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Platformization of language education

Abstract: This editorial introduction provides an overview of the special issue. It introduces readers to the topic of platformization, articulates areas of overlap among the seven contributions, and points to new directions for future scholarship.

1 Introduction

Digital platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, host over five billion users, which amounts to more than 60 % of the world's population (Statista 2024). While scholars have increasingly sought to address the impact of digital platforms on education (e.g., Coba and Rivas 2023; Decuypere et al. 2021; Williamson 2017), a range of pressing questions remain. Of particular importance to applied linguists is the question of how the mediating effects of digital platforms are changing the ways in which language is understood, taught, and acquired. In other words, how are digital platforms changing language education?

The contributors of this special issue observe that the nature of media consumption on digital platforms (e.g., video shorts and click-bait content) is changing how teaching and learning are managed. For instance, digital platforms may encourage teachers to sensationalize their delivery and materials in order to attract the attention of potential students. Learners may, in turn, overlook important pedagogical considerations, such as teaching qualifications, when selecting an appropriate teacher; instead, unconventional attributes and characteristics, such as personality, physical appearance, and digital editing skills, become important factors when "shopping" for teachers on digital platforms.

These teaching and learning developments are also transforming the ways in which foundational ideas, such as what it means to be proficient in a language, are understood. For example, when language education is made available on, and

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managed through, digital platforms, what is understood to be good or ideal target language use is often not determined by educational institutions but is rather an outcome of a mutual understanding between a service provider and customer. While it is important for educators and scholars to attend to the ways in which conventional teaching and learning issues and themes are being transformed by the use of digital platforms in language education, the current special issue demonstrates that such transformations are mediated by larger social, political, and economic forces that require theoretical consideration and empirical scrutiny. Take, for example, how the increasing integration of digital platforms in language education heralds rising marketization and privatization (e.g., Williamson 2021; Wang and Curran 2024). The marketization and privatization of language teaching, which is a natural process of a larger neoliberal system programmed into digital platforms, compel teachers to engage in constant self-promotion (Zeng and Curran forthcoming a). Digital platforms that host language tutors exemplify this point: teachers are required to complete profiles that include personal categories, such as nationality, hobbies, and other languages spoken, that they know are used by potential students to filter and search for instructors. This consumer-driven space encourages teachers to distinguish themselves from other teachers competing for the same pool of students, which additionally and frequently includes engaging in pricing strategies (e.g., penetration pricing and predatory pricing) that, while competitive, are incommensurate with a livable wage.

As this brief discussion of digital platforms and language education demonstrates, there is an urgent need for scholars to address the numerous domains in which platformization is affecting teaching and learning. Such domains include a range of societal issues and language contexts, but can in sum be categorized into two, overlapping empirical categories. First, platformization shapes the ways in which teaching is conducted and learning is managed. This empirical category is related to the nuts and bolts of language education (e.g., pedagogical principles and practices). Second, platforms and humans are entangled in complex and complicated ways (Jenks 2023), creating opportunities and challenges for societies dependent on technologies. This empirical category is related to the societal aspects of language education.

In addition to these two empirical categories, platformization must be addressed from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives. Macro-level research is needed to theorize the broader social, political, and economic implications of platformization. Micro-level empirical work is needed to investigate how platforms lead to varied outcomes for different groups of students, including those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged or marginalized. At the same time, more research is also needed to address how platformization is affecting teachers. Such work is especially vital given that recent scholarship highlights how digital platforms are capable of

exacerbating problematic linguistic and racial hierarchies (e.g., Curran et al. forthcoming; Litman 2022; Martinez 2022; Morikawa and Parba 2024).

This special issue addresses the need for critical, theoretically grounded scholarship on the platformization of language education. The papers included in this special issue adopt distinct perspectives and examine unique contexts. Before introducing the seven investigations that make up the special issue, a brief overview of platformization is presented to offer a backdrop to the collection of papers.

