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**THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
LEARNING AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE  
PARTIUM REGION**

Theses of the Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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## **Introduction of the topic**

In a broader sense, the topic of the dissertation focuses on the current wave of the technological revolution, which is still taking place today, and its social aspects. In a narrower sense, the focus of the analysis is on the impact on young people, more specifically on the high school age group. Today, the use of personal communication tools and social media platforms has become commonplace from an overall societal point of view, but while older age groups have assimilated these skills to a more limited extent, today's high school generations are already digital natives and are simultaneously and actively present on several devices and numerous social networks, and even during the years of the pandemic, these platforms typically became the primary scene of social life.

As a practicing teacher, I also have personal experience with the fact that the high school and young adult generations show language skills that improve year by year, especially in terms of English language competences. The correlation between digital skills and English language competence seems self-evident, but we have little information of scientific value on the mechanisms, scale and possible regional characteristics of the process, and on the catalyst effect of the pandemic. The research therefore focuses on the regional mapping of a globally spreading phenomenon, namely on the use of social media in the Partium region, including its possible applications in English language learning.

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 coronavirus epidemic, the use of social media has become even more prominent among students (Guld, 2022). This also raises the question, why not take advantage of the opportunity to learn English in the environment and with the tools that they use willingly and gladly anyway for a very large part of their time?

Social media research is a relatively new field. Nowadays, an increasingly important question is what role the internet plays in our lives, including the various online social networks (Szűts, 2018; Pikhart and Klímová, 2020). Although social networking sites are constantly changing and developing, we are already seeing the incredibly complex effects they exert on many areas of social existence – be it culture, politics, economy, human bonds, and the list can be continued for a long time (Miller et al., 2016).

Generation Z and Y have the largest user base among young people, but Generation X also uses social media in large numbers, while Generation Alpha has already grown up on it,

so it plays an increasingly important role in education and learning (Guld , 2022; Seemiller and Grace, 2019; McCrindle, 2014).

In the globalizing world of the 21st century, language learning plays a particularly important role, since communication with the whole world cannot be carried out without knowledge of foreign languages. That is why it would be important that language learning be as efficient and fast as possible and that more and more people learn foreign languages.

During my doctoral research, I examined:

- the nature of the information and communication technology tools (ICT tools) used by current high school students, i.e. members of the first generation born in the world connected to the Internet (Cilliers, 2017) – in their free time and at school

- the type of activities requiring device use

- characteristics of the use of social media

- the degree of use of English as the common (mediating) language on the World Wide Web

In the meantime, as an overarching goal, I searched for the answer to the question of how the use of social media can be incorporated into the teaching/learning of English, and whether the opportunities provided by social media can be incorporated into formal English language teaching/learning.

## **The relevance and actuality of the topic**

The relevance of the researched topic lies in the fact that it examines two important factors among high school students that can have a great impact on their future: one is the knowledge of foreign languages, and – the environment in which they spend a lot of time – the world of the Internet. The latter should be utilized in such a way that it serves their benefit and through it they also acquire useful (language) knowledge in addition to communication and entertainment.

Recently, the problem that the proportion of people who speak foreign languages is very small among the Hungarian population has often come up in the media and professional forums, and according to numerous statistical data (e.g. Eurostat) Hungary ranks last

regarding foreign language skills. Romania ranks better in terms of language knowledge and willingness to learn a language, which can be at least partially explained by linguistic factors. According to the 2017 data of the statistical office of the European Union (Eurostat), in Romania, 74% of the population between the ages of 25 and 65 speak a foreign language, while in Hungary this proportion is only 37%, which means that it ranks last in the European Union. The willingness to learn a language is not very high among 18-30-year-olds, in Hungary the rate is 61%, while in Romania it is 87% (Eurostat, 2018). According to the data, while in Hungary the majority of those interviewed think that knowing a foreign language is important, in Romania the majority say that knowing at least two foreign languages is crucial.

