

LEARNING MEANINGFULLY IN A DIGITAL WORLD: HOW DIGITAL AND MEDIA RESOURCES TRANSFORM LEARNING IN NON-FORMAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract: In the context of accelerated digitalization and the growing importance of media in everyday life, the educational process faces the challenge of adequately responding to new realities. The present article examines the role of media pedagogy as a conceptual and practical framework for the effective use of digital and media resources in non-formal foreign language education. The main goal is to explore how media pedagogy can contribute to building digital-media literacy and developing critical thinking among students educated outside the formal educational system. The study combines theoretical analysis with empirical data collected through an online survey of 42 foreign language teachers in Bulgaria working in the field of non-formal education. The results show that teachers actively use digital tools such as interactive platforms, mobile applications, and multimedia resources, have a positive attitude towards innovative methods, and strive to include them in a balanced way in the educational process. At the same time, teachers pay special attention to the possible problems that may arise from unfocused and one-sided use of digital-media resources, as well as their excessive use. At a theoretical level, the article outlines the development of media pedagogy and presents conceptual models for critical thinking and digital learning. The emphasis is on the application of project-based learning, critical analysis of media content, and the integration of digital communication in language practices – methods actively used in foreign language education in non-formal settings. The conclusions highlight that non-formal education creates a favorable environment for the development of digital-media literacy among young people. Systematic support is recommended for improving teacher qualifications, creating sustainable educational policies, and adapting teaching methods to the needs of the digital generation. This study contributes to the scientific and practical debate on meaningful learning in a digital environment by placing media pedagogy at the center of the transformation of non-formal foreign language education.

Keywords: *media pedagogy, digital literacy, non-formal education, foreign language teaching, critical thinking.*

Field: Humanities

1. INTRODUCTION

In today's world of digital transformations that constantly change our way of life, the topic of education and its adaptation to the new reality is becoming increasingly necessary and relevant. Modern children are digital natives, as defined by Prensky (Prensky, 2001), and for them, learning through digital methods and tools is absolutely natural. This inevitably requires changes in traditional pedagogical methods and practices and their transformation into dynamic and interactive models.

This process presents contemporary pedagogy with serious challenges, aiming to balance tradition and innovation in an effective educational process that fosters meaningful and critical learning, while digital resources are used responsibly and purposefully. Here comes the role of media pedagogy in achieving digital and media literacy among young people, defined by UNESCO as one of the key competencies of the 21st century:

"Media and Information Literacy (MIL) empowers people to think critically about the content they access and create, and to make informed decisions. MIL is a prerequisite for active citizenship and full participation in society and democracy. It is one of the key competencies of the 21st century." (UNESCO, 2012, p. 8).

Without digital and media literacy, the development of our modern society is unthinkable, given the dynamics of approach that applies media as an environment, means, and content for upward personal and professional development" (Danov, 2018).

Within this new context, non-formal education is gaining increasing importance - a form of learning outside traditional educational institutions, characterized by high flexibility, adaptability, and a focus on practical skills. It is widely applied in language education, where the use of new technologies and media contributes to meaningful learning and the development of critical thinking, aiming for young people to be

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active participants in public life and not vulnerable to fake news, manipulation, and fraud.

The present article aims to explore the role of media pedagogy as a methodological and practical framework for the effective application of digital resources in non-formal education, with a special focus on foreign language education.

The objectives of the study are:

- To outline the theoretical foundation of media pedagogy;
- To analyze current methods and tools used in non-formal foreign language education
- To highlight the benefits and challenges;
- To propose recommendations for future development and application.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study uses a mixed-methods approach, combining theoretical analysis of contemporary academic literature with empirical data collected through a survey.

The first stage includes a qualitative analysis of secondary sources, such as:

- Academic publications on media and digital literacy;
- Reports by international organizations (e.g., UNESCO, the European Commission);
- Conceptual models for critical thinking and digital learning in non-formal contexts.

The analysis focuses on defining key concepts and outlining current trends in the use of digital and media technologies in education.

The second stage is empirical, based on an online survey conducted via Google Forms. Participants were 42 foreign language teachers working in the field of non-formal education in Bulgaria. The sample was formed through convenience sampling, meaning participants were selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate. The sample included diversity in age, teaching experience, and types of learning groups, but it cannot be considered representative of all foreign language teachers in Bulgaria's non-formal education sector.