2 Platformization

Platformization is defined as "the penetration of the infrastructures, economic processes, and governmental frameworks of platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life" (Poell et al. 2019, pp. 5–6). Platforms are for-profit digital intermediaries or online markets (see Nieborg et al. 2022) that facilitate interactions among different users (Casilli and Posada 2019); examples include YouTube, Amazon, and Uber. Platforms create value by supplying the digital interfaces and algorithms that connect users. For example, Uber acts as a digital intermediary between ride seekers and drivers, creating value for both users in and through the app. The term platformization references the disruptive yet increasingly quotidian role played by digital intermediaries in today's global economy (Yu, 2025).

Platformization is the result of rapid advances in technologies, including the ubiquity and affordability of the internet and inexpensive mobile computing (Rainie and Wellman 2012). Yet, intellectually rigorous engagement with platformization and its effects requires moving beyond technocentric readings to include detailed attention to the "organisational forms, financial logics, regulatory practices and labour relations" that have accompanied platformization (Narayan 2024: 1). Adams-Prassl (2018) notes that many platforms are able to flourish not so much because of technological innovations, but rather as a result of avoiding government regulations and skirting labor laws. Furthermore, Srnicek (2017) highlights that platformization reflects enormous speculative investments from investors in the years following the 2007–2008 global financial crisis. Platformization must be understood as a process that is shaped not only by rapid technological advancements, but also the broader global capitalist economy and the fourth industrial revolution (Jenks 2023).

2.1 The effect of platformization on language education

Over the last decade, there has been rapid growth in the use of digital platforms for profit-oriented language education (for an overview, see Wang and Curran 2025). For instance, online tutoring platforms (OTPs) have transformed language education by lowering the barrier of entry for students to learn and teachers to teach. OTPs connect learners and teachers for one-off lessons conducted online (Curran and Jenks 2023; Kaltenegger forthcoming). On OTPs, monolingual, second language, and multilingual teachers all compete for the same students, which keeps prices low (Zeng and Curran forthcoming b). Platforms are able to keep prices down by taking advantage of low wages in countries such as the Philippines (Cho and Jang this issue), and employing workers on "zero-hour" contracts that do not guarantee income (Panaligan and Curran 2022). Platforms are able to absolve themselves of employee responsibility by discursively constructing themselves as impartial intermediaries that do not offer services but merely facilitate connection between end users (Gillespie 2010). Crucially, OTPs are increasingly utilized not only by individual learners, but also by national governments seeking to provide students access to "low-cost foreign teachers" (Kobayashi this issue). On social media platforms, language education has flourished, as evidenced by the growing number of publications examining language teaching on YouTube (Chao 2022; Ho 2023; Nishioka 2023), Instagram (Aslan 2024; Junior 2020; Nejadghanbar et al. 2024; Selvi 2025) and Douyin (Jiang 2022a, 2022b; Jiang and Vásquez 2025; Wang and Curran 2024).

The dynamics of platformization have been addressed frequently in communication and media studies, but are still relatively underexplored in applied linguistics. As result of this disciplinary imbalance, topics of concern to media scholars, such as technological affordances, have been thoroughly discussed, while topics pertaining to language education, have been underexplored (but see Wang and Curran 2024; Selvi 2025). That said, some applied linguists have called attention to the transformative role that digital platforms are playing in contemporary language education (Lee and Li 2025).

Speaking broadly, platformization transforms language education in three, interrelated ways.
1) Economy
2) Pedagogy
3) Power

While these three variables are bound tightly together, for conceptual clarity each aspect will be discussed individually below to illustrate the implications of using for-profit digital platforms for language education.

2.2 Economy

Platformization has drastically reduced the costs of language learning while expanding the range of free resources available (Barrot 2022; Blyth 2017; Lee 2023). OTPs facilitate one-on-one lessons at prices that are often significantly lower than what learners would encounter in a face-to-face context. Further, due to the global nature of the industry, prices are driven increasingly lower as individual teachers compete for students by offering low prices (Panaligan and Curran 2022). While low-priced lessons are good for language learners of limited financial means, low prices also make it difficult for teachers to earn a living. Indeed, a variety of studies draw attention to the exploitation faced by the globally dispersed labor force of online English teachers, including Cho and Jang (in this issue) and Kobayashi (this issue). Despite the possibility of teacher exploitation, platformization has provided a welcome source of income for hundreds-of-thousands of language tutors around the world (Panaligan and Curran 2023).