The topic of the research is an integral part of online learning opportunities that have been planned, discussed and debated for years, both in Europe and worldwide. We can state that everyone agrees on the necessity of online learning, decision-makers, teachers and students, but its full-scale implementation still awaits, and especially in terms of its wide accessibility, there is still plenty of room for progress.

The European Union published its digital strategy more than 10 years ago, which was slowly adopted by all member states and transformed according to the country's situation (European Commission, 2010). Romania developed the country's digital strategy for 2015, but its implementation is still ongoing (Strategia Națională privind Agenda Digitală pentru România 2020, 2015).

One of the most important conditions for digital learning and education is the appropriate infrastructure, i.e. Internet access, which must be developed, otherwise existing inequalities arising from various economic and social causes will continue to grow.

According to the 2019 data of the Romanian National Statistical Office (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2019), 78.4% of the population has broadband internet, 85.5% in cities, only 66.9% in rural areas, and 64.2% with mobile internet. % - 62.4% in cities, 67.2% in rural areas.

In Romania, the situation caused by the COVID-19 coronavirus highlighted the fact that online learning and education are very difficult to operate and are not equally accessible to all students due to the aforementioned incomplete infrastructure. The digital transition in education essentially increased the effects of social differences and caused a decrease in equal opportunities. Nevertheless, the trend is clear, according to which the opportunities provided by social media are increasingly coming to the fore, and they now promote learning

in addition to maintaining contact. Since we had to switch to online learning and teaching overnight, we were able to experience this duality en masse: the advantages of the transition and its disadvantages.

One of the most comprehensive international studies on the subject is attributed to Pikhart and Botezat (Pikhart & Botezat, 2021), who in 2021 summarized the studies published in Scopus and Web of Science between 2010-2020 regarding the effects of social media to learn a second language. Although studies related to generation Z were basically examined, the age group of university students was more predominant, in terms of effects, the studies highlighted the positive factors.

Many international studies deal with this topic, but they typically examine university students. Among them we can mention: Chapelle A. & Sauro (2020); Cummings Hlas, Conroy, & A. Hildebrandt (2017); Deacon, Parkin, & Schneider (2017); Klímová & Poláková (2020). Among Hungarian researchers, research was conducted among university students: Szűts (2014, 2018); Tick & Beke (2021); Barnucz (2019); Ketyi (2016); Nagy T. (2017).

Many international, Hungarian and Romanian researchers have also targeted the high school level of Generation Z on the topic: Otto (2020); Cilliers (2019); Gold (2022); Polonyi & Abari (2017); Abonyi-Tóth & Turcsányi-Szabó (2015); Bakó & Tőkés (2017); Meștereagă (2019); Radin (2017).

Research of a similar nature has not yet been carried out in the Partium region, so through my research we can get first-hand answers to the research questions asked, and the processes become comparable with the results of similar research conducted in other regions.

## **Research questions and hypotheses**

In my dissertation, I raised the following research questions:

Q. 1. To what extent and for what purpose do students use ICT tools and applications at home and outside of school?

Q. 2. What kind of Internet access does the school have, where the surveyed students study, and what ICT tools and applications do they use for learning in the lessons?

Q. 3. Do they use ICT tools and social media to learn English at home, outside of school or at school?

Q. 4. What do they think about ICT tools and social media and their use in general and in English language learning?

Q. 5. Has the use of ICT tools and social media increased in general and in English language learning as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic?

Based on my research questions, I formulated the following hypotheses:

H. 1. We assume that the surveyed students use ICT tools and applications extensively and frequently at home and outside of school, mainly for entertainment and communication.

H. 2. It is assumed that the surveyed students have Internet access at school, and that ICT devices and applications are used very little for learning in classes.

H. 3. We assume that the surveyed students use ICT tools and social media to learn English at home, outside of school, and at school.

H. 4. We assume that the surveyed students have a positive opinion about ICT tools and social media and their use in general and in English language learning.

H. 5. We assume that the interviewed students do not need teacher's help or guidance in using ICT tools and social media for English language learning purposes.

