Projecting authenticity through nativeness: a multimodal analysis of microcelebrity English teachers' Instagram reels

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Abstract: Many language teachers create short, engaging, and accessible English content on social media, accumulating large numbers of followers. Drawing on existing conceptualizations of authenticity and qualities of internet celebrities, this study presents a multimodal analysis of Instagram accounts of two microcelebrity British English language teachers, each with over a million followers. The findings reveal instances where teachers position themselves as the authority for linguistic or non-linguistic knowledge highlighting different forms of cultural capital including ordinary and mundane aspects of their everyday lives. The analysis also reveals exclusive representations of the West (specifically the UK) including vocabulary associated with British culture, idiomatic expressions, and British pronunciation of some words. The study provides novel and critical insights into the emerging forms of language teaching on social media platforms shaped by the neoliberal landscape of education with important implications for English language teaching professionals and teacher education programs.

Keywords: microcelebrity; nativeness; authenticity; self-branding; multimodality

1. Introduction

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of English language teachers who leverage social media platforms to deliver pedagogical content. The popularity of social media-based language teaching has given rise to a new digital profession of microcelebrity language teachers who share bite-sized content regularly with their followers (Aslan 2024). Accumulating large numbers of followers, these teachers attain a microcelebrity status by deploying and maintaining an online brand (Senft 2013) or what Marwick and boyd (2011) call "a consumable persona" (p. 140), performing intimacy, authenticity, and access to their personal lives whilst maintaining an active audience (Abidin 2018). Senft (2008) defines microcelebrities as individuals who engage in "a new style of online performance in which people employ webcams, video, audio, blogs, and social networking sites to "amp up" their popularity among readers, viewers, and those to whom they are linked online" (p. 25). Aslan (2024) further adapted the notion of microcelebrity to the language teaching context and defined such individuals as someone who "attained educational qualifications who use social media platforms to gain monetary benefits by reaching large audiences of learners and/or teachers by creating and sharing language teaching content" (p. 3). Despite the mounting interest from sociolinguists studying discourses on social media platforms, the principles,

ideologies, and practices that shape microcelebrity teachers' content curation practices are understudied.

Microcelebrity language teachers gain their fame by strategically using the affordances of social media platforms to establish a large following, thus making the trend of platformization an essential condition for their success. The platformized practices in language education are shaped by the current landscape of neoliberalism and digital economy (Curran and Jenks 2023). Platformization has led to the emergence of educational practices that are monetized and commercialized by teacherpreneurs (Carpenter et al. 2020) in competitive digital online spaces. As online language teaching continues to be a growing sector, language teachers' influencer-based practices are in line with the demands of the attention economy where the user's attention is the product that is sold to advertisers or other buyers. Against this background, influencer-based practices of teaching online create new career pathways for established language teachers aiming to enhance the public good of education through sharing content online. These developments are evolving the online language teaching sector and leading to the emergence of concepts such as online teacher entrepreneurship (Ho 2023) and leadership, and self-branding through microcelebrity teacher identities in precarious social media environments (Selvi 2025).

Closely related to the need for visibility and global reach on digital platforms is the issue of authenticity of content and the microcelebrity persona. Authenticity, a key topic in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in material design, has generally been associated with native speakers and cultures where English is used as a first language. What authenticity means in ELT is also hard to define and remains ambiguous. Gilmore (2007) reviewed the multiple definitions of authenticity in foreign language teaching and concluded that it has become "a very slippery concept" to define (p. 98). Notwithstanding the elusiveness of it as a concept, authenticity is generally seen to be related to th enotions of "realness" or "trueness to origin" (Buendgens-Kosten 2014, p. 457). Such "realness" or "trueness" is oftentimes exemplified by whether a text is produced by native speakers, and whether the text is reflective of real communicative contexts.

