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## Learning English in translocal exchanges in Instagram chat

**Abstract** This chapter analyses how social media – Instagram chats – is employed by a group of youth in Catalonia and in Greece for communicating in English as a lingua franca, as an extension of a translocal project initiated in their schools. We set out from the premise that learners’ participation and willingness to use the language to communicate in this context can be attributed to a genuine, agentive interest in learning English, even though learning English is neither the immediate nor the main goal of the youths’ communicative exchanges. Our study focuses on the plurilingual and multimodal procedures participants employ to organise participation, construct meaning and build relational bonds. Our results suggest that learners’ communication in the lingua franca is scaffolded by a channel they are well acquainted with – Instagram – and a shared code including emoji and multimodal resources. Additionally, we discuss the methodological and ethical challenges teachers and researchers face when supporting out-of-school digital spaces for learning and conducting research.

**Keywords:** learner agency, participation, turn-construction units (TCU), plurilingual and multimodal communication, Instagram chat, informal language learning

### 1. Introduction

The reasons adolescents might have for interacting through social media in their everyday lives are countless, but most of the time, they are arguably not primarily related to language learning. However, using a foreign language in digital channels can become an unexpected language learning experience for teenage language learners. The notions of ‘online informal learning’ (Sockett, 2014; Toffoli & Perrot, 2017), or ‘CALL in the digital wilds’ (Sauro & Zourou, 2019) – the latter based on the notion of ‘learning in the wild’ (Clark & Lindemalm, 2011; Clark et al., 2011; Firth & Wagner, 2007; Moore, 2015) – encapsulate the idea of informal language learning in digital spaces, communities, and networks that are independent of formal instructional contexts, less controllable or organised than a classroom (Sauro & Zourou, 2019), “but which present interesting, and perhaps even compelling, opportunities for intercultural exchange, agentive action, and meaning making” (Thorne, 2010, p. 144). In this chapter we focus on peer

interactions in Instagram chats, as an extension of a translocal project initiated in their school.

Our study seeks to comprehend how a group of Catalan and Greek adolescents organise their participation and create social bonds in this digital space. In particular, we analyse how they structure their turns and orient to the other participants to convey and construct meaning in English as a lingua franca. In Section 2 of the chapter, we discuss the notion of learner agency and the nature of communication through social media. In Section 3, we present our corpus and justify our decision to employ the theoretical and methodological toolkit of conversation analysis (CA) in our study. We also argue for the need to expand the understanding of turn construction units (TCUs) proposed by Sacks et al. (1974) to account for the nature of multimodal communication in social media. In Section 4, we use our proposed model for analysing participation and learner agency in Instagram chats in interpreting our data. To conclude, we reflect upon the implications of our study for the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

## **2. Learner agency and participation in peer interaction through social media**

Agency has been described as a “temporally embedded process of social engagement” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963) and as a socioculturally mediated process related to people’s will to act (Gao, 2010). According to Mercer (2012), it “concerns how agentic an individual feels both generally and in respect to particular contexts [...] [and how that] individual chooses to exercise their agency through participation and action, or indeed through deliberate non-participation or non-action” (p. 42). Learner agency has captured the attention of language education researchers as one of the keys to success in learning (McLoughlin, 2016), especially because it is linked to processes of self-regulation and has an impact on learners’ self-efficacy, identity, motivation, and meta-cognition (Xiao, 2014). As Larsen-Freeman (2019) claims, “although second language development is rightly seen to be embedded in a larger sociohistorical ecological system, languaging is still performed by an agentic learner in particular in a specific place [...] for particular reasons with particular others” (p. 63). Larsen-Freeman (2019) defines learner agency as being emergent, spatially and temporarily situated, achieved, relational, changeable through iteration and co-adaptation, heterarchical and multidimensional.

Agency is emergent because it is situated in a particular time and space, while also being shaped by past, present and future experiences (Larsen-Freeman,

2019); it is the “capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963). Agency should “be conceived as something that is achieved, rather than possessed, through the active engagement of individuals with aspects of their contexts-for-action” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 134). It further depends on “the availability of economic, cultural and social resources within a particular ecology” (Biesta & Tedder, 2007, p. 137). Additionally, it is relational because it does not depend on one individual (Gallagher, 2017), but develops “in relationship with others and with the world” (Miller, 2014, p. 142) and it changes because learners iteratively co-adapt to one another time and again. Change – co-adaptation through an iteration process – depends on several of the previously mentioned traits; thus agency is heterarchical because those traits are interlinked. Finally, agency is multidimensional and contingent upon intrapersonal factors (emotions, beliefs, personality, etc.), occurs simultaneously on the three levels of learners’ engagement (behavioural, cognitive and emotional), and is observable in learners’ discursive actions. The behavioural dimension of learners’ agency relates to participation and interaction patterns and to turn allocation and turn selection processes. The cognitive dimension refers to how interactants understand and convey meaning. The emotional dimension – which we will refer to as relational so as to distinguish this type of engagement from emotions as interpersonal factors – concerns the employment of affective, cohesive, and interactive indicators of social presence. For example, the use of humour, emoji or self-disclosure texts denotes affection; the use of vocatives or inclusive pronouns are a few of the procedures learners employ to maintain group cohesion; and referring to others’ messages or asking questions contributes to the social construction of discourse.

Participation is reflected through the actions all interactants perform during the development of a particular communicative event (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004). Text-based, mobile-mediated chats like Instagram feature the use of abbreviations, interjections, and a range of audiovisual resources that shape the way in which utterances are produced and received. Consequently, meaning is mediated by photographs, gifs, short videos, audio messages, emoji, etc., which may remain in the chat or disappear after being viewed once, according to the parameters set by the sender. These features influence turn-taking and the construction of the next turn; they “might posit word-like properties and show grammatical patterns and orders, similar to words” (Stamatov, 2017, p. 2). Furthermore, these multimodal resources may often convey meanings that are more complex than the simple observation of what they represent, because their interpretation relies on the ability to make constantly evolving and varying

intertextual connections that can be highly ephemeral as they are often linked to trends or events that are only meaningful and relevant for a certain time. This constant adaption and evolution can be linked to the idea put forward by Blommaert and Rampton (2011) that:

contexts in which people communicate are partly local and emergent, continuously readjusted to the contingencies of action unfolding from one moment to the next, but they are also infused with information, resources, expectations and experiences that originate in, circulate through, and/or are destined for networks and processes that can be very different in their reach and duration (as well as in their capacity to bestow privilege, power or stigma). (p.14)

Therefore, when approaching technology-mediated interaction through a social media app, conducting a “multimodal analysis is an inevitable empirical adjustment to contemporary conditions, and we are compelled to move from ‘language’ in the strict sense towards semiosis as our focus of inquiry” (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011, p. 28).

