REPORT

Using Instagram for language learning

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Abstract

As a corpus of multimodal microblogs, Instagram is a useful language learning tool. The app abounds with authentic L2 content and allows for language learning outside of the classroom. This report proposes systematic methods for learners to cultivate multilingualism on Instagram. The multimodal literacy techniques I outline cater to Instagram posts as a specific genre, and I use example posts in a variety of languages to illustrate different learning processes, relying on multiliteracies pedagogy as a theoretical lens. My discussion also makes use of Instagram's hashtag and geotag search functions as well as its automatic translation feature to demonstrate ways of finding L2 content and critically assessing machine translation output. This report is intended both for L2 learners who want to advance language goals using social media and for specialists in postsecondary language teaching, research, and program direction who are interested in Instagram's offerings as a mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) resource. Language educators can use the ideas I present as groundwork for introducing students to MALL and multimodal literacy simultaneously. From there, educators can either create in-class activities with pedagogical scaffolding or encourage students to work independently with Instagram outside the classroom.

Keywords: *mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), multimodality, multiliteracies, social media*

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Introduction

Instagram is an under-recognized language learning resource compared to other popular social media platforms, which may come from an assumption that it deals more with photography than language. In actuality, most Instagram posts combine multiple semiotic resources, or modes, to convey meaning. I view the perpetually expanding repository of posts as a corpus of multimodal texts and believe that wherever smartphones go, so too can language learning. Despite the range of world languages represented on Instagram, Shadiev, Hwang, and Huang (2017) reported that mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) research produced between 2006 and 2017 focused overwhelmingly on EFL or ESL learners (p. 292). To enrich the conversation about MALL with Instagram, this report focuses exclusively on learning non-English L2s with the app.

To use Instagram for language learning, a purpose-driven systematic approach is necessary. Logistically speaking, discovering L2 Instagram content requires informed search practices because users cannot find or filter posts based on language. Learners also need baseline training in relevant multimodal literacy practices before working with content they find. My discussion below is meant for a varied audience of specialists and non-specialists. I present methods understandable enough for self-directed language learners

to start working with Instagram independently, but also intriguing enough to pique the curiosity of MALL-interested researchers, educators, and language program directors.

I write this report to bridge a gap between my language learning experiences and my current role as a graduate student wishing to incorporate MALL, multiliteracies, and multimodality into my language teaching. When I started using Instagram in 2014, I immediately pursued ways to practice and maintain my stronger L2s (French, Italian, and Spanish). By 2018, I was so satisfied using the app for language learning that I looked for content in additional L2s with which I had little experience (Romanian and Urdu). Over seven years and working with five languages at proficiency levels from absolute beginner to near-native, I have developed an informed perspective as an Instagram language learner. One year ago, I introduced Instagram language learning to a Romanian conversation group at my university. Ever since, my colleagues and I have been refining best practices for locating Romanian posts to use as teaching examples for speaking, reading, grammar, and culture. In my parallel role as an assistant instructor of French, I have not yet brought Instagram into the L2 classroom but intend to do so in the future. Therefore, the concepts and literacy practices I mention here are based more on theory than evidence. I do not expect all learners to have the same success as me using these methods, and I hope to test their efficacy and observe responses among a larger pool of learners.

I focus on what I deem the most compelling affordances of Instagram language learning: multimodality, authenticity, and learning outside the classroom. To begin, I give an overview of multimodal literacy techniques and tenets that apply to Instagram language learning. It is essential that learners gain a basic grasp of these multimodal reading strategies before they approach Instagram posts. Then, I outline some search methods that should help a wide range of L2 learners find content. To close, I touch on some advantages of using MALL with Instagram outside of the classroom. I use example Instagram posts in commonly and less commonly taught languages to illustrate my points, but this is by no means a comprehensive representation of the diverse range of non-English languages on the app.

The Multimodal Microblogging Genre

Instagram posts commonly intermix photographs, illustrations, videos, emojis, written language in captions and hashtags, spoken language and musical audio, and geotags. Although each component carries some meaning individually, when combined they form an integral unit. Only through a composite effort to deconstruct interrelated visual, written, and auditory elements can meaning be obtained. Therefore, each Instagram post is best analyzed as a multimodal text or, to use Serafini's (2013) preferred term, a multimodal ensemble, which is a unit that "utiliz[es] a variety of cultural and semiotic resources to articulate, render, represent, and communicate an array of concepts and information" (pp.12-13). The learner's path to understanding language on Instagram should make use of non-linguistic codes, be they visual or otherwise. The interpretative process for multimodal texts requires learners to analyze each constituent semiotic resource (working *intramodally*) as well as the aggregate whole (working *intermodally*). In so doing, they become a practitioner of *multimodal literacy* (Serafini, 2015).