This paper examines authenticity in the ELT reels of British microcelebrity teachers. Although the concept of authenticity is difficult to define, we adopt in this study Lowe and Pinner's (2016) definition that views authenticity as "the way an individual sees themselves in relation to the various contexts in which they exist and are required to use language for the social production of meaning" (Lowe and Pinner 2016: 32). Bringing together Lowe and Pinner's (2016) conceptualization of authenticity and Abidin's (2018) characterization of the qualities of internet celebrities (as shall be described in the next section), this study presents a multimodal analysis of Instagram accounts of two microcelebrity English language teachers based in the UK. The purpose of this study is twofold. First, we attempt to explore connections between authenticity and the notion of microcelebrity. Second, we describe ways in which microcelebrity English teachers navigate the multimodal affordances of social media platforms to create authentic language teaching content. Exploring the intersections between authenticity and nativeness, the study brings novel and critical insights into the dichotomy of

native-speakerism in the field of ELT, shedding light on the platformized teaching practices and emerging forms of teaching professionalism and identity in the increasingly neoliberal and digital landscape of education.

2. Literature review

The purpose of this literature review is to critically examine existing research on the role of social media in language teaching, with a particular focus on self-branding and authenticity. First, the review outlines key studies focusing on the affordances of different social media platforms for language learning. Second, it introduces the emerging self-branding practices employed by language teachers on social media and the associated conceptual frameworks. Finally, it unpacks the concept of authenticity in ELT drawing on its intersections with nativeness, race, and microcelebrity teachers.

2.1 Social media in language teaching

The integration of social media into language teaching is a well-documented and ongoing phenomenon. In Barrot's (2018) critical analysis of research on the use of Facebook for language teaching and learning, the author found that the foci of interest are to use Facebook for enhancing students' general language proficiency, developing students' productive skills, analyzing their interactions, and developing language learning strategies. Furthermore, even though social media can be considered a recreational practice that students engage in, often outside of class, a considerable number of studies have documented how social media was incorporated into institutional settings to facilitate students' language learning (Manca 2020; Solmaz 2018). In contrast, only a handful of studies have begun to explore recreational language learning beyond the classroom. Chik and Ho (2017) observed how three language learners freely explored language learning resources using Facebook as a platform to share their learning. The study compared how the three participants differed in their approaches to locating and sharing language learning resources in 2010 versus 2015. In particular, the authors found that the change in privacy settings of the Facebook group where the participants shared their language learning experiences "strongly impacted what the participants chose to share, which in turn influenced how they made their learning decisions" (p. 167). Hence, platform affordances play a role in shaping what learners choose to share and which resources learners choose to learn with. For instance, Lee (2023) identified the affordances of Instagram and TikTok as "multimodality, mobility, instantaneous participation, and interactivity" (p. 1), and these features are "unique compared to features of earlier platforms" (p. 14).

Changes in the digital environment and platform affordances of emerging social networking sites also play a role in determining what kind of language learning resources are favored by language learners, especially in recreational settings (Aslan and Butabaeva Sirojitdinovna 2025). When comparing the learning resources used by three language learners in 2020 and 2015, Chik and Ho (2017) observe that learners demonstrate "persistent uses of structured non-formal resources" and the "decline of [using] object-oriented DIY learning resources" (p. 166). The freedom to "window-shop" for language learning resources to "personalize one's

language learning" (ibid, p. 170), coupled with the change in the popularity from language-based to image based and now to video-based social media platforms, gives rise to the popularity of a new digital profession of microcelebrity English teachers (Aslan 2024; Ho 2023; Ho and Tai 2020; Wang and Curran 2024).

2.2 Self-branding

Offering ELT instruction on social media requires teachers to engage in self-branding practices to succeed in the attention economy in which "users compete with other users to attract attention" (Jones and Hafner 2021, p. 218). The need to maintain visibility and gain legitimacy in teaching compels teachers to become brands. Curran and Jenks (2023) identified the self-branding practices of teachers in online teaching platforms, namely self-editing, authenticity, and cosmopolitanism, each of which is defined by the authors as follows (p. 7–8):

– Self-editing refers to the self-branding strategy of selecting individual qualities and attributes for public consumption

– Authenticity is a positive attribute associated with being real, true, natural, or original

– Cosmopolitanism is the tendency to orient oneself beyond the boundaries of the community to which one belongs

Situated in the context of the gig economy, Curran and Jenks (2023) argue that teachers in online teaching platforms must "continuously recalibrate their self-branding strategies" and are "being forced to ceaselessly self-brand" to keep up with the ever-changing demands of working in a gig economy (p. 16). While microcelebrity language teachers face similar demands of self-branding, a lesser-known challenge is the dissonance, or even conflicts, between the different discourses in which microcelebrity language teachers participate. For instance, Ho (2023) reveals the complex identity performances of microcelebrity language teachers and how the need to appeal to a global audience may or may not align with the teachers' expectations and beliefs about their role. Specifically, microcelebrity language teachers "employ different strategies to align or distance themselves" from their identities as language teachers, microcelebrities, and entrepreneurs (Ho 2023, p. 12). In a similar study exploring the vulnerability and identity negotiation of Iranian EFL teachers in relation to self-branding on social media, Nejadghanbar et al. (2024) found that teachers struggle to maintain visibility and remain legitimate and authentic, which suggests the need for professional support for teachers navigating social media-based language teaching.

