




# The innovative use of social media for teaching English as a second language



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The need to improve English proficiency and inclusion of social media in language teaching have resulted in teachers having to develop new teaching strategies incorporating digital tools. In South Africa, English teachers in township settings have to develop teaching strategies suitable for teaching English using social media platforms, especially in resource-constrained secondary schools. From literature and education policies, teaching of digital literacy is strongly recommended, but teachers in some township environments are not pedagogically capacitated to teach and use social media in teaching English. To explore the experiences of such teachers, this study explored the use of social media for the teaching of English as a second language in township schools. The study used an interpretivist qualitative approach in an exploratory case-study design to understand teachers' initiatives and strategies in teaching English as a second language using social media. Data collection was done using semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and document analysis. Teachers' voices, actions and documents on the use of social media were analysed inductively and thematically. The research findings indicate that the sampled English teachers used social media for collaboration, networking, communication and out-of-school digital literacy practices as their initiatives. These digital initiatives lead to the utilisation of digital connection platforms for socialisation and teaching and learning English. In addition to dividends of connectivism, visual communication and cyber linguistics were found to have become critically important practices for learners learning English as a second language. The implication is that the education policy-makers and planners in South Africa need to revisit the policy on e-learning and Information Communication Technology (ICT) usage in schools to incorporate the methodological requirements and competences for teachers to use in the teaching of English using social media. In addition to improvements in policy measures, English teachers in resource-constrained township secondary schools need to improve their digital literacy skills to line up themselves for online and out-of-school literacy learning requirements.

**Keywords:** digital literacy; multiliteracy; second language learning; social media; teacher initiatives.

## Introduction and background

Technological development and the teaching of English as a second language have been the focus of debate among academics and language specialists in the past decade. English language teachers in secondary schools have been compelled by technological innovations and curriculum needs to update their teaching and learning skills in line with technological requirements and policy. The purpose of this article was to explore the digital development and technological innovations that have changed the communication landscape the world over (Prensky 2001) and is true for the African continent as well. The presence of social media has provided many opportunities for teaching and learning English as a second language. In South Africa, teachers are required to use digital technology for teaching subjects such as English as recommended by the syllabus rolled out in 2011 (National Department of Basic Education [CAPS] 2011). Social media in the South African education system is not widely used officially because of disciplinary challenges and financial constraints. According to Dzvapatsva, Mitrovic and Dietrich (2014), social media has a chance to improve participation by learners who perform poorly because social media can cater to different personality profiles. Social media is also convenient as individualised learning experiences. Social media, thus, connects cultures through collaborative authorship and digitally connected and networked knowledge communities in a participatory culture.

In support of becoming knowledge communities, practising teachers must be aware that single authorship is now an option and that the classroom extends beyond the visible walls, as it is connected to digital resources and learning partners (Lotherington & Jenson 2011). For computer

technology to support cognitive functions and encourage higher learning outcomes, teachers have a duty to reconceptualise the way digital tools are used in the integration of theory and practice (Jonassen 2006). The reconceptualised procedure should result in a shift away from a teacher-centred approach to instruction that attempts to engage learners in collaborative activities that support knowledge construction in an integrated fashion. In the modern paradigms of language teaching, teachers are not necessarily knowledge reservoirs but are facilitators who should enable learners to discover and understand their environment. Ingre and Basil (2017) claimed that social media comprises platforms that promote interactivity and community building among users. According to Savage and McGoun (2015), digital classrooms, digital music, cell phones, smart phones, video games, digital music players, online entertainment, cyber learning and collaboration, massive open online courses, video cams and all other forms of digital toys have characterised the environment of the child of the digital age across international boundaries.