## **The structure of the dissertation**

After presenting the topic, the dissertation addresses its relevance and topicality, and then describes the formulated research questions and hypotheses. After that, the dissertation is divided into six important parts.

In the "Theoretical background of the research" chapter, relevant theories and research are presented in terms of the research topic: social media, the presentation of the generations, including the Z generation central to the research in more detail, the knowledge of foreign languages in Europe and Romania, the Partium region, the research relevant learning theories and learning models, as well as theories of language learning and language acquisition, and last but not least computer-assisted language learning (CALL).

The chapter "Presentation of the research methodology" presents in detail the methods used in the research, the participants in the research, the technical implementation of the data collection, the structure of the questionnaire and focus group interviews used in the research.

The next three chapters "Research I. - data analysis", "Research II. - data analysis" and "Research III. - the results of the focus group interviews" presents the results of my empirical research, with a summary of the conclusions at the end of the chapters.

In the "Summary" chapter, the answers to the research questions and hypotheses are formulated, and in the "Further possible directions of the research" section, I present new research and pedagogical proposals arising on the topic.

Additional chapters of the dissertation include the bibliography, appendices, list of figures and tables, as well as publications and conference presentations on the research topic.

## **Research methodology**

In my research, I used both quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to explore the topic as well as possible.

1. Quantitative method. The questionnaire mainly contributed to the quantitative study, which is a useful tool for social science research (Babbie, 2014). My self-edited questionnaire contains mostly closed questions, as well as Likert-type questions for the purpose of conducting an attitude test. The questionnaire also contains questions on social and sociological background variables. Due to the outbreak of the coronavirus epidemic, I repeated the 2020 survey in 2022.

2. Qualitative method. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the answers received in the questionnaire, I used focus group interviews. The questions of the interviews were the same as those in the questionnaire, but in this case the answer options were not specified.

When the methodologies appear in support of each other, it is called a mixed methodology in the literature (Vitrai, 2011), during which quantitative and qualitative data provide answers to the same questions for a better and more thorough understanding of the problem raised.

## **Summary - the results of the research**

My research focused on the Partium region, which proved to be a gap-filler in this area. Although we are not talking about representative research, it shows a picture of the respondents' habits of using ICT tools and social media in English language learning at the beginning of the coronavirus epidemic and two years after the beginning of the epidemic among high school students in Partium. Although multilingualism is characteristic of the Partium (Szilágyi, 2019), in my research I did not find significant connections related to nationalities, which may be due to the fact that the topic is a globally spreading phenomenon.

The use of social media for the purpose of learning English is a relatively new field, which is very popular among students, according to my research, among Partium students as well.

The studied population belongs to generation Z, in which, as it turned out, in line with Rothman's (2016) research, although they are the first generation that was already born and socialized in the world of the Internet, after a while inequality can be observed in terms of ICT tools and social in media use.

My research has shown that informal learning takes on an increasing role when "technology becomes invisible" and "integrates into everyday practice" (Bax 2003). Learning English through social interactions significantly affects the learning process (Warschauer and Kern, 2000; Lee, 2009) or language acquisition (Krashen, 1985; Lantolf, 2000).

Students learn through interaction within their social networks, as one student explained in the focus group interview, similar to how language exchange apps work on social media. Cooperative learning and computer-supported learning – these days it is mostly supported by mobile technology – is gaining more and more space in the light of the results of my research.

Many unstructured online activities, including public forums, social media sites, and massively multiplayer games, have been shown to be valuable language learning opportunities in my research into what Thorne (2010) calls “intercultural communication in the wild” where mobile devices play a prominent role.

As a result of the COVID-19 epidemic that broke out in 2020, the role of communities became more valued and this was also noticeable in the learning process. Due to the



coronavirus epidemic, the answers to the questions asked at the beginning of my research reflect on two different periods by initiating two questionnaire inquiries, the first in March 2020, when the epidemic broke out, and two years later in May 2022. In order to gain deeper and more nuanced knowledge on the topic, I also organized focus group interviews, which serve as a supplement to the quantitative data shown in the questionnaire.

