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### **A two-year investigation of a Facebook community for supporting language teachers using technology: Possibilities and challenges**

## **Bio data**



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## **Abstract**

The importance of educating language teachers to develop their competence in using technology for teaching purposes has been well established in the literature, but the reality is that many teachers around the world have been forced to educate themselves with little or no formal training. The Internet has opened up opportunities for individuals from all over the world to learn. With the use of Social Networking Sites (SNSs), language teachers are now able to connect with other like-minded teachers and support each other regardless of their geographic location and/or financial situation. Despite the increased number of online language teacher communities forming on these platforms, much remains unknown when it comes to how language teachers actually make use of such communities to learn about technology. Hence, the current mixed-methods longitudinal study investigated the role of online communities on SNSs for supporting language teachers who are using technology in their classes. The main data collection methods employed in the study were: (1) a content analysis of the posts shared in a Facebook community which consists of over 1000 online community members during the two-year observation period (i.e., October 2018 – September 2020), a questionnaire to understand the members' backgrounds and experiences in the community, and semi-structured interviews with the questionnaire respondents to obtain an in-depth understanding of their views about being a community member. The findings will be discussed in terms of the benefits and issues of using Facebook communities as a source of professional and emotional support.

## **Conference paper**

### **Introduction**

For language teachers to be able to teach using "smart" CALL technologies, they essentially need to become a "smart" CALL teacher. Smart CALL teachers are able to select appropriate CALL technologies and effectively integrate them into their classes to create a smart learning environment for their students. Integrating CALL technologies into language classrooms, however, is not an easy task. Merely providing language teachers with these technologies will not automatically result in successful integration (Hubbard & Levy, 2006). They need to be aware of the different technologies available,

learn how to use them, and learn how to implement them into their classrooms. What is more, with the constant advancements of technologies, they need to continuously enhance their skills and knowledge in technology throughout their entire teaching careers (Son, 2018). Although language teachers should be educated in how to use technology for language teaching purposes, in reality, not many of them are able to access formal CALL training programmes, often due to time and financial constraints and a lack of effective CALL training programmes (e.g., Kessler, 2007; Stockwell, 2009). Receiving little or no support from their colleagues, institutions, or government, they may have no choice but to learn on their own through informal means.

With the emergence of numerous online language teacher communities on SNSs over the past decade, SNS platforms seem to have the potential to serve as an alternative professional learning context for language teachers using technology. Previous studies (e.g., Carpenter & Krutka, 2015; Kelly & Antonio, 2016) have found that teachers can easily create new social relationships with other teachers who are teaching in similar situations on these platforms. They are able to join online teacher communities on SNSs and discuss matters concerning their views and queries about using technology for language teaching purposes. These communities could potentially help language teachers find new online resources, teaching ideas, and solutions to the problems they encounter when using technology. To date, studies on online teacher communities have predominantly focused on non-language teaching contexts (cf. Wesley, 2013), and there have been even fewer studies examining how online communities can specifically support language teachers using technology. Therefore, the current study aims to shed light on the realities of how language teachers are utilising these communities to learn about technology for teaching purposes. Although the current study was largely exploratory, it was guided by the following main research questions:

- 1) What is happening in a technology-focused language teacher community on Facebook?
- 2) What are the possibilities and challenges of being in such a community?

## **Methods**

The current study is part of a larger research project, in which the role of online communities on SNSs for supporting language teachers who are learning about technology in language teaching and learning, is being investigated. Relevant studies in the past have often employed self-reporting data collection methods such as questionnaires and interviews with community members (e.g., Bissessar, 2014; Carpenter & Krutka, 2015), observations of posts shared in online communities on SNSs (e.g., Goodyear et al., 2019; Kelly & Antonio, 2016), and a combination of these methods (e.g., Curwood & Biddolph, 2018; Yildirim, 2018). Hence, for the current study, a combination of these methods were employed. Specifically, a technology-focused online teacher community on Facebook, which consisted of mostly language teachers in Japan, was observed for a period of two years from October 2018 to September 2020 to create a taxonomy of different types of posts shared in the community, and a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with community members were administered to examine the community from a member's point of view.