Establishing genre norms is a helpful way for learners to approach social media content with platform-specific expectations. According to Chun, Kern, and Smith (2016), "getting learners to think about how genres mediate between language, social context, and medium of expression introduces a certain level of abstraction that is necessary for the development of a critical awareness of language in communication" (p. 68). Social media platforms are alike in that their social contexts are virtual and have the possibility of reaching global audiences. Looking at each platform's medium of expression, however, lets us distinguish genres based on content type. Twitter's signature genre is *microblogging*, or "the act of posting short character-constrained messages to the Internet" (Zappavigna, 2014, p. 209). Taking inspiration from Zappavigna's term, I call Instagram's signature genre *multimodal microblogging*, where the post body or caption uses a limited amount of written text and the message is co-constructed by an indispensable visual or audio-visual element. Instagram posts can tell stories or make statements about interests and experiences, and we expect this unique genre to include certain modes.

A Multimodal Literacy Primer

I recommend the following exercise for getting started with multimodal literacy and becoming familiar with Instagram's genre constraints. The learner should retrieve four L2 Instagram posts from different accounts, then complete all steps for each post individually. First, examine the post; review all visuals (photos, illustrations, emojis, videos), listen to audio, and read all text in the body, caption, and tags (hashtags, geotags, @-tags). Then, draw three columns on a piece of paper. Title the first column "Modes," the second "Description," and the third "Meaning." Under Modes, list all the modes of meaning the post uses. Under Description, briefly summarize each mode (e.g., an image of..., the song...plays, the caption says..., geotag is in...). Under Meaning, write why you think the post creator included that mode. After creating three-column tables for all posts, put them side-by-side and compare them. The contents of the Modes columns will likely vary, showing differences between multimodal ensembles. Comparing the Meaning columns for a single mode across posts will reveal differences in intentionality. With this exercise, a learner practices deconstructing posts into separate constituent modes, then reconstructing multimodal ensembles based on intentional meaning-making.

The Instagram language learner can ask What am I seeing?, What am I reading?, What am I hearing?, and How does that relate to what I am seeing? Video posts with captions invite answers for all these questions. A post to Fargana Qasimova's account contains a video of her driving while singing traditional *mugham* style improvisations over an instrumental track playing in her car. The passenger's filming angle gives viewers a feeling of being along for the ride as the camera pans to a view of Baku and the road ahead (Qasimova, 2019). The viewer is exposed to contemporary life and culture in Azerbaijan before even looking at language. After watching, learners of Azerbaijani can check the geotag for a location. Then they should read the caption, looking for familiar words. Beginners might identify English cognates (*pozitiv*, positive) or basic greetings (*Sabahınız xeyir*, good morning). Then, learners should look over the hashtag set, which contains four permutations of Qasimova's name and the country name in English and Azerbaijani (*#azerbaijan*, *#azərbaycan*). Learners can click on any hashtag to discover similarly tagged posts. Intermediate or advanced learners might read at the morphemic level, searching for grammatical clues in affixes to get an idea of how sentences hold together. Reading the comments shows the linguistic community's response and might give clues about meaning. One comment expresses appreciation for the performance with a *Maşallah* followed by applause emojis. After deciphering the most accessible elements of the text without external help, learners should utilize linguistic reference materials to gain full comprehension.

Looking Through a Multiliteracies Lens: Knowledge Processes

The knowledge processes that Cope and Kalantzis (2015) identify in their multiliteracies pedagogy are helpful heuristics for the learning strategies presented above. Two of these processes, *experiencing* and *analyzing*, are most relevant. Experiencing "involv[es] learning through immersion in the real, everyday stuff of the world" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p. 17). Ideally, according to Cope and Kalantzis, a learning activity will involve interplay between two facets of experiencing: *experiencing the known* and *experiencing the new*. The Instagram language learner begins relating to a multimodal text by experiencing the known, seeking to confirm understanding of completely familiar elements; the text meets the expectations of the multimodal microblog genre, the visual mode contains recognizable aspects of daily life (driving, riding in cars, listening to music, singing), and the language of the caption is identifiable. Learners then progress to experiencing the new, which "has to have some elements of familiarity; it has to make at least half sense" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p. 19). If the exact location tagged is new to learners, they might at least situate the country. If learners do not fully grasp the caption's meaning, they might recognize a few words or grammatical structures. If the audio mode presents music or speech never previously heard, learners might place what they hear within a familiar broader national or historical culture.