Platformization has also facilitated the rise of a new class of language teacher: platform language teacherpreneurs (PLTs) (Wang and Curran 2024). PLTs are individuals who create highly engaging language teaching content that combines language instruction and entertainment (Aslan and Ho this issue). A small percentage of these platform teacherpreneurs enjoy incredible success and earn millions of dollars (Wang and Curran 2024). The success of superstar PLTs, such as "MrYang" (Jiang 2022b; Lee and Li 2025), illustrates how platformization has reshaped economic opportunities (see Nejadghanbar and Song this issue).

While platformization has lowered the economic costs of learning and also created job opportunities for teachers, platformization has a number of worrisome pedagogical implications.

2.3 Pedagogy

Platforms create immense pressures for teachers to stand out, resulting in content that tends to be focused on entertainment (Wang and Curran this issue). The intense competition on platforms encourages teachers to brand themselves; as a result, self-branding has emerged as a central aspect of the content produced by platform teachers (Aslan 2024; Selvi 2025). Platforms tend to have little incentive in encouraging teachers to produce materials based on sound pedagogy. Relatedly, platforms have little incentive to police the pedagogical content so long as teachers generate sufficient income for the platform by driving traffic or attracting customers. As a result, few mechanisms to control pedagogical quality exist. The few mechanisms that do exist are questionable in their effectiveness. For example, one of the

primarily quality-assurance mechanisms used by OTPs is user-based ratings that students assign to teachers. However, this mechanism may function to push out pedagogically qualified teachers in favor of "popular" teachers who fulfill students' linguistic stereotypes or who prioritize pleasing their students over delivering sound content. Teachers who diverge from students' stereotypes may find themselves receiving low ratings, as was the case for the Black teachers in Curran (2023) that taught students who expected their English teachers to be White.

Platformization has resulted in teachers needing to be able to deliver short, "bite-sized" lessons (Aslan 2024) with universal appeal. In order to survive as online teachers, especially on social media, teachers must deliver clickable content that encourages subscriptions. These tensions are mirrored for teachers on OTPs, who are under intense pressure to attract re-bookings. Further, as the lines between entertainment and teaching continue to blur, platform algorithms will prioritize eye-catching content and promote teachers for the wrong reasons. While the ludic aspects of platform language teaching are not inherently problematic, platforms' prioritization of customer satisfaction over sound pedagogy raises concerns about whether the linguistic and culture content students encounter online is doing more harm than good (Wang and Curran 2024).

Platforms have facilitated the rise of an incredibly competitive market where teachers are evaluated on popularity rather than pedagogy. This change represents an important shift in terms of power dynamics, shifting value away from traditional "experts" to entertaining teachers.

2.4 Power

Securing employment in language teaching is traditionally supported by gaining qualification and experience that are then certified by institutional organizations and accreditation bodies. Conversely, platforms rely on customers/users to evaluate pedagogical quality through likes, comments, and ratings that feed into platform algorithms that promote teachers (Curran 2023). The crucial structuring power of platforms' algorithms to rank and distribute content (Gillespie 2014; Kim 2017; Noble 2018) means that traditional qualifications and credentials are less important in platform teaching. In other words, under platformization, traditional gatekeepers, such as accreditation bodies, are overshadowed by "algorithmic gatekeepers" (Napoli 2015). Algorithms inadvertently challenge and transform traditional teaching concepts, such as "professionalism" (Nejadghanbar and Song this issue) and "language teacher" (Wang and Curran 2024).

Like social media platforms, OTPs change the distribution of power between students and tutors. This re-distribution occurs because platforms rely on a

combination of student evaluations and search/matching algorithms. For example, on OTPs, negative evaluations from even just a few students can cause teachers to be algorithmically deprioritized, which has significant implications for career security and financial stability (Curran 2023). Power is also skewed to students because most OTPs provide few opportunities for tutors to give feedback on students, leading to possible exploitation and abuse (Cho and Jang this issue). The power imbalance is further exacerbated by the precarity that defines work in the gig economy in general (Anwar and Graham 2021; MacDonald and Giazitzoglu 2019). For example, most OTPs classify tutors as "independent contractors," which shields business from legal recourse over harassment or the practice of wage garnishment (Panaligan and Curran 2022).