To legitimize themselves as expert language teachers, microcelebrity language teachers draw on discourses of authenticity, such as "[signaling] authoritative claims to a language" (Curran and Jenks 2023, p. 8). One way to do this is to employ discourses of 'native-speakerism' in an implicit way by mentioning birthplace or highlighting being raised in a country where English is used as the dominant language. Furthermore, as observed by Jenks (2019), "skin color, nationality, ethnicity, and facial morphology are used to sell an 'authentic' and

‘Western’ learning experience” (p. 520), thus allowing teachers from specific backgrounds to use their appearance as self-branding strategies to construct themselves as authentic, and at the same time there is a risk of teachers being ‘othered’ or even discriminated by means of customer-based ratings and algorithms (Curran 2023).

2.3 Authenticity in English language teaching

Authenticity is a complex and often problematic concept in ELT. Traditionally, it has been associated with materials and language use that reflect the language used outside of classrooms. Mishan (2004) argues that authenticity involves a relationship between the text and the learner, where the interaction and appropriate response of the learner to the text are crucial. In other words, authenticity is not an inherent quality of the text itself but is realized through the learner’s engagement with it. Thus, an authentic text in language learning is one that elicits genuine communicative behavior and interpretative processes from the learner, regardless of whether the text was originally created for a native audience or specifically for educational purposes. Drawing on its complex relationship with concepts such as native speakers, real audience, and the interaction between students, Gilmore (2007) defines authentic text as “a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort” (p. 98).

The concept of authenticity is intertwined with native-speakerism. Lowe and Pinner (2016) even go as far as to argue that one needs to have knowledge of both concepts before one can understand their implications in ELT. “Native speakerism is a term used to describe a disparity of treatment of English users due to their perceived native speaker status, with native speakers often receiving favorable treatment over non-native speakers” (Rose and Galloway 2019, p. 14). Holliday describes native-speakerism as a “pervasive ideology within ELT, characterized by the belief that ‘native-speaker’ teachers represent a ‘Western culture’ from which spring the ideals both of the English language and of English language teaching methodology” (Holliday 2006, p. 385). However, seeing authenticity as language produced by native speakers for a real audience is not without its criticisms, for the notion of native-speakerism is often critiqued in the literature (Jenks and Lee 2020; Rose and Galloway 2019). For example, Cook (1999) argues that when the native speaker is viewed as a model in language learning and teaching, the perennial issue of which kind of native speaker should be taken as a model arises. Scholars like Holliday (2005) and Phillipson (1992) contend that the native speaker concept is intertwined with racial and cultural stereotypes, often privileging White, Western English speakers. This bias reinforces linguistic imperialism favoring Inner Circle varieties of English while marginalizing Outer and Expanding Circles (Kachru 1985). The native speaker ideal fuels discriminatory hiring practices in ELT, where White teachers are preferred, regardless of their qualifications or teaching ability (Selvi 2014), whereas non-White teachers are often subject to discrimination (Curran 2023). However, several studies have shown that learners do not have favorable or unfavorable attitudes towards native and non-native speaker teachers when they are not presented with the dichotomous native/non-native labels (Aslan and Thompson 2017; Todd and Pojanapunya 2009).

