

# *Bite-sized language teaching in the digital wild: relational pedagogy and micro-celebrity English teachers on Instagram*

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# **Bite-sized language teaching in the digital wild: Relational pedagogy and micro-celebrity English teachers on Instagram**

## **Abstract**

While ‘social media influencers’ have predominantly been studied in marketing and advertising, there has been an increase in language teachers’ engagement in content creation on social media platforms. Informed by the principles of *relational pedagogy* (Kern, 2015; 2018), the present study explores how a group of Turkish teachers of English (n=10) each with over 100,000 followers on Instagram navigate around the material, social, and individual multimodal semiotic resources to create English language teaching content. The data sources which include reels from teachers’ public accounts and netnographic fieldwork notes were analyzed informed by the principles of *social semiotics* (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). The findings revealed that the teachers create digital artefacts relying on creative relationships between words, contexts, and situations and provide opportunities to practice simple conversations, learn vocabulary in context, and distinguish nuances in the pronunciation of challenging words. The multimodal meaning-making practices demonstrate how social, material, and individual affordances shape, reframe, or recontextualize linguistic meanings in various forms. These findings highlight the facilitative power of social media for noticing linguistic forms, interaction, participation, and multimodal communication with important implications for teacher education, identity, and professional development in the evolving landscape of language teaching in the digital wild.

**Key words:** micro-celebrity, influencer, relational pedagogy, netnography, multimodality

## **1. Introduction**

Participatory digital technologies have had a profound impact on language learning and teaching offering both teachers and learners opportunities to engage with a wide range of

multimodal resources for meaning making. Kern (2021) underscores the major contributions of digital technologies in the areas of (1) agency, autonomy, and identity, (2) creativity, and (3) new sociality and communities. Similarly, Jones (2022) highlights multimodality and heteroglossia, connectivity and interactivity, and games and play in changing digital literacies. Technology today encompasses a wide spectrum of mediational resources with enhanced intellectual capacity and creativity (Chun et al., 2016) allowing users to engage in different types of meaning making depending on rich combinations of multimodal texts (Jones, 2018; Kern, 2018). In this picture, social media as an integral part of our everyday Internet-based communication mediating the ways we generate, consume, and share information also provide numerous opportunities for language learning and teaching (Jenks, 2018; Kessler, 2013; Reinhardt, 2019).

Domingo, Jewitt and Kress (2015) highlight two important trends in the recent evolution of multimodal text: images are displacing writing, and screens are displacing printed page. Along with the diverse forms of communication enabled by participatory social media platforms (e.g., commenting, sharing, liking), multimodal texts gained new meanings, functions, and dimensions in the digital environments where remixing of written texts with visual media, sound, and other semiotic resources is common. In this new era of multimodality, embodiment and embeddedness are emphasized, specifically the relationship between the body and digital context with its all material, social, spatial, and temporal elements in our communication practices (Pennycook, 2017; Jones, 2020). Although multimodality has always been in the landscape of language teaching in the form of textbooks, picture books, flashcards, music, or drama, many recent digital media genres such as Internet memes, viral videos, GIFs have provided opportunities for teachers to use and create materials representing a plurality of genres and modalities (Jones & Hafner, 2021; Kessler, 2013).

Today more than half of the world's population (around 4.76 billion) are social media users (Statista, 2023). This massive growth in the use of social media has prompted educators to explore its pedagogical affordances. As a result, new forms of recreational language learning in which teachers can create content and learners have the freedom to “window shop” (Chik & Ho, 2017, p. 171) for online learning resources have emerged. Using another ‘window’ metaphor, Reinhardt (2020) emphasizes the opportunities offered by “social media as windows” (p. 237) for viewing authentic language use and cultural practices of native and expert users of a language. While the online language learning and teaching sector was already growing before the COVID-19 pandemic, the sudden shift to online teaching required many teachers to integrate social media and language learning platforms into their classrooms (Moser et al., 2021). For the first time in educational history teachers are no longer confined to their physical schools and classrooms and can connect with thousands of learners (or followers) on social media platforms.

Curran and Jenks (2022) argue that online language teaching is a growing sector of the gig economy – a notion that refers to jobs that are carried out on a short-term and freelance basis through digital platforms (Vallas & Schor, 2020), such as Uber and Airbnb. They suggest that neoliberalism is affecting the online language teaching landscape leading to the monetization and commercialization of teaching practices in the competitive digital online spaces. Nowadays, many ordinary language teachers use social media platforms as ‘micro-celebrity’ teachers (Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2023), ‘education influencers’ (Carpenter et al., 2022) or ‘teacherpreneurs’ (Carpenter et al., 2020) by creating short chunks of teaching content in an interactive video format to gain large numbers of followers and get monetized by social media platforms. These influencer-based practices are predicated the concept of “attention economy” (Andrejevic, 2002; Smythe, 1997), simply defined as determining content that could generate advertising revenue economic based on the of public

attention it gets. The attention is usually measured by the number of followers, shares, likes and comments received (Marwick, 2015). The impact of influencer-based language teaching on social media platforms is undeniable. For instance, ‘Rachel’s English’ – a popular YouTube channel created by Rachel Smith that offers lessons in the vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation of American English – hosts over 1,000 free videos about spoken English and listening comprehension on YouTube and has nearly 5 million subscribers and over 200 million views. Another example is ‘Linguamarina’ a YouTube channel (over 7.5 million subscribers and over 600 million views) created by Russian content creator Marina Mogilko, who shares English learning tips about pronunciation, vocabulary, slang as well as motivational stories about language learning.

As Reinhardt (2020) argues, social networking sites, despite their numerous benefits for language learning have not been normalized and fully integrated into formal language teaching but are rather used for informal language learning for many learners outside of formal school contexts. Social media mediated learning and teaching can also be considered as a prime example of CALL in the ‘digital wilds’ defined by Sauro and Zourou (2019) as “informal language learning that takes place in digital spaces, communities, and networks that are independent of formal instructional contexts” (p. 2). In this vein, influencer-based language teaching on social media can promote learning that teaching is not governed, controlled, or recognized by a formal institution and provides learners a wealth of opportunities and freedom to follow influencer teacher accounts of their choice.

