
USE OF DIGITAL METHODS AND TOOLS IN NON-FORMAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

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Abstract: This article explores the role and importance of digital methods and tools in non-formal foreign language education for students from grades 1 to 12, focusing on practices in private language schools. In the context of global digitalization and the growing emphasis on developing key 21st-century competencies, multilingual and digital-media literacy emerge as central goals of modern education. Using survey data from language teachers, the article analyzes the digital resources used—interactive learning systems, online platforms (e.g., Kahoot, Wordwall, Quizlet), video materials, and AI tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly—and their effects on student motivation and progress. Teachers’ attitudes toward balancing traditional and digital teaching methods are also presented.

The results show that despite age differences, all participants use digital tools in their work, albeit to varying degrees. The most commonly used technologies are laptops and smartphones, while interactive whiteboards are used significantly less. Most teachers report a moderate increase in student motivation when digital tools are employed, though some also express concerns about potential distraction and superficial engagement with the material.

The article also examines the context of digitalization in Bulgaria, highlighting both the existing technological infrastructure and the generally low level of digital competence among the population. In conclusion, the article emphasizes the need for systemic support to improve teachers' digital preparedness and for a responsible approach to integrating technology in the learning process. Non-formal education emerges as a suitable environment for experimentation, flexibility, and the introduction of innovations that help develop sustainable digital skills and critical thinking in students.

Keywords: digital methods and tools, multilingual and digital-media literacy, non-formal education, foreign language education

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of foreign languages has become an integral part of modern life. It is no coincidence that multilingual competence is defined as one of the key skills of the 21st century. This article focuses on foreign language education in the non-formal sector, specifically in private language schools, with a particular focus on the use of digital methods and tools in the learning process.

Why did we choose this topic for study? Generally, the use of digital devices is so natural for today’s children, who are “digital natives”, (Prensky, 2001) that the lack of adequate methods and tools in education—regardless of the field—would be unnatural.

"Today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach. These students have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, video games, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age. What should we call these 'new' students of today? Some refer to them as the N-[for Net]-generation, but the term that fits them even better is Digital Natives." (Prensky, 2001)

The use of digital methods and tools is fundamental in fostering digital-media literacy among children, which UNESCO defines as one of the key 21st-century competencies. In this way, digital resources in foreign language education from grades 1 to 12 help develop key skills such as multilingual and digital-media literacy.

In this context, we examine the role of teachers as key agents in the learning process and their knowledge, skills, and attitudes regarding the use of digital resources in teaching.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study is based on a survey conducted among 36 foreign language teachers working mainly in private language schools. The sample was formed using convenience sampling, i.e., participants were selected based on their accessibility and willingness to participate.

The sample includes diversity in age, teaching experience, and type of study groups, but it cannot be considered representative of the entire population of foreign language teachers in non-formal education in Bulgaria. The survey was conducted entirely online, and participation was voluntary.

The goal of the study is not to make a quantitative generalization of results at the national level but to outline main trends, attitudes, and practices related to the use of digital tools in education. The findings should be viewed in this context—as indicative, with the potential for future expansion through broader and more representative studies.

The main questions in the survey are related to:

- Materials used in class – types and frequency of use;
- Types of digital resources;
- Types of digital devices;
- Use of AI-based tools in teaching (such as ChatGPT, Grammarly, etc.); These tools are part of the growing application of artificial intelligence in education, showing significant potential for personalized learning, individual progress adaptation, and automated feedback (Holmes et al., 2022).
- Results from using digital tools;
- Effect on students;
- Teachers' attitudes toward the optimal ratio of classical and digital methods in teaching;
- Problems associated with the use of digital methods and tools.

3. RESULTS

Types of digital methods and tools used in foreign language education

Today's students can hardly imagine how foreign language learning took place 25 years ago. For them, it is unthinkable to have only a paper textbook and notebook, to write on a blackboard with chalk, and to be without tablets, laptops, interactive whiteboards, smartphones, and—above all—the Internet.

For both children and the older generation, the lack of digital resources is already history. Over a relatively short period, educational resources have undergone a transformation that is evolving at a rapid pace. Let us examine the main teaching resources and their development over the years.

- Teaching systems – textbooks and workbooks.

In the early 1990s, English language teaching systems from major international publishers such as Oxford, Cambridge, Longman (now Pearson), and Macmillan entered Bulgaria and quickly became widespread. The structure of the courses, the inclusion of listening cassettes, teacher's books—all this was new and very appealing.

Private language schools emerged in Bulgaria in the early 1990s and quickly attracted large numbers of children. It is a fact that interactive learning systems were first introduced in non-formal language education and only later in mainstream education. This is one reason why this article examines non-formal foreign language education as a key environment for the adoption of digital methods and tools.

Today, interactive learning systems—as digital educational resources combining text lessons, audio/video content, self-assessment exercises, simulations, games, visualizations, and progress tracking—are used both in classrooms via interactive whiteboards and remotely via tablets, computers, and mobile devices.

