Exploring Austrian Digital Residents’ communicative habits, skills, and needs as resources for tertiary-level (English) language learning

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The basis of this presentation is a survey of eighty students at two tertiary-education institutions in eastern Austria. The informants completed a paper-based questionnaire on the topic of their use of social media in general, and their use of the English language in this particular context, addressing the central issues investigated in this colloquium:

(1) 'Digital Resident’ students’ usage habits and practices regarding social media and digital/online communication tools,

(2) The kinds of different English language learning needs, skills, and usage habits students have developed in this context,

(3) Experience and suggestions students have regarding the integration of online communication tools and social media in English language learning.

Early findings show that the student informants use a broad variety of social media, but in particular Facebook (about 90% of respondents) and Whatsapp (75%). Twitter, by contrast, is far less used, by only about a third of the respondents. The English language is a central factor in the students’ use of social media – almost 90% use it in this context. The same percentage indicates that English plays a ‘very important’ role in their lives. Further, while the use of new media sources like Youtube and online dictionaries has clearly arrived in language teaching classrooms, few students explicitly report the use of social media for this purpose. Suggestions made on this head concern using Facebook for modern international ‘pen pal-ships’, while also raising the issues of data protection and the registration requirements involved.

Overall, our survey thus sheds light to today’s students’ use of social media and apps, in connection with that of the English language. Eliciting their ideas with regard to applying new media skills in the classroom, the results provide a basis for integrating social media and digital communication for tertiary language education in Austria.

Keywords: digital residents, tertiary education, new/social media.