Although social networking sites have been extensively studied and numerous benefits have been noted in relation informal second language (L2) use and learning, intercultural learning, self-directed learning, sociopragmatics, and digital literacies (Barrot, 2021; Jenks, 2018; Kessler, 2013; Manca, 2020; Reinhardt, 2019), there is scant scholarly attention on how language teachers utilize SNSs to create pedagogical content for learners. In

this picture, Instagram, despite being a relatively new and understudied social networking platform for language learning and teaching, is gaining more popularity among language teacher influencers. Launched in 2010 as a solely photo-sharing platform, as of the writing of this paper, there are over 1.35 billion users of Instagram worldwide (Statista, 2023). This exploratory study fills an important gap in research focusing on language teacher's use of Instagram with a particular focus on multimodal content curation. Informed by Kern's (2015, 2018) conceptualization of *relational pedagogy* drawing on the relationships between material, social, and individual dimensions shaping language use and literacy practices, the purpose of this study is to explore the creative ways English language teachers as influencer teachers design English language learning content on Instagram drawing on their digital literacies, social-semiotic resources, and individual creativity. The following overarching research question guided the study:

1) How do Turkish micro-celebrity teachers of English exploit different modes and communicative resources at their disposal to create language teaching reels on Instagram?

In what follows, the concepts of social media influencer and micro-celebrity are introduced to contextualize the emergence of education influencers and teachers on social media. Next, research relevant to the use of social media in language learning and teaching is described. The literature review is followed by the methodology of the current study and the findings. Finally, the implications of the findings in relation to research and pedagogy will be discussed.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. The rise of social media influencers and micro-celebrities*

The terms influencer and micro-celebrity are related. Social media influencers are individuals who have built a large network of followers on social media platforms and actively engage in promoting and endorsing products and services on various social media platforms. Social media influencers are also described as micro-celebrities (Senft, 2008) who create customized and engaging content for large social media followers of specific interests (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Khamis et. al., 2017). Micro-celebrities are ordinary internet users who strategically leverage their persona by engaging in self-presentation practices and interactions with their followers to increase their status online (Abidin, 2018). By sharing custom content and rich multimodal narration of their everyday personal lives, micro-celebrities convey authenticity (how genuine or sincere an influencer's actual lifestyle and sentiment is), interconnectedness (interpersonal connections between media personalities and their audience), and intimacy (feeling of familiarity) (Abidin, 2015) and are considered more approachable and relatable than usual celebrities (Enke & Borchers, 2019). After establishing sizeable numbers of followers largely due to their positioning as credible and inspirational experts – known as *instafame* (Marwick, 2015) on the social media platform on Instagram – social media influencers are known to monetize their work by seeking compensation for endorsing people, products, and services (Duffy, 2016; Khamis et al., 2017). According to Statista (2023), the global influencer marketing market value was worth 16.4 billion US dollars as of 2022, having more than doubled since 2019, making social media influencers stand out both culturally and financially.

## *2.2. Teachers as micro-celebrities on social networking sites*

The influx of social media influencers has also been observed in the education domain. The influencer culture has changed the way educators use social media leading to the emergence of the concept of 'education influencers' which Carpenter et al. (2022) define as

“individuals who use social media platforms to gain large audiences of educator followers and monetize this attention” (pp. 1-2). In this burgeoning area of research, studies have shown that teachers share messages that promote products and services, other influencers, motivational content, and useful classroom practices (Shelton et al. 2020), and posts representing pandemic-related support as well as culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Shelton et al., 2022). Examining a group of teacher influencers amidst national financial and professional deficits in the US elementary education context, Davis and Yi (2022) found that teachers utilized Instagram to represent an amalgamation of personas highlighting teachers as a ‘person’ outside of the classroom, as an ‘edupreneur’ capitalizing on commercial educational content, and as a ‘critical advocate’ expressing views on social justice issues around race, class, sexuality, and politics. Finally, in the micro-celebrification process of teachers on TikTok, Vizcaíno-Verdú and Abidin (2023) identified elements, such as responsibility (sharing content as service to students and peers), commitment (demonstrating awareness of ethical and social justice issues), authority (framing of teachers as authoritarian figures and gatekeepers), and recognition (positivity and humor around teachers’ content).

As discussed above, recent research focusing on education influencers indicates that professional practice on social networking platforms is complex and multi-dimensional involving teachers adopting multiple roles and identities. In this line of research, the concept of influencer has mainly been investigated mainly in US elementary and secondary school contexts. Like other education influencers, ‘language teacher influencers’ can be conceptualized as individuals with relevant attained educational qualifications who use social media platforms to gain monetary benefits by reaching large audiences of learners and/or teachers by creating and sharing language teaching content. To better understand language

teachers' engagement with social media, it is necessary to provide an overview of existing research on social media in foreign language learning and teaching.

### *2.3. Language learning and teaching in the age of social media*

To map the landscape of scholarly work on the use of social media in language learning and teaching, it is both practical and useful to provide a synthesis of systematic reviews available in the literature. Some reviews focusing on specific social media platforms have shown the facilitative potential of Twitter for noticing, interaction, meaning negotiation, and community building (Hattem & Lomicka, 2016) and the use of Facebook as a learning environment to develop students' productive skills, particularly writing (Barrot, 2018). Solmaz's (2018) critical review of multiple social media platforms revealed that Facebook was the most researched social networking site followed by Twitter. Additionally, learners were found to engage in meaning negotiation through interaction, practice different language skills, create content, and raise their intercultural and socio-pragmatic awareness. In his review of social media in second and foreign language teaching and learning, Reinhardt (2019) identified several theoretical and methodological innovations in research in this area including social networking sites as intertextual spaces for self-presentation and identity performance, visualized network analysis to identify multilingual and multimodal resources for social media literacy practices, and computer-mediated discourse analytic techniques to explore how users employ agency, engage in play, negotiate space, manage their learning. Focusing on the higher education context, Manca's (2020) review of social media platforms for language learning revealed that WhatsApp and Instagram were found to be effective environments facilitating written, spoken, and visual communication. Finally, Barrot's (2021) recent review revealed the positive impact of Facebook, Skype, WhatsApp, and Twitter on variables such as learner satisfaction and attitude and interaction and collaboration. These

reviews highlight the pervasiveness of social media platforms for language learning providing a rich learning environment for learners.

While existing systematic reviews demonstrate the numerous benefits of the use of social media platforms for various aspects of language learning, to date, there is no research on how language teachers utilize social media spaces for informal language learning for learner audiences outside of their own formal classes. Additionally, most existing research on language learning and social media has focused on platforms other than Instagram – a tool with increasing numbers of educator users. This study not only fills these important gaps, but it also addresses one of the calls for future research arising from Reinhardt's (2019) systematic review in relation to the role of verbal, visual and other semiotic modes in second language learning with social media by focusing on Turkish micro-celebrity teachers' multimodal meaning-making practices in creating language teaching reels on Instagram.