The ‘native speaker’ ideologies stem from a history of Western imperialism and colonialism (Philipson 2008; Willinsky 1998) and White supremacy (Mills 2003). The racialization of the English language reinforces the perception that the language belongs to White native speakers and that speaking English, along with being closely aligned with Whiteness, conveys social and cultural superiority (Jenks 2019; Kubota and Fujimoto 2013). The idealized perception of White English speakers perpetuates inequality and oppression within language teaching and among language teachers in various ways. For instance, equating “native English speaker” with “White” frequently leads to discriminatory practices in recruitment and hiring (Curran 2023; Von Esch et al. 2020). Extant research has documented several examples of racial preferences for English teachers including White Caucasian individuals from European countries securing teaching positions due to their racial appearance (Galloway 2014; Hansen 2004) and students perceiving such individuals as ‘native’ English speakers (Braine 2005). Rivers and Ross (2013) report that when factors such as country of origin, experience, and qualifications are held constant, students show a preference for White teachers as the most desirable. Ruecker and Ives’s (2015) analysis of 59 websites of language schools in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand revealed deeply ingrained stereotypes portraying English teachers as young, White native speakers hailing from a small group of predominantly White-majority countries. In addition, English language textbooks often depicted ‘White English speakers’ as affluent, influential, American, and socially and economically successful, while portraying minorities as impoverished and powerless (Taylor-Mendes 2009; Yamada 2015). Similarly, when White English language teachers fail to develop a critical understanding of the diverse racial profiles of their students, they often engage in practices and discourses in the classroom that reinforce White supremacy (Stinson and Migliarini 2023).

The extant research on authenticity in ELT shows that the concept has been largely confined to traditional classroom settings and materials. Additionally, several social constructs such as race, nativeness, and colonialism appear to be closely linked to how authenticity was viewed in ELT. What remains unexplored, however, is how authenticity is manifested in the discourse of microcelebrity teachers on social media platforms.

2.4 Authenticity in the age of social media

In today’s era of platformization, authenticity continues to be a significant, albeit often debated concept. Alongside its flexibility to fit various contexts, ranging from textbook creation to online collaborations and interactions and different facets of language learning, the concept remains appealing and influential, gaining new meanings and dimensions in digital spaces. Through an analysis of how authenticity claims are justified within CALL literature, Buendgens-Kosten (2013) identified three domains of authenticity: linguistic, cultural, and functional. Linguistic authenticity is based on the resemblance of language used in learning materials to natural language use by native speakers in everyday situations. Cultural authenticity is concerned with ensuring that the learning materials reflect the culture of native speakers, making the context and content culturally relevant and accurate. Functional authenticity involves the use of language in meaningful, practical activities that

mirror real-life situations, thus providing a purposeful learning experience. Rather than treating authenticity as a fixed, binary attribute (i.e., authentic vs. inauthentic) in language teaching, Pinner (2014, 2019) interprets authenticity as a dynamic, multidimensional concept, viewing it as a continuum that captures its fluid and context-dependent nature. It integrates two axes: the social dimension, ranging from individual learners to broader language communities, and the contextual dimension, spanning classroom settings to real-world use. This model emphasizes the interaction between personal identity, cultural context, and pedagogical goals, encouraging a flexible approach to teaching materials. By validating diverse forms of linguistic engagement, it aims to align authenticity with learners' motivations and global English usage.

Following on the discussions of authenticity in relation to native-speakerism in the previous section, Lowe and Pinner (2016) present a theoretical framework to explore their connections, focusing on authority, culturism, and cultural capital. Authority refers to the undue credibility and legitimacy granted to 'native speakers' as the ideal bearers and teachers of the English language, marginalizing 'non-native speakers.' Culturism involves the process of 'othering', where 'native speakers' are seen as representatives of an idealized Western culture, thereby reinforcing Western dominance and the perception that 'non-native speakers' are inherently inferior (Holliday 2005). Cultural capital denotes the value ascribed to Western cultural norms and institutions, which are perceived as the benchmarks of authenticity in language use and teaching. The authors argue that this ideology not only impacts the professional lives of 'non-native speaker' teachers through discrimination and bias but also perpetuates a skewed perception of linguistic and cultural legitimacy within the ELT industry.

The nature of digital technologies and social media platforms and the engagement they elicit from language learners are driving a shift in how we understand authenticity today. English language learners, with immediate and continuous access to social media platforms, can easily connect with real-life experiences. Many language teachers utilize social media platforms to curate English language content and achieve a microcelebrity status by acquiring thousands of followers (Aslan 2024). Through the sharing of personalized content and detailed multimodal narratives of their daily lives, microcelebrities project authenticity, which refers to the perceived genuineness of their lifestyle and sentiments; interconnectedness, highlighting the personal connections between media personalities and their audience; and intimacy, creating a sense of familiarity (Abidin 2015). This makes them appear more approachable and relatable compared to traditional celebrities (Enke and Borchers 2019).