In addition to experiencing, learners take part in analyzing, wherein they 'examine the inter-relation of the constituent elements of something, its functioning, and the underlying rationale for a particular piece of knowledge, action, object, or represented meaning' (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p. 20). Cope and Kalantzis refer to the core analyzing activities as *analyzing functionally* and *analyzing critically*. On Instagram, the language learner begins analyzing functionally by parsing through multimodal design factors like images, videos, geotags, and hashtags; then they consider how these factors influence the meaning communicated by a post. When analyzing critically, learners think about the content creator's intentions, such as whether a post is an expression of creativity or informational, what the creator hoped to achieve by making the post publicly available, and who the intended audience might be. Analyzing critically and analyzing functionally can occur sequentially or simultaneously.

Now we can trace the multiliteracies-informed learning process in a second example from a Romanian tea purveyor's commercial account. The body of the post in Image 1 (dorotearo, 2019) is an infographic, reminding us that written text on Instagram does not only appear in captions and hashtags. To start unpacking this multimodal text, Romanian learners should do a quick visual scan for known elements. With infographics, I recommend looking at colors, fonts, and imagery before language. Image 1 contains a photograph of dried green leaves overlaid by a green text box and a list of green icons followed by a green horizontal line. The color theme and dried leaves narrow the range of guesses learners can make about the post's meaning, but more scanning of language brings other elements into focus. English-proficient learners can pick up on the repetition of the word "tea" in the URL at the bottom of the infographic and in the hashtags #tealovers and #tea4life. At this point, learners should conduct an experiencing the known checkpoint by answering two questions: What do I know about this post? and What hypothesis can I make about the meaning of this text based on what I know? The sum of known elements so far yields "green" and "leaves" from the visual mode, and "tea" from the textual mode, leading a learner to guess that this post pertains to green tea.

Image 1

How to store green tea (Romanian)

Having covered the known, the learner begins experiencing the new by making deductions about what is familiar. Reviewing the list of icons accompanied by text, learners might deduce that this post

communicates several pieces of information about green tea, but it is not clear what every icon symbolizes. The fourth icon contains rising curved lines that, the learner might conjecture, signify water vapor. To bridge the familiar with the new, the learner must look up the meanings of unknown words next to the icon; they would discover that *umezeală* means "humidity," which when prefaced by the preposition *fără* becomes "without humidity." Learners should continue in a similar fashion, identifying all familiar linguistic components in Romanian. Having set aside the parts that "make at least half sense" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015, p. 19), learners dive into unknown words using whatever linguistic resources are available to them outside the app. Learners might surmise that the textbox at the top of the infographic contains the post's main idea because of its prominent text size, font alternations, and contrastive white color. Indeed, *Cum să depozitezi ceaiul verde* means "How to store green tea" and each icon below this heading is a specification about tea storage. Unlocking the main idea might motivate learners to decode other vocabulary items under the presumption that remaining linguistic components relate in some way to the central topic: green tea. Experiencing gives Instagram language learners a great point of access because the app heavily uses the visual mode, which allows learners to begin accessing unknown linguistic signifiers (the new) by starting with non-linguistic signifiers (the known).

Finding Authentic Content

Learners may encounter a few problems while searching for suitable Instagram content. Millions of worldwide users upload content daily, meaning that numerous languages are well-represented. However, the available search tools do not allow users to sort posts by the languages they contain nor by users' default languages. Learners cannot simply type their desired L2 into a search bar and expect a return of target-language results. Pointing to a related conundrum on Twitter, Eleta and Golbeck (2014) stated, "the interface does not offer the option to select multiple languages and some users write in a language different from the one set as default" (p. 426).

