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Language learning made short and sweet? Exploring student perceptions of microcelebrity teacher reels on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Many microcelebrity language teachers today share linguistic content on social media platforms to attract learners. However, little is known about how learners perceive the multimodal affordances of social media platforms utilized by microcelebrity teachers for language teaching in EFL contexts. Motivated by this gap, this study explores learner perceptions of vocabulary learning from microcelebrity language teachers in the under-explored Uzbek EFL context. Over a period of two weeks, 10 EFL students enrolled at a state university in Uzbekistan were asked to follow two Uzbek microcelebrity teacher accounts on Instagram featuring vocabulary content. In addition to the multimodal analysis of a sample of Instagram reels and stories from these accounts, learners' experiences and perceptions about learning were elicited via learner diaries and semi-structured interviews. While the students enjoyed the engaging linguistic input incorporating role-play and references to pop culture artefacts, they also experienced challenges in relation to the fast-paced speech, brevity of the videos, and irrelevant platform-based content. The findings raise critical implications of language learning and teaching within monetized, platformized, and algorithmic social media spaces.

1. Introduction

Language learning has moved beyond traditional classroom settings (Benson, 2017) and now encapsulates a range of digital tools and environments (Barrot, 2022; Manca, 2020) including but not limited to private online tutoring platforms, gamified mobile apps like Duolingo, and commercial AI-powered apps like ELSA Speak and Promova. Additionally, teachers employ a diverse range of tools and environments (e.g., virtual learning environments, quiz and game-based apps such as Kahoot, and collaborative virtual bulletin boards like Padlet) to support instructional activities both inside and outside the classroom. Today's accessible digital platforms make it possible for language learning to occur in highly independent, self-directed, and recreational ways (Chik & Ho, 2017; Godwin-Jones, 2019; Perry et al., 2023). As a result, formal classrooms are increasingly transitioning from being the primary contexts of language learning to being only one of numerous options (Reinders & Benson, 2017). According to Lai et al. (2017), "Out-of-class language learning is positively associated with both language learning gains and positive affective outcomes" (p. 115). In such informal environments, learners are exposed to linguistic input not only through

direct contact with the target language but also through virtual online interaction in the digital wild (Han & Reinhardt, 2022; Sauro & Zourou, 2019). As a result, social networking sites (SNS) are emerging as alternative spaces for language learning (Barrot, 2022; Manca, 2020).

Learners of different ages and generations have varying degrees of involvement with digital technologies. As "digital learners" (Creighton, 2018; Gurung & Rutledge, 2014), they have grown immersed or integrated in technologized communication and learning practices, which has changed how they process information and acquire new skills. Informal language learning in digital environments enable language learners to engage with authentic and spontaneous language (Lee, 2019). These environments are facilitated by digital games (Sykes & Reinhardt, 2012), social media and online forums (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016), fan fiction (Thorne & Black, 2007) online dictionaries/translators, and audiovisual resources like music and online videos (Toffoli & Sockett, 2010). Leveraging the extensive resources that allow adaptable learning experiences, learners engage with linguistic content in more dynamic and personalized ways (Sockett, 2023). Emerging forms of digital media genres such as internet memes, GIFs, emojis, viral videos have presented numerous opportunities of language exposure for

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language learners in a range of modalities with creative combinations of text, image, and sound (Jones & Hafner, 2021; Kessler, 2013). These informal opportunities provide a form of incidental learning that occurs spontaneously outside of a structured and traditional learning environment (Richards, 2015).

The substantial growth in the use of social media all around the world – over 5 billion of the world's population (Statista, 2024) – has also prompted educators to explore the pedagogical affordances of social media platforms. Today, many language teachers create bite-sized videos on various social media platforms to teach grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, idioms, slang, and cultural aspects (Aslan, 2024; Ho & Tai, 2020). Language teachers leveraging social media platforms to share English language content to achieve a substantial follower base and get monetized by the platforms have come to be known as “education influencers” (Carpenter et al., 2020) or “microcelebrity teachers” (Aslan, 2024; Vizcaíno-Verdú & Abidin, 2023; Zhang & Pan, 2024).

One type of linguistic content that typically appears in microcelebrity language teacher social media accounts is vocabulary. Vocabulary is fundamental to achieving proficiency in understanding and communicating in a second language (L2). According to Schmitt and Schmitt (2020), vocabulary size significantly correlates with overall language proficiency, making it one of the key components in language learning. However, acquiring extensive vocabulary remains a major challenge for language learners, particularly in formal education settings where opportunities for authentic language exposure are often limited (Arndt & Woore, 2018). In the Uzbek EFL context in which the present study was conducted, vocabulary learning presents several challenges due to curricular and pedagogical factors. English language instruction in many universities relies heavily on traditional and form-focused approaches, such as rote memorization and isolated word lists, which limit students' ability to use vocabulary communicatively in context. Additionally, learners often have limited access to authentic English input outside the classroom, which reduces opportunities for incidental vocabulary acquisition. The lack of interaction with diverse and multimodal content in the classroom further hinders opportunities to see vocabulary use in context. As pointed out earlier, many language learners today engage with bite-sized video content created by microcelebrity language teachers on social media platforms like Instagram. While these teachers accrue thousands of followers, it is not yet known how learners perceive vocabulary learning in short-video format and engage in new digital learning habits (Han & Reinhardt, 2022).

By examining the interaction between digital content creation and vocabulary learning and teaching, this study aims to shed light on the emerging informal language learning practices on digital platforms. In what follows, research on education influencers, language learning in the digital wild, and platformization in language teaching is presented with a focus on Instagram. Next, the study methodology is described, and the findings are reported. In conclusion, the implications of the findings will be discussed in relation to leveraging social media platforms as innovative language learning tools for educators, students, and researchers.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Language teachers as social media microcelebrities

Being pivotal figures in contemporary digital culture and marketing, social media influencers with a substantial following shape audience opinions and behaviours on digital platforms. Their influence stems from various displays of authenticity, expertise, and personal connection with their audience, distinguishing them from traditional celebrities (Abidin, 2015; Enke & Borchers, 2019). Research identifies influencers as key players in the attention economy (Andrejevic, 2002; Smythe, 1977), leveraging platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok to promote products, ideologies, or lifestyles (Khamis et al., 2017). They operate within a blurred space between content creation and

advertising, often participating in practices of self-branding to maintain relevance and appeal.

Many educators today use social media platforms as education influencers, leveraging digital platforms to share insights, resources, and strategies related to teaching and learning, often shaping educational practices and discourse within online communities. They disseminate pedagogical ideas, promote professional development, and engage with diverse audiences, including teachers, students, and policymakers (Carpenter et al., 2020). Their content often blends expertise with personal branding, making educational topics accessible and engaging, while fostering a sense of community among educators (Trust et al., 2016). Among many education influencers are language teachers engaging in online teaching, navigating the dynamics of self-branding and economic demands, while utilising the advantages of digital media to engage learners successfully (Curran & Jenks, 2022). Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok allow teachers to leverage the unique interactive features of social media platforms such as stories, comments, and quizzes to connect with a global audience, thus increasing their visibility and success (Chao, 2022). These emerging trends are in line with the concept of platformization of education (Curran, 2021; Rivas, 2023), specifically Curran's (2021) concept of online Gig Economy Language Platforms (GELPs), as social media platforms provide a cost-effective, widely accessible language learning option for learners worldwide. The multimodal, engaging, and relatable nature of their content attracts substantial numbers of followers and fosters interaction through platform-specific tools such as comments, likes, and shares.

