Use of Language: Cultural Aspects

First of all, we can have in mind linguistic and pragmatic aspects, related to whether communication culture is direct or indirect (Joyce 2012; Stoian 2020, 93-102), or high or low context (Condon 2015, 262-281). In high-context cultures (e.g., Japan and the Arab countries, and, more generally speaking, Asian and Middle Eastern countries), much of the communication relies on shared knowledge and implicit understanding. In contrast, low-context cultures (e.g., Germany, the United States, and, as a rule, the Western world) favour explicit, or direct communication. Social media interactions reflect these patterns through tone, present in both video and textual interaction, emoji use, and messaging, offering students real-life examples of cultural norms in communication.

Linguistics and culture are strongly interconnected in pragmatics, the latter being defined as the study of language in use and context. Social media posts often involve colloquial expressions, use of humour, irony, and speech acts (Sadock 2006, 53-73) that vary across cultures. Students encountering these forms of pragmatic examples of communication online develop pragmatic competence, which is essential for effective communication in real-world situations. Online social media posts are definitely closer to everyday life communication than any written study materials. Speech patterns on social media also reflect regional dialects, generational slang, and sociolects (Guy 2013, 63-71), the latter being defined as the dialects of a social class. All of these elements are part of both everyday life communication and foreign language teaching and learning.

2.2. Intercultural Competence in Language Teaching

Michael Byram's model of intercultural communicative competence (Byram & Golubeva 2020, 70-85) is especially relevant for foreign language teaching. He

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identifies five key components: attitudes (curiosity and openness), knowledge (of social groups and practices), skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, as well as critical cultural awareness. These elements align well with social media-based activities that ask students to engage with real-life content, analyze cultural meanings, and reflect on their own perspectives. Social media enables learners to move beyond static representations of culture and instead interact with living, evolving cultural expressions.

2.3. Translation Studies and Cultural Transfer

Foreign language learning includes notions of culture, language, as well as translation. In addition, translation and culture are interrelated, together with language. Students being taught a foreign language need not necessarily be studying for a future profession of translators and/ or interpreters in order to have, at some point, to solve exercises related to translation. The author of the present paper teacher English as a foreign language for students in engineering, as well as at the translation and interpretation specialization within the Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest. Online social media can provide for both specializations, translation and interpretation, as well as engineering, specific cases for translation exercises. These exercises are related to both culture and use of language during our present day. Definitely, this type of language, related to a familiar environment for students, the online social media one, is specific to the present age and online medium. At the same time, online social media refers to everyday realities of the users, and, consequently., language related to taking walks in a certain country and city, going out, talking to friends, visiting cafes, museums, and so on.

In the field of translation studies, culture is seen as a key factor that influences how meaning is transferred from one language to another. Online content often contains culturally specific references, in the case of online social media, memes, idioms, political jokes, as well as visual symbolism, all of which being elements that are difficult to translate literally. In this case, we can have in view the concept of cultural untranslatability (Kitamura 2009) and the need for cultural adaptation. By engaging with authentic online materials, students can exercise their ability to identify and interpret culture-bound elements, and explore strategies for rendering them in another language.

2.4. The Role of Social Media in Cultural Understanding

The teacher can use the example of major platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc.) in order to help students understand the role of social media as both a communication tool and content platform. These platforms reflect cultural values and trends of present-day society. We can understand their role from an ideological perspective, as ideology itself is intertwined with culture (Geertz 2014, 279-294; Griffin 2013, 75-97; Van Meurs et al 2021, 200), influencing it, when it comes to promoting certain norms, values, beliefs, principles, trends and mindsets. Language, culture, and digital tools are all prone to be influenced by ideology. We can see how

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online social media helps spread individualist (Hofstede 2011) and democratic values (Besley & Persson 2019, 59-76), as each and every user has the opportunity to create, not only follow, online content. Each and every user can express him or herself freely, and create an online image of their choice, that would represent him or her. Individualist societies encourage self-expression and creativity. They allow individuals to be different from the rest, and in fact even encourage this. Individualist societies move away from the pressure of society to shape individuals to be all alike. A democratic society allows access for individuals to viewing, interacting with and creating online digital content, as well as to interacting with other users. The online social media platforms are easy to use, which guarantees equal rights to all users.