The survey included both closed and open-ended questions covering the following topics:

- Use of digital resources (interactive learning materials, apps, multimedia);
- Effectiveness of digital resources in terms of motivation and progress in learning;
- Teachers' skills, confidence, and attitudes toward using new technologies and AI;
- Development of critical thinking and digital and media literacy among students;
- Teachers' attitudes regarding the optimal balance between traditional and digital teaching methods;
- Pedagogical challenges.

The data were exported and analyzed using Google Sheets and Excel, applying basic statistical methods (percentage distribution, grouping by age, experience, and technologies used). Open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic qualitative analysis to identify prevalent attitudes and opinions.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Media Pedagogy: Origins and Development

The definition of "media pedagogy" is closely related to the concept of digital and media literacy. Research interest began as early as the 1970s, initially focusing on "information literacy," prompted by the rapid development of computer technologies in Western Europe, the USA, and Japan. The topic later gained traction in Europe as well.

The term "digital and media literacy" emerged relatively late - in the first decade of the 21st century—as a result of merging two existing concepts: media literacy and digital literacy. In the period 2000–2010, the need for an integrated approach combining critical thinking about media content with technical skills for working with technology became increasingly evident. The term "digital and media literacy" was popularized by Renee Hobbs's book "Digital and Media Literacy: Connecting Culture and Classroom" (Hobbs, 2011), which presents this type of literacy as an educational framework meeting the needs of the 21st century. In 2011, UNESCO introduced the term in its concept of MIL (Media and Information Literacy), formalizing the integration of media, information, and digital literacy in the document "Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers" (UNESCO, 2012).

The term "digital and media literacy" reflects the need for combined skills - technical, critical, communicative, and ethical - necessary for navigating the modern information environment.

Media pedagogy is an interdisciplinary field that studies, analyzes, and applies technologies, media, and communication strategies in the educational process. The growing influence of mass commu-

nication on culture, socialization, and education has led to the emergence of media pedagogy as an independent discipline in the second half of the 20th century. Media pedagogy has undergone significant transformation - from analyzing traditional media to integrating new digital platforms and moving from passive to active consumption and creation of media content. Media pedagogy is interdisciplinary, combining pedagogy, communication sciences, sociology, psychology, and information technology. The inclusion of media literacy in educational programs at various levels has intensified globally, especially after UNESCO initiatives introduced the concept of MIL - Media and Information Literacy.

In Bulgaria, media pedagogy began to develop more seriously after the 1990s, as a response to increased media presence in society, the advent of private media and the Internet, and the need for critical thinking in education in the context of democratic transition. Media pedagogy is not a separate subject or mandatory module, but is present fragmentarily in various disciplines. Despite the growing number of policy documents, both internationally and nationally, Bulgaria still lacks a systematic state-level strategy. In this context, the non-formal sector actively tries to compensate for the deficit of a national strategy through the activities of numerous NGOs engaged in the topic and the implementation of projects in this field.

3.2 Non-Formal Education in the Context of Media Pedagogy Development

Non-formal education is defined as “a specific approach in and towards education, using pedagogical and social methods and learning activities that engage the learner (child or adult) in an alternative, non-traditional way, based on their direct involvement and engagement in their own learning and development” (Center for Interdisciplinary Research and Innovation in Non-formal Education, 2024). Given its nature and main characteristics, non-formal education is a natural environment for developing digital and media literacy. Foreign language education in educational centers provides a fertile ground for developing students' skills for working in a digital environment, using technology for learning, and acquiring critical thinking skills. According to UNESCO (2012), non-formal education complements formal education and plays a key role in building life skills, civic engagement, and digital literacy.

3.3 Conceptual Models for Critical Thinking and Digital Learning in a Non-Formal Context

In the process of developing digital and media literacy and critical thinking, several conceptual models offer different theoretical frameworks for understanding and applying digital learning in non-formal contexts. What unites them is the view of learning as an active, social, and reflective experience, where learners do not simply absorb information but interpret, analyze, and transform it (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983; Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978; Siemens, 2005; Mishra & Koehler, 2006; Postman, 1970; McLuhan, 1964).

These models treat digital learning as a process of meaningful interaction with technology, where not only technical skills but also analytical abilities, civic engagement, and conscious behavior in a networked environment are developed. In non-formal foreign language education, where media content is often used for communicative and cultural purposes, the application of these models is especially effective for developing digital and media literacy and critical thinking.

