Chapter 17
Critical Praxis Through a Social Media Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

The use of social media in language education is evident in the plethora of online content generated by education organizations. Teachers and learners alike have used platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram to access and disseminate learning content in the forms of text, images, podcasts, and videos. However, despite the prevalence of social media in the language-learning sector, its pedagogical use has been limited to learning language features. This chapter analyzes the potential use of an ecosystem of social media platforms to augment varied modes of TESOL instruction, namely live, online, and hybrid, through a critical lens in higher and adult education. The integration of critical content and critical thinking development in social media platforms, in which authentic content is directly consumed, co-created, and disseminated, enables TESOL teachers to help learners become aware of how power shapes information, how to resist coercion, and challenge the status quo.

INTRODUCTION

"Why do things have to be like this?" This is the overarching question posed by education practitioners who encounter biases and inequities in practice yet struggle to find, conduct, and use research to question power and facilitate change. One possible solution lies in critical praxis, defined here as bridging pedagogical theory and practice from a critical lens (Waller et al., 2017, p. 4). In the context of Teaching English to Students of Other Languages (TESOL), critical praxis offers English teachers a way to encourage "students" critical thinking so that they may be aware of oppression and learn how to fight against it (Pessoa & de Urzêda Freitas, 2012, p. 753).

One approach used to facilitate critical praxis in TESOL is computer-assisted language learning (CALL). A conventional CALL approaches center around using computer technologies to enable English learners to play an active role in the co-construction of knowledge. Through CALL and the use of the Internet, learners can interact around meaningful, authentic, and diverse language content in various con-

texts (Kessler, 2013, p. 616). This participatory learning approach facilitates greater dynamic interaction amongst students and enables them to access the learning of meaningful content free from restrictions of institutions and authorities. However, CALL is limited by its lack of access; not all students own computers, and some may be less than motivated to use school learning platforms outside the classroom. Compounding accessibility is the current COVID-19 pandemic, which has forced both language learners and teachers to jump from live to hybrid or fully online instruction with little or no transition period.

An augmentation to conventional CALL, hybrid, or fully online instruction is the use of social media in higher and adult education in regions where platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are ubiquitous. Social media is also accessible by smartphones, which typically have a higher penetration rate than laptops or computers needed for traditional CALL systems. In Taiwan, over 98% of the population owned a smartphone in 2019 (Wong, 2020). As for social media, Facebook alone was used by 98.9% of all Taiwanese Internet users in the same year. YouTube came in next, being used by 80%, while Instagram was used by 38.8% of the population (Huang & Chung, 2020). Thus, in terms of accessibility in Taiwan, a combination of social media platforms could supplement the varied modes of TESOL instruction. Social media platforms also have the added advantage of enabling learners to access, co-construct, and exchange language in a digital setting that they already regularly use to acquire authentic information and interact with the world. The boost in accessibility, authentic content, and participatory engagement enables more non-restrictive discourse and practices under a critical lens. Thus, this chapter aims to explore the potential of the integration of three social media platforms, hereto referred to as a social media ecosystem, to augment critical praxis. The implementation of such a system will be explored in three ways.

First, the chapter examines how the author defines pedagogic concepts such as critical praxis, and shows how his practice, an online course with a social media ecosystem, attempts to align with these concepts.

Second, the author's online course on English learning through the news will be examined from conception to delivery. The course was designed to provide language instruction, and develop critical thinking and media-related literacies using seven news domains (e.g., healthcare, business, and technology). The overarching goal of the main course was to help students recognize how power shapes news creation and dissemination by drawing upon Bloom's Taxonomy and collaborative learning. A social media ecosystem (See Appendix 5) was later added to provide content that was more critical and to facilitate discussion on the platforms used to create and disseminate news.

Third, the chapter discusses the pedagogic and practical concerns of implementing a supplementary social media ecosystem. The ecosystem, for example, might increase teacher-student engagement in a region where there is high Internet penetration and social media usage, but may widen the urban-rural divide in others. Critical content may be banned in specific political contexts, with dissemination or discourse of such content resulting in severe legal consequences or life endangerment. In such instances, critical praxis requires deliberation and differentiation. Additionally, the delivery of critical content on social media, for example, does not always translate into critical thinking and socially transformative action. The author reviews his practice and discusses how such a proposed system could be refined to provide a more impactful critical praxis.

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