#### *2.4. Conceptual framework: Relational pedagogy*

The present study adopts Kern's (2015, 2018) *relational pedagogy* as its conceptual premise to explore language teacher influencers' practices on social media. Relational pedagogy is predicated on the relationships between *material*, *social* and *individual* dimensions of language and literacy in making meaning. *Material conditions* refer to the sources or mediums in which meaning design processes are grounded, such as paper, writing systems, computer, smartphones, emojis, body language, and speech. These choices have their unique characteristics in terms of the way they use graphic space, the sizes and shapes of the signs they make, and the meanings they communicate. For example, responding to a social media post with a GIF – the animated Graphic Interchange Format that enables endless iteration of image sequences to communicate a range of emotional and affective states and meanings – can convey humorous meanings more effectively than a simple text-based

comment. New meanings are also created based on how new technologies and *social ecologies* shaped by social practices, norms, conventions, ideologies, and cultural attitudes interact. The adaptation of social media platforms from mere social networking (e.g., connecting with old friends on Facebook, sharing photos on Instagram) into marketing and education platforms within the new ‘social media influencer’ era is a striking example of this interaction resulting from the neoliberal practices in the current social ecologies. Finally, the *individual dimensions* relate to the ways individuals make creative and innovative semiotic choices shaped by their own unique communicative repertoire and cultural history. A typical example of this dimension in contemporary digital communication is how individuals create internet memes by remixing, combining, and manipulating cultural artefacts, popular texts, celebrities, and media events to produce new (generally humorous) meanings for different purposes.

Informed by the mediated relationships between the abovementioned material, social, and individual resources utilized in meaning making practices, Kern (2015) introduces a framework for relational pedagogy centered around five principles, summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. Principles of relational pedagogy	
Principles	Examples
1. Meanings are situated and relational	exploring different kinds of meaning (e.g., referential, metaphorical, intertextual, social, ideological) in specific contexts
2. Language, literacy, and communication rely on both convention and invention	reflecting on conventions of language and culture and exploring their creative, idiosyncratic, and stylistic adaptations in other contexts (e.g., netspeak, lolspeak)
3. The medium matters	performing different functions of language using different mediums of communication and exploring the effects of different mediums on communication (e.g., breaking up with someone in an email)
4. Texts and communication are always multimodal	exploring rhetorical skills in a range of modes (e.g., speech, writing, image, gestures) and reflecting on

	the interactions between them (e.g., visual and textual elements in an internet meme)
5. Language, technologies, and texts mediate	exploring the ways in which language, technologies, and texts mediate social identities, foster critical abilities, highlight aesthetic and affective dimensions of communication (e.g., a news story told in a newspaper article vs. in a short social media video)

By emphasizing the relationships between different mediums of communication, cultural practices, and individual creativity, relational pedagogy is a suitable approach in fostering critical semiotic awareness which is central to all kinds of text production informed by issues related to power, ideology, and identity. Text production on social media requires such an awareness of the relationship between what teachers teach (content or form), textualizing and contextualizing language use, and creative and adaptive practice. As highlighted in Satar and Hauck (2021) and Satar et al. (2023), relational pedagogy is generally associated with language learners who are encouraged to develop a critical awareness of the relations among forms, contexts, meanings, and ideologies. However, to date, there is no research that provides evidence of how language teachers in the digital wilds employ principles of this pedagogy. Therefore, a relational pedagogy approach could provide a good lens to explore language teacher influencers' meaning-making practices in the rich and multi-layered semiotic scope of social media platforms.

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopts netnography defined as “a form of qualitative research that seeks to understand the cultural experiences that encompass and are reflected within the traces, practices, networks and systems of social media” (Kozinets, 2020, p. 14). In today’s highly globalized and networked world in which opportunities for language learning and teaching have expanded (Kern, 2021), netnography has become a useful method among second

language acquisition (SLA) researchers to explore language learning and teaching in emerging digital landscapes (see Kessler et al., 2021 for an overview). For the purposes of this study, netnography was deemed appropriate as it allowed for both immersive and investigative data. The immersive data in netnography usually involves field notes on various aspects of the study, including the process of conducting the research, the information about the various sites/pages/forums that have been visited, the different ideas the netnographer is exploring. The investigative data, on the other hand, involves multimodal data such as text, audio, images, videos, and graphics from a range of online sources (e.g., blogs, forums, webpages, social media posts, threads, or chats).

### *3.1. Research site*

Due to its rich infrastructure for multimodal design, Instagram proves to be a key social networking platform for education influencers (Richter et al, 2022; Shelton et al, 2022) to engage with their audience and is therefore chosen as a social semiotic research site in the present study. In addition to images, Instagram now allows users to create and edit short videos known as *reels* which are the empirical focus of the present study. This recently added feature increases the multimodal affordances for users to create engaging and effective combinations of semiotic modes. Instagram allows video posts under 15 minutes to be shared as reels with access to creative editing tools to help make reels aesthetically pleasing and engaging. For example, users can engage their audience with stickers, such as music, hashtag, captions, location, questions, poll, quiz, and emoji slider. Users are also able to add a voiceover to their reels or remix a video. Much shorter videos under 90 seconds are eligible to be recommended and seen by more users if the creator account is public.

### *3.2. Data collection and analysis*

To gain an in-depth understanding of the everyday digital practices of Turkish micro-celebrity language teachers as part of a specific community on Instagram, I began to follow a few teachers of English who speak Turkish and post English language teaching content targeted for Turkish learners of English L2. Doing so allowed me to identify more Turkish teachers based on the recommendations generated by Instagram's algorithmic system. Using my own personal Instagram account, I positioned myself as a non-participant observer to immerse myself in the language teaching contents shared by the teachers and analyze the profile of the teachers and the dynamics between them and their followers relying on the comments on posts. Choosing to focus on Turkish teachers was purposeful as I was able to understand the content shared as a native Turkish speaker and a former English language teacher. Throughout this preliminary immersion period which lasted from June until August 2022, I analyzed the contents daily and took field notes regarding the profiles of teachers, the number of followers, posts with most likes, views, and comments, and the shared contents. Due to the large number of accounts available for analysis, I decided to adopt a final sampling method based on the number of followers of the accounts. Following research focusing on social media influencers (Davis & Yi, 2022; Kováčová, 2021), I identified 10 teacher accounts each with at least 100,000 followers, giving them the status of micro-influencer. Eight teachers were female, while 2 were male. Six of the accounts were based in Turkey, while the remaining were in the US, UK, and Europe. All teachers self-identified as English language teachers under their Instagram handles, and some included their academic (e.g., BA, PhD degrees) and teaching qualifications (e.g., CELTA, TESOL). They were all in-service teachers teaching English in various contexts. Based on the information shared in their accounts, one teacher has had 19 years of teaching experience and was teaching ESL in a US secondary school at the time of this study. Another teacher who was based in Turkey was also teaching in an elementary school context. Three teachers were teaching English