Given Instagram's search criteria limitations, the best way for learners to begin finding personally relevant content is to perform hashtag-based or geotag-based searches. Instagram permits searching in four categories: Top, which returns suggestions related to popularly searched items or a user's previous activity; Accounts, which returns usernames that contain characters typed in the search bar; Tags, which returns hashtags that contain the characters entered; and Places, which returns posts with a geotag matching the characters entered. To perform a hashtag-based search, I recommend that learners search for a term or expression that exists only in their L2; for example, #concert could return results in French and English, whereas #salledeconcert would return more results in French only. Learners should preferably choose search terms based on their interests but can also use vocabulary from in-class learning materials. The first vetting of search results entails scrolling through and identifying posts that both interest learners and sufficiently involve the L2. Alternatively, learners can click on any hyperlinked hashtag in a post to explore new content.

Hashtags do not always align with the message images and captions express, so learners should beware of possibly dissonant hashtag sets. Dorsch's (2020) survey on Instagram hashtag use best practices reported a small percentage of respondents intentionally including false hashtags in posts and others used hashtags as jokes rather than tools for indexing related content. Despite this openly recognized discordance between posts and hashtags, self-created hashtags can have an additional value: They are examples of linguistic creativity and language play among L2 speakers. Learners might use such hashtags to make generic observations about culture or humor.

For example, Italian-language learners might have noticed certain COVID-19 related hashtags became popular on Instagram after March 2020. One hashtag springing from the imposed quarantine was #iorestoacasa (I will/am stay(ing) home). Searching for this hashtag would lead learners to posts from Italy about staying home to slow the spread of the virus. This invites a comparative look at structural and cultural differences between #iorestoacasa and its popular English-language counterparts, #stayhome or

#stayathome (the first-person singular pronoun in the Italian hashtag implicates personal responsibility to protect others, whereas the imperative verb form employed in English hashtags gives a command-like tone).

Geotag searching is a straightforward choice for learners not interested in brainstorming potential target-language hashtags. One can type a city, country, point of interest, or business name into the Places search bar, then verify the correct geotag among the results. The remaining process is the same as in hashtag-based searches: Learners parse through posts that use the L2 and suit their interests. The example in Image 2 was pulled from search results for the Mexican city Queretaro. The post gives Spanish learners a glimpse of life at a coffee shop in Queretaro. The caption details what the original poster likes about the place and includes a clickable @-tag that redirects to the business's commercial account (La del buen diente, 2018). This post demonstrates how Instagram can continuously deliver up-to-date snapshots of life in target cultures because social media co-evolves with society. Most curricular resources, especially printed ones, cannot do the same because they are bound to specific moments in time.

Image 2

A coffee shop in Queretaro, Mexico (Spanish)

The learner's search for L2 content may lead them to hashtags and accounts that have an explicit L2 teaching aim. Such accounts can help connect fellow learners in the comment section, test knowledge, and provide metalinguistic explanations. However, I encourage learners to prioritize finding non-didactic content, which I refer to as *authentic content*. By this I mean posts where the L2 carries a meaningful message contributing to the multimodal ensemble and whose creators do not intend to teach the L2 to readers. It falls upon readers to turn language-in-use into learning examples based on the needs they wish to target, such as vocabulary acquisition or pronunciation practice.

The dichotomy of didactic versus authentic L2 content I propose here is inspired by terms used in multiliteracies pedagogy. Whereas *didactic pedagogy* relies on theoretical knowledge and reformulation of material from the real world to facilitate a specific way of teaching, *authentic pedagogy* underscores practical learning that draws on real world experience (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). Both types are useful, but learners can better practice multimodal literacy with authentic pedagogy as it requires them to make deductions based on previous knowledge and cross-modal reference. Provided that language-teaching accounts exist for a given L2, learners can combine the best of both authentic and didactic strategies in a method called *reflexive pedagogy* (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015).