In the Instagram chats studied in this chapter, participants are more focused on the progressivity (Heritage, 2007) of the interaction than on language problems, and they orient to different discursive activities to accomplish and co-construct understanding (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2011; Mori 2004; Wong, 2005). Different languages are frequently put into play to help communication progress and meaning is co-constructed and mediated through translation and peer-scaffolding. The mobilisation of plurilingual resources (Llompert et al., 2020) in the interactions studied in this chapter is closely related to the use of multimodal elements. The visual resources deployed pertain to a medium which young participants are not only familiar with, but expert users of. Even those young people who are not confident in English as the lingua franca still interact more or less successfully thanks to their mobilisation of multimodal resources, together with plurilingual ones. The young people switch from one code to another (Auer, 1999), including different languages and modalities; for example, to emphasise an idea, participants may convey the same message subsequently in different languages or in different modes (text, image, audio, etc.). Our research thus supports the claim that plurilingualism must be regarded as being embedded within multimodality (Masats & Nussbaum, 2021).

### 3. Methodology

In this section of the chapter, we present the theoretical and methodological toolkit employed, our research objectives and the corpus studied.

### 3.1. CA for the study of Instagram chats

Conversation analysis (CA) offers the theoretical and methodological apparatus used in this study to investigate authentic, situated interaction, focusing on how participants orient to, understand and construct each other's actions (Sacks et al., 1974). CA enables researchers to determine how speakers demonstrate they understand each other in the context-shaped and context-renewing character of interaction (Heritage, 1984). When the interaction analysed is not oral but written and technology-mediated, adopting CA involves taking into account that sequence organisation in technology- or mobile-mediated communication might seem "chaotic, highly disrupted, without any adjacency [...], mainly due to the fact that the exact timing of message placement cannot be controlled by the interactants" (González-Lloret, 2011, p. 310). However, previous research has shown that participants' turns tend to orient clearly to specific previous turns within the same conversation, which has been referred to as 'virtual adjacency' (Schönfeldt & Golato, 2003), including when participants are language learners (González-Lloret, 2007, 2008). It must be noted, however, that in Instagram chats, unlike other text-based chats (i.e. WhatsApp), participants cannot select a previous message to signal they are posting a response to that message, which makes it more complex to reconstruct adjacency pairs. In this vein, as González-Lloret (2011) points out, the turn-taking system in technology- or mobile-mediated text-based communication differs from face-to-face interaction and is highly constrained by the medium (see also Beisswenger, 2008; Garcia & Jacobs, 1999; Herring, 1999; Murray, 1989; Negretti, 1999; Schönfeldt & Golato, 2003; Thorne, 2000), which poses challenges for both participants and CA analysts.

Difficulties arise when determining what constitutes a turn. To describe the organisation of turns, we have coined the term 'message unit'. Message units are created when participants press enter to post their contributions. Participants may opt to post a contribution as a single message unit or divide it into smaller units. In the first case, turn message units are compact (we call them 'compact message units'); no other participant takes the floor while the message is being produced and delivered. In the second case, the message is split into what we call 'split message units' and other participants may either decide to wait to receive what they interpret as the complete contribution, or participate while one (or more) different units are still being constructed. In this latter case, we interpret that a new turn has been opened by means of an overlap. Other types of overlap are difficult to interpret as such because in Instagram chat turns do not physically overlap; that is, two participants may be producing their messages at the same time, but their posts will be published one after the other. The exact time

when a message is posted is not recorded either, therefore overlaps cannot be measured and pauses cannot be inferred. If messages are not read synchronically, it is impossible to determine whether two messages were posted at the same time or after a pause. Similarly, a string of turns repeating the same word(s) within the same exchange cannot simply be analysed as choral responses; it may be the case that all participants had simultaneously opted to take the floor following a self-selection procedure, but some participants may also opt to respond after seeing other participants doing so. Furthermore, our description of the composition of turns is not only constituted by lexical (words), phrasal (phrases), clausal (clauses) and sentential (sentences) units, but also by visual (pictures, gifs, giphys and emoji), audial (instant recorded oral messages), audiovisual (videos) and hypertextual (links to other – multimodal – texts) units.

To demonstrate our approach, in Image 1 we observe two turns; one produced by speaker C1 and the other produced by speaker G1. Speaker C1's turn is composed of a compact message unit which consists of a sentential and a visual unit (line 10). As a response, G1 produces a turn composed of a message unit split into two smaller units: a visual unit (line 11) and a lexical unit, which is repeated twice (line 12).



**Image 1.** Screenshot of message units.

### 3.2. Research objectives

This chapter studies learners' spontaneous use of social media (i.e. Instagram chat), triggered by their participation in a translocal classroom project. Particularly, we aim to investigate how the learners' interaction in social media prompts their agentive use of English. We will identify the three dimensions

(behavioural, cognitive and relational) that constitute this multimodal agency by observing the discursive actions learners adopt to interact and co-construct meaning. Thus,

- to identify the behavioural dimension of learners' agency, we analyse participation and turn allocation and turn selection processes;
- to explore the cognitive dimension, we study how interactants construct their turns, and
- to examine the relational dimension, we focus on their employment of affective, cohesive, and interactive indicators that denote affection or social presence.