online privately. One of them had prior school-based teaching experience before coming to the UK. One teacher had more than ten years of teaching experience in various international contexts. The data involved all reels shared by the selected teachers from the time they joined on Instagram as they are accessible to existing and potential future followers at any time. As of the beginning of March 2023, the total number of reels available for analysis from the 10 teachers' Instagram accounts was over 4,000 which also included reels unrelated to language teaching. The English-teaching focused reels had varying number of views ranging from 80,000 to 7.5 million. Therefore, three most popular reels from each teacher's account were chosen based on the number of views at the time of the study resulting in a final dataset of 30 reels. More specifically, the reels were examined to identify the mediated relationships between material, social, and individual resources utilized in meaning-making practices in light of Kern's (2015) principles of relational pedagogy. Because meaning-making is dependent on the complex and creative interrelationship between various modes of communication, multimodal discourse analysis was conducted on the reels to explore the material, social, and individual resources employed in the teaching practices.

To examine the micro-celebrity teachers' semiotic repertoire in creating reels, this study draws on multimodal discourse analysis as a methodological approach. A multimodal approach to discourse is concerned with how semiotic modes and communicative resources are combined to create new forms of meaning-making. A social semiotics approach (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001; Bezemer & Kress, 2016) was chosen as a theoretical lens to text and design placing multimodality and agency in meaning-making taking into account all modes of communication and showing how modes are intricately intertwined with other modes revealing the complex design process a sign-maker is engaged in to achieve particular social functions and purposes. For the analysis, each reel was saved as a file using the screen recording function of MacBook, as Instagram does not allow video content to be

downloaded. A short descriptive summary of each video was created including the teaching focus, linguistic units, the setting, and other analytical thoughts, and observations that might be helpful for the analysis.

Later, following the conventions outlined in Norris (2019), a multimodal transcription of each reel was produced detailing relevant information regarding modes such as layout, proxemics, posture, gesture, gaze, head movement, facial expression, object handling, and language (Table 2). Single video stills were extracted from the reels to be used as snapshots of these resources as well as to mark sequences of discourse or interaction to identify modal dominance, order, and coherence. A sample multimodal transcription was provided in the appendix. The transcription process was subject to gains and losses in meaning as such remaking of data does not always wholly and accurately represent the data (Bezemer & Mavers, 2011). Central to the analysis were key concepts of social semiotics including *modal affordance* (modes having different meaning-making potential – e.g., an image conveying more humorous meaning than verbal joke), *transduction* (remaking of meaning resulting from a move across modes – e.g., writing, image, layout), and *transformation* (remaking of meaning resulting from changes within the same mode – e.g., using prose and poetry to convey the same meaning) (Jewitt et al., 2016).

Table 2. Multimodal transcription conventions (Norris, 2019)

Modes	Definitions
1. Layout	The distance taken up between objects, the environment, and the people
2. Proxemics	The distance that people take up to one another and to objects in the environment
3. Posture	The way individuals hold their bodies (e.g., standing, sitting, crossing legs etc.)
4. Gesture	The way individuals hold and move their arms, hands, and fingers
5. Gaze	The way individuals look at something or someone
6. Head movement	The way individuals hold and move their heads
7. Facial expression	The way individuals maintain and move the expressions of the face

8. Object handling	The way individuals use objects
9. Language	The way individuals use language and its different modes (e.g., spoken and written)

Issues regarding the ethical use of reels in this study were considered in line with the Internet Research Ethics 3.0 of the Association of Internet Researchers (2020). One issue was whether presenting reels as data has the potential to cause harm for the involved subjects – the teacher influencers. Because all accounts chosen in this study are public in Instagram's public archive with large number of followers, the posts are intended to be maximally shared, and the content of interest is educational, potential harm or protection of privacy was not considered a concern, and therefore, no consent was needed to access the data. However, to protect the identity of the teachers and acknowledge credit for their intellectual work, informed consent was acquired at the dissemination stage of the study, particularly from those teachers whose reels were included in the findings as examples. Five out of the 10 teachers responded to the invitation to take part in the study and agreed to the use of their reels in the study.

#### **4. Findings**

In what follows, the findings of how Turkish micro-celebrity teachers of English exploit different modes and communicative resources to create language teaching reels are presented in three sections: 1) interaction and participation, 2) intertextuality and resemiotization, and 3) critical semiotic awareness. These thematic sections were informed by the emerging codes from the multimodal transcription of the reels. As will be shown, these themes are also closely aligned with the principles of relational pedagogy. In each section, the observed patterns will be supported by representative examples from the dataset. I will use the teacher influencers' chosen Instagram account names to refer to them in the examples presented.

#### 4.1. Interaction and participation

In this section, examples of how teacher influencers create opportunities for their followers to engage in simulated interaction as well as conditions for different patterns of participation are presented. By orchestrating a range of modes and purposefully navigating the multimodal affordances of Instagram, the teachers create an engaging and participatory learning environment for their followers. In Figure 1, the reel created by *metaingilizce* is from a series of reels that provides simulated and asynchronous speaking practice on ordering food at a restaurant. The reel begins with brief spoken instructions asking followers to read out the yellow highlighted texts (Inset 3, 5, 7) following the turns indicated in white highlighted texts by *metaingilizce* (Inset 2, 4, 6). Distinguishing the text by different colors is purposeful allowing users to identify turns in the interaction. Turn-taking moves are also indicated by ear and speaking head emojis preceded by the written text at the bottom to indicate listening and speaking turns, respectively. The teacher pauses for a short while (3-5 seconds) after her turn to allow followers to read out their part but advises them to press and hold the screen to pause the video when it is their turn if they need more time. As for the layout, a filter is used in the background to create a restaurant ambience, and the teacher is acting as a waitress wearing a white shirt and holding a notepad and a pen as if she were to write down the order. The captions and reading out exemplify an instance of transduction of two modes, exposing followers to both written and spoken input. Despite being an asynchronous dialogue, the multimodal design of the reel not only takes visual and verbal logic into account (Jones & Hafner, 2021) involving various modes such as language, object handling, layout (language being the dominant mode), but it also enables a two-way interaction between the teacher and the follower, creating a simulation-based pattern of ‘participation framework’ (Goffman, 1981).