Some of the most significant conceptual models in this field include:

- The experiential learning model (Kolb, Schön), which emphasizes personal experience and critical reflection as the foundation of learning;
- The critical digital literacy model (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013), which outlines five dimensions of digital criticality, including content creation and analysis;
- The constructivist model of digital learning (Vygotsky, Siemens), which highlights the social and cooperative nature of learning in a digital context;
- The TPACK model (Mishra & Koehler, 2006), which integrates technological, pedagogical, and content knowledge in the educational process;
- The media ecology model (Postman, McLuhan), which examines the influence of the media environment on thinking and cultural literacy.

These models are not just theoretical constructs but practical frameworks that can help teachers in non-formal education create more engaging, critical, and meaningful learning environments.

3.4 Methods and Tools of Media Pedagogy in Non-Formal Foreign Language Education

When discussing digitalization in the educational process, especially in foreign language teaching, we are immersed in a sea of possible technological solutions and resources. The modernization and digitalization of the learning process began with the introduction of interactive learning systems, moved through the interactive whiteboard (smartboard) - one of the key innovations in transforming the traditional classroom - and reached the integration of mobile applications, cloud platforms, media simulations, and artificial intelligence. All these tools and methods have the potential not only to facilitate learning but also to foster digital, media, and language literacy among learners.

The main methods of media pedagogy in non-formal foreign language education include:

- Project-based learning - creating presentations in a foreign language, which actively engages students and develops productive language skills;
- Interactive platforms and gamified approaches - using tools like Kahoot, Quizlet, and Wordwall, which combine learning with game elements to motivate participation;
- Working with authentic media materials - videos, advertisements, news, social media, and music, which immerse students in real linguistic and cultural contexts;
- Learning through digital communication—language chats, forums, partnerships, and video meetings with native speakers via platforms such as Zoom, WhatsApp, Discord;
- Media simulations and role-playing - students take on certain roles, using language in simulated situations;
- Critical thinking through media analysis - analyzing news, propaganda, stereotypes, and influencer content, which encourages a conscious attitude toward information.

The tools that support the application of these methods are diverse and constantly evolving, offering teachers opportunities for creativity and adaptation to the needs of their students.

3.5 Survey Results

This aim of the survey was to examine the attitudes, practices, and effects of using digital tools in foreign language teaching within non-formal education, in the context of media pedagogy. The study included 42 teachers, most of whom work in language schools (86%), while the remaining 14% give private lessons. The diversity in age and professional experience among participants provides valuable insight into the intergenerational approach to digitalization in teaching.

• Participant Profile

The age distribution shows a relatively even representation of both younger and older teachers, which allows for comparative analysis between age groups. Teaching experience ranges from 7 to 39 years, highlighting significant pedagogical expertise. It is noteworthy that, despite age differences, all participants report using digital tools in their teaching.

• Frequency and Types of Digital Resources Used

Half of the respondents use digital tools in every lesson, indicating a high level of technological integration. The rest use digital resources at least once a week or less frequently, with lower frequency corresponding to higher age groups. Types of resources used include interactive learning systems (100%), educational games, videos and songs (66.6%), online platforms such as Kahoot and Wordwall (50%), and digital worksheets (66.7%).

• Devices Used

Laptops and smartphones are the leading devices (83.3% each), reflecting adaptation to the mobile and dynamic environment of modern education. The use of interactive whiteboards is surprisingly low (33.3%), which may not be due to limited access to such technology, but rather indicates a preference for more flexible tools.

• Impact of Digital Tools on Student Motivation and Achievement

Despite the widespread use of digital tools, teachers do not report a significant increase in student motivation. 89% indicate a moderate effect, and 11% believe that digital technologies are unlikely to contribute to motivation. Similar results are observed regarding student progress - digital tools are seen more as supportive rather than leading to higher achievement. According to teachers, the main effect is visualization and engagement - children enjoy digital elements, which to some extent supports their participation.

• Use of Artificial Intelligence and Chatbots in Foreign Language Teaching

It is notable that, when asked about the use of AI-based tools in teaching (such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, etc.), 30% say they use them, but not often; the same percentage say they have not tried and do

not intend to; 20% use them sometimes; and 20% use them frequently.