### 3.3. Corpus

The study presented in this chapter is an extension of a collaborative research project aimed at empowering teachers to transform teaching practices in the English classroom ('Teachers as agents of transformation through their engagement in cross disciplinary innovative projects in the English classrooms [DATE]', led by Dolors Masats<sup>1</sup>). Within this initiative, teachers were encouraged and enabled to implement meaningful and innovative teaching, creating opportunities for authentic communication in English (Dooly & Sadler, 2019). The design, implementation and assessment of these proposals was done through a form of collaborative action-research (Nussbaum, 2017; Masats et al., in press), in which teachers and researchers work in collaboration from symmetrical positions to design, implement, assess and disseminate classroom proposals. This type of research is also referred to with the Spanish term *colabor* (Leyva & Speed, 2008; Ballena et al., 2020). In this collaborative spirit, the actual teaching proposal that frames the data analysed here was designed by the authors of this chapter and an English teacher (Jorge Solans) participating in the study. It aimed at offering a group of Catalan adolescents from a public high school in the metropolitan area surrounding Barcelona opportunities to use and interact in English. This collaborative proposal engaged two groups of students, in Catalonia and in Greece, in a classroom project to get to know each other's culture and lifestyle. The two groups were connected through different virtual exchanges organised and mediated by their teachers so that they could share information on various topics related to their traditions and daily life. By the end of the project, the classes planned a face-to-face meeting in Greece, which triggered the interest of participants to

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get to know their peers better. As a consequence, during the videoconferences carried out in their classrooms, they found an excuse to exchange their personal Instagram accounts to socialise. The translocal project, therefore, succeeded in offering the students an authentic context in which to use the target language in and outside the classroom. At that point, teachers requested access to their Instagram chat conversations and students accepted to send them screenshots on the understanding that these data would be used for research purposes; in this case as part of the IEP! project, which focused on out-of-school use and learning of English.

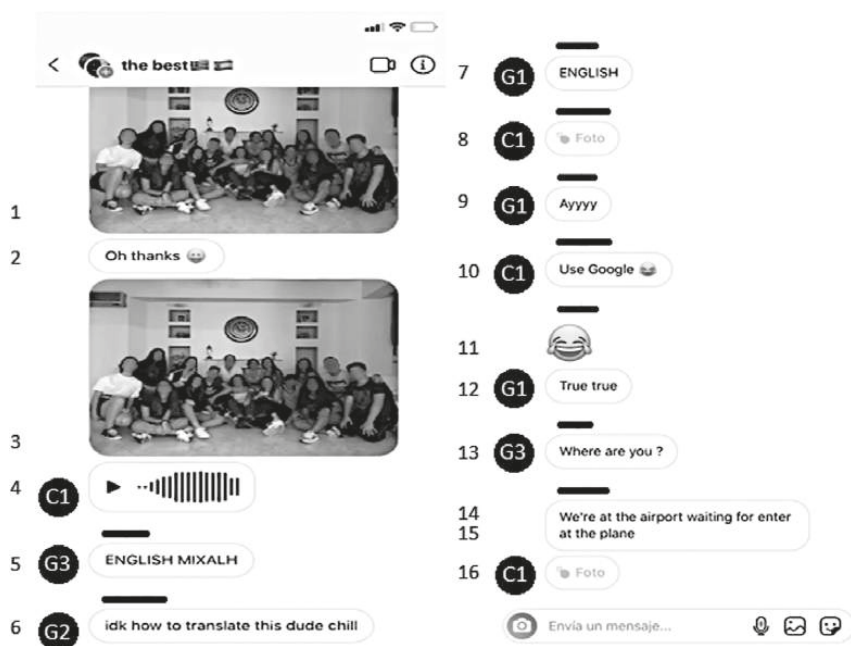
### **3.4. Data treatment and ethical issues**

The data studied in this chapter are screenshots of Instagram chat conversations that Catalan students voluntarily shared with researchers, before and after meeting face-to-face with their Greek counterparts. Ethically, our data collection practice has pros and cons. The translocal project offered students an authentic context in which to use the target language. This was particularly important in the school in Catalonia which was located in an underprivileged milieu and whose students had rarely experienced a real need to learn English. The use of social media in a language other than the one used in their homes also reinforced the value of learning foreign languages. Teachers/researchers had parental permission for legitimising communication outside the classroom through social media and also permission from all participants to have access to the screenshots for research purposes, which have been anonymised. Yet, as the bonds between students grew more solid, especially after the two groups had met personally in Greece, having to send their teachers screenshots of their chats was seen as an intrusion into their private lives. At this point the data collection ceased.

The excerpts we examine in this chapter serve as examples of interactions not mediated by the teacher, where learners use language in a natural, authentic manner, without any supervision. Methodologically, the data is interesting because it gives access to natural talk-in-interaction occurring outside classroom walls. However, it poses two major problems. In Section 3.1, we already problematised the notion of TCU to account for the multimodality of discourse in social media. A second problem relates to the features of the chat itself and to the fact that the exchanges may not always be complete when data is shared with the researcher, either because the students only select fragments of their Instagram chats or because the screenshots acknowledge the presence of audio and visual elements which are not disclosed to the teachers/researchers, or no longer available. Here we present an example of the type of data being



analysed to illustrate the characteristics of our corpus. As we see in Image 2, the screenshots of Instagram chats reveal that our participants deploy different types of multimodal resources to interact, as discussed in Section 2 of the chapter (e.g. abbreviations, audio clips, emoji or photos). As for the photos, it is to be noted that there are two types according to their display time; some stay in the chat and some others become unavailable once they have been seen once. The user of the app decides on either option before sending the photo to the chat. The same applies to audio messages.



**Image 2.** Screenshot of group chat at the end of the trip to Greece.

Image 2 also illustrates the way data was treated before the analysis. To guarantee anonymity, students' faces in the pictures were blurred by the researchers. Similarly, the names of the participants were crossed out and their profile pictures replaced by a code composed of a letter (G for Greek students or C for Catalan ones) and a number identifying the order of first appearance of the participants in the chat, which is maintained throughout the different excerpts (so G1, for

example, is the same student in all the data). This code is also employed to substitute students' names when they are mentioned in the text messages (see Image 3 in the next section).

Screenshots are shown as they were received by the teachers/researchers, which means the photos are shown if they were visible in screenshots learners shared. Multimodal data such as photos and audio clips are considered as information present in turns. The content of the deleted photos or the audio clips that are not available to researchers are counted as elements that constitute a turn because they were available to the participants. Additionally, we added line numbers. Turns can be simple and correspond to one line, as we can see in lines 3 (picture), 4 (audio) and 5 (text) of Image 2, or longer and correspond to several lines. In Instagram chats, participants' names appear at the beginning of their turns. In our data, turns start in the lines with no participant code and end in the lines that contains the participants' code. Thus, lines 14–16 of Image 2 correspond to one turn produced by a Catalan student (C1). That turn is composed of text (lines 14 and 15) and a photo (line 16). Finally, it is important to mention that any non-standard language use or spelling in the excerpts was produced as such by the participants. Translations from Greek to English have been added, when necessary, after text lines (see Image 3 in the next section).