Students are given the opportunity to access the digital world, which is also part of communication around the world for various cultures and which gives them the opportunity to communicate directly with members of other cultures and speakers of the foreign languages they are learning and studying.

Students can be given, as a task, to look at a Facebook page of their choice, related to a culture whose language they are studying, or of a culture which is presented in the foreign language they are studying (this language is often English) and try an analysis of language use, visual elements, comments from users around the world based on their own, intuitive observations. The online social media platform offering access to this page can be one of their choice. As an example, they can choose a Facebook page presenting facts from Japanese culture, including holidays such as the Cherry Blossoms festival, old paintings, pictures with temples during springtime, autumn, as well as other seasons, as well as facts related to the way the Japanese are allowed to sleep at work in order to prove that they work very hard, hard enough to be tired and need rest, and others.

The activities proposed for students can sound as follows:

- Follow a cultural page in the target language and present findings;
- Compare memes from two different cultures;
- Create an Instagram Story about a cultural event and explain it to classmates;
- Analyze comment sections to see cultural communication styles.

The activities were selected from those proposed through discussions with Chat GPT. Chat GPT offers ideas for activities and possible scenarios, from which the teachers can select those suitable for the respective group of students they are teaching.

The first suggested activity can include selecting a Facebook page or an individual user's page on any other online social media platform focused on a certain culture. Students can select pages or accounts about Great Britain, America, Germany, Italy, or about Asian countries and cultures, which are very much attractive for the Western culture members. For students of English as a foreign language, the Facebook page which includes an Instagram and Tiktok account called Great British Tea Party is a good example of online social media account related to British culture. The activity may be adapted to include not only Facebook pages in the English

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language about other cultures and countries, speaking different languages than English. As an example, the Facebook page titled Jaded in Japan presents various aspects of Japanese culture in the English language. Other such examples are the Facebook page German Culture & More, which deals with cultural aspects of the German-speaking countries, We The Italians, which focuses on both contemporary lifestyle, including places to go out, e.g. cafes and restaurants, as well as the past, e.g. preserving historical sites.

The second activity, about the memes (Kayali et al 2021, 155-160) circulating on social media in different cultures, may show students different versions of translation of the same text and type of humour. At the same time, some culturally specific references may be added, or memes can be created directly in and specifically for the respective language and culture. Students may in such cases identify a different type of humour and especially issues that are subject to being treated humorously. The memes will often include references to a specific culture, and at some point students may need to resort to their background knowledge about the history, as well as traditions, rituals, practices, values, symbols and personalities of the respective culture. This is why observing and analysing even memes can become a good exercise in checking and better understanding a certain culture. Students may also recognize similar mindsets in cultures all over the world. Here we can have in view the quotations related to individualist aspects, taken from older works, as well as belonging to users living today, and referring to personal freedom, of action and thought, or about feeling good about oneself even if we are not like the others. Memes express present-day types of mindsets and values, and present-day type of communication, including both text and visual images. The memes have, as a specific feature, the fact that they are striking, rely on a pun or present us with food for thought since they place an otherwise known reality and way of thinking into a completely different perspective. The memes also refer to common, everyday life experiences, and feelings about them, to which the users can easily relate.

The third activity, about creating an Instagram Story related to a cultural event can allow students to take an active part in creating digital content, and not just observe and interpret it, as it has been the case with the first two activities. After observing the online social media environment related to the culture and civilization niche, students are invited to create such content themselves. An Instagram story relies on a striking, visual component, as well as on short text component, where each and every word needs to be carefully selected and its power of allusion and references is important. A striking type of message should be chosen. Students can create a short clip or sequence of images. They can also add music which they consider suitable for the image, images or clip and overall message or simply to express the way they feel about what they are presenting.