Research to date on online language teachers utilizing social media platforms has largely focused on the identity construction of teachers. Curran and Jenks' (2022) study focusing on language teachers on *LanguageSpeak*, a popular online language teaching platform, revealed a complex range of identities, including professional, cosmopolitan, and multilingual. In a similar study, Ho (2023) found that online teacher identities lie at the intersection of the professional teacher identity, the entrepreneurial identity, online microcelebrity persona while operating within raciolinguistic ideologies. Focusing on two language teaching YouTubers' identity construction, Chao (2022) found a contrast between the teachers in how they position themselves in relation to social media audience and language teaching community. Similar identity and self-branding strategies were documented in Wang and Curran's (2024) study on two teachers on the Chinese social media platform Douyin. While both teachers leveraged the platform's affordances to create immersive and entertaining content, they differed in constructing their professional identities based on their credentials. Negotiation of identities was also demonstrated in Nejadghanbar et al. (2024) who investigated language teachers on Instagram. They found that teachers navigated around struggles for visibility and their efforts to position themselves as authentic and legitimate teachers.

Though limited, some research has revealed the multimodal content creation practices of microcelebrity language teachers. Exploring how online language teachers establish expertise in language teaching videos on YouTube, Ho and Tai (2020) found that the teachers' multimodal design knowledge and practices involved using hyperlinks, multiple colours to present content in a visually appealing way, and pop culture references to make learning more relatable. Exploring the translinguaging practices of two YouTuber English teachers, Ho and Tai (2021) demonstrated how the teachers drew on different registers and styles of speaking by strategically navigating multimodal affordances to teach vocabulary through role play. More recently, Aslan (2024) illustrated how microcelebrity teachers exploited material affordances of Instagram and the multimodal resources used by teachers such as speech, writing, eye movements, signing, and other non-verbal digital resources such as emojis and stickers to establish meanings that draw on the intricate relationships between words, contexts, images, and situations.

As can be seen, the extant research on microcelebrity language

teachers has revealed interesting insights into language teacher identity dynamics and the utilization of platform-based affordances for multimodal content curation. What remains unexplored, however, is how learners as followers of microcelebrity teacher accounts engage with the multimodal content and perceive their learning experience on popular social media platforms like Instagram.

2.2. Instagram as a platform for educational purposes

2.2.1. Education influencers on Instagram

Educators' engagement with Instagram has received abundant attention in empirical education literature in recent years. Using an online survey to investigate the Instagram activities of a diverse group of teachers teaching different grade levels and subjects, [Carpenter et al. \(2020\)](#) found that teachers used Instagram to increase their content and pedagogical knowledge as well as seek emotional support and develop a sense of professional community. Analysing the public Instagram posts and stories shared by 18 education influencers from an education collaborative group (Teach Your Heart Out), [Shelton et al. \(2020\)](#) identified a range of activities including teachers promoting self-achievements and educational products and services, sharing motivational messages for teachers including education celebrities, soliciting engagement from viewers, and sharing lesson content and pedagogy. In a similar study by [Richter et al. \(2022\)](#) focusing on questionnaire data from teachers in Germany, Instagram's use for teacher collaboration involved seeking and sharing information and co-creating teaching and learning resources. Professional use of Instagram for justice-oriented pedagogies was investigated by [Shelton et al. \(2022\)](#). The authors analysed a sample of public Instagram posts of justice-oriented education influencers. While the posts showcased culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, they didn't illustrate how these pedagogies could be enacted. The authors argued that Instagram's image-focused interface and algorithmic infrastructure may have permeated teachers' promotional posts and limited sustained justice-oriented dialogues. Instagram as a form of commodification and commerce was also noted in [Davis and Yi \(2022\)](#). The analysis of Instagram posts of popular pre-K-6 teacher influencers demonstrated that teachers commodified their teaching practices and identities to establish a professional teaching brand.

Much of the research investigating teachers' use of Instagram has focused on self-directed professional activity, critical activism, community building, and collaborative and promotional efforts. In this domain of research, the concept of teacher influencer was investigated in Western contexts, mainly the US elementary and secondary education settings. While the findings of the extant research offer much needed critical insights into teachers' engagement with social media platforms for professional purposes, it is only the 'tip of the iceberg' considering the increasing numbers of teacher influencers and microcelebrities, particularly in language learning and teaching all around the world. Additionally, more research is needed to understand how followers (or learners) engage with the content generated by microcelebrity teachers on Instagram.

2.2.2. Language learning and teaching with Instagram

Social networking sites including Instagram have received extensive scholarly attention in language learning and teaching research (see [Reinhardt, 2019](#); [Solmaz, 2018](#), for a comprehensive overview). Analysing a sample of public Instagram posts identified through a set of language learning related hashtags, [Lee \(2023\)](#) explored the affordances of the platform for language learning. She found that Instagram offers a range of filters and visual effects such as brightness and contrast, allowing users to upload images with text (e.g., memes) and emojis and edit short videos on 'stories' and 'reels.' Additionally, by not allowing reposting of others' content, Instagram ensures that the content created by users is authentic and original. The hashtag feature, a key semiotic resource in social media discourse that allows searchability

([Zappavigna, 2015](#)) enables learners to identify language-related content and interact with others and learn about their experiences. Instagram was also explored as an online learning community in which users shared foreign language learning histories drawing on a range of informal learning opportunities and affordances such as multimodality, technologies, fandoms, and cultural artefacts ([Gomes Junior, 2020](#)).

Using experimental designs, some studies explored the effectiveness of Instagram-based language teaching interventions with a focus on vocabulary. In [Erarslan's \(2019\)](#) study, EFL students following a researcher-created Instagram account that is aligned with the syllabus of a traditional CEFR B2 level English class for a period of ten weeks performed significantly better on an achievement test than a control group. The students also reported favourable perceptions of learning regarding vocabulary related posts on Instagram. Drawing on self-report data based on a questionnaire, [Gonulal \(2019\)](#) explored English learners' perceptions about Instagram's effectiveness as a language learning tool. The learners recognized the affordances of Instagram for vocabulary learning, particularly its ability to contextualize words with visual input. Using a similar design focusing on vocabulary learning, [Kaviani \(2022\)](#) found that Iranian EFL learners following ten Instagram pages for four weeks performed significantly better on a vocabulary knowledge test than a control group that received regular classroom instruction. Exploring the effect of Instagram on the development of technical vocabulary by Iranian EAP students, [Tavassoli and Beyranvand \(2023\)](#) found that students practicing with teacher-created Instagram content outperformed the control group. In a similar study drawing on a project-based teaching intervention using Instagram accounts to improve technical vocabulary on sport science in the ESP classroom, [Gómez-Ortiz et al. \(2023\)](#) reported positive perceptions towards using Instagram to learn technical vocabulary.