- The interactive whiteboard – development and application in education

One of the significant innovations in transforming the traditional classroom is the interactive whiteboard (smartboard), which has revolutionized teaching methods. In Bulgaria, interactive whiteboards appeared in the first decade of the 21st century, initially introduced by private language schools, again as pioneers in applying educational technologies.

- Interactive platforms (Kahoot, Wordwall, Quizizz)

With the development of digital education, innovative interactive platforms have emerged, making learning more engaging, dynamic, and effective. Among the most popular are Kahoot!, Quizlet, Mentimeter, Wordwall, Nearpod, and others, widely used in both face-to-face and remote learning.

Their main goals and benefits include:

- increasing student motivation and engagement;
- suitable for review, reinforcement, and assessment;
- enabling real-time feedback;
- promoting gamified learning.
 - Videos (YouTube, TED-Ed, etc.)
 - Online dictionaries and translators
 - AI tools (ChatGPT, Grammarly, etc.)

When discussing the digitalization of the learning process—and specifically of foreign language teaching—we are immersed in a sea of possible technological solutions and resources. These also include distance learning platforms, software for presentations, mobile applications, and more.

We focused in detail on interactive learning systems and the smartboard as the beginning of the digital transformation in education. Together with interactive platforms, they are the most frequently used by teachers in the learning process.

Non-formal education

Regardless of how familiar the term “non-formal education” may be, it is an integral part of everyday life for both parents and children. The participants in both formal and non-formal education are the same—students attending general schools and also enrolled in various forms of non-formal education, and teachers who often operate in both spheres.

Therefore, when discussing non-formal education, we must consider its interrelation and points of intersection with formal education.

This type of education is not new and has a longstanding tradition in Bulgarian pedagogy. In today’s dynamic times, characterized by rapidly evolving digital technologies and social media, non-formal education is marked by a high degree of flexibility and adaptability to modern realities, as well as an openness to introducing new methods and tools in the educational process.

Digitalization in Bulgaria – reality, development, and goals

According to the European Commission (2020), digitalization is 'the process of using digital technologies to change a business model and provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities' (European Commission, 2020).

The large-scale digitalization of all EU countries is a key priority of the European Commission for the period 2019–2024. The so-called 'Digital Compass' outlines four main goals, the first of which is 'a digitally skilled population and highly skilled digital professionals' (European Commission, 2020).

As clearly stated by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen: “It is important to invest in digitalization, education, and young people.”

Despite significant technological infrastructure in Bulgaria (e.g., fiber optic coverage in 85% of homes, compared to the EU average of 50%), the country ranks 26th out of 27 EU members in the DESI index. The discrepancy between infrastructure and population skills illustrates a key problem that needs national-level resolution.

A 2023 survey by Sova Harris, commissioned by the Council for Electronic Media, shows that:

- 90% of households with children (0–18 years) have Internet access;
- 88% own one or more smartphones;
- 79% have a laptop and/or desktop computer;
- 46% have a tablet.

Additionally, 72% of children up to age 18 use smartphones and 42% use laptops.

This confirms the existence of digital environments in homes with children, but also highlights the low level of digital competence among the general population, creating a gap between technological potential and its effective use.

Survey results

The survey was conducted among 36 foreign language teachers in non-formal education. Most—83%—work in language schools, while 16.7% provide private lessons.

Participants’ age range is broad: 16.7% are under 30 years old, 33.3% are between 30 and 40, 16.7% between 40 and 50, and 33.3% are over 50. Their teaching experience ranges from 7 to 39 years.

Despite age differences, all respondents answered “Yes” to the question: “Do you use digital tools in your lessons?” Half of the teachers use digital tools in every lesson, 33.3% use them at least once a week, and 16.7% use them rarely (mostly those over 50).

100% of respondents use interactive learning systems; 66.6% use interactive games and activities, videos, and songs; 66.7% use worksheets from the Internet, and 50% use online platforms such as Kahoot, Quizlet, Wordwall, etc.

The most commonly used devices are laptops and smartphones (83.3% each), while only 33.3% use interactive whiteboards.

Teachers report that digital tools moderately improve students’ motivation. 83.3% believe digital tools help to some extent; 16.7% say 'rather not.'

Most believe students enjoy digital tools (66.7%); 16.7% say they increase engagement; 16.7% say they distract students.

Despite some concerns, all agree that digital tools diversify and illustrate lessons, increase engagement, and improve motivation to some extent.

Opinions on the ideal balance of classical and digital methods vary—some say 40/60 in favor of digital, others 70/30 in favor of classical. But all agree that modern education is impossible without a balanced blend of tradition and innovation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Digitalization is transforming all spheres of society in real time. Education—both formal and non-formal—must remain adaptive to these changes to adequately prepare children for a high-tech future.

The non-formal sector holds great potential for applying innovations and addressing the challenges of education in the digital age.

All surveyed teachers agree that new skills are needed for changing attitudes. They express readiness to undergo training related to digital competencies and the use of AI.

Non-formal education is inherently positioned to foster digital-media literacy and ensure the healthy use of digital tools by children.

Only critically thinking children will be able to thrive in civil society and become creators—not just consumers—in the new era.

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