## **4. Understanding Instagram chat and language learning**

The objective of the analysis is two-fold. First, we examine two excerpts of one-to-one Instagram chats as examples of how learner agency is triggered by the classroom telecollaboration proposal and the mobility programme that derived from it. Second, we will focus on how a group of Catalan students participate in those chats, and especially how they construct and convey meaning. Our analysis sheds light on learning in the digital wild and on how interaction unfolds in Instagram chats.

### **4.1. One-to-one Instagram chat**

The first excerpt (Image 3) we analyse corresponds to a private chat with two participants in which a Catalan female student (C2) and a Greek male student (G12) are sharing information about each other after one of the teacher-mediated virtual encounters, during which participants spontaneously and agentively decided to share their Instagram accounts by holding up pieces of paper with their usernames.



**Image 3.** One-to-one chat occurring after one of the teacher-mediated virtual encounters.

First, we see that participation is quite balanced among the two participants: G12 produces four turns with a total density of 52 words/emoji, whereas C2 produces a total of three turns and 49 words. Yet, although G12 enacts an agentive behavioural action and takes the initiative of starting the conversation (line 1), C2 immediately self-assigns the role of allocating turns and proposes the topics that will unfold in the conversation, by making an explicit request (“tell me something about your life”, lines 3 and 4) or by prompting a response through a question tag (“no?”, line 16) based on a comment previously made by G12 (that he had played basketball for four years). So, in this excerpt we can interpret agency as a process of co-adaptation to the circumstances in which the interaction unfolds and which is

observable in the procedures of turn and topic selection and acceptance. Second, if we focus on the traces that participants' cognitive actions leave on this chat, we can observe that the composition of the turns each participant constructs differs slightly. By asking G12 to introduce himself (lines 3 and 4) and commenting on what he says (lines 13–16; 18–20), C2 actively participates in the communicative event through the production of turns which take the form of split message units that only contain short sentences. Yet, her action triggers the production of a compact message unit by G12, which is composed of both text and visual units. With regards to how the message is conveyed, we might argue that the Greek student seems to use a rehearsed discourse when introducing himself, with the utterance being similar to one that could be produced during a classroom activity. On the contrary, the Catalan student's turns resemble more spontaneous dialogue and she enacts listenership by showing attention to and commenting on the information G12 provides (lines 13 and 14) and constructing her messages based on that information (lines 15–16; 18–19). Third, the relational dimension of the learners' agency can be observed by analysing social presence in the content of the turns. Affective indicators of social presence in this excerpt take the form of visual (emoji) and lexical units (interjections) to represent laughter. Both participants resort to laughter to show affiliation with each other and to create a sense of 'community'. Laughter is used by C2 to justify her request to G12 to disclose his life (line 4) and by G12 to signal his acceptance (line 5), reinforced by the use of the lexical unit 'okeyy' (his lengthening of the "y" reinforces the acceptance), before actually taking the action of introducing himself. When G12 completes his disclosure of personal information (lines 11 and 12), he does so with laughter represented by an emoji, preceded by an iteration of the sentence unit C2 had produced to request that information from him (line 3). Referring to another's message is an interactive indicator of social presence. C2's response to the last part of G12's message also starts with a lexical unit to represent laughter, followed by a sentence unit that embraces G12 in her state of being bored. The use of inclusive pronouns ("we", in this case, line 13) is a cohesive indicator of social presence. Finally, laughter in line 17 is used by G12 to indicate that he liked C2's appraisal of his basketball skills and in line 20 it is used by C2 to signal that she made an impressive revelation – that she has been doing judo for 10 years and is thus also good at it – which is interpreted as such by G12 when he produces an interjection to show admiration ("Wowww", line 21). Social presence is also traced through other interactive indicators, such as asking questions (as C2 does in line 16) or referring to others' messages (as G12 does in lines 11 and 12; or C2 does in lines 15 and 16). Additionally, C2's split message unit in lines 18 and 19 is

constructed by relating to one of the topics (interest in sports) G12 had brought up, which is a cohesive indicator of social presence.

As this excerpt is an example of peer interaction on Instagram chat, it is not surprising that participants deploy so many indicators of social presence. The opposite would be strange. Yet, we also claim this is a learning space. In this regard, we can observe that both participants take risks when participating. G12 misspells two words (“cuncil”, line 7; “wtcing”, line 9), which seems to indicate he struggles with them. We do not consider the spelling errors to be the typical abbreviations people use when texting because G12 does not employ this procedure in any other message he sends. C2 seems to take even more risks; she expresses herself more naturally in the sense that she does not produce classroom-like messages as G12 does, and she relies on plurilingual procedures to overcome language troubles and participate in the conversation in English. For example, in lines 13–14 she relies on code-mixing procedures and constructs a sentence unit (“we are already two who got very bored”) that is a word-for-word translation of a typical Catalan expression (“ja som dos els que ens avorrim”). Similarly, in line 16, she closes her sentence unit with a “no?”, which corresponds to the standard confirmation tag that it is used in Catalan and Spanish. At the end of this excerpt, we can also observe an instance of self-repair; when C2 first made use of the interjection for laughter, she used the Spanish spelling (line 4), which was followed by G12 using the same interjection spelt in English (line 5). As his split message unit was immediately followed by quite a long compact message unit (lines 6–12), G12’s move was not interpreted by C2 as a hetero-repair, which explains why she uses the Spanish spelling again in line 13, when she takes the floor. Yet, it is interesting to note that after the Greek student uses again the interjection “Haha” with English spelling in line 17, the Catalan student incorporates the corrected spelling into her next turn (line 20). We cannot confirm whether she does so as self-repair or to imitate G12, but we do consider this uptake to offer learning potential. This focus-on-form episode can only be understood in the emergent, spatially and temporarily situated context in which learners’ agency has been achieved, and which leads participants to put into play their interactional competence in English as a lingua franca.