Taken together, while the existing research on the interface between Instagram and language learning indicates favourable linguistic outcomes and perceptions in relation to vocabulary learning, the research designs generally involve researcher-created Instagram pages that are aligned with regular classroom curriculum and mainly traditional quantitative measures. Research focusing on perceptions of learning from microcelebrity teachers on Instagram with a large follower base is needed to explore how learners engage with more authentically and independently created linguistic input in informal digital settings.

3. The study

3.1. The theoretical rationale

Instagram's bite-sized videos align with the theoretical principles of microlearning, which involves delivering educational content in short and manageable bursts ([Corbeil et al., 2021](#); [Hug, 2021](#)) with an engaging interface and user-friendly design ([Pittman & Reich, 2016](#); [Richter et al., 2022](#)). Microlearning is defined by its singular focus on a specific learning objective or reinforcement activity, which directs learners' attention and helps to minimize cognitive load ([Sweller, 2020](#)). The duration of microlearning activities is determined by the learning objectives and the desired performance outcomes ([Díaz Redondo et al., 2021](#)). Instagram's emphasis on visual content supports multimodal learning combining text, image, and audio, thus enhancing language exposure. This distinction may prompt educators to use Instagram differently from other social media platforms, as noted by [Pittman and Reich \(2016\)](#). Its inclusion of various types of content and hypertext enables users to explore different parts of the screen and connect content in their preferred order ([Jones & Hafner, 2021](#)). These affordances correspond with contemporary pedagogical approaches that prioritise learner autonomy, engagement, and contextualised learning ([Greenhalgh & Koehler, 2017](#); [Manca, 2020](#)) and facilitate teaching complex content with short videos ([González-Mohino et al., 2024](#)). The content created may not always be informed by learner needs, though many microcelebrity teachers elicit content requests from their

followers through polls or comments.

In view of the gaps identified in existing research on microcelebrity teachers, the present study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the multimodal content curation practices of microcelebrity language teachers as well as explore learners' perceptions of learning vocabulary on Instagram. The study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do Uzbek microcelebrity language teachers navigate the affordances of Instagram to curate vocabulary teaching content?
2. How do Uzbek EFL learners perceive their learning of vocabulary through content generated by Uzbek microcelebrity language teachers on Instagram?

3.2. Research context and participants

This study was conducted in Uzbekistan where the second author of this study was from and had worked as an English language teacher at a university in the northeast for four years. Due to her proximity to the Uzbek EFL context, the recruitment of learner participants was based on convenience sampling (Dörnyei, 2007). The participants were identified through the Telegram platform, a widely used social media messenger in Uzbekistan used by various student groups at the second author's university. Five of the 15 students who expressed initial interest in the study withdrew after being informed about the data collection process. As a result, 10 students comprised the final participant pool.

All participants were undergraduate students enrolled in an English language teaching program. Nine of the participants were female and one was male. The participants were pre-service English teachers who actively followed Instagram-based educator accounts. Their dual identity as both learners and emerging educators made them particularly well-positioned to engage critically with the pedagogical styles and perceived authority of influencer teachers. All participants were multilingual, with proficiency in Uzbek, Russian, and English. According to the national testing system in Uzbekistan, the participants had intermediate English competence (B2) as required by the university for admission. They were capable of handling academic texts, participating in discussions, and understanding a range of spoken and written English materials. The main areas of emphasis for the participants' English language instruction in formal educational settings were reading, writing, and grammar. The English language curriculum in Uzbek higher education institutions primarily uses traditional teaching methods, offering little chance for practice and conversational learning. Each participant was given a pseudonym for anonymity. Informed consent procedures approved by the Ethics Committee of both researchers' institutions were followed once the learners agreed to take part in the study.

3.3. Data sources

3.3.1. Instagram reels and stories

The participants were instructed to follow two Uzbek microcelebrity English teacher accounts on Instagram, namely @teacherazam¹ and @linguobarno.² These accounts were selected based on their active presence on Instagram with over 100k followers. While other accounts existed with similar followings, these two were chosen for their relevance to the study focus, regular posting patterns, and their clear self-identification as English teachers on their profiles. Additionally, both teachers used Uzbek as the medium of communication in their videos, making it convenient for the participants to follow. While this approach contrasts with typical social media engagement, where users autonomously choose who to follow, the decision was made to ensure uniform

exposure to specific content and to maintain consistency across participants' experiences. This also allowed for more controlled analysis of learner perceptions in relation to specific pedagogical styles and multimodal content.

In the first phase of the study, the learner participants were asked to follow the microcelebrity teacher accounts for two weeks. More specifically, they were asked to watch short educational reels created by the teachers on Instagram. This phase of the study was voluntary and outside the classroom. Although this was not part of their formal curriculum, it complemented their broader training as future English teachers by offering a modern, informal approach to language input and vocabulary development. This context allowed the researchers to investigate students' engagement and perceptions in a more naturalistic learning environment. The two-week duration allowed for sustained, yet manageable, exposure to Instagram-based content. It also offered enough time for participants to observe patterns, engage meaningfully with a range of reels, and provide reflective input across multiple entries in the learner diaries. The daily 30-minute engagement a day was deemed sufficient to allow for consistent exposure to video content without overwhelming the participants and affecting their regular studies. For the two-week long involvement, the participants were given precise instructions, which included watching at least 30 min of vocabulary-learning reels or stories every day. The participants' B2 proficiency level was well-suited to the content shared by the influencer teachers. The selected Instagram reels and stories featured upper-intermediate vocabulary, everyday expressions, and accessible grammar explanations that aligned with the students' existing knowledge. Additionally, the multimodal nature of the content – combining spoken language, subtitles, and visual aids – provided support for comprehension. The participants were not provided with specific videos to watch in order not to control or limit their agency and choice. They were only asked to reflect on the recently introduced vocabulary, pay attention to the written and visual explanations, and assess their understanding of the content each day in their diaries. They also provided the links to the reels they reflected on. To answer the first research question focusing on the affordances of Instagram reels and stories for vocabulary learning, a sample of videos, specifically three reels and three stories, were selected from each account based on the participants' responses in the learner diaries and interviews. The selection was based on the frequency and consistency with which participants referred to them in their learner diaries and interviews. During the data analysis phase, the most frequently mentioned posts across multiple learner entries were identified, with specific attention to those that were cited as being helpful, memorable, or particularly engaging for vocabulary learning. These selections were therefore grounded in the learners' actual engagement and perceptions, ensuring that the multimodal analysis reflected the content most relevant to their learning experiences.