In support of the use of technology in English language teaching, Mubarak (2016) and Shava and Chinyamurindi (2017) said that the use of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp, is an attempt to take advantage of peer attention, freedom of expression, and to create and manage participants' identities as they seek for information. In addition to socialising and sharing of information, McKnight et al. (2016) strongly argued that digital classrooms outperform traditional classrooms, and their findings and the declaration by the former US President Barak Obama in 2013 to have Internet in classes within a period of 5 years in American schools show a commitment towards the use of digital technology and social media for teaching and learning. Mubarak (2016) supported the use of social media in education, as it provides more flexible language learning experiences through constructivism. Learning communities in Mubarak's (2016) view have significantly progressed from regular classroom to a computer-generated education environment in which learners come together in a virtual environment to exchange ideas, solve problems, explore opportunities and understand the world in a better way.

Recent research has demonstrated how collaborative learning improves learners' performance and provides extended learning time (Le, Jansen & Wubbels 2018). In view of the advantages of collaborative learning in a digital landscape, teachers should eliminate inhibitions and perceived obstacles limiting learner progress. In a study on the use of tablets in a classroom context, Falloon (2015) attributed the positive findings on the use of technology to tablets' capabilities for instant sharing and feedback. In the same project, Falloon and Khoo (2014) explored the impact of open-ended Apps versus closed-ended Apps on students' learning and found that the content generation requirement of open-ended Apps stimulated more interaction among learners through which different subject teachers could build learners' verbal and other communication skills. In view of the learning

opportunities provided by the Apps, English teachers in resource-constrained secondary schools in South Africa have the chance of using social media platforms to interact with learners, thereby sharing content, developing writing, curation and other visual communication skills.

In a study by Bagdasarov, Luo and Wu (2017), the use of Apps and technology in the teaching of a second language improved on the learners' writing and averages because of the use of technology in learning mathematics. We argue in this article that the use of technology, and social media in particular, provides opportunities for learners to develop critical thinking skills, writing abilities, communication effectiveness and learning experiences. Previous studies, as mentioned earlier, focussed on the use of tablets in teaching mathematics in the classroom. Bagdasarov et al. (2017) and Sangra and Gonzalez-Sanmamed (2016) focussed on the role of ICT in education in terms of content access. Yarbrow et al. (2016) explored digital instructional strategies for content coverage, cognitive process and instructional practice, and made comparative analysis with English Language Arts (ELA) subjects in classroom practice as well. The mentioned researches did not cover in detail the use of technology in resource-constrained English second-language teaching environments such as township secondary schools.

In the South African research landscape, Shava and Chinyamurindi (2017) investigated the use of social media in learning at tertiary institutions in South Africa and found that social media connects and links students' learning opportunities through socialisation, habituates the learning process through the perceived social media addiction and connects students to a global digital citizenship. On the social networking and use of social media continuum, Eke and Singh (2018) explored the proliferation of violence in schools perpetuated by social media and also discovered that collaboration and networking played a critical role. On the role of social media and its negative effect, I therefore suggest improved legislation and improved school policy on participation of learners in social media platforms. This participation is very important because it creates opportunities for teachers and learners to have critical discourses, thereby constructing solutions to human challenges. The practices on social media with digital technology concur with constructivist perspectives, which posit that reality is socially constructed.

In this research, we also sought to understand the strategies used by English teachers while teaching in resource-constrained schools without making a comparison with other subjects in the curriculum. This study is unique in the South African context in that it explores the use of social media in the teaching of English in resource-constrained secondary schools where cell phone usage during class time is highly controlled and access to smart phones for connectivity poses a challenge to learners from poor communities (Rwodzi 2018). Although studies by Ngesi et al. (2018) were conducted on the use of social media, very few studies were conducted in resource-constrained

secondary schools or on teachers' initiatives in the teaching of English using social media in Gauteng.

Social media largely benefits active participants (through interaction) either as consumers of knowledge or architects on knowledge construction sites (cognitive function). For English second-language learners in township settings, critical thinking skills, collaboration and networking provide a platform to exchange ideas across international physical boundaries where English is used as a medium of instruction in schools or for communication in business and socialisation. Social media therefore combines socialisation and learning at the same time.