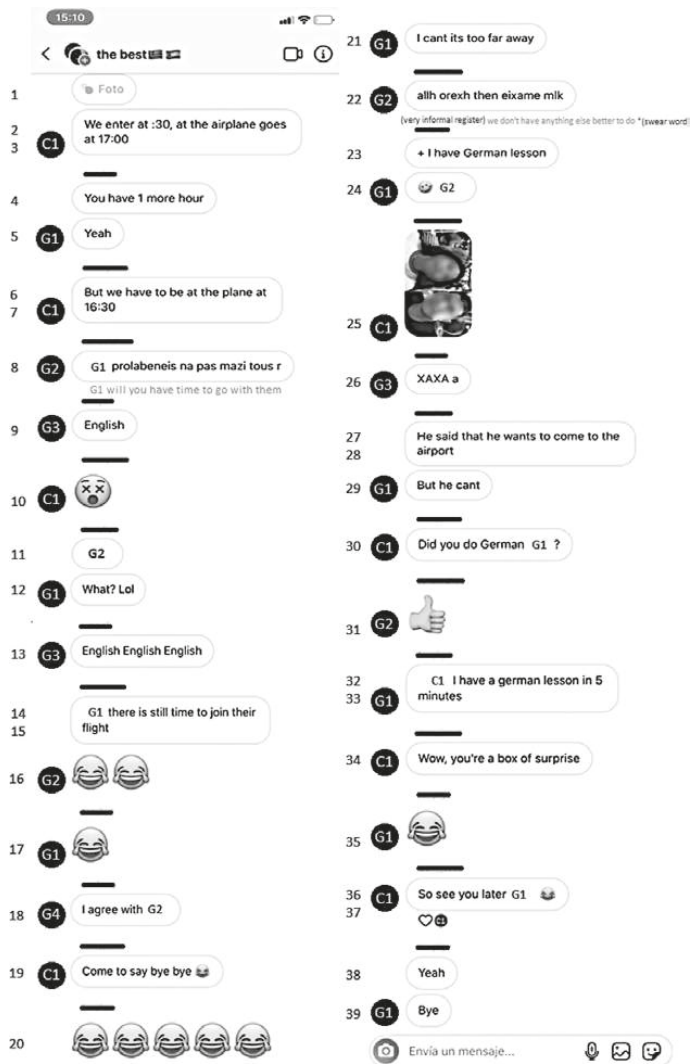
#### **4.2. Instagram group chats**

In this section we analyse an episode that takes place on an Instagram group chat when the Catalan students were at the airport about to board their plane back home after their stay in Greece. The conversation is very lively as students are recalling all the enjoyable moments they have shared together and are expressing

how they will miss each other. There are several group members in this chat, but only one Catalan student (the one who provided us with the screenshots) and 11 Greek students participate in the conversation by producing at least one post. The episode has been divided into two parts to facilitate the analysis. In the first part (see Image 4), C1 takes the initiative and addresses the Greek students. This excerpt ends when he posts his last farewell message. The second part of this episode (see Image 5) contains the response of the Greek students to C1's last message, which serves as a conclusion.

The communicative episode starts with a photo that is not available on the screenshot (see line 1 in Image 4), as it is the kind of photo that can only be viewed once according to the app parameters set by the sender, as detailed in the Section 3.4. That unavailability of the totality of the content from when the actual conversation took place poses a challenge for researchers; not having access to the entirety of participants' turns makes it impossible to interpret how the topic was selected in turns 1 and 2 in Image 4 from an emic perspective. However, the episode presented in Images 4 and 5 does not contain any other non-disclosed image, therefore, we can trace how the conversation unfolds.

Image 4 has two main participants: the Greek student G1 and the Catalan student C1. C1 produces eight turns with a density of 46 words/emoji and G1 produces nine turns with a density of 32 words/emoji. The other participants – Greek students G2, G3 and G4 – base their participation on G1's and C1's turns; G2 produces four turns and a total of 15 words/emojis, G3 produces three turns and a total of six words and G4 produces one turn and a total of four words. Other Greek students are also attentive as we will see through their participation in Image 5. From Image 4 (line 25), we can also see that at least one Catalan student – C3 – is also a silent participant (the photograph depicts students C1 and C3). We will now proceed to analyse participation and the construction and allocation of turns and topics.



**Image 4.** Instagram group chat with Greek and Catalan students occurring just before the group of Catalan students board their plane back to Catalonia.

Image 4 provides an example of agency, understood as a process of co-adaptation, that is observable through the actions taken by participants when selecting and accepting turns and topics. Participants' behaviour in this chat differs from that of the students in Image 3 in the sense that the sequences that make up this episode do not unfold one after the other, instead most are embedded in another. The fact that this is a group chat and that different participants may be writing a post at the same time offers an explanation of why this is so. Although Instagram does not allow for participants to refer to the exact turn they are responding to, 10 different sequences can easily be traced. C1 is the participant who took the agentive action of initiating the episode, the one that participates most and who initiates most of the sequences (five out of 10) by proposing new topics. G1 is the student who produces most turns and words/emoji, but only initiates a side-sequence to take on the role of interlinguistic mediator (see Zhang & Llompart, this volume). G2 only produces four turns (two sentence units in Greek, one in English and one visual unit) but initiates three sequences. Additionally, we can see that most sequences are made up of either two- or three-turn units. Occasionally, the same turn is responded to sequentially by several participants. For example, in lines 14 to 16, G2 had suggested that G1 go to the airport through a split message composed of a textual and a visual unit (two emoji laughing with tears of joy). G1 responded with the same emoji (line 17). The sequence could have ended with this adjacency pair (proposal/reaction), but G4 (line 18) and C1 (line 19) also react. It is interesting to note that C1's turn in line 19 serves to close a sequence (lines 14–19) but also triggers a new adjacency pair (request/refusal, in lines 19–21) in which G1 provides a reason for not going to the airport. Thus, we can conclude that agency in this medium and at the time in which the episode occurred is achieved through students' behaviour (turn initiation and topic selection) but does not correlate with the density of participants' discourse.