Closely related to the discussions of authenticity in digital spaces is Abidin's (2018) conceptualization of the main qualities of internet celebrities: exclusivity, exoticism, exceptionalism, and everydayness. Exclusivity pertains to the portrayal of elite and rare experiences or possessions that are generally inaccessible to ordinary people without significant economic capital. Exoticism involves the depiction of individuals, practices, or cultures that appear unusual or foreign to the mainstream audience, drawing attention due to their perceived novelty and rarity. Exceptionalism highlights individuals with outstanding abilities or skills, whether mundane or elite, that are admired for their technical capital.

Everydayness celebrates the ordinariness and relatability of internet celebrities, emphasizing their mundane activities and lifestyles that resonate with the average person.

3. The study

The primary data in this study consists of Instagram short-form videos (known as reels) (n = 12) of two verified British microcelebrity teachers who generate English language teaching content on their respective Instagram channels open to public. Following the guidelines of the Internet Research Ethics 3.0 of the Association of Internet Researchers (Franzke et al. 2020), we did not seek informed consent from the two teachers, as we deemed the data analyzed here is of educational nature and maximally shared on public Instagram accounts with large numbers of followers. We received no response to our communications to the two content creators regarding our request for permission to use their reels as examples in our study. Therefore, we decided to present the data anonymously using pseudonyms to protect the identities of the teachers.

One of the teachers was Brian who had 1 million followers at the time of data collection. His reels featured British English and culture. Similarly, the second teacher, Aaron, had 1.1 million followers and shared content focusing on British English culture. In keeping with the extant research on social media influencers that classifies influencers based on their number of followers (Conde and Casais 2023; Haenlein and Libai 2017), we selected these two accounts due to their 'mega influencer' status – i.e., having a more than 1 million followers, demonstrating global Internet fame and visibility. The secondary source of data was peripheral information about these teachers including their Instagram bios and 'about' reels in which they presented information about their background and teaching experience.[1]

Data were sampled by browsing approximately 1,000 reels available on the two teachers' accounts. This extremely ambitious process was necessary to identify reels that share common themes and discourses in line with our conceptual framework of authenticity and nativeness. To this end, we developed a set of criteria inspired by Lowe and Pinner's (2016) conceptualization of authenticity and Abidin's (2018) characterization of Internet celebrity qualities to identify reels that meet the purpose of our research. These criteria enabled us to systematically select reels in which:

(1) the microcelebrity teachers position themselves as the authority for linguistic or non-linguistic knowledge and demonstrating 'exceptionalism' thanks to their linguistic expertise.

(2) the content reflects the West (the UK in our study) as the authentic bearer of the English language and marginalizes non-Western cultures or language use, thus exhibiting 'exclusivity' due to glamorization and celebration of Western practices and possessions.

[1] Though we were unable to obtain sufficient information about the teaching qualifications of the two content creators we focus on in this study, we still refer to them as 'teachers.'

(3) the content demonstrates various forms of exotic cultural capital of the teachers, demonstrating "everydayness and exoticism" of the mundane and ordinary aspects of British life.

After careful viewing, taking notes, and discussing, we identified 12 reels for closer analysis – six from each content creator – that we believe form a representative sample of data that meets the above criteria. To extract the data for analysis, we screen recorded each reel and saved them as video files. The length of the reels ranged between 6 s to a little over a minute. The next step was to transcribe the reels multimodally to identify different semiotic modes used in meaning making (see the Appendix for a sample transcription). Transcribing the reels multimodally helped us to identify how different modes orchestrate in the reels to convey meanings that would have been missed had we only focused on the linguistic mode alone. Each reel is a product of multimodal design. Multimodal design, as explained by Kress (2010), is the use of different modes "to present, to realize, at times to (re)contextualize social positions and relations, as well as knowledge in specific arrangements for a specific audience" (p. 139). Multimodality challenges the superiority of language and asserts that different modes of representation such as visuals, speech, gestures, to name just a few, are equally significant in making meaning (Jewitt 2006; Kress 2010). It is therefore our interest to unpack how different modes orchestrate to convey meaning, either by reinforcing the same meaning, or conveying different information which relies on viewers to co-construct meaning with the content creator by viewing modes not in isolation, but as a multimodal ensemble (Kress 2010). For methodological reasons, the following modes relevant to our analysis were transcribed for each shot: speech, text, visuals, sound effects, camera angle and distance, gaze, gestures or other actions to help us obtain insights into the multimodal design process.