Social media combines a number of practices such as creativity, networking, content selection, entertainment, electronic writing, editing and evaluation, critical thinking and problem-solving through collaboration (Hicks & Turner 2013). The above-mentioned practices combine to make social media practices a set of human experiences and practices in organised social settings such as schools. If literacy is understood as the relationship between the reader and the text, social media participation provides more opportunities in text construction, deconstruction, analysis and interpretation for meaning-making. Creativity, networking, content selection, collaboration and connectivism (Bell 2011) all add up to critical thinking in problem-solving using digital literacies. The aim of the article was to explore the opportunities, unpack the experiences and authenticate English teachers' initiatives on the use of social media in teaching English as a second language.

## Theoretical framework

Social media combines a number of human digital literacy practices. According to Hicks and Turner (2013), creativity, networking, content selection, entertainment, electronic writing, editing and evaluation, critical thinking and problem-solving through collaboration form part of the practices imbedded in the social media interaction process. For this study, socialisation on social media platforms helped learners develop language writing and communication skills through collaboration. Social media provided electronic writing opportunities, creativity in English as a subject in school and an ability to analyse information presented to them in different formats. The use of social media involves an ability to manipulate digital devices and software as well as a willingness to share experiences as participants interact. The knowledge construction as indicated by Savage and McGoun (2015) is informed by constructivism.

Constructivist theories propagate that learning is achieved through active construction of knowledge in different contexts and to serve different purposes (Hew & Cheung 2008). In addition to active construction of knowledge, Wang (2008) said that the belief of constructivism is founded on the premise that knowledge is actively constructed by learners rather than transmitted by the teacher. In the same vein,

learners are active knowledge constructors rather than passive recipients. Participation by learners on social media in diverse groups presents opportunities for them to construct knowledge in their different contexts. At both the concept and the theory level, learner participation as part of a response to the presence of functional technology in behaviourist perspectives and cognitivist context makes a perfect merge and guidance to the teaching and learning of English as a second language. In this case, the technology provides stimuli and motivation, while the content discussed online involves a cognitive process, as the learner and teacher construct knowledge and bring an awareness and understanding of the concepts in English as a second language.

## Methodology

The study is rooted in the interpretivist–constructivist world view. According to Creswell (2013), interpretivism attests to how meaning is assigned by participants to their actions as well as how social constructions yield knowledge about their practices. Interpretivism focusses on participants' subjective experiences on how they construct the social world by sharing meanings. Interpretivists assume that reality is not objectively determined, but socially constructed (Nieuwenhuis 2010). Constructivism belongs to the broad framework of interpretivism and was used as a foundation for the research process. We used the qualitative approach to explore the strategies used on social media by English language teachers in selected resource-constrained secondary schools. We used a case-study design for this exploration because the use of social media for teaching English as second language in resource-constrained secondary schools is a critical issue in the Tshwane North district because of a lack of digital resources and limited pedagogical support from curriculum planners. Yin (2012) said that an exploratory case study is pertinent when the research addresses either descriptive or exploratory questions.

## Selection of participants and the selection criteria

We purposively selected six English teachers and 12 learners in township schools who teach and learn English as a second language, respectively, using social media. Three secondary schools were selected as research sites in the Tshwane North district. We selected secondary schools that are resource-constrained in terms of computer technology, network connection, financial resources and infrastructure to accommodate large numbers of learners for the teaching with technology. The selection process was guided by the need to find an understanding of the initiatives taken by English language teachers in resource-constrained secondary schools considering the increased use of social media in society. Participants selected were English teachers and learners who use social media, such as Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube, which are popular in resource-constrained locations. The participating English teachers were digitally literate and

competent or proficient in some of the social media platforms, such as Facebook and WhatsApp. The participants were selected for this study on the use of social media because their schools did not have enough computers for digital literacy and social media learning practices. Teachers and learners who were participants relied on their personal smart phones.