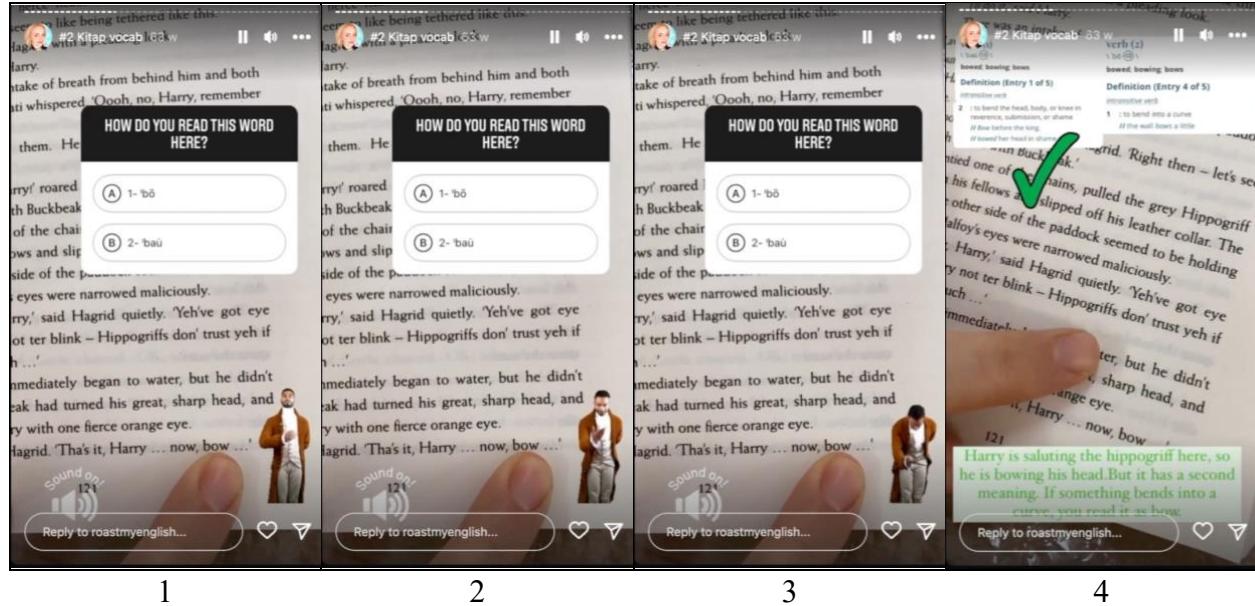
Figure 1. Ordering food at the restaurant



In Figure 2, another pattern of participation is encouraged by *roastmyenglish* from her story reel series focusing on teaching vocabulary from books. In this example, the teaching focus is on the homograph ‘bow’ and its different pronunciations and meanings. Using the poll feature of Instagram story reels, the teacher displays the two phonetic variants of the word ‘bow’ with the question “How do you read this word here?” whilst using her index finger to point at the word in the book. The proxemic position of the index finger is crucial in enabling the viewer to identify the word in question and its meaning from the context in which it is used to be able to answer the question. The teacher then switches to the spoken

mode, pronouncing each variant (/baʊ/ vs. /bəʊ/) and asks her followers how they would pronounce the word in the context in which it was used (Inset 1-3). At this point, she provides a hint for the correct answer via a moving sticker of a man bending down his head and body in the bottom right corner of the screen, visually depicting the meaning of the word by drawing on several modes including posture, gesture, and head movement. The embedding of a sticker results in a transductive process from the verbal to visual modes revealing the situatedness of the transmodal semiotic action (Newfield, 2014) purposefully establishing a form-meaning relationship between the linguistic unit and its visual representation. At the end of the video (Inset 4), she reveals the correct answer with a green check sticker that the word should be pronounced as /baʊ/. The answer is justified by the contextual clues in the text as shown in the text box inserted at the bottom of the screen (Harry is saluting the Hippogriffs here, so he is bowing his head). The two dictionary definitions of the homograph were inserted as images at the top of the screen (Inset 4).

Figure 2. How do you read this word here?



#### 4.2. Intertextuality and resemiotization

Through references establishing relationships between signs and other texts known as intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980), some creators, like *nevinglish*, draw on connections between the teaching content and popular cultural texts, particularly scenes and characters from popular films and TV shows. In doing so, teachers evoke a cultural context for their audience (Jones & Hafner, 2021) and contextualize language use. In Figure 3, the teacher introduces the word ‘wicked’ (Inset 1) by stating verbally that the word could mean ‘excellent’ or ‘awesome’ (Inset 2) in British English. To provide an example for this usage of the word, the teacher transitions in Inset 3 using her index finger to a popular film clip from the famous Harry Potter in which the expression is used. In Figure 4, the film clip provides a short dialogue between Harry and Ron. Pointing to Harry’s forehead, Ron asks if he really has the scar (Insets 1-3). Harry smiles and shows the scar on his forehead (Inset 4) to which Ron responds by saying ‘wicked’ to express his astonishment. This intertextual shift between Insets 1-3 in Figure 3 and Insets 1-5 in Figure 4 establishes a more authentic context for language use which is likely to facilitate learning more effectively. Films and television shows as multimodal text resources have long been considered as an important tool for foreign language instructors. (Kaiser, 2011; Washburn, 2001). By purposefully integrating such multimodal texts, content creators such as *nevingenglish* present aspects of language that students do not usually learn in the classroom but are made more salient through such popular and relatable intertextual references.