Let us consider a pair of Urdu posts to highlight the difference between didactic and authentic content. The first post comes from a word-of-the-day account. The post's body is an image of the term رم جھم with its English translation "slight drizzle" below it. Clicking the image causes an audio file of the Urdu pronunciation to play. The accompanying caption lists dictionary-entry style details: transliteration, phonetic transcription, etymology, and the word in context (Words in Urdu, 2020). This didactic post is accessible for all levels of learners to study, review, contextualize, or participate in the comments section. By contrast, the post in Image 3 below comes from a Pakistani graphic illustrator's account (Kamal, 2020) and has no didactic intent. As such, it is more suitable for intermediate-to-advanced Urdu learners familiar with both cultural norms and code-switching practices. Phrases appear in transliterated (Romanized) Urdu, a script more frequently used by young people and netizens than the traditional Perso-Arabic script. The illustration uses phrases older women commonly direct at girls to make a statement about misogynistic repression (overhead: You're not old enough yet to go out by yourself; bottom left: Go on a tour with your husband; bottom right: You're an old woman now—stay home). The caption shows a prime example of the intermixing of languages in Pakistan, with one sentence in English, a second in Urdu (The big issue of Desi homes), and an English comment following below. I consider this second post authentic content because didactic commentary does not mediate language use and it showcases everyday habits of Urdu speakers (codeswitching, Romanization) that are not usually taught to classroom learners.

Image 3

A feminist graphic illustration where Romanized Urdu and English intermix (Urdu)

If learners are concerned that informal posts will only expose them to lower linguistic registers, they can seek out official accounts of reputable journalism outlets in countries that use their L2. Journalism accounts provide authentic content (the L2 is used as a medium for news reporting, not language teaching) and all the while maintain the use of higher linguistic registers. As an added bonus, Instagram news content commonly involves audio-visual components, linking written language in captions with spoken language, images, and videos. These snapshots of the L2 mediasphere also show how particular sources disseminate information both linguistically and visually to L2 communities. Using news posts, learners can not only

become L2 information consumers themselves, but also observers of how information is packaged for L2 users to consume.

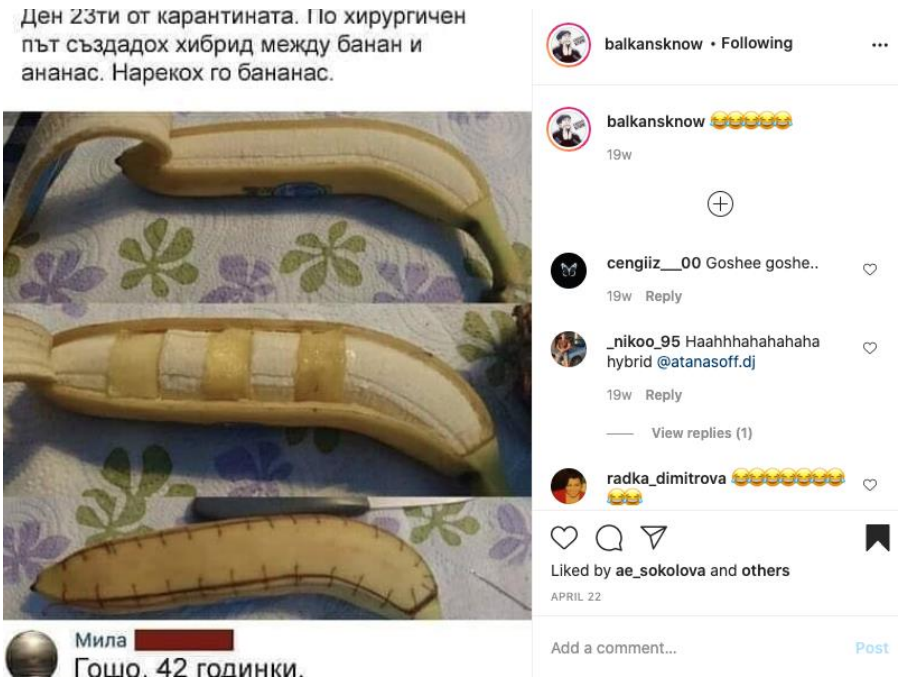
Language Learning Outside the Classroom

As Richards (2015) suggested, learners can benefit from noticing gaps between L2 forms taught in the classroom and forms encountered in other contexts. Finding these gaps can elicit learning opportunities. Lai, Hu, and Lyu (2018) reported that "out-of-class language learning has been found to be positively associated with both language learning gains and positive affective outcomes" (p. 115). Individuals who already use Instagram avidly should have little trouble undertaking the "self-directed naturalistic learning" (Benson, 2011, p. 12) of an L2 so long as they are equipped with basic multimodal literacy tools. It is less effective if someone with a keen interest in language learning, but no affinity for Instagram, tries to achieve their goals using the app. According to Lai, Hu, and Lyu (2018), "what matters more is learners' perception and selective appropriation of the affordances of technological resources for learning, namely, their lived experience with technological resources" (p.116). Language learning success is thus more likely to come to learners genuinely interested in Instagram. When learners associate a sense of enjoyment or leisure with time spent in contact with their L2 on Instagram, they move from *intentional learning*, designed expressly to advance language acquisition, to *incidental learning*, which is unplanned and results from L2 exposure outside of an instructional context (Richards, 2015, p. 10).