The fourth activity is related to students' ability to identify communication styles, relying on their background knowledge about whether a country has a predominantly direct vs indirect communication culture, or high context vs low context communication culture. In order to be able to identify a few such aspects,

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they need to study and look for the right example of page or account on a social media platform where there are enough examples of comments. At the same time, they may discover that online, as users from all over the world connect together based on a commonly known language, namely English, that the online medium develops its own specific type of communication, which is universal and may simply make references or allusions to common cultural landmarks. These landmarks may be universally known films, books, or episodes in history.

For all activities, students are asked to select an example of online social media page or account, or even group, in the case of Facebook, which can be used for the respective activity. This is an additional effort on the part of the student, which also makes the activity all the more challenging and engaging. As students are familiar with the online social media in general, using it on a daily basis, they should find the activity entertaining and feel that they are in a familiar environment. Students will find that they are already practising communication skills in the context of an environment which is widely used nowadays on a daily basis in a foreign language. Motivation for active participation (Almosa 2024), in the foreign languages classes is, thus, ensured. The activities can be done individually, in pairs, or in groups, which allows room for even more active participation, interaction and engagement during the foreign languages classroom. The activities can be done in class or discussed among students and be prepared before class, function of the decision of the teachers. One advantage if the activities are done in class is that the teacher can offer students feedback while he or she moves around the various groups, pairs, or students working individually. At the same time, an activity such as the one asking for creating an Instagram Story can be complex and require more time to be done.

Since cultures are dynamic (Baciu 2012, 8), meaning that, in time, they go through various changes, it is natural to assume that the teaching and learning process of foreign languages and not only can also go through the same stages of change.

3. Results

What are the benefits and challenges of introducing online social media in a few activities within foreign language learning classes? Among the benefits, we can consider the following aspects: access to authentic materials, increased student motivation, prompting active participation of the students in classes, access to current language use, as well as achieving intercultural insights. Students can start their own exploration on the assignment topics and activities, and they can engage in critical thinking about the practices present in online social media interaction, as well as observe how communication there takes place. Among the challenges, we can consider the following issues: the risk of cultural stereotyping, the risk of misinformation, language register issues, since users coming from all areas of the world may not speak properly the foreign language used on the platform, together with other platform limitations when presenting students a certain culture. Online social media platforms use, after all, minimal text content, since users do not take the time to read too much text at once. However, there can be links towards academic

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articles or blog articles. Online social media can be, therefore, a starting point for the further explorations of the students regarding cultural aspects, as well as ways of their own further readings and explorations on the topic.

4. Discussion

Among the implications on using online social media for foreign language is the issue related to how teachers can integrate it into the curriculum. Definitely, the use of online social media cannot be integrated at all times. Yet, it provides a different approach and allows for varied activities with the foreign language teaching classes. Students can be presented during foreign language classes with a variety of activities, some of them based on classical textbooks, some of them based on technological aspects we have around today, and also some of them based on serious topics, from formal and academic registers, while others can be based on entertainment and social life. Variety makes up the key to successful foreign language learning classes, as otherwise students can end up feeling caught in routine tasks and standard, repetitive structures of their classes. Teachers can also vary individual, pair, and group work activities, as well as the practice of skills, ranging from listening, speaking, reading, to writing.

Online social media is, without a doubt, part of our everyday life and contemporary culture. It can be used for entertainment, socialising, personal reasons, as well as for promotion of a professional, public image.

5. Conclusion

We notice, in the case of introducing online social media in the foreign language learning classes, the importance of digital literacy, alongside linguistic and cultural literacy. Since online social media is a strong part of who we are today, ranging form personal communication, to professional and student communication, using, for instance, Facebook groups, to entertainment, and educational-related use of resources, we need to consider its introduction in foreign language learning classes as well. What is more, culture is an important aspect nowadays, since we live in a world where multiculturalism and cultural awareness are important values. We have the EU and UNESCO recognize various cultural practices, rituals and traditions as part of the heritage of the respective culture. In this way, these rituals, traditions, and practices become landmarks for the respective culture. These are all made known based on online social media posts, groups, pages, and also through comments on individual users' pages, showing their engagement with these. This is why a culture and civilization section in foreign language learning classes needs to be allocated to online social media, since it helps spread through modern means the specific features of various cultures.

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