Figure 3. Wicked

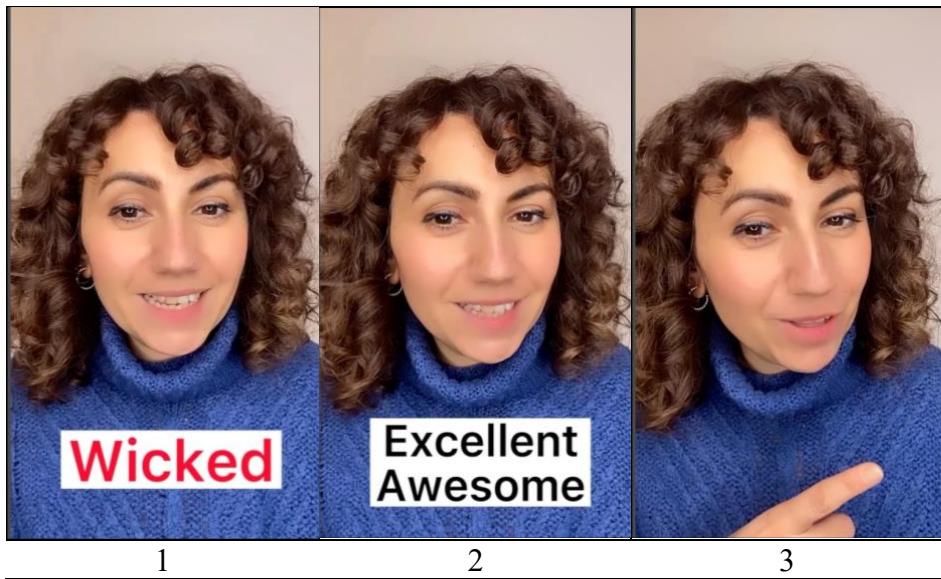
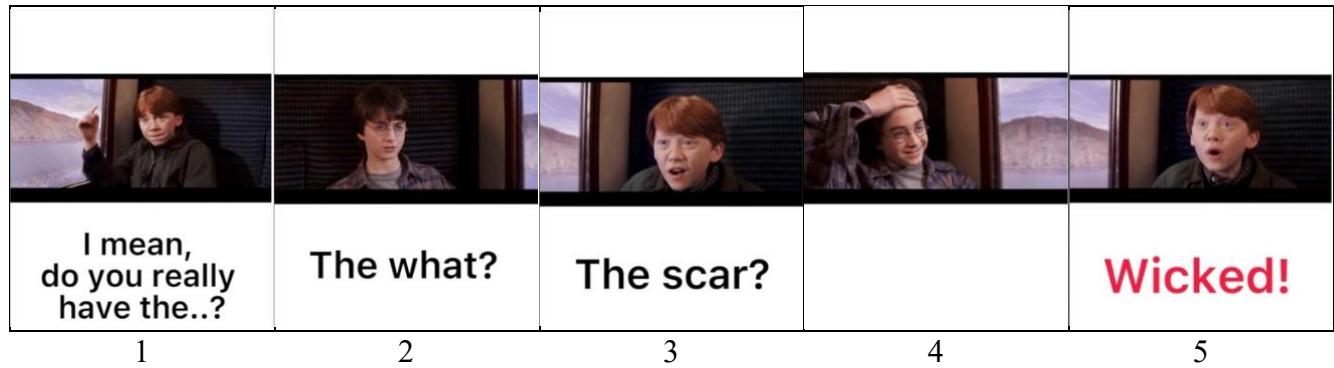


Figure 4. Harry and Ron on the train



Some teachers skillfully navigate the material, social, and individual dimensions of communication and literacies and find creative opportunities for expression and connection to project their own individual teaching style. To do so, they draw on their semiotic repertoires to recontextualize meanings. This phenomenon is known as resemiotization which can be defined as the process of how multimodal resources are combined, organized, or repurposed (Jones, 2022; Leppänen & Kytöla, 2017). In a reel created by *marnelenglish*, 7 words and expressions associated with eye movements (roll one's eyes, stare, blink, wink, squint, peek, and glare) are presented. Because the vocabulary presented in this reel is associated with bodily movements and facial expressions, the teacher utilizes her own body and make

meaning alongside other sources and mediums such as text and language. Figure 5 exemplifies the presentation of one of the words (peek) from the reel. Here, we see a creative interplay of two modes, namely the proxemics of the book that is handled, gaze and eye movement. The teacher begins by covering half of her face with an open book that she is holding as if she is trying to avoid being seen. The handling of the book in this manner allows the teacher to create an appropriate setting to introduce the word 'peek.' (Inset 1). She then begins to move her eyes right to left quickly (Inset 2), and below (Inset 3). In Inset 4, she moves her head up slightly behind the book to shifting her gaze to look further down playfully to convey the meaning of 'peeking'. Other modes accompany these bodily movements, such as the English word 'peek' at the top followed by the Turkish equivalent of the word (dikizlemek), demonstrating a transduction of modes. The use of miming here provides an important modal affordance facilitating the meaning-making more effectively especially with words whose meanings can better be conveyed through visual representations. Though not presented here, the teacher draws heavily on the mode of gaze to demonstrate the meaning of other words (stare, blink, wink, and squint). The embodiment of these diverse modes enables teachers to present vocabulary words that are similar in meaning and could help followers identify the different meanings.

Figure 5. Peek



#### 4.3. Critical semiotic engagement

An important dimension of language teacher influencers' multimodal design of content on Instagram is their ability to make, frame, and transform meanings in particular contexts. Using their imagination and creativity, teachers establish links between physical, ideological, and technological worlds, critically engaging with meaning-making practices. In her series called 'ayaküstü Ingilizce' (loosely translated meaning 'casual English'), *teacher4everr* presents a range of English words, expressions, and cultural information about the United States where she is based. In her reels she both textualizes and contextualizes language use by establishing a relationship between linguistic units and the material world, thus demonstrating a multi-layered semiotic landscape involving the social media platform, the physical world, and texts.

In Figure 6, the linguistic focus of the story reel created by *teacher4everr* is the word 'aisle.' In Inset 1, she introduces the context with a caption 'yne bir market ingilizcesi' (English in the supermarket). Here the layout of the video indicates that the teacher is standing in front of shelves in an aisle in a supermarket. Later, she changes the camera angle to capture the aisle sign hanging from the ceiling (Inset 2). Following this layout shift, she creates a short exchange (Inset 2-3) to provide a meaningful context for the word she is about to introduce, starting with the question highlighted in yellow text "Where can I find hair products?" (Inset 2) followed by the answer "Aisle 13" (Inset 3) both in text form with the Turkish equivalent of the word added as caption (reyon), as well as the sign in the supermarket to which she points with her index finger. Following this exchange, she transfers to non-verbal and visual mode by repositioning herself to capture a wider view of the aisle and using her hand to indicate the location of an aisle in the supermarket in Inset 4. In addition, she recontextualizes a sticker of a flight attendant stretching both arms to indicate the exit in an aircraft with an aim to further demonstrate the physical area of the aisle. As can

be seen, the presentation of a single vocabulary item is linked to various modes that are skillfully synthesized in a video.

Figure 6. English in the supermarket



After introducing the word in a meaningful context, in Figure 7, she focuses on the pronunciation of the word ‘aisle’ by highlighting the differences in spelling and pronunciation. In Inset 1, she first introduces the word as a written caption on the screen with silent *s* letter replaced with a blank. Following this textual enhancement that draws viewers’ attention, in Inset 2, she inserts the letter *s* in yellow color to increase its noticeability. As posited by the noticing hypothesis (Schmidt, 1995), presenting learners enhanced input to enable them to notice new linguistic features can increases their awareness, comprehension, and acquisition of language. In Inset 3, she provides a phonetic transcription under the orthographic form to indicate that that the *s* is silent and not pronounced. Using the affordances of multiple modes including the physical context (layout), language, gesture, and textual enhancements, the teacher provides a complex multimodal representation of a single

vocabulary word, demonstrating her critical semiotic awareness that shapes her creative and adaptive teaching practice.