Learners may favor MALL outside the classroom for its informality and reduced cognitive load, which are only a few of many benefits reported in Shadiev, Hwang, and Huang's (2017) study. Learners can treat Instagram as a space where imagination and play know no bounds. There is no requirement for Instagram language learning to only use serious posts. Indeed, comic relief can open a window into the target culture's sense of humor. The Bulgarian example in Image 4 (Balkans Know, 2020) comes from an account specializing in Balkan humor and jokes with the absurd boredom caused by too much time quarantined at home.

Image 4

On Day 23 of quarantine, a banana-pineapple hybrid was born (Bulgarian)



A Critical Eye Toward Machine Translation

Using Instagram's automatic translation feature in unconventional ways can allow learners to deconstruct L2 meaning creatively. For example, French chef Alain Passard uses poetic license when writing the recipes posted to his Instagram account. One post gives a salad recipe in the caption and includes an English version below the original French (Passard, 2020). Parts of this translation are questionable, such as the rendering of *saveurs*, meaning "flavors," as "savors," but this invites a learning opportunity through an exercise that I call the *unreliable parallel text*. First, the learner notes the bilingual caption. Then they click See Translation below the caption to generate Instagram's automatic English translation of the French part of the text. The learner then decides, for example, whether "Mix the 4 savors" (chef Passard's version) or "Mix the 4 flavors" (the automatic translator's version) is an acceptable equivalent to *Mélanger les 4 saveurs*, or if both translations are altogether too atypical in English. Elsewhere in the post, learners might note that "flower de salt" (the automatic translator's version of *fleur de sel*, which chef Passard kept in French in his translation) is in no way viable. This exercise would most often only involve two texts—the source and the automatic translation—but Passard's bilingual caption offers a third text for comparison and translation critique.

The point of the unreliable parallel text exercise is for learners to treat machine translation into English as an intermediary step rather than a final destination. Instagram's translation feature might prove fairly accurate when captions contain no figurative language, but language learners should always keep a skeptical eye when it comes to machine translation. Students can do this exercise on their own, or teachers can use it in the classroom for training critical awareness in a world saturated with automatic translation tools. Chun, Kern and Smith (2016) posited accordingly that:

> Instead of categorically forbidding students to ever use translation tools, perhaps it might be prudent to teach them how to use such tools to produce an even better understanding of a text than they would have been able to by using the more traditional tools and strategies for L2 reading. (p. 73)

Conclusion

I hope this report will encourage L2 learners, teachers, and researchers alike to take advantage of Instagram's multimodal offerings. Although there are didactic language-teaching accounts on the app, learners should take every opportunity to engage with authentic content, by which I mean unmediated use of the L2 to express ideas, communicate messages, present culture, and tell stories. MALL with Instagram can provide out-of-class digital immersion experiences where learning is imaginative, humorous, and playful. To promote exploration on students' own time, instructors might consider introducing MALL using the multimodal literacy activities explained above or developing one of their own using an Instagram post. Multiliteracies pedagogy works well as a theoretical launching point because it promotes instructional design based on students' experiential backgrounds. Since an overwhelming amount of language learners today are savvy with mobile phones and many of them are familiar with Instagram, instructors can scaffold MALL explorations by combining multiliteracies knowledge processes with students' pre-existing technological skills.

MALL with Instagram has a lot of room for expansion. First, more studies about learning non-English languages with Instagram are needed to counterbalance existing ESL and EFL research. Second, I believe that integrating automatic language detection into Instagram's search function would both make finding L2 content easier than tag-based searching and allow for statistical analysis of represented world languages. Hypothetically, reorganizing Instagram content into language groupings could be the basis for creating multimodal learner corpora or conducting applied linguistics research. Whether such innovations come to fruition or not, Instagram already offers bountiful digital immersion in languages and cultures. We should all be recognizant of social media's ability to produce and prolong global connections in light of the extended period of international travel restrictions the COVID-19 pandemic has imposed.

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