## Data collection and analysis

We used interviews, field notes and document analysis as research instruments to explore participants' initiatives or innovative use of social media to teach English as a second language in resource-constrained secondary schools (Flick 2014). We used audio recordings of the interviews, and writing pads for capturing additional data (Flick 2014). Scheduled interviews with selected English teachers were conducted and their views recorded. We analysed electronic texts, images, pictures and group chats from participants' cell phones to collect data on the innovative use of social media for teaching English as a second language. Documents analysed included the texts on social media, learner activities, pictures and any other graphic images linked to the use of social media in learning English. We followed Creswell's (2013) spiral data analysis framework to analyse the collected data, by first managing the data, then organising the data (files and units), followed by reading (making margin notes and comments) and reflecting, as well as forming initial codes. The iterative process involved examination, analysis, interpretation of participants' views and actions about the innovative use of social media in the teaching of English as a second language. We adhered to all ethical considerations in accordance with the recommendations from the Department of Basic Education in South Africa and the institution where the research was conducted.

## Findings

The main findings indicate that English teachers use social media to communicate with learners on matters relating to school work. English teachers and learners use online resources to research and then share the information with their classmates on social media groups in spite of the fact that the use of social media in teaching English has not been advocated by the Department of Basic Education policy on methodology. The platforms commonly used by teachers and learners are WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Learning English also involves the innovative use of new and existing cartoons, games and puzzles to understand and practice the use of different language aspects using the social media platforms. Most of these resources are in electronic format. Findings reveal that teachers and learners combine socialisation, working and learning through extended hours in digital literacy practices. While on the school premises, teachers and learners limit the use of digital tools for typing, storage, transfer, curation and retrieval of information, but they continue to access the same information sources even after school hours on their smart phones. In other cases,

teachers use applications such as Share it and Bluetooth to share information with learners and colleagues. A participant said:

*'My learners are in different groups based on their interests on social media. I discuss homework assignments, selected English topics and answer questions asked by learners on academic issues. WhatsApp has made my class to become a family because we also discuss social issues, share jokes, music, videos and gospel preaching. Learners also ask questions relating to the subject.'* (T1, English teacher, male)

The social media is an extension of the class activities, and learners construct knowledge through interaction. Data collected show that teachers and learners connect and chat on WhatsApp groups, participate on Twitter, and share pictures and videos, thereby improving their communicative ability and language proficiency. Lessons observed indicated that the cartoons shared on social media, jokes and images are also used for communication. One of the participants said:

*'I use images and pictures to communicate my feelings and to demonstrate my ability to use different digital facilities. The use of images creates an emotional appeal and motivates texting online. I feel happy to receive hearts from my friends, learners and colleagues in trying times. So, social media combines academic discussions and socialisation. In other instances, the images are combined with music tunes and voices on YouTube and I become happy. This mode of communication and socialisation makes learning an exciting activity.'* (T2, English teacher, female)

In other cases, participants indicated that they enjoy socialising and learning at the same time, and find the support valuable when faced with challenges during difficult times. Another participant said:

*'We use social media images and pictures for fun and assisting learners with homework and other subject-related matters. Images, pictures and videos provide entertainment, learning opportunities and socialisation. We share music videos, pictures and images with learners on social media. In some cases, we discuss the lyrics with learners on certain music genres. In one of my group chats, we also use videos that explain or help answer a question about homework or any other form of classwork.'* (T3, English teacher, female)

The reality of social media in township secondary schools, as observed and understood from interviews, indicates that English teachers and learners were doing their best to use social media for learning and teaching even though many learners do not have access to smart phones and the Internet. English teachers who participated in the study were concerned that learners who do not have smart phones or access to the Internet could not participate in social media activities. In some cases, learners from families with no access to the Internet or social media tried to make use of their friends or neighbours' resources, but there was limited progress in such instances. Participants indicated during interviews that they share knowledge with their teachers, and solve their personal problems by asking for working

solutions from their peers and teachers using the social media. One of the participants said:

'I share knowledge with my peers on our social media group chat. They ask questions and I also ask questions. The good thing about WhatsApp group is that I can attend to the questions any time and sometimes share jokes. They help with solutions or guidelines on life challenges. The use of social media is very very nice. I can even chat to my friends any time of the day or ask questions to teachers any time.' (L1, learner, male)

In view of the comments from the participants, I observed that they enjoy the use of social media. The texts and images analysed show how English teachers communicate and discuss matters relating to their school work. The extract below shows how learners and teachers communicate on social media.