The cognitive actions students undertake to construct their messages are varied. C1 seems to have preference for producing messages composed of sentence units in English (lines 2–3, 6–7, 19, 30, 34 and 36) and G1 for constructing messages composed of sentences (lines 4, 21, 23, 27–29 and 32–33) and lexical units (lines 5, 11, 12, 38 and 39). Occasionally they both resort to the use of emoji as indicators of social presence in response to what other participants have said. As Dooly and Czura (2021) note, emoji are combined with verbal communication and are understood as an alternate code or language variety. Thus, emoji:



may have more communicative purposes than simply conveying emotions or pictorially representing facial expressions or gestures [...] [and] may be deployed to orchestrate the interaction (e.g. mitigation through humour) or to elicit a next-turn interaction from other participants (e.g. orientation of an expected response). (Dooly & Czura, 2021, p. 223–224)

In our data, emoji produced in multimodal turns (used in combination with lexical units) are used by interactants to provide connotative meaning relating to the degree of commitment to the truth of the propositions they utter. For example, when C1 in line 19 requests G1 to go to the airport, he knows it is not feasible. Therefore, his verbal request is followed by an emoji laughing with tears of joy. However, when turns are only composed of visual units or two split message units (one of which is visual), emoji express a reaction to a previous turn. For example, C1's reaction to the turn produced in Greek (line 8) is delivered through a visual unit in the form of an emoji with crossed eyes, often meaning dead or astonished (line 10). In either case, emoji are code-switching procedures with communicative intent.

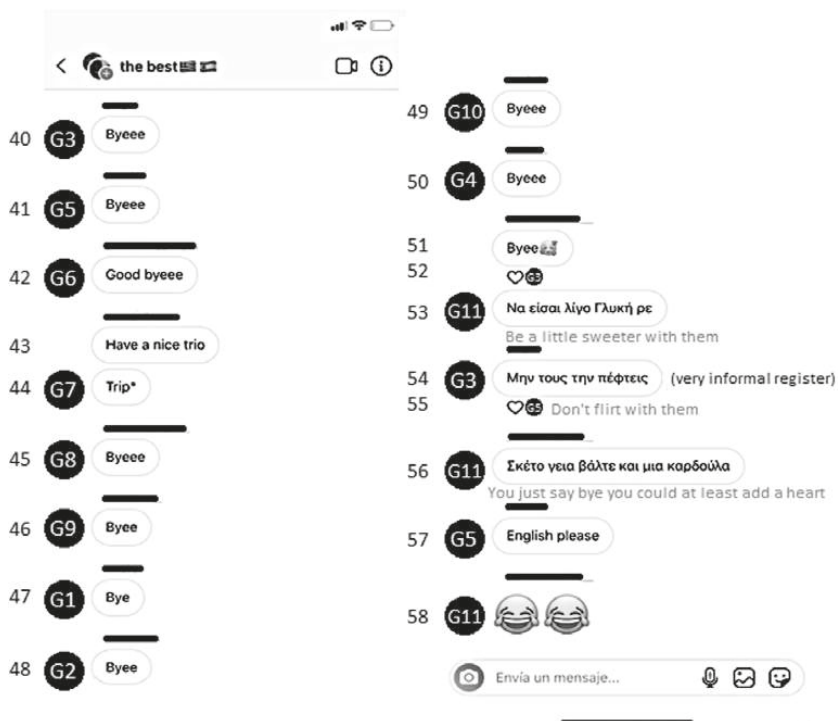
That is, in line 10, C1 shows astonishment about G2's turn by switching from one code (verbal) to the other (visual). Similarly, G1 responds multimodally with laughter to G2's proposal both with a lexical unit (the slang interjection "Lo!" in line 12) and with a visual unit (tears of joy emoji, in line 17). G2's four turns are produced in Greek and in English and are also composed of sentence units (lines 8, 14–15 and 22) complemented with emoji (line 16). G2's code-switching, unlike C1's actions, is used to signal a change of addressee (G1 and not the whole group), which, on one of the occasions (line 8) is also reinforced by the fact that a vocative (the addressee's name) is used. So, by switching to Greek, G2 is not only addressing a Greek participant but also excluding (purposely or not) the Catalan participants that do not speak Greek. The participant-related switch (Auer, 1999) in line 8 triggers G3's turns in lines 9 and 13 in which she asks her peer to switch back to English. Thus, G3 takes the agentive action of regulating code use without actually translating G2's turn. This is done by G2 himself, who in lines 14–15 accepts G3's request and translates the utterance he had previously produced in Greek into English.

As we discussed earlier, C1's acceptance of G2's proposal (line 19) through a message composed of a sentence unit and a visual unit (an emoji laughing with tears of joy, possibly showing that his proposal is a joke) serves to open a new topic (a request/invitation to G1 to visit them at the airport). G1's message to declare he cannot travel to the airport and justify why (lines 21 and 23) is split into two posts. G2's second switch into Greek (line 22) is again participant-related, as it is addressed to G1 only and embedded within his split message. G1 responds with

an emoji in line 24. As his message is produced after his response to C1's invitation, G1 adds G2's name in his turn. G2's message in line 22 is delivered in a quite informal register with the inclusion of an abbreviated swear/slang word. His use of the first-person plural pronoun signals he embraces G1's idea when he claims "we (Greek students) don't have anything else better to do" – presumably, apart from going to the airport to see the Catalan group off. G3 participates with an interjection in Greek representing laughter and written in capital letters ("XAXA", line 26), suggesting a louder utterance in digital text-based communication. In her turn in line 26, G3 seems to be responding exclusively to G2's previous turn in Greek. This leads G1 to take on the role of interlinguistic mediator and to entirely reformulate G2's message (he changes "we" in Greek to "he" in English, uses a more formal register and "We don't have anything better to do" is replaced by "He said that he wants to come to the airport But he cant", lines 27–29). The translation of G2's turn does not include G1 as one of the people who have nothing to do, and it comes after G1's disclosure of the reasons why he cannot get to the airport ("+ I have a German lesson", line 23). This prompts C1 to ignore G1's translation of G2's comment and to ask for more information regarding G1's German lesson (line 30), just before G2 formulates a turn with a visual unit (the thumb-up emoji) to signal his acceptance of G1's adapted translation of his own words (line 31). G1 responds with a sentence unit explaining that he has a German class imminently, preceded by a vocative to indicate C1 as the person he is addressing (lines 32–33). C1 completes this sequence with a comment preceded by the interjection "Wow" to indicate amazement (line 34), to which G1 responds with an emoji (line 35). The turn produced by G1 here also triggers the initiation of a new sequence, in this case, an adjacency pair as a farewell. The fact that C1 starts this last exchange with the adverb "so" (line 36) indicates the connection between the two turns (lines 32–33 and 36). The use of G1's name also corroborates this and signals that C1's farewell is addressed to him only.