3.3.2. Learner diaries

To elicit the participants' experiences of learning from the microcelebrity teachers, they were asked to keep a learner diary using a Google Form and answer a series of comprehensive questions over two weeks. The questions covered various topics, such as what they learned from the Instagram content, their views on the effectiveness of the educational journey on Instagram, and their overall experience. Participants were requested to provide a concise written response in a paragraph for each question. Sample prompts included: "What new vocabulary did you learn today?", "How effective were the reels/stories in helping you understand the vocabulary presented?"

3.3.3. Semi-structured interviews

To corroborate findings from the learner diaries, semi-structured interviews were conducted on Zoom with only 8 participants, as two participants declined to take part in the interviews. Interviews with each participant lasted about 30 minutes. Following the interview guide by

¹ <https://www.instagram.com/teacherazam/>

² <https://www.instagram.com/linguobarno/>

Rolland et al. (2019), the interview questions were organized into three parts. The first part focused on the participants' language learning background including their vocabulary learning practices outside the classroom. The second part delved into their use of social networking sites, specifically Instagram. The third part aimed at eliciting participants' perceptions of vocabulary learning on Instagram, particularly how the platform features multimodal elements such as images, text, or audio facilitate their learning and retention of vocabulary items. Before the interview, the participants were given the option to use either Uzbek or English or alternate between them if they desired. Two participants preferred to use their first language Uzbek, while others chose to use English.

3.4. Data analysis

The data analysis involved an iterative qualitative process including manual coding of the learner diaries, a multimodal analysis of video content, and thematic analysis of the interview data through NVivo. Initially, each set of data was analysed independently. To answer the first research question Instagram reels and stories were analysed using Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001) multimodal discourse paradigm, with a particular emphasis on the content that was referred to in the learner diaries. Following a thorough analysis of the learners' diaries and interviews, the reels and stories that were central in the two datasets were chosen for multimodal analysis to explore their design and structure. The video content was acquired using the researchers' personal Instagram accounts and screenshots taken on mobile devices. A descriptive multimodal summary was generated for each video focusing on the interplay of verbal, visual, and auditory aspects that could facilitate vocabulary learning. To generate a thorough multimodal transcription of each video, the parameters offered by Norris (2019) were used. These included important multimodal elements such as layout, visual look, gesture, facial expression, and language (see Appendix A for a sample transcription). In compliance with ethical norms for online research, no consent was sought from the microcelebrity teachers because the analysed content was sourced from public accounts designed for educational sharing (franzke et al., 2020). Additionally, the data was collected unobtrusively from their public Instagram accounts, and they were not created as part of the present study (Kaye et al., 2021).

The data collected from learner diaries was used to document participants' engagement with Instagram over two weeks and to help answer the first research question. To begin the data analysis process, the collected diaries from Google Forms were downloaded and converted to PDF files. Next, a coding framework was developed, including a structured system of codes with clear definitions. Then, the codes were applied to categorise and organise the data, leading to the identification of broader themes. Before coding the data, the diaries were carefully read, and key phrases and sentences were highlighted. The highlighted data was then collected into tables summarising the information shared by the participants. Having a comprehensive understanding of the responses in the diaries, descriptive codes were generated in the first coding cycle. Their definitions were identified so that the notes could be reviewed without confusion. The second circle coding was essential since it laid the groundwork for the rest of the data analysis and led to a system for classifying the data and creating a codebook. The streamlined codes-to-theory paradigm for qualitative research proposed by Saldaña (2013) ensured systematicity and accountability throughout this coding circle. An iterative review involving multiple readings of the data by the researchers ensured the identification of the best possible NVivo codes to characterise the information contained inside. A sample of codebook categories can be found in Appendix B.

Before the analysis of the interview data, the video recorded in interviews were converted to audio files before transcription. Before starting the coding process, all the interviews were transcribed using the audio transcription function in Microsoft Word. The transcriptions were then checked multiple times for accuracy. First, essential points were

manually highlighted in the materials, and then all interview scripts were imported into NVivo to generate themes. Interview findings were later compared against the other datasets (learner diaries and videos) to ascertain triangulation of the interpretations of the main findings.

4. Findings

The findings corroborated from all three data sources are presented below in two sections. The first section focuses on the multimodal design affordances of the reels and stories for vocabulary learning. The second section unpacks the participants' perceptions of these affordances and their overall language learning experience through Instagram.

4.1. Multimodal design of content on Instagram

The analysis of the video dataset from the two Instagram accounts shows that the platform offers unique language learning opportunities by combining multimodal content and interactive features to generate contextualized presentation of vocabulary. The microcelebrity teachers combine visual cues, text, and emoji to create a visually appealing learning experience.

In Fig. 1, Insets 1 and 2 from Instagram stories demonstrate how the microcelebrity teacher @teacherazam introduces the phrase *any day now* in the story series named *Good to Know*. The video³ includes a scene from the popular Netflix movie *Tick, Tick...Boom* (Inset 2) where the phrase is used by the actor Andrew Garfield sitting on the floor. The illustration of a context in which a linguistic form is used through embedding of a popular culture reference is typical in such reels. The phrase *any day now* is highlighted in yellow and its Uzbek translation *yaqin kelajakda* is provided underneath. The insertion of the smiley face with sunglasses emoji in a speech bubble conveys casualness or coolness likely adding an informal and conversational tone to the reel. While the movie scene provides the linguistic input in spoken form in the two seconds that it appears in the reel, it does not provide any co-text that would allow learners to see how it is used in a full conversation. In such reels, creators tend to keep their content short to increase their visibility

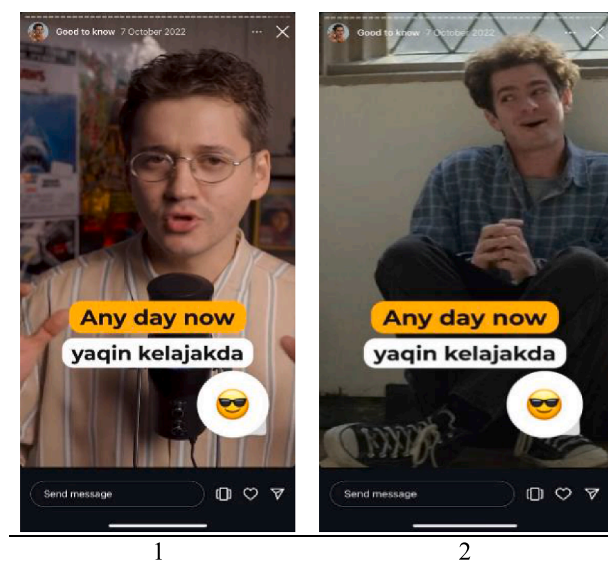


Fig. 1. Any day now.

³ https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE3OTQ1MDQyMDY4OTI1MzM3?story_media_id=2943605301947784987&igsh=dngwN2QyaTVsCDB5

on the platform, and therefore, provide very speedy explanations and short examples. Intertextual references to visual digital artefacts (e.g., emojis, stickers), pop culture artefacts (e.g., songs, TV shows, movies), audio-visual emphasis through spoken language and other semiotic modes (e.g., gesture, posture, colour), and brief contextualisations help create an engaging and appealing presentation. This multimodal ensemble likely enhances the visibility of the post and contributes to the popularity of microcelebrity teachers (Lee, 2023; Wang & Curran, 2024).