Based on the two questionnaires and the focus group interviews, I formulated the following answers to the hypotheses:

H1. We assume that the surveyed students use ICT tools and applications extensively and frequently at home and outside of school, mainly for entertainment and communication.

*Partially correct.* For the period of the first survey, at the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic, the assumption would be completely correct, but two years after the beginning of the epidemic, it was proven that, in addition to the very large and frequent use of ICT tools and applications by the students surveyed at home and outside of school, currently they are using them not only for fun and communication, but also for learning.

H2. We assume that the surveyed students have Internet access at school and that ICT tools and applications are used very little for learning in class.

*Correct.* Although Partium schools have access to the Internet, ICT tools and applications are still being used for learning purposes at a very low rate in class, regardless of the fact that the rate has improved during the COVID-19 outbreak.

H3. We assume that the surveyed students use ICT tools and social media to learn English at home, outside of school, and at school.

*Partially correct.* The surveyed students use ICT tools and social media more often to learn English at home, outside of school, this is especially true in the post-epidemic period. It is not typical at school either at the beginning of the epidemic or two years after the beginning of the epidemic.

H4. We assume that the surveyed students have a positive opinion about ICT tools and social media and their use in general and in English language learning.

*Correct.* The surveyed students have a positive opinion about ICT tools and social media and their use in general and in English language learning.

H5. We assume that the interviewed students do not need teacher's help or guidance in using ICT tools and social media for English language learning purposes.

*It's not correct. Both surveys and the opinions expressed in the focus group interviews indicate that the interviewed students need teacher help and guidance in using ICT tools and social media for English language learning purposes.*

From the answers to the research questions, we get a broader picture of the topic for the two research periods:

Q. 1. To what extent and for what purpose do students use ICT tools and applications at home and outside of school?

*My research revealed that there is no significant difference between the answers of the surveyed students, based on the results of the first survey, regarding the use of ICT tools and different applications. Smaller differences can be observed in the answers according to the type of school or the profile of the classes. According to this, a higher proportion of students attending national colleges use computers/laptops/notebooks outside of school than those attending theoretical high schools, vocational high schools or art high schools. Examining the activities, students attending national colleges more often read or watch online news, use an online translator, write homework on a computer or laptop, which is related to learning, but at the same time, they often use online tools to talk with their classmates about school assignments. Considering the profile of the classes, the same statement can be made about the students attending the theoretical Maths class.*

*Outside of school, the vast majority of students use a desktop computer, laptop, tablet, notebook or mini notebook, smartphone with Internet access. Among the devices used, the most popular is the smartphone with Internet access. On a daily basis, the majority of students use ICT devices for entertainment: they browse the Internet for entertainment, watch video clips, download music, games, software from the Internet, maintain their own Facebook and Instagram pages, listen to music, communicate on social media platforms, and they are looking for information about their own topics of interest.*

*According to the data, the responding students use the computer/laptop outside of school to a similar extent as at the beginning of the epidemic, which may indicate that this was a natural action in their case. What has changed compared to the data from two years ago is the use of mobile phones, they are used much more in the light of the results.*

*There is no significant change in terms of online activities, but reading and watching online news and searching for useful information have come to the fore.*

Q. 2. What kind of Internet access does the school have, where the surveyed students study, and what ICT tools and applications do they use for learning in the lessons?

*Based on the results, we can conclude that the majority of students access the Internet on a computer at school, as well as via the school WiFi. Cable internet is preferred in county seats and cities, while Wi-Fi is preferred in rural areas. Internet access via WiFi is much greater in Bihar county than in Szatmár county. Students in theoretical humanities and theoretical Maths classes use computers, tablets, and laptops/notebooks to a very large extent in schools for the purpose of learning, but the majority of students use their own mobile phones in class. Almost all of the participants in the focus group interview reported that they were satisfied with the school's ICT tools and equipment, but there were things that could be improved to make it work more efficiently.*