Figure 7. Aisle

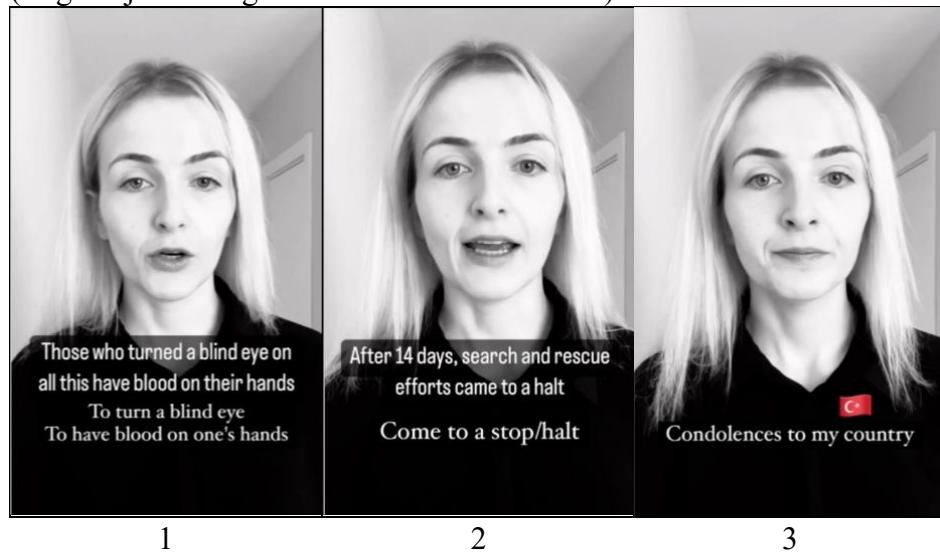


Figure 8 illustrates a different instance of critical semiotic awareness (Kern, 2015; 2018) resulting from a strategic multimodal design that enables a teacher to demonstrate critical reflection on social issues within a local and national context (Darvin, 2015; 2017). In this reel, *roastmyenglish* presents expressions in relation to the massive earthquakes that took place in Turkey on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023. The design choices in this reel provide subtle ways to challenge structures of power and systemic patterns of ideologies. The choice of a black and white filter in the layout of this reel conveys the meaning of mourning. With respect to the linguistic content, her choice of idiomatic expressions of wrongdoing such as ‘to turn a blind eye’ (Figure 5, inset 1) and ‘to have blood on one’s hand’ (Figure 5, inset 2) alludes to the discussions in the aftermath of the earthquakes in relation to the popular and critical discourse ‘bad buildings killed people, not the earthquake’ putting the blame on builders, authorities and regulations in Turkey. This connection between the earthquakes and the expressions is clear from the examples she provides in the captions (Insets 1-2). In addition to the verbal modes, the teacher purposefully combines a low tone of voice with facial expressions

conveying sadness and anger thus creating dramatic effects in line with the expressions. She ends the reel by expressing her condolences with a sticker of Turkish flag (Figure 5, inset 3) which conveys her sympathies with her followers. Creating such custom content in light of news and events of cultural significance, teachers strengthen their rapport with the followers and make language learning more relatable to real life.

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Figure 8. Derdimizi anlatacak kadar İngilizce  
(English just enough to talk about our troubles)



## 5. Discussion

Drawing on the principles of Kern's (2015, 2018) relational pedagogy, this study aimed to answer the question of how a group Turkish micro-celebrity teachers of English on Instagram create highly curated language teaching content for their followers. The analysis illustrated how the influencer teachers exploited material, social, and individual resources in three key dimensions: interaction and participation, intertextuality and resemiotization, and critical semiotic awareness. By relying on the interfaces between material affordances of Instagram and communication manifested in different forms including but not limited to speech, writing, eye movements, signing, and other non-verbal digital resources such as emojis and stickers, the teachers establish meanings that depend on the complex and dynamic

relationships between words, contexts, images, and situations. Such meaning-making practices contribute to the facilitative power of social media for noticing linguistic forms (Schmidt, 1995), interaction (Hattem & Lomicka, 2016), and multimodal communication (Manca, 2020).

The meaning-making practices of teachers via short videos provide opportunities for learners to see how social and material affordances shape, reframe, or recontextualize meanings in various forms, allowing them to practice simple conversations, learn vocabulary in context, and distinguish nuances in the pronunciation of challenging words. As shown by the findings of this study, multimodal digital discourse practices of micro-celebrity teachers draw heavily on language in the real world and the communicative functions of language use. When teaching conventional forms of language, be it a vocabulary word or an idiomatic expression, they channel their creativity using their agency and semiotic repertoire to discover and devise unique and innovative digital means to present and explain linguistic content in interactive and engaging ways. The findings of this study indicate that verbal and visual modes of communication are in a complementary relationship, and the interactions between these modes provide opportunities that could facilitate learning. In addition, embodiment of the self (Pennycook, 2017; Jones, 2020) is an important teaching resource by which teachers draw on displays of non-verbal semiotic modes of communication including facial expressions, head/eye movement, and aural input using their own voice. Resemiotization and intertextuality provide opportunities for embeddedness and creative language teaching content in the form of scenes from popular media texts (e.g., TV shows and movies). Such practices align with current practices of digital communication where emerging genres of communication such as internet memes, remixing, mash-ups, and GIFs provide innovative, engaging, and relatable language input (Kessler, 2013; Knobel & Lankshear, 2010).

The use of Instagram as a multimodal medium of instruction with its affordances repurposed for language teaching demonstrates great pedagogical potential for language teaching, enhancing how linguistic content is presented. It goes without saying that reels analyzed in this study exhibit complex multimodal ensembles of diverse modes and semiotic resources. Creating a material and interpretive context in which learning is mediated through texts and imagined discourse worlds (e.g., simulated speaking practice in a restaurant, intertextual reference to a popular movie scene), the teachers demonstrate their critical semiotic awareness as well as their bold and affective sensitivity to real-life social issues (e.g., *roastmyenglish*'s contextualized teaching of the idiomatic expressions revealing her feelings and stance about the earthquakes in Turkey) similar to the critical agency demonstrated by previous research on education influencers on Instagram (Davis & Yi, 2022; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2023). Multimodal performance can serve as a tool for critical reflection and pedagogy, holding the powerful capacity to represent, critique, and transform in unique styles of teaching.