Microcelebrity teachers frequently perform in their reels, taking on different roles. In Fig. 2 Inset 1⁴ @linguabarno uses a mirror selfie to teach the vocabulary word *reflection* in different contexts. The selfie features the word *reflection* highlighted in yellow with the definition in Uzbek (*oynadagi aks ma'nosini bildiradi*). She later explains the word highlighting both literal and figurative meanings in the caption at the bottom of the video. The literal meaning of *reflection* is shown in the example *She was looking at her reflection in the mirror*, which is multimodally accompanied by her walking up to a mirror and checking herself out as she records the video. The figurative meaning is given in the example sentence in Uzbek *Uydagi tartib sizning ma'suliyatingiz aksi*, which means *The order in your home is a reflection of your responsibility*. This example is followed by a quiz that asks followers to translate another figurative sentence (*Shu gapni tarjima qilib ko'ring*) encouraging them to use their knowledge of *reflection* in a different context. Such translation tasks are quite common in the videos of microcelebrity teachers who share the same first language as their followers. Translation-based tasks not only allow these teachers to connect with their learners more closely, but it also contributes to the richness of translanguaging (Li, 2011; Ho & Tai, 2021) by integrating learners' first language in the learning process, along with other modes of communication. The text is formatted with highlighted sections – white for the literal translation and red for the figurative use – to help learners identify the various meanings of the word. This interactivity facilitates a more profound level of engagement, as participants can not only observe but also practise and contextualise new language structures simultaneously. In Inset 2, the teacher provides scene from the music video of the famous pop singer Christina Aguilera in which two verses of the soundtrack of the movie *Mulan* are presented including the title of the song “Reflection” (When will my reflection show/Who I am inside). This pop culture reference reinforces the meaning of the word *reflection* allowing learners to hear it in a meaningful and relatable context.

The diary and interview data indicate that learners feel they benefit from the real-life context and examples provided in the reels by teacher influencers, contributing to their daily language exposure and informal conversations. For example, Megan, one of the participants, stated that authentic dialogues from movies make learning more accessible:

“While watching English movies, there were times when I couldn't understand the meaning of certain phrases. However, after watching a video by @teacherazam, I learned two idioms: *Leave it to me* and *Look half dead*.” (Day 2)

In Fig. 3, the reel⁵ created by @teacherazam focuses on idiomatic expressions and vocabulary in casual English. The Inset 1 and 2 feature the phrase *half-dead* used to describe someone's tired or unwell appearance. The second Inset features a caption about the character Wednesday from the popular dark fantasy Netflix series *Wednesday*. Referring to the dark and morbid nature of Wednesday who makes sharp, deadpan remarks about death and suffering, the association of the expression *half-dead* not only makes the sentence interesting but also

gives viewers an instant, relevant mental picture, enhancing the memorability of the phrase given the show's great popularity and cultural relevance.

Presenting its use within a particular context, the third and fourth Insets focus on the phrase *leave something to someone* by illustrating how individuals assign chores or duties. This kind of expression fits the dynamics of the series *Wednesday*, when people often delegate or take on responsibilities influencing their intricate connections. These references help the phrases to be linguistically relevant and connected to the unique tone and plot of the series, thus contributing to their memorability through their practical use in a popular series. The teacher presents the phrase in a conversational setting, encouraging learners to understand and apply it in their interactions. The visual layout is consistent across the reel. The teacher stands before a microphone, emphasising the lesson's focus. The yellow-highlighted text draws attention to the key phrases, ensuring learners can easily identify the target vocabulary. This multimodal approach combines visual and auditory elements, enhancing the learning experience by providing written and spoken input.

By incorporating role-play, some microcelebrity teachers provide context for the vocabulary, showing how words are used in real-life situations. Fig. 4 shows @linguabarno explaining health-related vocabulary through a role-playing scenario which involves simulating a conversation with a chemist. In the reel⁷ the teacher plays two roles: a foreign customer and an English-speaking sales assistant at a chemist. The Insets 1,3,5, and 7 capture the teacher as the customer, describing her health issues by pointing to different body parts. In Insets 2,4,6, and 8 she switches to the role of the sales assistant, providing the English terms for the illnesses mentioned, such as *headache*, *cough*, and *sore throat*. Using gestures and facial expressions is an example of embodiment of the self (Jones, 2020) as a teaching resource, contributing to multimodal meaning making. The Inset 3 features a phrase in Russian (“ГОЛОВА БОЛИТ ЕЩЁ” meaning “my head still hurts”), in contrast to the other Insets that use Uzbek or English. The inclusion of Russian reflects the multilingual context of Uzbekistan where both Uzbek and Russian are widely used in everyday communication. The use of Russian in the reel likely aims to appeal to a broader local audience and reflects the influencer's rich linguistic repertoire. In this case, the influencer appears to use Russian playfully, to create a fun and relatable moment for the audience.

One of the participants Nancy's reflection on the role-play style of teaching “Teacher influencers are like actors,” implies that participants value this performative aspect, as it establishes a strong mental association between the word and its usage and captures their attention. Julie, another participant, elaborated on how role-playing facilitated her learning:

“Observing the teacher influencer act out a conversation made the vocabulary feel real.” Not only are there words on a page, but I feel like using them myself [...] It was immediately apparent when they displayed the phrases at the chemist.” I could visualise myself in that circumstance, which is why it was effortless for me to recall what was said.”

The dual persona role play is a creative strategy used by microcelebrity teachers to also highlight models of speaking. In Fig. 5, the reel⁸ shows @linguabarno explain idioms commonly used by native speakers and their equivalents used by L2 learners. The teacher plays both roles, with the native speaker (til egasi) dressed in a red suit and the

⁴ https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE4MDA4NzU1MzgxNDM4NjU1?story_media_id=2883600205156361510&igsh=Zmdqc2FzenMyCHZq

⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CmJtUK8gh1H/?igsh=QkFFYw9vUjZUNw%3D%3D>

⁶ We believe that a typo occurred in the caption of the reel in Inset 4, and it should be *leave* instead of *live*.

⁷ <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C0J9nEytCAO/?igsh=QkFFOG02aEt3VA%3D%3D>

⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CoZwBHBNAxX/?igsh=QkJVYnZMajJBOA%3D%3D>

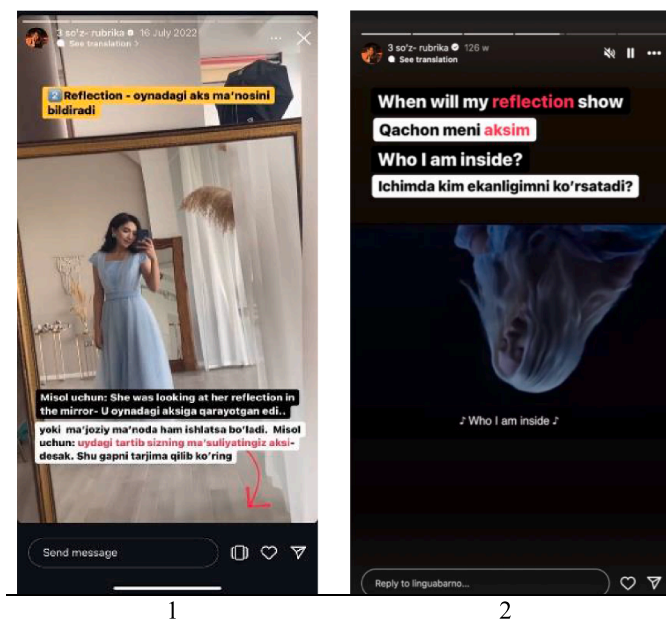


Fig. 2. Reflection.