*The vast majority of respondents never or almost never use the applications listed in the questionnaire, the exception being multimedia editing tools, e.g. PowerPoint, video editors, digital recorders. At the beginning of the coronavirus epidemic, regardless of the profile of the class, the listed devices and applications are only used a few times a month at most, and image editing applications are preferred (Pixlr, Paint, Google Photos, Gimp, etc.). Less than two years after the start of the COVID-19 epidemic, students use ICT tools and applications for learning in classes much more often.*

Q. 3. Do they use ICT tools and social media to learn English at home, outside of school or at school?

*In order to learn English, students prefer to use ICT tools and social media at home or outside of school. Among the applications/activities listed in the questionnaire, for the purpose of learning English, the vast majority of respondents indicated Google translator, online dictionaries, the option "Search for online materials in English", "Discussing tasks with friends on social networks in English (Facebook, Instant Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp, etc.)" answer option. The tasks practicing the four language skills were also chosen to a similar extent, but in a smaller proportion: "Listening practice", "Speaking practice", "Writing practice", "Reading practice". To a lesser extent, communication with teachers in English also appears among the answers, with a higher proportion on social networks:*

*"Discussion of assignments with teachers by e-mail in English", "Discussion of assignments with teachers on social networks in English".*

*During the outbreak of the coronavirus, the most commonly used social media applications for learning English were YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Facebook Messenger and Pinterest, as well as the language learning application Duolingo. The use of these applications increased significantly two years after the start of the coronavirus epidemic, and the list expanded to include the social media platforms named by the students: TikTok, Twitter, Reddit, blogs, Discord and Netflix as a streaming service provider.*

*A positive change can also be observed in the case of English language learning applications, as several applications were marked in a higher proportion, apart from Duolingo, namely Italki, Anki, Polyglot Club, Busuu and Word Reference. During the focus group interview, the students stated that social media provides a space for conscious English learning as well as language acquisition. For the former, it was emphasized that it is good to have some previous knowledge of the target language.*

*Based on the results, we can conclude that ICT tools and social media are rarely used in school for the purpose of learning English. If they do, they typically use their own smartphone. Among the used social media platforms are YouTube, Facebook and Instagram.*

Q. 4. What do you think about ICT tools and social media and their use in general and in English language learning?

*Two years after the start of the coronavirus epidemic, respondents agree with almost all statements to a greater extent than their peers two years before. A higher proportion of students also agree that using social media helps improve their English reading skills, speaking skills, listening skills, and English grammar. For each of the listed statements, we can observe an increase in the proportion of positive responses compared to the responses two years ago: more than two-thirds of the respondents agree that social media applications allow them to learn English more effectively, that English teachers use fresh English-language materials from the Internet, they want to use social media applications in English more often to improve their English language skills.*

Q. 5. Has the use of ICT tools and social media increased in general and in English language learning as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic?

*Based on the results of the three researches, we can state that as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, the use of ICT tools and social media in general and in English language learning has increased, typically more at home and outside of school. Students require teachers' guidance on the use of ICT tools and social media in connection with learning, because, as the results have shown, students' use of ICT tools and social media differs depending on their social background.*

## **Further research opportunities**

Regarding the topic, I can imagine and suggest the following possible directions:

1. I would definitely consider it useful and necessary to carry out a representative research on the subject in the entire Partium region, across the border from here and beyond, especially now that online education and the use of ICT tools are increasingly being used, not only as a consequence of the pandemic, but also as part of the European Digital Also as part of a strategy.

2. In addition to the Partium region, a similar survey could be carried out in Bánát and Székelyföld regions and the results of the different regions could be compared, which could help in the development of future education strategies.

3. It would be useful and important to develop and compile an online guide of the available language exchange social networking sites and applications for students who want to learn English (or even other languages).

4. Last but not least, as an accredited adult trainer, the compilation of a teacher's manual and course for English teachers could also be implemented with the use of social media in English language teaching.

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## **Publications related to the topic of the doctoral dissertation**

### **A. Book Chapters & Journal Articles**

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## **B. Presentations Related to the Research Topic**

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