It is important to highlight the multilingual repertoires of the teachers, particularly how they embed their first language Turkish in their reels. As shown in various examples (e.g., Figures 5 and 6), the teachers do not shy away from using their first language as they explain vocabulary words and provide instructions for learning. They channel their translanguaging abilities (Li Wei, 2011) in various multimodal ways including Turkish oral instructions or written texts inserted into the videos. Using Turkish not only enables them to express their Turkish identity but also connect with Turkish learners of varying levels of English proficiency. While the number of language teachers harnessing social media platforms is on the rise all over the world, the present study was limited to the digital literacy practices of Turkish language teachers of English. Future studies can explore teachers of other nationalities as well those teaching languages other than English, which can contribute

to our understanding of the diverse multilingual repertoires of these teachers. In addition, due to time and availability constraints, the present study did not involve interactive interview data as part of netnography (Kessler et al., 2021). Understanding language teachers' motivation and engagement with social media-based teaching and their reflections on multimodal content curation practices could enhance our understanding of their decision-making processes in creative multimodal design. In this vein, it would be interesting to explore the emerging identities of language teacher influencers who have achieved a micro-celebrity status, and how these identities impact their continuing professional development.

While the present study focused only on the digital artefacts of language teachers, student learning was outside the scope of the study. Therefore, future research is needed to explore how learners benefit from multimodal teacher-generated content and how exposure to 'bite-sized' linguistic content supports learners' self-directed learning. In addition, how teacher influencers establish relationships with their learners (or followers) and how these new relationships affect the teaching and learning process could be explored. For such a research endeavor, comments and replies under videos, teachers' interactions with followers during live sessions, Q&A sessions in Instagram stories can be analyzed.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications**

This study makes an important contribution to research on language learning and teaching on social media by focusing on language teachers who use social media to promote creatively curated language teaching content as teacher influencers. In this vein, this study adds to the growing body of research on influencer cultures – a topic that is generally associated with marketing, advertising, and internet and media studies.

Presenting novel insights into language learning and teaching 'in the wild' beyond the boundaries of physical classroom contexts, this study shows that social media remains a relevant educational environment allowing language teachers to connect with learners. As

shown in this study, teachers not only recognize the importance of technology in teaching, but they also show more confidence and increased digital literacy competence to create language teaching content in ways that are accessible, relevant, and engaging. Therefore, engagement in social media as a teacher influencer requires teachers to be better prepared in multimodal design to explore ways in which student progress can be monitored, extensive language practice can be created, and learning can be assessed. As argued by Kessler (2013), teachers need to maintain a focus on pedagogy and align their content with clear learning objectives and existing curricula. Those who are interested in augmenting their classroom teaching with microlearning content need to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the resources shared posted and necessary mechanisms and infrastructure at the institutional level should be established.

This study also raises awareness of an emerging form of professionalism in language teaching and monetized language teaching practice on social media with implications for the community of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). More specifically, while influencer-based practices can create new career pathways for novice or established language teachers, they can also pose vulnerabilities and challenge teachers' efforts to enhance the public good of education through sharing content online. Therefore, this study raises important questions about influencer-based digital teaching practices and emerging forms of teaching professionalism and identity in the increasingly neoliberal and digital landscape of education. As online language teaching continues to be a growing sector of the gig economy, it appears that many language teachers are participating in the influencer industry and competing with the demands of the attention economy where users' attention is the product that is sold to advertisers or other buyers. While such vulnerabilities were outside of the scope of this study, future research is needed to explore how English teacherpreneurs

navigate around the potentials and pitfalls of influencer-based teaching practices on monetized, algorithmic, and often flawed social media platforms.

Finally, drawing on the theoretical and methodological paradigms such as social semiotics and relational pedagogy to explore influencer-based teaching practices on social media platforms, this study contributes to our understanding of multimodal digital discourse practices and multimodal construction of short Instagram videos known as reels for language teaching purposes. As shown in the various reels analyzed multimodally, relational pedagogy enables teachers to make language more real and relatable than mere rules or facts “fostering reflection on relationships between physical worlds, cultural worlds, and technologically mediated worlds” (Kern, 2018, p.12). The agentive, creative, resourceful nature of language teaching in the digital wilds allows teachers and learners to connect in new ways, develop diverse networked communities of learning, and engage with linguistic content in much more multimodal and interactive ways that align with the practices of the current participatory digital culture.

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## Appendix: Sample multimodal transcription

Time	Screenshot	Modes and semiotic resources
00:00		Layout: a stable full shot of teacher in a room Posture: sitting Gaze: looking ahead Facial expression: annoyance or boredom Gesture: arms crossed Language: writing in the top caption (roll your eyes) Other: Playful and upbeat background music
00:01-00:02		Layout: a stable full shot of teacher in a room Posture: sitting Gaze: looking right Facial expression: annoyance or boredom Gesture: arms crossed Language: writing in the top caption (roll your eyes) and bottom caption in Turkish (gözlerini devirmek) Other: playful and upbeat background music
00:03		Layout: a stable full shot of teacher in a room Posture: sitting Gaze: looking left Gesture: arms crossed Facial expression: annoyance or boredom Gesture: arms crossed Language: writing in the top caption (roll your eyes) and bottom caption in Turkish (gözlerini devirmek) Other: playful and upbeat background music
00:18		Layout: a stable full shot of teacher in a room Posture: sitting Gaze: looking ahead Proxemics and object handling: holding the book up to hide part of the face Facial expression: furtive, secretive Language: writing in the top caption (peek) Other: playful and upbeat background music

00:19		Layout: a stable full shot of teacher in a room Posture: sitting Gaze: looking right Proxemics and object handling: holding the book up to hide part of the face Facial expression: furtive, secretive Language: writing in the top caption (peek) Other: playful and upbeat background music
00:20		Layout: a stable full shot of teacher in a room Posture: sitting Gaze: looking left Gesture: arms crossed Facial expression: furtive, secretive Proxemics and object handling: holding the book up to hide part of the face Language: writing in the top caption (peek) Other: playful and upbeat background music
00:21-00:23		Layout: a stable full shot of teacher in a room Posture: sitting Gaze: looking down Facial expression: raised eyebrows, excitement, curiosity Proxemics and object handling: holding the book up to uncover the face and peek Language: writing in the top caption (peek) and bottom caption in Turkish (dikizlemek) Other: playful and upbeat background music
00:28-00:32		Layout: a stable full shot of teacher in a room Posture: sitting Gesture: Pointing with index finger Language: spoken and caption in English "Which eye movement is your favorite?" caption in Turkish "En sevdiğin göz hareketi hangisi?" Other: playful and upbeat background music (lowered volume)