Figure 1 indicates that the conversations are taking place online and learners use their digital literacy skills such as composing messages, typing (electronic writing), punctuating and responding to requests during chat sessions. Learners ask questions during the conversations, and voluntary participation results in sharing of information. An analysis of the extract also shows the use of short forms, abbreviated language and emoticons. Participants indicated

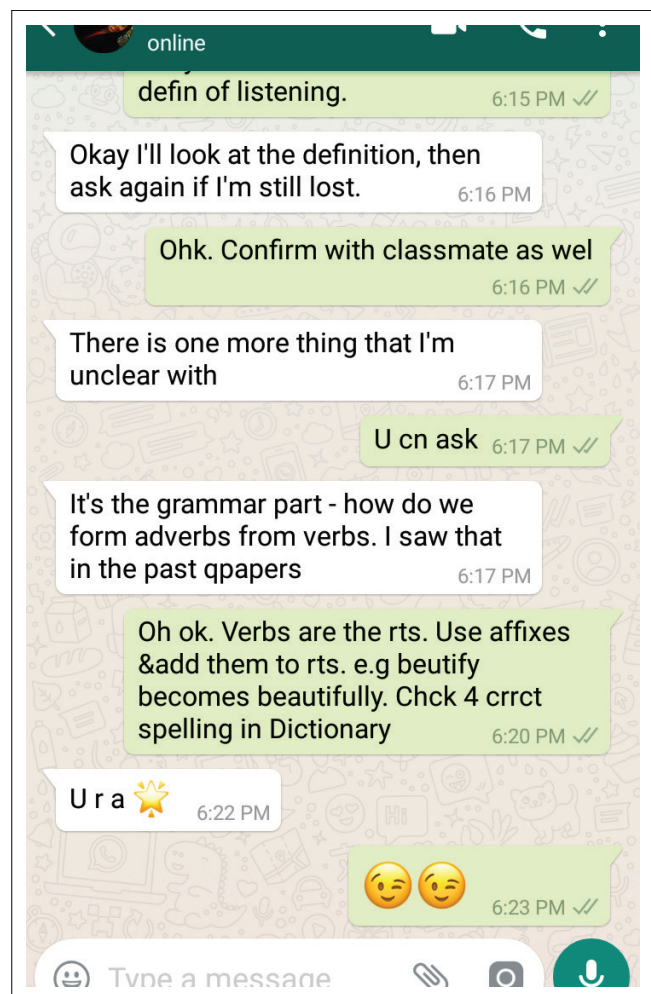


FIGURE 1: Extract of communication of learners and teachers on social media.

during discussions that the use of images provided emotional aspects of communication. They indicated that certain images ignited some positive emotions during the chat sessions, which encourage the discussions. The extract also indicates the times when the learners had the discussion, which shows that the conversations were done after school. This clearly shows the extension of learning time after normal school hours.

During interviews, participants strongly indicated that extreme caution needs to be taken when working with learners using social media. Participants stressed that the content that they post on social media needs to be examined and analysed carefully before posting. Participants recommended strongly that the social media group chats require rules and structures that control and mediate the conversation as well as take cognisance of the different cultural contexts of the group members. Group administrators need to constantly check on the behaviour of participants to avoid insults, obscenities, undermining public figures and spreading falsehoods as well as fake news. Participants also indicated that English teachers need to prepare content, and identify learners' critical needs and interests in the process of designing tasks and activities. There is also the need to cautious while allowing creativity, diversity and constructive criticism during chat sessions. During group interview discussions, English teachers were critical on the use of emoticons, images, abbreviated language, short forms and acronyms and their impact on the learners' communicative ability as well as their ability to raise an emotional appeal.