All manuscripts for this special issue deal with how platformization shapes language education in terms of economy, pedagogy, and power. The manuscripts represent a diverse range of contexts and geographical foci.

3 Overview of the articles

The first three manuscripts are directly concerned with how platformization, and in particular its amplification of eye-catching content, is reshaping understandings of language teaching content and language teacher identity. The first paper by Hassan Nejadghanbar and Juyoung Song examines shifting notions of professionalism among language teachers using social media. Engaging explicitly with how plat-formization challenges traditional conceptualizations of expertise, the article focuses on Iranian English teachers who use Instagram. Nejadghanbar and Song adopt a sociomaterial lens, which is grounded in the "constitutive entanglement of the social and material in everyday life" (Orlikowski 2007: 1435). Based on interviews with Iranian English teachers, the contribution provides in-depth analyses of how teachers' understandings of professionalism are transformed by the competitive social media environment in which they are striving to succeed. The highly educated and qualified participants are forced to confront the realities of social media, where pedagogical qualifications are often of less value than eye-catching content and entertainment (Wang and Curran 2024). Echoing our observations in this introduc-tion about the populistic refashioning of expertise under platformization, one participant cogently observes: "You are as professional as your number of followers and likes." The sobering observation highlights the inescapable importance of self-branding for teachers working on digital platforms.

The second paper by Erhan Aslan and Jenifer Ho also focuses on Instagram. Extending both authors' individual work on micro-celebrity teachers (Aslan 2024; Ho 2023), the article adopts a multimodal-based approach to focus on the accounts of two

highly popular teachers from the UK. Building on Pinner's (2014, 2019) and Lowe's and Pinner's (2016) work on authenticity, the study explores how the two British teachers draw upon their identities and cultural capital to construct themselves as ideal English speakers and teachers. The findings demonstrate how two teachers use Instagram's multimodal affordances to create engaging content that foregrounds their authority as native speakers and reinforces dominant languages ideologies of nativeness. The article also notes the pedagogical challenges that face online teachers, many of whom confront the conundrum of trying to include meaningful teaching content in videos that last less than a minute. Noting the reality that many teachers today "wish to integrate themselves into platformized online language teaching spaces," Aslan and Ho (this issue) conclude by calling for language education programs to emphasize equipping teachers with the digital literacies needed to navigate today's platform-based teaching environment.

The third contribution by Jinyan Wang and Nate Ming Curran shares much in common with the first two contributions. Like the first two articles, the paper focuses on online teachers' use of social media, though its context is English teachers on Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok). The researchers draw heavily on the concept of "authenticity." However, while Aslan's and Ho's contribution examines how influencer teachers convey authenticity through their performances of native speaker identity, the contribution by Wang and Curran focuses on how ethnically Chinese English teachers establish authenticity by drawing on their regional Chinese identities. Wang and Curran argue that the English teachers' use of regional varieties of Chinese serves a crucial role in helping the teachers to brand themselves and attract viewers. They also note that the intensely competitive context of online English teaching prompts teachers to commodify any and all aspects of their identities that are unique or which allow teachers to stand out from a veritable sea of competing content creators.

While the first three manuscripts examine different national contexts, the findings all collectively foreground the intense competition facing social-media based online language teachers. In their pursuit of students – or perhaps more accurately, viewers – all the teachers rely heavily on self-branding techniques. Thus, even though teachers rail against the success of "unqualified" English teachers (Nejadghanbar and Song this issue), they recognize the indisputable importance of keeping viewers entertained. However, the contributions also underscore that the drive to keep viewers entertained may result in the production of content that at is pedagogically lacking, and at worst, exploits stereotypes and essentialist ideologies of language and culture.

The fourth contribution by Ron Darvin maintains the focus on social media platforms but with a focus on learners. Drawing on a longitudinal project with 18 participants, Darvin explores the digital literacy and language practices of Filipino

secondary students. The students' varied use of social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat) reveals how learning resources interact with the digital affordances of platforms, which expanded students' social networks and helped with their acquisition of symbolic capital. Extending his earlier work on how the "socio-technical structures" of digital platforms reflect and reproduces offline inequities (Darvin 2023), Darvin theorizes how the students' "digital repertoires" and "digital socialization" account for how they invest in various digital literacies. The contribution orients readers towards both the negative and positive potential that digital platforms hold for learners from different backgrounds.