Using content analysis as the main data analysis technique, the collected online posts and interview data were categorised and coded. The other observational data including the number of new members, number of posts, shares, likes, response rate for each post, and questionnaire responses were summarised using descriptive statistics.

## **Ethical considerations**

Researching online communities on SNSs poses a number of ethical challenges. Considering the contentious ethical issues associated with investigating closed communities on Facebook (Kelly & Antonio, 2016), the current study focused on a public

language teacher community on Facebook which is open to the general public. Although ideally, it would have been preferred to seek informed consent from all community members, realistically speaking, seeking informed consent from all the members of a large online community with over 1000 members was not possible. Thus, since the community was a public group and the discussion topics were mostly related to technology and not particularly sensitive (McKee & Porter, 2009), informed consent was not taken. On the other hand, informed consent was received for the questionnaire and interviews.

### **Overview of the findings**

Various types of online posts were identified in the observed technology-focused language teacher community on Facebook during the two-year observation period. The most frequent types of posts were about sharing upcoming events (e.g., conferences, webinars, social gatherings), courses, reading materials (e.g., books, research articles), and videos (e.g., Youtube videos), thereby indicating that the community is offering various learning opportunities to its members. Moreover, the online language teacher community was providing some of its members with professional and emotional support. Online community members were asking questions related to technology and teaching in the community. They were also using the online communities to connect to other teachers teaching in similar contexts and discussing teaching and non-teaching related matters. Although participating in such a community may bring various benefits, the challenges should not be overlooked. From the data sources, language teachers indicated that the online communities were not always a positive environment. Several participants reported that they had personally received rude and negative comments when participating in the discussions, and a few also reported that they had occasionally witnessed online arguments in the communities. Another concern identified from the findings relates to the quality of the posts. Several participants indicated that they were concerned about the credibility and reliability of posts and comments shared in the communities. Finally, another concern is the blurring of lines between work and private time. Although teachers can access these communities at any time of the day, having a lack of clear boundaries between work and private life may lead to negative consequences. Overall, the results of the analysis seem to indicate that technology-focused language teacher communities on Facebook can be a double-edged sword for language teachers using technology.

### **Future directions**

Based on the findings, it is apparent that further research is required to fully understand how online teacher communities on SNSs can support language teachers using technology. Since the current study only focused on language teachers who were already using online teacher communities on SNSs for professional learning purposes, the next step of the research project is to go beyond the original scope and include the views of other types of language teachers. It is worth expanding the sample to: (1) language teachers who members of online teacher communities on SNSs in the past but later quit, (2) those who are currently not using SNSs for professional purposes but are interested in using them for professional learning purposes, and (3) those who are resistant towards the use of SNSs for professional learning purposes.

### **Final remarks: Connecting the findings to the conference theme**

According to Colpaert and Stockwell (2022), the “smart” in SMART CALL consists of three key elements, namely “personalization,” “contextualization,” and “socialization” (p. 4). They postulate that an effective learning environment possesses these three main elements. Based on this assumption, the findings from the current study seem to suggest that technology-focused language teacher communities on Facebook are providing language teachers with a “smart” learning environment: Language teachers who joined the observed online language teacher community on Facebook were exploring new ideas and obtaining resources and information about conferences, seminars and other relevant

events, which could potentially initiate and lead to the enhancement of their professional learning, especially with regards to learning about technology. The community seems to support personalised learning as they enable language teachers to find topics that they are personally interested in, which, in turn, could potentially help them in their own teaching context. Moreover, in the community, language teachers were socialising with one another by engaging in informal discussions with other community members and participating in the Friday night social gatherings, conferences, and webinars. They were also occasionally reaching out to community members to find people to socialise with and discuss their teaching ideas. It seems that these online language teacher communities on Facebook are being used as a platform for teachers to socialise with other teachers interested in learning about technology for teaching purposes. Although these online teacher communities are not without flaws, they appear to be offering various benefits to language teachers, particularly those who have limited professional learning resources and collegial support.

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