As discussed previously, we argue that the qualities of microcelebrities proposed by Abidin (2018) intersect with Lowe and Pinner's (2016) concepts of authenticity. First, the quality of exceptionalism aligns with authority in that microcelebrity teachers who are native speakers of English may position themselves as the authority for linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. Second, Lowe and Pinner's concept of culturism, referring to the power and privilege of the Western Anglo cultures, resonates with exclusivity, making Western Anglo teachers the authentic bearers of the English language and marginalizing non-Western cultures or language use. Finally, Abidin's internet celebrity qualities of exoticism and everydayness bear connections with cultural capital of the West being represented by native speakers including but not limited to mundane and ordinary aspects of everyday life. In what follows, we demonstrate these intersections in how British microcelebrity English teachers create content on Instagram to establish connections with English learners. More specifically, our analysis focuses on (1) how the microcelebrity teachers position themselves as the authority for linguistic or non-linguistic knowledge by portraying 'exceptionalism' and 'nativeness'; (2) how the content reflects 'exclusivity' by presenting the West (specifically the UK) as the authentic bearer of the English language and/or marginalizing non-Western cultures or language use, and (3) how 'exoticism' is displayed via different forms of the cultural capital of the teachers, including ordinary and mundane aspects of their lives (everydayness).

4. Findings

4.1 Authenticity through cultural capital

Both teachers draw on their cultural capital to varying degrees to make their content more authentic to their audience by helping learners acquire "pronunciation and discourse features of the empowered language variety" (Lowe and Pinner 2016, p. 36), and in this case, British English. Within our dataset, Brian appears to make use of both linguistic and other multimodal resources to draw on his cultural capital of being a native speaker of English and displaying knowledge of the UK. For example, in one of his videos, he begins by being explicit about the objective of the video (Figure 1, Shot 1), which is to introduce 'British words you must know if you want to go to London.' Having grown up in London (as he shares in one of his other videos),

Figure 1. British words you must know.

he appears to claim authority in British English as evidenced in the opening seconds of the reel with his use of the modal verb 'must.' His confident smile, gazing directly at the camera, which results in a 'demand' image (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020), also signals his attention to engage the audience who is watching through the screen. The 'necessity' of learning 'British English' is constructed by highlighting London as an attractive travel destination. This is realized by the use of a digital sticker of the Tower Bridge, which is one of the most iconic landmarks of London. Brian's 'authority' as a 'British English native speaker' is also demonstrated through the setting of the video, which is filmed outside of a kind of house commonly seen across Britain. These multimodal displays of authority position Brian as the authentic representative of British culture and British English.

Cultural capital is enacted through the presentation of the features of key places, objects, and experiences that are exclusive to London. In the same video (Figure 1), Brian introduces words including 'London Underground' (Shot 2), 'The Tube' (Shot 3), and 'Oyster Card' (Shot 4). An explanation was provided for the 'Oyster card' at the bottom of the page to

inform the audience of what it is. When presenting the relevant vocabulary, he inserts stickers to visually illustrate places. For example, a digital sticker of a train is also used to visually explain the meaning of 'London Underground' (Shots 2–4), which by itself does not take on the meaning of a train. These are everyday words that someone who lives in London would understand, and those who do not have knowledge of London will need to be introduced to. This is an example of how the introduction to these terms allows Brian to present them as cultural capital and gain authenticity as an English teacher.