The fact that the sequences are interwoven does not seem to be a barrier for participants to convey or interpret messages. This is so, in part, because participants take multiple agentive relational actions to guarantee the cohesion of the co-constructed message. For example, G1's sentence unit in line 23 is preceded by a "+" symbol to indicate that this turn is part of a split message unit he was elaborating before G2's turn. The use of vocatives by G1 and G2 also serve to guarantee discourse cohesion and, like code-switching procedures, are also indicators of social presence as they signal who is included or excluded from each sequence. Group cohesion is achieved through interactional procedures including asking questions on a previous topic (as in line 30) or responding to other's messages (as in lines 17, 18 or 19, to cite a few). The employment of

affective indicators such as humour (as in lines 14–16 or 19), self-disclosure (as in line 23) and especially the use of emoji, reveal social presence; that is, participants' ability to project themselves socially and affectively. The whole conversation is scattered with emoji, representing different reactions and emotions as a response to an immediate or distant previous turn. Code alternation from textual to visual message units is done naturally and emoji are integrated into the different sequences. Emoji are also employed to qualify messages. For example, in line 37, C1 produces a turn by simply clicking “like” on his previous sentence unit message to reinforce the idea that he really hopes to see G1 again. Thus G1's next turn is a split message to respond both to this wish (line 38) and to the farewell (line 39). In Image 5, which is the continuation of this conversation, we observe how two other interactants also participate by clicking “like” on a message produced by a peer (lines 52 and 55).



**Image 5.** Continuation of the Instagram group chat with Greek and Catalan students occurring just before the group of Catalan students board their plane back to Catalonia.

Image 5 is also interesting because although up to that point only four Greek students had displayed the agentive action of taking the floor, there were, at least, seven other Greek students engaged in the communicative episode we are examining. We are unsure whether the Catalan students did not respond to this choral farewell because they were no longer available – they may have been boarding the plane – or due to other reasons. We need to bear in mind that time is not recorded in Instagram chats, so this string of messages could have been produced within a few seconds or over a longer time span. Additionally, turns do not overlap, which poses a challenge for researchers when recreating how the discourse evolved. In Image 5 we can observe 19 turns and three sequences. The first sequence is a farewell exchange that started in the last two turns of Image 4, when C1 says goodbye to G1 (line 36) and the latter responds (line 39). This farewell exchange has three moves. The first one is the farewell between C1 and G1 (lines 36 and 39, Image 4); the second one (lines 40–51, Image 5) is a string of farewell utterances whose target addressee changes as the discourse unfolds; and the third one (line 52, Image 5) is an assessment move (a “like”) performed by G3 on G11’s turn. If we take a closer look at the second move from the first sequence, we can see that Image 5 starts with a post by G3, one of the students who had already taken part in this episode (see Image 4). In her turn, she is unlikely farewelling C1 as C1 had not explicitly addressed his farewell to her; instead, she seems to address the whole silent Catalan student audience. This is confirmed when the string of farewell utterances is over; the use of a plural vocative ‘them’ in the sequence produced in Greek by G11 and G3 (lines 53 and 54) indexes that the Greek students perceive the group of Catalan students as ratified participants (Goffman, 1981) in the event, and were addressing their farewell to them all, and not just to C1. Similarly, the fact that G1 offers his farewell again (line 47) also indicates that he is no longer addressing C1, as he had done in the previous excerpt (line 39, Image 4), but the whole Catalan audience. This change of target audience is not signalled but is implicitly assumed by the Greek participants and is possibly what triggered them to explicitly participate by posting.

In Image 5 we can also observe that the string of messages is not produced simply as iterations of G3’s first turn. So, out of the 11 turns that make up the second move of this first sequence, eight are composed of the same single lexical unit (versions of “bye” in lines 40, 41, 45, 46, 47, 48, 49 and 50), one is produced with this lexical unit followed by a visual unit (line 51), and one is made up of two lexical units (line 42). In all cases, “bye” is produced with a variety of spellings, with various extensions of the vowel “e” at the end of the word. In Instagram, like in other text-based social media chats (e.g. WhatsApp, Messenger or Facebook), the more letters that are used to extend the last vowel

sound, the longer the sound being represented, which could be an indicator of interactants' genuine interest in participating in this last communicative episode. Finally, only G7 takes the agentive action of expressing farewell by employing a different conversational formula ("Have a nice trio", line 43), which semantically connects with the actual reason why they are saying goodbye to their friends. It is also worth mentioning that G7's clause unit contains a spelling mistake that is marked with the "x" symbol, as is convention in this medium, and self-repaired in the following line ("trip").

The second sequence in this excerpt takes place in Greek and involves two Greek students: G11 (in lines 53 and 56) and G3 (in line 54). G11 is the last participant to post a farewell message and the only one that complements the lexical unit with a visual unit: a smiling face with three hearts emoji (line 51). This action is followed by a comment on how other Greeks should farewell their Catalan friends (line 53, translated as "Be a little sweeter with them"). His participant-related switch into Greek indicates he is addressing his Greek counterpart only. G3 (the same student who had asked G2 to use English in Image 4) responds (we can't tell in which order) by liking the message that contains the emoji (line 52) and by producing another sentence unit in Greek (line 54, translated as "Don't flirt with them"), which is marked with a "like" by student G5 (line 55). In reply, G11 produces another sentence unit in Greek (line 56, translated as "You just say bye you could at least add a heart") to justify himself.

A final consideration about Image 5 relates to the third sequence. In it, G5 participates again by producing a clause unit (line 57) that paraphrases G3's turns 9 and 23 from Image 4. G11 responds to this with a visual unit, a face with tears of joy emoji (line 58). These last two turns reveal that although G5 and G11 had not posted earlier, they were attentive to how the interaction unfolded.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

In this chapter we have examined how two groups of English learners use Instagram chats to communicate and socialise translocally. Their interest in consolidating their bonds was genuine and was rooted in their participation in a collaborative classroom project that involved several online exchanges and a trip by the students from Catalonia to visit their counterparts in Greece. The initiative of establishing contact in a non-teacher-led environment offered to them by social media was an agentive action students took in class and that teachers/researchers, after obtaining parental permission, encouraged. The results of our analysis on learners' participation in two communicative episodes occurring in two of those Instagram chats – one between two learners and the other between

the two groups – have implications for both teachers and researchers, which we will discuss after summarising our findings.