### Ethical consideration

Ethical clearance (number: HU 16/08/03) was granted by the Department of Humanities, Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, Gauteng Department of Basic Education.

### Discussion

The fundamental experience of learners in the social media connection brings a sense of belonging to a network where social matters and academic issues are combined. The practices connect and link with constructivist tenets where knowledge is constructed collaboratively in the respective contexts. Learning in this context, as mentioned by Yarbrow et al. (2016), takes place through collaboration (constructivism), self-correction, self-regulation and self-rewarding. Learning in social media is personalised because each learner is connected to groups of their choice in accordance with their interests and motivation. This study discovered that learners join chat groups, such as the cartoon club and spelling competition groups, on the basis of their interest. Social media incorporates creation of new knowledge through recycling, remixing and legitimisation of the existing material. This way, new forms, patterns, structures and genres of knowledge are created and shared among the group members (Ingre & Basil 2017).

Teachers implement innovative initiatives to create strong partnerships with learners in both social and academic matters. Learners seek advice in both social and academic issues on social media platforms. Teachers have become almost 24 × 7 online parents, caregivers, mentors, supervisors and counsellors. The study found that teachers can provide individual support to learners if group and individual connections with their learners are made available even after school. The social media according to patterns from this research reveals that class activities are extended beyond the school hours, thereby creating more opportunities for learning. Based on the constructivist perspective, the interaction of learners on social media, as they socialise, creates a platform for them to share knowledge with their teachers, shape their thinking, solve problems and apply different solutions to challenges in their life (Hew & Cheung 2008). The study revealed that the innovative use of social media provides opportunities for teachers and learners of English as second language to practise, share and construct knowledge as they participate in their diverse contexts. Digital literacy practices in addition provide access to other digital competence facilities. For example, social media socialisation and learning English using digital technology help learners with typing skills, editing, copying and pasting, forwarding and resolving ideological differences in a professional way. The revealed practices and their implications in language education are a product of constructivist underpinning principles (McGoun 2015).

Digital tools provide access to videos on YouTube, pictures, cartoons, texts, diagrams, tables and graphs, all combined to communicate and present content to both teachers and learners. According to Kajee (2018), the experience of merged learning environments, and social- and work-related settings, makes digital literacy a socio-cultural practice and excites learners when they combine work, play and learning in one continuous process. Multimodalities and multiliteracies create opportunities for learners as they develop their identities in social media participation and share cultural beliefs and values across ethnic groups in a multilingual and multiethnic South Africa. Learners experience learning in multicultural contexts (Lie 2017). Teachers indicated that the social media group chats and discussions took place across ethnic and cultural groups. In situations where social media is used, learners experience, construct, analyse and question knowledge in multiple contexts (Lotherington & Jenson 2011). This practice creates rigour in learning and is based on partnership.

## Conclusion

### Limitations of the study

This study could have covered a number of resource-constrained schools; however, because of financial constraints, the opportunity for participation was limited to selected schools. It was also not easy to access digital devices for some English teachers and learners, especially on their socialisation patterns.

## Implications for teaching English as a second language

The use of social media for learning and teaching extends the classroom activities beyond the school programme. In view of the technological development, social media supports the teaching of English as a second language by providing electronic writing opportunities, use of symbols and images for communication, thereby improving proficiency, multiliteracy and multimodality skills. Teachers need to develop pedagogical skills in the use of social media in teaching English as a second language. In terms of policy development and implementation, the Department of Basic Education needs to provide professional training for English language teachers to be able to use social media in the teaching of English in resource-constrained secondary schools.

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The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

## Authors' contributions

All authors equally contributed to this work.

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## Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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