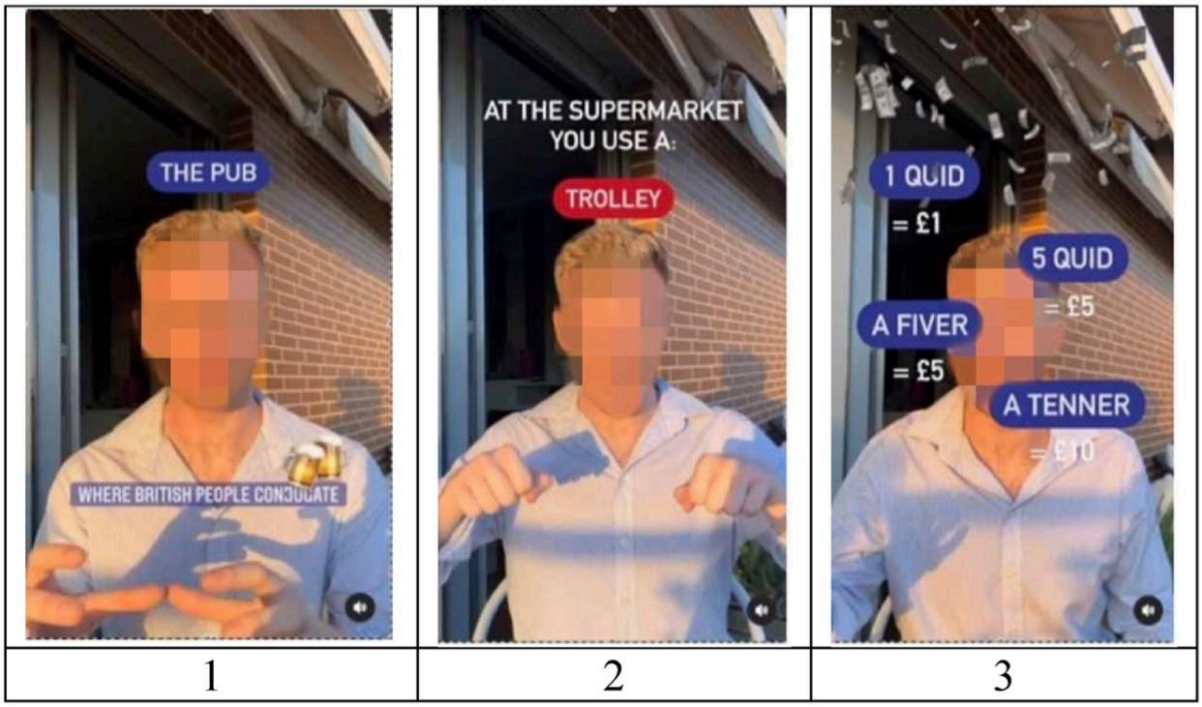


Figure 2. Everydayness of living in Britain.

Another salient example of the use of cultural capital to perform authenticity is when Brian taught another set of vocabulary related to the 'everydayness' of living in Britain. In this segment of the video (Figure 2), words such as 'the pub' (Shot 1), 'trolley' (Shot 2), 'quid', 'a fiver', and 'a tenner' (Shot 4) were introduced. When he explains the word 'pub' he emphasizes the cultural significance of a pub as a venue where British people socialize. He attaches a sticker of two beer mugs over the caption "where British people conjugate[2]" to further highlight the sociability aspect. To help readers understand the meaning of 'conjugate' a gesture was also used where his open palms both move to the center of his body, signaling the meaning of "coming together."

Lastly, different ways of talking about money are also introduced: "and we have different words for money, you can say one quid, five quid, a fiver, and a tenner" (Figure 2, Shot 3). On the screen, the corresponding amount of money that these words describe is shown in numbers, also with the animation of banknotes falling from above. The use of the pronoun

[2] While we believe what Brian meant to say here was 'congregate', he does use the word 'conjugate' to mean people meeting or coming together. According to Urban Dictionary 'conjugate' can mean 'the act of drinking or pouring alcohol' or an 'unlearned' way of saying 'congregate.'

‘we’ signals Brian’s perceived ownership of English as a ‘native British English speaker’. Like the example above, the speech conveys the linguistic content shown on the screen, whereas the meaning of these words is only shown visually.

Figure 3. At the bakery.