We have seen that both posting and not posting constitute behavioural agency actions participants undertake. Being silent does not indicate absence or disengagement, as we saw in Image 5 when two Greek students, G5 and G11, made reference to a previous joke to which they had not previously responded. Similarly, the Greek students in Image 5 address their farewell to all the Catalan students, when only one of them, C1, had been posting, while another was only made visible in a photograph C1 had posted of the two of them. Our analysis also reveals that the density of participants' messages, calculated in terms of number of turns and of lexical and non-lexical elements in their contributions, does not relate to the agency actions of selecting and attributing turns or topics. Thus, in Image 3, participation is quite balanced if we observe the behaviour of the two students in the chat, yet the student who initiates the episode and produces most turns and denser contributions is not the one who allocates the turns and selects the topics. The same occurs in the group chat, in which G1 is the participant with most turns and the second in terms of the density of his contributions, but he only selects one of the 10 topics during the conversation. On the contrary, G2 intervenes half as much as G1, with less dense contributions – two of his turns are in Greek, one is in English (the translation of one of the turns he produced in Greek) and one is constructed with a single visual unit (an emoji) – but he initiates the topic of three of the sequences.

With regards to indicators of participants' cognitive agency, that is, the actions interactants adopt to produce their messages, we can see that communication through English, a language both groups are learning, is scaffolded by the use of a channel they are familiar with (Instagram) and the legitimate shared code (including emoji and other multimodal resources) that accompanies it. Posting emoji (or "likes" to own and other's messages) entails enacting listenership, understood as "the act of giving feedback on prior messages" (Choe, 2018, p. 703), but emoji are also used to add meaning to the message being conveyed. For example, in Image 4 an emoji is used by G2 (line 16) to indicate that he knew his proposal (lines 14–15) could not be accomplished. Similarly, laughter – expressed through textual units in the form of interjections or acronyms – is used to modulate a demand so that it could be interpreted as a mild request, as in Image 3. Additionally, different symbols are employed for purposes that are recognisable to technology-mediated text writers (e.g. the "+" symbol is employed to indicate that a message is incomplete or the "\*" symbol is used to introduce a correction). Participants' communication, apart from being supported by the agency action of employing multimodal resources (participants shift from

text-based messages to visual messages in Images 4 and 5), is also scaffolded by the languages in the participants' repertoires, as observed when interactants rely on mechanisms such as code-switching (they produce messages in Greek in Image 4) or code-mixing (they make a word-per-word translation of a Catalan idiomatic expression in Image 3).

Cognitive agency is also achieved when interactants take decisions regarding the density of their contributions. In Image 3 we observed how one of the participants opted for creating compact message units which contained several smaller units (in the form of sentence units or image units) and a variety of topical elements. On the contrary, in Images 4 and 5, participants opted to construct their turns based on what we called split message units, that is, by developing a topic though more than one brief post. These agency actions have implications for how the conversation unfolds and are partially dependant on the space in which it takes place; in Instagram chats turns never overlap, previous messages cannot be selected to mark they are being addressed, unlike, for example, in WhatsApp. Consequently, while in Image 3 topics develop sequentially, in Images 4 and 5 all sequences contain other embedded sequences. Yet, the conversation develops fluently and with no misinterpretations, which indicates that all participants know well how to participate.

The mediation actions of translating the sequences produced in Greek into English could be regarded as a means of achieving relational agency in the sense that while the original language choice excluded part of the interactants from the conversation, interlinguistic mediation moves acknowledged them as ratified speakers. Other relational actions in our data include the use of emoji, humour, and self-disclosure (affective indicators), the employment of vocative and inclusive pronouns (cohesive indicators) and the actions of asking questions or referring to other messages (interactive indicators). Again, students seem to rely on these procedures rather spontaneously, which leads us to argue for the need to bring technology into the classroom to establish connections between classroom practices and social practices. As we mentioned, the introduction provided by G12 in Image 3 in the form of a compact message unit resembles the type of texts students produce in the classroom when asked to introduce themselves, but the way interaction unfolds in excerpts Images 4 and 5 differs a lot. Hence, if the role of formal language instruction is to trigger an authentic need for learners to use the target language to accomplish real communicative goals, classroom practices cannot ignore the type of communicative practices learners engage in in informal environments. That is, language teachers should allow for classroom communication and learning to generate the kind of learning opportunities that informal communication offers. This study sheds light on the nature

of participation in out-of-class peer interaction and may serve as inspiration for those teachers willing to promote learners' abilities to participate in real social encounters mediated through technology.

Our chapter also seeks to contribute to the study of peer interaction and learning in the digital wild. Since learning is a socially situated action, participation in Instagram chats in English as a lingua franca is to be regarded as a potential language learning experience in itself, although concrete evidence of language learning can also be traced in the data (see for example C2's self-repair in Image 3), even though that is not learners' immediate goal. The study of language learning through social media needs a robust theoretical and methodological apparatus. We have argued that CA, and especially the notion of TCU proposed by Sacks et al. (1974) to study participation, is valid if it is updated to capture the essence of multimodal communication such as that developed in social media. In this regard, we suggest that the types of units that make up a turn should be expanded to include non-textual units such as audio/video files, photographs and all sort of visual elements (gifs, emoji, likes, etc.) or the prototypical symbols in technology text-based communication (\*, +, etc.). In our data, non-textual units, apart from contributing to the co-construction of meaning, also constitute the preferred mode of participation of some of the interactants. Symbols, on the other hand, are used by interactants as cohesive devices to link together the split message units that constitute their turns, as we see in Image 4.

A second challenge researchers of authentic, informal, peer communication face relates to the ethical implications of using personal data disclosed by learners. The Greek and Catalan students in our study gave us permission to read their personal communication and they were the ones who selected what we could and could not see. We also had consent from their families. Nevertheless, 'spying' on how young people build up their relational bonds raises ethical issues as we described in Section 3.4. Therefore, it is necessary to create conditions under which social media can be used in classrooms in a genuine manner and investigate the types of discourse it generates and how it contributes to learning. Proposals in which formal teaching and learning is developed through social media are still scarce but gaining prominence in the formal language classroom. An example of one of these emerging initiatives in secondary classrooms in Catalonia can be found in the work of Olivé (2020a, 2020b), who engages language and literature students in the process of understanding literary work by setting them, for example, the task of impersonating in Instagram a character from the novel they are reading.



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