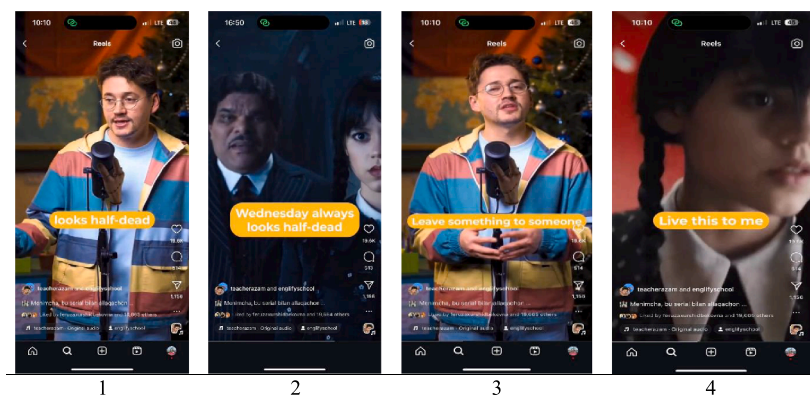


Fig. 3. Did you watch this movie?.

L2 learner ('siz', meaning 'you') in a black suit. The post starts with the L2 learner, expressing confusion over idioms like "I'm very hungry" and "Don't be stupid," displayed in blue speech bubbles. The 'native speaker' then clarifies these expressions with explanations like "I'm starving" and "Don't be a jerk," which are shown in yellow speech bubbles while providing Uzbek translations as subtitles. The contrasting outfits and speech bubble colours make the roles distinct and the lesson easy to follow. Combining visual cues such as side-by-side layouts and facial expressions with linguistic explanations creates an engaging and interactive learning experience that can help learners quickly grasp and remember these idiomatic expressions (Lee, 2023).

The effectiveness of this approach was mentioned in Megan's learner diary:

"...I can say "I'm feeling a bit peckish" when I'm feeling slightly hungry but if I say "I'm starving, I'm famished" it means I'm very hungry. What I want to say with this example is that I should admit that before watching Ms. Barno's this video content I've known only how to say, "I'm hungry" but now I can say it at different degree." (Day 10)

Daisy provides another example about this post in her interview,

stating:

"I never realised how phrases like "I'm all ears" or "I feel you" could foster a more personal or friendly exchange. I was encouraged by this post to use these terms correctly in my everyday life."

As can be seen, participants in these responses emphasise how the visuals, side-by-side comparison, and role-playing strategy in *linguabarno's* post aid in understanding register variation in English sentences. The creative and practical presentation of linguistic input allows learners to know when and how to use words. However, it should be noted that such 'native speaker' versus 'learner' comparisons can create problematic assumptions about the ownership of the English language. Native speakerism is a highly contested notion in English language teaching. The presentation of linguistic forms positioning 'native speakers' as 'til egasi' (meaning the 'owner of the language') can create false assumptions about language learning and perpetuate biased raciolinguistic ideologies (Curran, 2021; Ho, 2023). More specifically, learners may develop questionable assumptions about idealized ways of language use, as shown by Daisy's characterization of 'native speaker' language use as "personal" and "friendly." In fact, some entries in learner journals revealed a subtle reproduction of native-speaker

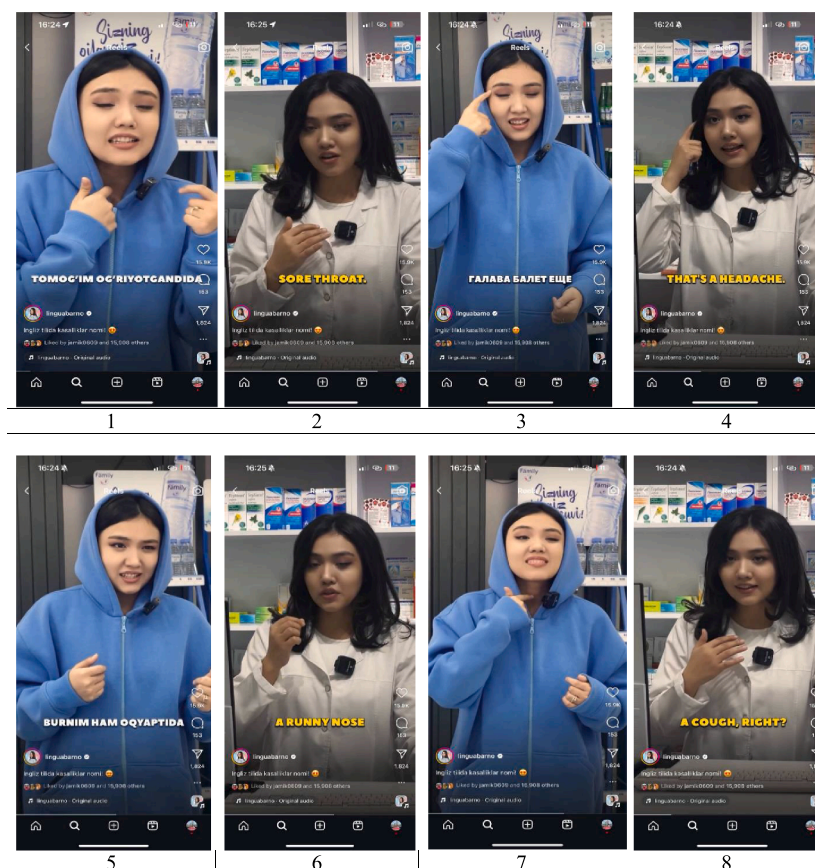


Fig. 4. Health issues in English.

ideologies. Several students expressed admiration for the pronunciation and fluency of the speakers in the Instagram videos, often identifying them as "real" or "correct" English models. For instance, one participant described a speaker as "sounding like a real English person," while another mentioned trying to imitate the speaker's accent to sound more authentic. These comments suggest an internalization of native speaker norms as benchmarks for English language proficiency. Although no explicit comparisons were made between native and non-native speakers, such reflections indicate that informal digital learning environments – such as Instagram – can inadvertently reinforce hierarchical language ideologies that privilege native varieties of English.