The fifth contribution by Eun Cho and In Chull Jang brings the focus once again to teachers. This time, however, the focus is not on teachers' use of social media but instead deals with OTPs. Rooted in a decolonial feminist perspective in the tradition of Mohanty (2005), examines how three Filipina online English teachers navigate their professional experiences and identities. The paper situates the women's experiences within both the broader gig economy, as well as the feminization of online language teaching (Simpson and Tajima 2024). Reflecting growing scholarly attention towards the racialized and gendered experiences of online Filipina teachers (e.g., Domingo 2025; Morikawa and Parba 2024; Tajima 2018), the paper discusses the sexual harassment that the participants face from male students. The paper reveals that participants often shrug off or excuse the harassment they receive from their students. In contrast, said teachers are more likely to react with indignation – and subsequently report to the platform – when students make comments they perceive as disparaging of their language proficiency or qualifications as English teachers. The contribution by Cho and Jang draws attention to how platformization, via both the anonymity it grants students and the policies of individual platforms, exposes teachers to widespread and varied forms of harassment (see, for example, Curran 2023). Crucially, this piece offers more than critiques of OTPs; it also recommends how platforms can mitigate the risks that teachers face.

The sixth contribution by Yoko Kobayashi also deals with the topic of Filipino English teachers. Kobayashi draws on an exhaustive analysis of both press and government documents about the increasingly widespread phenomenon of Japanese school districts contracting companies that employ Filipino teachers. Informed by Kobayashi's wealth of experience working in the Japanese education context, the paper identifies the severe inconsistencies in the policies of various governmental bodies regarding the employment of Filipino teachers. Complementing the previous contribution by Cho and Jang, Kobayashi highlights the lack of clear protections for online Filipino English teachers in Japan, as well as the strategic ambiguity adopted in terms of their classification as alternately "native" and "non-native" speakers. In addition to highlighting Filipino teachers' ambiguous linguistic status in the global gig economy, whereby they are conveniently designated as native and non-native to

achieve profit (Panaligan and Curran 2023), the paper reveals the pressing need for national governments to respond proactively to the consequences of platformization, and in particular to the status and working conditions of the global online workforce.

The seventh and final contribution to the special issue is from Ali Fuad Selvi. Selvi focuses on the intersection of platformization and artificial intelligence (AI). The paper features an in-depth examination of 48 ostensibly AI-powered language learning platforms. Selvi's piece focuses on how for-profit companies marshal the "hype" around AI to appeal to potential users. Adopting a critical discourse analytic approach, the article considers platforms' celebratory discourse about AI within its broader entanglements with neoliberalism. By offering an analysis of the recent branding strategies adopted by myriad language education platforms, Selvi's article offers new insights into how burgeoning techno-optimism has become woven into the branding discourse of individual companies. With its empirical overview of the platformization of the ELT ecosystem (Selvi 2025), the contribution orients scholars toward future trends in platformization, including platforms' claims regarding the technologies they adopt.

4 Inequity and competition

In addition to the economic, pedagogical, and power issues discussed above, the papers demonstrate how platforms exacerbate inequity within the profession. While unequal access to resources (Darvin this issue), the reproduction of stereotypes (Aslan and Ho this issue; Wang and Curran this issue), and the exploitation of teachers from low-income countries (Cho and Jang this issue; Kobayashi this issue) are issues that predate platformization, the authors of this special issue show how platformization has the potential to magnify preexisting issues in many ways. For example, while the sexual harassment of teachers is recognized in offline educational contexts (e.g., Robinson 2000), the issue is exacerbated on OTPs because the platforms allow students high levels of anonymity while simultaneously pressuring teachers to earn good reviews after every lesson (Panaligan and Curran 2022). Meanwhile, many platforms lack appropriate policies for countering sexual harassment, instead adopting a laisse-faire approach that enables harassment (Cho and Jang this issue). In addition to sexual harassment, online tutors face a variety of other challenges linked to their status as "gig workers" (Curran and Jenks 2023). While policies for workers' protection are often highly elaborated in various legal frameworks, transnational platforms operate in legal gray-zones that circumvent national labor laws (Adams-Prassl 2018).