Regarding attitudes towards the use of chatbots and AI in language teaching, 46% of surveyed teachers are moderately supportive, 33% are skeptical, and 21% do not approve. There were no responses indicating "fully support".

Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Questions

• Methods Used to Develop Critical Thinking and Digital-Media Literacy Among Students

All surveyed foreign language teachers actively use multimedia resources, educational apps, and games in their lessons, apply project-based and problem-based approaches, and discuss and analyze media materials. In this way, students not only learn the language through media materials (videos, articles, podcasts, social networks), but are also encouraged, supported, and guided to think critically about content and to create their own.

• Balance Between Traditional and Innovative Methods

Teachers provide reasoned opinions regarding the balance between traditional and new teaching methods. All agree that today, teaching without digital tools is possible if the teacher is sufficiently skilled. However, such teaching is not adequate for the dynamics and demands of our time. Therefore, a balance between traditional and new methods is necessary, generally defined as 50/50, while taking into account the individual abilities and needs of students, their language proficiency, age, learning goals, etc. The ratio may vary depending on the parameters of the course; for example, digital methods and tools are indispensable for preparation for electronic exam formats and for tasks that are not available in other formats, which leads to a much higher percentage of digital tool use in such cases.

• Drawbacks of Using Digital Tools

Along with the advantages, surveyed teachers also point out the drawbacks associated with the use of digital-media resources. Above all, they emphasize the serious risk of plagiarism, use of resources without personal effort, and the risk of lazy thinking - accepting that everything can be found ready-made on the Internet. This can have serious consequences for students' attitudes and outlook on life in general.

4. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Modern foreign language teachers in non-formal education, regardless of age, actively use digital tools in their teaching and appreciate their benefits for creating a dynamic, more interesting, and effective learning environment.

Non-formal educational formats allow for experimentation with new methods and media tools, which are often absent from the traditional education system. This significantly contributes to the development of conscious, critically thinking, and responsible participants in the digital society, thus making media pedagogy a key ally in the 21st century. When discussing how digital-media resources are changing learning in non-formal foreign language education, it is necessary to outline the focal points of possible negative consequences, such as:

- **Overexposure to technology:** Excessive use of digital resources may lead to a loss of authentic cognitive activity, with students relying on ready-made solutions instead of developing their own thinking and creativity.

- **Risk of superficial learning:** Although engaging, digital tools should not be used superficially - for entertainment or visualization - without sufficient pedagogical depth.

- **Insufficient development of critical thinking:** Critical analysis and reflection on media content, which is a main goal of media pedagogy, are not always achieved.

- **Lack of sufficient digital culture among teachers:** Some teachers are reserved or skeptical about the use of AI and chatbots, indicating a need for training not only to improve general digital competence, but also for a professional and specialized approach regarding the principles and norms of AI use, both personally and professionally. The rapid introduction of AI and chatbots into everyday life is evident, and instead of skepticism or denial, it is necessary to start targeted teacher training on the benefits, challenges, and forms of working with students using AI, as well as ways for its effective and healthy use.

- **Risk of plagiarism and lazy thinking:** There is a risk that students will stop making an effort to create their own content and will perceive technology as a shortcut to quick but incomplete results, especially with the rise of AI.

The non-formal sector in foreign language education in Bulgaria has the necessary resources to successfully transition to an educational model required by the rapid development of new technologies and social media. In order to realize this potential, several steps are necessary, including:

- **Professional development of teachers:** Organizing training and seminars on the ethical use of technology, critical thinking, and media literacy.

- Creating strategic frameworks and guidelines: Developing methodological guides and best practices for the use of digital tools based on the principles of media pedagogy.
 - Meaningful integration of AI: Promoting conscious and purposeful use of artificial intelligence and chatbots in teaching as supportive tools.
 - Focus on critical media literacy: Encouraging analysis of media and social content to develop skills for recognizing fake news and manipulation.
 - Support for individualization and adaptability: Developing approaches that consider the age, level, and learning style of students through a balanced combination of traditional and digital methods.
- In contemporary education, we increasingly seek the intersection between formal and non-formal learning and media pedagogy. One of the most important meeting points is the development of digital-media literacy and critical thinking. In this respect, non-formal education— with its flexible and practical nature—not only supports but also complements formal education, as the main participants remain the same: children, teachers, and parents. This synergy is essential for preparing young people for the challenges of the digital age.

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