4.2. Perceptions of learning with microcelebrity teachers

Participants generally regarded Instagram as a convenient, accessible, and engaging platform for learning vocabulary. They appreciated the efficiency of learning through Instagram's content, particularly praising the short videos known as reels. The platform's capacity for short-term learning allowed them to quickly grasp new words and idioms through visually appealing content. Megan described in her learner diary how she could learn more vocabulary in a very short amount of time while watching educational videos (Day 6). The brevity of the videos encouraged repeated viewing, which provided some learners a sense of retention of linguistic forms. Lila also preferred learning through short educational reels, noting in her diary that "I could watch the content repeatedly and learn more effectively" (Day 8).

In the interviews, participants also mentioned finding frequent and useful brief posts focusing on vocabulary, contributing to their daily exposure. Lucy appreciated Instagram's efficiency: "I love that it's so easy to learn so much information in just 20 or 30 s." The platform's short content was perceived beneficial providing concise and engaging

information and allowing participants to save time while enjoying the learning experience. Lily noted, "It's a time saver; we can surf the net and learn new words for fun." The participants consistently highlighted in the interviews the simplicity and accessibility of learning through Instagram's interactive and visually rich posts, as shown by Lila:

"Instagram is covered with colourful pictures, examples, and some actions to express this word. That is why it is more effective for us."

The data shows that learners perceived microcelebrity teacher content on Instagram effective, particularly because of its distinctive format of short, visually engaging videos and posts. The platform's capacity to provide rapid, memorable, and repetitive language exposure was particularly valuable to participants. It appears that the brevity and accessibility of reels created a sense of frequent learning opportunities without necessitating significant time commitments, as evidenced by Megan's and Lila's learner diaries, as well as comments from Lucy and Lily as noted previously.

Although Instagram is perceived to be a valuable platform, some participants expressed challenges. One common issue raised in the diary and interview data was the difficulty in following the fast speech in the brief videos. Molly shared her perspective in her diary:

"I can say the speaker was faster that cannot be recalled or understood at once." (Day 6).

"...reels are not easy to remember and recall. I watched 2 more times, and the speaker explained too fast. I understand them well while watching but now after an hour I can remember 30 percent of them" (Day 8).

For Molly, the issue was not only the fast speech but also the retention of the content she viewed. In the interview, she also stated the



Fig. 5. Presentation of idioms by comparing native and L2 language usage.

challenge might be due to her current level of English proficiency. As discussed before, many reels created by microcelebrity teachers on Instagram tend to be very short including very speedy explanations of linguistic forms or references to pop culture media with insufficient contextual background. Therefore, it might be necessary for some learners to watch them multiple times to fully understand the content. Lila mentioned in her diary that while repetition can help with reinforcement, re-watching a video can be time-consuming and require more effort:

“It is somehow useful mechanic for learning language online, but you can waste your time average 3–4 h in a day” (Day 11).

These challenges could also be attributed to the platform-based constraints, specifically the length of the reels. While an Instagram reel time limit is currently 180 s, reels under 90 s can be recommended and viewed by more viewers if the account is public. Consequently, many content creators strive to keep their reels as short as possible to increase their visibility. Therefore, the references from movies and TV

shows tend to be very brief and the transitions between scenes and instructional talk by the teacher could be very swift, leading to difficulties in understanding or repetitive viewing cycles.

Another challenge mentioned by the participants was the interruptions from other irrelevant content. Due to the platform's rich content repertoire, some participants occasionally found themselves distracted and overwhelmed by irrelevant posts or videos, which decreased learning effectiveness and caused them to lose focus. Molly pointed out that despite her best intentions to watch educational content on Instagram, she frequently experienced distractions that impeded her focus on the intended material, hindering her ability to locate relevant content:

“Instagram is taking up my time by distracting me with other videos”. “I feel some nervous because I want to learn new words, but I face with some difficulties in finding appropriate video lessons” (Day 6).

The unstructured and unsystematic presentation of learning content coupled by other irrelevant content and ads likely present challenges for learners. Indeed, many Instagram stories are interrupted by ads, and the reels of microcelebrity teachers may not always be about language. To maintain their popularity and visibility, many microcelebrities post vlogs about their daily lives, promote products and services, or collaborate with other influencer teachers. Such diversity of content could create a cognitive overload and make learners feel distracted.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In response to the first research question, the findings of this study demonstrate that the bite-sized multimodal presentations of vocabulary by teacher influencers on Instagram provides a range of opportunities for vocabulary exposure. These opportunities encompass and promote interactivity, engagement, authenticity, and learner autonomy (Godwin-Jones, 2019; Perry et al., 2023). Microcelebrity teachers utilize platform affordances such as text, images, emojis, audio (Lee, 2023) to create snippets of vocabulary. They also use colour-coded captions, popular media references, and role-play to make their content attractive and engaging, and visible. Despite these affordances, some videos tend to be very brief with too much metalinguistic explanation condensed into 15–30 s or insufficient contextual information about some examples provided.

Regarding the second research question focusing on learner perceptions of learning vocabulary from microcelebrity teachers, the findings are comparable with previous research (Erarslan, 2019; Gonulal, 2019; Gomez-Ortiz, 2023). Learners generally expressed favourable attitudes towards learning idioms, phrases, and daily vocabulary from microcelebrity teacher reels. Participants may value learning vocabulary that they can relate to or observe in contextually rich and authentic presentation formats, helping them see language in use. Engaging with microcelebrity teacher content seem to give the learners a perceived ability to integrate such vocabulary repertoires in their daily conversations. However, these findings should be taken with a grain of salt as positive perceptions does not always imply favourable learning outcomes. As some participants indicated, viewing microcelebrity Instagram reels may create an ‘instant’ sense of learning, but it is questionable whether this type of learning facilitates long-term retention and improved linguistic performance. Further research is needed to explore what learning strategies learners use when they consume bite-sized social media content for language learning.

The combination of visual and verbal texts in Instagram reels and

stories was perceived beneficial by the learners, lending support for the role of multimodal interaction in boosting learning outcomes (Manca, 2020). The favourable attitudes about learning could also be attributed to the platform's accessibility, which allows learners to process linguistic information in a low-pressure environment at their own pace and provides with the sense of autonomy they need in the learning process (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Additionally, regular and repeated exposure to multimodal content could stimulate incidental vocabulary learning activating learners' cognitive mechanisms for natural discovery of new words in meaningful contexts (Richards, 2015). Learners' preference for Instagram's bite-sized videos aligns with research indicating that microlearning can facilitate the learning process by minimizing cognitive overload (Sweller, 2020), thereby promoting consistent and manageable interactions that seamlessly fit into learners' everyday lives (Corbeil et al., 2021; Hug, 2021). However, as some learners in this study indicated, it can be difficult to process some Instagram reels containing condensed information delivered at a very fast speed. Producing brief and fast-paced content not only adds a cognitive load on the learners' part but it might also obscure understanding due to the lack of detailed explanations. Therefore, future research is necessary to explore the immediate and long-term effects of exposure to language content on social media.