Put differently, the papers in this special issue have highlighted a range of issues related to how platformization is affecting inequities in language education for teachers (Kobayashi this issue) and learners (Darvin this issue). While inequity in language education is a common topic of investigation (e.g., Sah and Naqvi 2025; Zhang and Darvin 2025; Zhang and Phyak 2025), little attention is paid to the role that platformization plays in (re)producing inequitable outcomes (see, however, Darvin 2023). Collectively, the assembled manuscripts underscore the immense power that for-profit platforms have accumulated in shaping public perceptions of key concepts in language education, including not only professionalism (Nejadghanbar and Song this issue), but also language assessment and proficiency (Curran et al. forthcoming). As platforms seek to cash-in on the global fears and excitement around AI, companies jostle and compete amongst each other, making ever more ambitious claims about their platforms and ability to streamline teaching and learning (Selvi this issue).

In addition, the papers all reveal how platforms accelerate competition in language education. The macro-level competition among platforms identified by Selvi (this issue) is mirrored at the micro-level, with content creators and online tutors competing fiercely for viewers/students. This is unsurprising given that one of the primary innovations of platformization is the facilitation of open competitive markets with low barriers to entry (Casilli and Posada 2019). In theory, an account run by individual content creator on social media can achieve just as much viral success as that of a large company. This narrative is further popularized by the rags-to-riches stories of mega-influencers, such as the Senagalese-born factory worker Khaby Lame whose droll humor in his silent videos propelled him to become the most followed person on TikTok with over 100 million followers (Karimi 2022). Indeed, Wang and Curran (2024) estimate that the most popular online English teachers on Douyin are earning, conservatively, millions of dollars per year through a combination of revenue from not only English classes, but also sponsorships, livestreams, and partnerships with brands. Yet, many less popular online language teachers struggle to attract viewers (Nejadghanbar and Song this issue), underscoring the challenges of working in a competitive language education market. In other words, while platformization has created great wealth for a select group of language teachers, this financial success is concentrated among a select group of content creators.

Troublingly, many of the most successful language teachers on social media partly derive their popularity through the circulation of problematic language ideologies (Aslan and Ho this issue) and cultural stereotypes (Wang and Curran this issue). On OTPs, the algorithms that mediate competition disincentivize teachers from confronting students about inappropriate behavior (Curran 2023). Meanwhile, the creation of a global market for language teaching has spurred intense competition that has driven down prices globally, with platforms charging students in

Japan as little as USD 2.20 per lesson (Simpson and Tajima 2024). As Kobayashi (this issue) notes, the working conditions of online tutors raise important questions about violations of human rights and the role of national and local governments in combatting the transnational exploitation of workers.

5 Moving forward

The papers collected for this special issue offer an initial foray into addressing how platformization continues to transform the language education landscape. Yet, much work remains to be done. Adequately theorizing how platformization is shaping language education requires sustained attention to numerous empirical issues and pedagogical contexts, as this introduction has argued. Yet, the political economy of digital platforms (Narayan 2024) is an area that is particularly lacking in the literature despite its profound impact on how language education is understood and managed. Adopting perspectives from political economy would strengthen understandings of how teachers' and students' reliance on for-profit platforms impact the profession (see Block 2017). Also needed are empirical analyses that identify which aspects of platformization merely continue trends observable in language education "offline." For example, the rapid growth of online platforms specialized in language education reflects the changing role of language under neoliberalism (Block et al. 2012) and emerging trends of linguistic entrepreneurship (De Costa et al. 2016). On the other hand, some aspects of platformization, such as the use of opaque algorithms that determine the popularity of teachers, have little precedent in offline language instruction (Curran 2023). Put differently, it is incumbent upon future scholarship to investigate whether platformization is leading to the intensifications of long-standing practice or fundamentally changing the nature of language education. Finally, we hope that scholarship will move beyond critiques of existing instantiations of platformization by explicitly (re)imagining future alternatives.

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