

Abstract

The rapid advances in emergent technologies have made it increasingly challenging for language teachers to know which technologies to use and how best to implement them in their classes. Despite the obvious need for teachers to properly be trained to use technology for instructional purposes, in actuality, they are often placed in a position where they need to educate themselves using informal methods of learning as opposed to a structured traditional classroom setting. It is not entirely unexpected that, in the past decade or so, as an alternative way of learning, language teachers have been turning to online teacher communities on Social Networking Sites (SNSs), which are free and accessible to anyone with Internet connection. These online teacher communities appear to offer a space where they can easily connect to other like-minded teachers to exchange teaching ideas, discuss the challenges that they face, and ask for help and advice. As the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic virtually upended every aspect of teachers' professional and personal lives, even more teachers seem to be relying on these online teacher communities which are available even when social-distancing rules are enforced and in-person gatherings are not being taken place.

Although research into online teacher communities on SNSs has not been exceptionally scarce over the years, to date, there are surprisingly few studies which specifically look at how language teachers are making use of online teacher communities as a source of professional learning. In particular, not many studies are set in the context where the primary theme of discussions is on technology. To bridge the current literature gap, the aim of this doctoral thesis was to explore the realities of online language teacher communities on SNSs as a means of supporting language teachers who are trying to learn about technology. The present four-year mixed-methods research study thus provided an in-depth understanding of how technology-using language teachers are capitalising upon online language teacher communities. For the

study, a longitudinal mixed methods research design using multiple data collection instruments was employed: Firstly, to identify the different types of posts and engagement occurring in an online language teacher community on SNSs, a public Facebook group was monitored for two years from October 2018 until September 2020 and four other comparison cases were monitored for three months from October 2021 until December 2021. Moreover, self-reported data were collected through an initial questionnaire which was distributed in June 2020 (n=482), semi-structured interviews which were conducted between July 2020 and June 2021 (n=31), and a post-interview questionnaire which was distributed in March 2022 (n=29). The questionnaires and interviews allowed the participants to report about their experiences and thoughts about learning about technology in general and their uses of online language teacher communities on SNSs in detail.

The study's findings suggest that instead of learning through formal courses, many language teachers were learning about technology through various self-directed means of learning, including reading journals, blogs, and email list messages, searching the web, watching videos, and participating in online teacher communities on SNSs. Specifically, the in-depth analysis of nearly 4000 posts and comments shared in the observed online language teacher communities and questionnaire and interview data collected from a diverse sample of participants in 78 different countries evidently showed that language teachers from all over the world were fulfilling their professional and emotional needs through these online language teacher communities. Although the findings clearly illustrated that such communities were offering numerous benefits to teachers who are teaching with technology, they also featured several drawbacks. Further, as the study was conducted amid the pandemic, it also sheds light into how online language teacher communities provided assistance to teachers who were struggling to cope with the crisis situation when they had unexpectedly needed to teach online. Finally, the

thesis is concluded by discussing the findings' practical and research implications for teachers, teacher educators, administrators, policymakers, and researchers.