Another key finding relates to learners' perceptions of microcelebrity teacher content on Instagram. The authentic and contextually meaningful nature of the videos incorporating real-life examples and dialogues from movies, TV shows (Aslan, 2024; Ho & Tai, 2020; Kaiser, 2011) could resonate with learners and make learning more relatable and enjoyable. This aligns with the concept of critical semiotic awareness, where the multimodal performance of language in a material and interpretive context (e.g., embodied performance of health problems and intertextual references to popular culture) serves as a tool for reflection and transformation (Aslan, 2024). However, the pop culture materials may not always provide sufficient interpretive context for learners to understand the vocabulary item in focus. More importantly, some pop culture references may not be accessible to some learners, for example, references from Netflix productions would likely be known by learners who have a paid Netflix subscription. Therefore, due to the potential issues in accessibility and familiarity with pop culture, microcelebrity teachers need to be more mindful in selecting examples in their multimodal design process.

The findings of this study have important implications for language teaching professionals engaging in unconventional forms of informal teaching practices on digital platforms in the increasingly digital landscape of education. Participating in the influencer and creative culture of education requires teachers to compete with the demands of attention economy. This competition may force teachers to resort to content creation practices that can override pedagogical goals to increase visibility and popularity. For example, the promotion of native speaker-based models of using language can create misconceptions about language users and speakers and perpetuate stereotypes about language and ethnicity (Curran, 2021) and create unsound social comparisons (Carpenter et al., 2022). The view of 'native speaker' as a model has long been a thorny issue in English language teaching (Cook, 1999; Philipson, 1992; Holliday, 2006) often leading to discriminatory hiring practices based on racial and cultural stereotypes (Selvi, 2014). Additionally, as shown by the findings of the study, the pedagogical appropriateness and soundness of created content could be undermined due to platform-based constraints and algorithmic dynamics resulting in unstructured and unsystematic presentation linguistic content appearing in a myriad of other content unrelated to language learning. As shown by

the findings in Shelton et al. (2020), teachers were engaging in promotional content (e.g., giveaways and tagging other accounts) to circumvent platform algorithms. This explains the diverse range of content followers are exposed to, as also shared by some of the participants in the present study, that causes distraction in learning. Overall, caution is warranted by educators using social media platforms to respond to neoliberal demands, platformization, and commodification of teaching in online spaces (Curran & Jenks, 2023) to minimize the adverse effects on content creation practices. Additionally, teachers should assume the responsibility to guide students engaging with social media content and exploring their experiences and perceptions of learning in informal digital environments regularly.

Despite the intriguing insights this study has offered, several limitations need to be acknowledged. Firstly, due to the small-scale nature of the study, it is not possible to generalize the findings to a large population of EFL learners. While the purpose of the study was not to achieve generalizability, future research can explore bite-sized language learning and teaching practices in other diverse contexts and on other social media platforms. Additionally, the two-week study period in which learners' engagement with microlearning on Instagram was monitored does not allow us to predict the long-term effects on language learning and retention. It would be helpful to explore whether microlearning through social media facilitates long-term learning using longitudinal experimental research designs. The specific design decisions taken in the present study may have imposed additional constraints; for example, instructing participants to engage exclusively with two content providers may have limited their access to a broader range of educational material. The reliance on self-reported data raises the risk of response bias, since participants may have been preoccupied during study procedures, resulting in delayed or incomplete information. Future research could employ more diverse mixed methods approaches, assessing participants' digital literacy, and looking into the impact of various instructional tactics and content topics on learner motivation and engagement.

In sum, this study makes important contributions to the emerging body of research on microcelebrity teachers in education by providing insights for the first time from learners engaging with multimodal vocabulary content on Instagram created by microcelebrity teachers. The study sheds light on the increasing use and commodification of social media platforms where millions of learners engage with numerous microcelebrity teachers for informal language learning beyond traditional classrooms. While many teachers take advantage of the affordances of Instagram as a transformative and contemporary career path in the digital ecosystem of online teaching garnering the attention of tens and thousands of followers, the colourful multimodal interface of the platform can mask a false sense of learning, a range of social and cultural inequities, and questionable pedagogical practices.

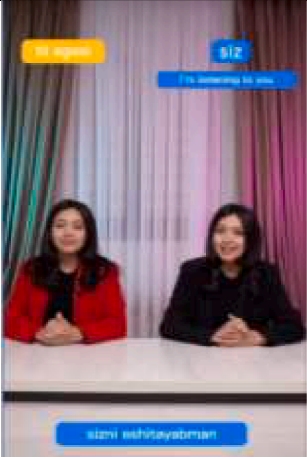
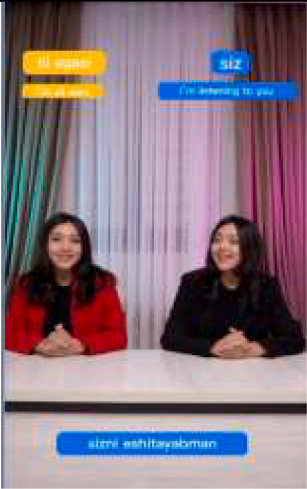
CRediT authorship contribution statement

Erhan Aslan: Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Mukaddas Butabaeva Sirojiddinova:** Writing – original draft, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

I have nothing to declare.

Appendix A. Example multimodal transcription or a reel

Time	Speech	Text on screen (subtitles)	Screen-capture	Sound effect	Camera angle	Mode
00:01	I'm listening to you	Siz (blue highlight) I'm listening to you (blue highlight) Uzbek translation: sizni eshitayabman		Calm ambient music in the background	Medium distance shot	Visual: Siz: wearing a black jacket Til egasi: wearing a red jacket Posture: Facing camera, upper body upright, hands folded Facial expression: smiling Layout: Sitting side by side at a desk, colored curtains behind
00:02	I'm all ears	til egasi (yellow highlight) I'm all ears (yellow highlight)		Calm ambient music in the background	Medium distance shot	Visual: Siz: wearing a black jacket Til egasi: wearing a red jacket Posture: Facing camera, upper body upright, hands folded Facial expression: smiling Layout: Sitting side by side at a desk, colored curtains behind Gaze and head movement: The one in black turns her head and looks at the one in red

Appendix B. A sample of coding categories from the learner diaries

Categories	Subcategories	Code Description	NVivo Codes
Vocabulary learning	Idioms Phrasal verbs Topic-specific words Daily expressions Slang	The participants' learning frequently focused on vocabulary acquisition, mainly through idioms, phrasal verbs, and topic-specific words.	"new words" "some useful phrases" "more than five collocations" "idioms" "phrases related to gym" "my vocabulary is improving"
Learning techniques and tools	Short videos Reels Role-playing Film extracts	Participants indicated using various learning techniques and instruments on Instagram to learn the language, such as watching short videos on Instagram and utilizing SNS (Social Networking Sites) for learning. In addition, they highlighted the usefulness of the books, film excerpts, and websites referenced in the Instagram content.	"teaching methods," "found reels effective" "watching movies," "easily remember by watching" "speech of film characters" "useful tool" "used role play method" "easy to learn through videos" "catchy movies or songs"

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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