

English language learning through social media and entertainment

By Marija Ivanovic, ELTA Co-editor

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In recent years social media has become a predominant factor in our daily communication, especially among young people, who 'hang out' on Facebook or Twitter via their laptops or mobile devices almost around the clock. We update our status on (un)usual events in our lives, write on our friends' walls or just tweet an interesting link from any imaginable sphere of life. Such is the power of social media that the rumour has it that if news/information is not on Tweeter, Facebook or LinkedIn, it literally did not happen.

So, why not use this trend of massification of online communication also as a means to attracting (young) people to learn languages in a funny, informal and laid-back way? [Prodirekt company](#) has recognized the power of social media as a tool to reaching out to potential English language learners by creating a [language network Verbalisti](#). Our co-editor, Marija Ivanovic, has spoken with Prodirekt's director of educational programmes, Jasmina Saric, who explains the ideas behind their work as well as the latest trends in English learning in Serbia when it comes to social media and entertainment.

Tell us more about the social language network Verbalisti – what inspired its concept and how it develops?

It all happened three years ago after the prolonged talks with our educational partners - major European language schools and colleges, about how we could raise the standard of language learning in our region. We wanted to offer students in the region a social media that will be a motivating factor to learn foreign languages. Consequently, we created [the social media](#) and [language network Verbalisti](#) that quickly changed many things in our region. Probably the most significant result is that Verbalisti language network diversifies the language learning practice in Serbia by introducing innovative and up-to-date approaches, such as learning through social media and entertainment. The network features various online language learning tools and [YouTube videos](#). Additional educational content can be accessed through the two language specific blogs of Verbalisti - [stranijeziciblog.com](#) (Serbian) i [stranskijazici.com](#) (Macedonian). Last year, in partnership with Pearson and Kings Colleges London, Verbalisti conducted [the language competition Verbalizuj se!](#), with a two-week language course in Kings Colleges in London as the main prize. The competition generated 432 entries and more than 34,000 visits to the site in just one month.



What in your opinion makes Verbalisti so special and different?

Perhaps it's the fact that we offer students an accessible and attractive way of finding out everything they need to plan their language education. We have recognized the importance of the social networks, Facebook and YouTube in particular, as the main environment for opinion exchange. There was no doubt about it. Languages are live organisms, they change and evolve as we speak... communication and opinion exchanges are essential. Facebook is the one that probably enables the highest interaction levels. The other important thing was to create a platform for students to view and exchange photos, video clips or simply start a discussion. We further spiced things up by interviewing celebrities, because our motto is learning through entertainment, especially when it comes to the young. The result of our efforts is more than 12,000 Verbalisti language fans on Facebook.

Now that you've mentioned the interviews with the celebrities in your media, tell us how important was their support for Verbalisti popularity and how can social media be used in the classroom?

Very important, I'd say. Since the very beginning we've made a point of "opening up" celebrities to tell us more about their education, their language competencies, about their travel. All of them supported the project we dubbed "[Speak Your Mind!](#)". The most significant of all, however, was to show the young how important it was to speak languages in our times, by sharing the experiences of their favourite singers and actors. English teachers can use these clips as a tool to motivate students to learn the language. If teachers don't have access to internet at schools, they can, nevertheless, recommend the links during class and in this way give students the freedom to explore them on their own at home while on Facebook or YouTube. As feedback exercises, teacher can, then, after a few days re-initiate the discussion in classrooms. This can be done either through group discussions or as a part of a writing exercise.

The screenshot shows a Facebook page for 'Verbalisti, moja jezička mreža' (Education · Beograd). The page features a green header with the text 'Verbalizuj se!' and 'TAKMIČENJE U KOM SVI OSVAJAJU NAGRADE'. Below this is a video player showing a man speaking, with the title 'Sergej Trifunovic porucuje Verbalistima: Jezik je spoj mate.' and 'by VERBALISTI'. The video player shows a progress bar at 5:06 / 5:13. To the right of the video player, there is a section titled 'You and Verbalisti, moja jezička mreža' with 6 friends who like this. Below that is a 'People you may know' section with two suggestions: Stanicka Faye Dinsmore and Irrenah Sheckler Vanceva. There is also a 'Sponsored' section with an advertisement for 'Meet Kai Tana'. The left sidebar shows a navigation menu with options like Wall, Info, Friend activity, PROGRAMI I CENE, NAGRADNA IGRA I TAKMIČENJE, and Speak Your Mind!.

We talked about students' preferences, especially the younger ones, for the digital media and social networks. It explains to a great extent the fast growth of the language network Verbalisti, but what is the situation like when it comes to the foreign language teachers? How trained and how prepared are they for the advantages of the digital media and the latest teaching tools?

Well, here the situation is not so rosy, although we have to be honest in realising that the poor use of the digital media in our schools has come as a result of many different factors, most of which are out of the teachers' hands. For instance, the economic crisis is to blame for the lack of funds – therefore, no money for the speedy internet connections, for computers at the students' disposal or acquiring new, powerful teaching tools, such as, interactive whiteboards. We need more significant help in financing teacher training, educating them to incorporate new media and tools into a class, and last but not least – we need to come up with the compensation system which would motivate teachers to evolve and improve with the times. This is the core reason why our teachers should seize every opportunity for additional training, especially those organised abroad and supported by the foreign colleges, the British Council or other institutions. The overall implementation of the digital media and the improvement that comes with it have forced the western countries to transform their teaching, and I honestly hope we'll follow in their footsteps.

PRODIREKT, with its language network Verbalisti, recently signed the regional partnership agreement with the Paris based Entertainment Learning, the creator of language learning service - English Attack! In line with the importance of adopting new media in our teaching, we will in the next issue discuss with Jasmina Saric the power of social media and how digital entertainment can be applied to help people learn languages.

Marija Ivanovic is a MELT co-editor, an educational consultant and an English teacher. At the moment, she is setting up a project on harnessing teacher and student emotional intelligence called 'Cool Fire' in Denmark with partners from the UK. Her professional interests include Reflective practice, Teacher development, School leadership and Emotional intelligence. She received her BA degree in the English language and literature from the Faculty of Philology, Belgrade University and her MA in Lifelong learning from the Danish School of Education, Deusto University and London University respectively.

About ELTA

ELTA is a non-governmental, non-profit association of teachers of English in Serbia, affiliated to IATEFL (International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language) and TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages). It was founded in 2003 by merging of two, at the time, biggest teachers' associations ELTAB (English Language Teachers' Association of Belgrade) and YELTA (Yugoslav English language Teachers' Association). ELTA brings together primary and secondary English teachers, teachers working in higher education, language schools, students of English, all language professionals and professionals-to-be interested in ensuring excellence in English language teaching.

About PRODIREKT LLC and Communication Network Verbalisti (Verbalists)

PRODIREKT (www.prodirektgroup.com) provides strategic management and executive education and training in the Balkan region. PRODIREKT's innovative solutions for corporate management, marketing and international business communication offer a bridge between strategy and education, while its business group and social network Verbalisti, dedicated to language studies and professional training, helps young professionals and business people achieve their objectives in international communication.