We observed in our dataset other instances of mundane and ordinary aspects of everyday life that allow microcelebrity teachers to establish familiarity, trust and closeness with their audience. One prominent example of everydayness in microcelebrity teachers’ content is to contextualize linguistic units, particularly vocabulary words, by enacting communication situations in authentic or sometimes simulated contexts. For example, Aaron, in one of his reels, introduces some vocabulary related to pastry items (Figure 3). The content of the reel follows a rather mechanical pattern including him asking “What’s this?” (Shot 1) while showing one of the pastries close to the camera and providing the answer “It’s a muffin” (Shot 2). What makes the reel authentic is the other multimodal means utilized. First, it appears that he is either in a bakery shop or he is using a background filter. Second, there is mellow accordion music in the background, evoking a pastry or coffee shop ambience. Finally, Aaron is wearing an apron suggesting that he’s been involved in baking. Through this multimodal play across a range of modes, Aaron represents a common social setting in the

Western world with which some viewers from non-Anglo cultures may be unfamiliar and find exotic and interesting.

4.2 Authenticity through culturism

Displays of the English-speaking world in the reels of many micro-celebrity language teachers highlight practices and lifestyles that may be unfamiliar to those from non-

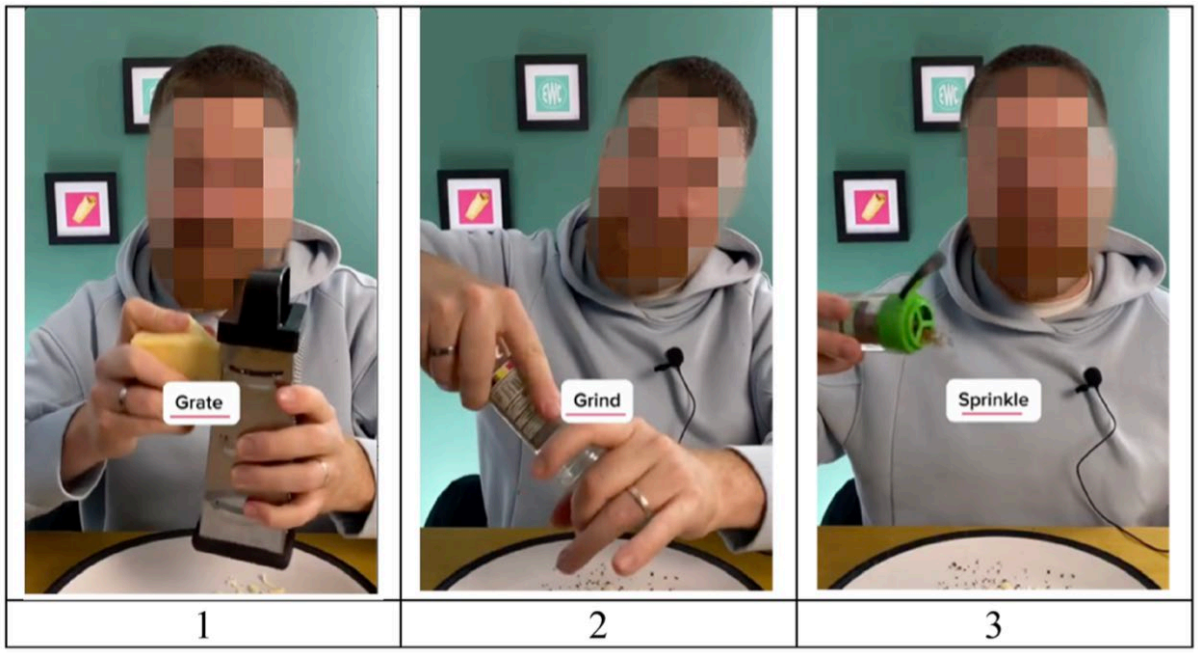


Figure 4. Grate, grind, sprinkle.

English speaking cultures. Such displays of culture can help microcelebrity teachers stand out and increase their authenticity through culturism. For example, in a reel introducing the vocabulary words ‘grate’, ‘grind’ and ‘sprinkle’ (Figure 4), Aaron draws on a cliché about British cuisine while enacting an imaginary dialogue with a customer in a pub to demonstrate how these words are used in an authentic context. Assuming the role of a waiter and using a bit of humor, he asks “Hello extremely drunk person, do you want some cheese grated onto your chips?” (Figure 5, Shots 12). Pretending as if he received an unsatisfactory response from the customer, he repeats “Oh, your meal is boring?” (Shot 3) followed by “Well, we are in England, but you could try sprinkling some salt on it.” (Shots 4–5). By saying “Well, we are in England”, Aaron implies that British food is boring and uninspiring, a common stereotype about food in England. Sharing a cultural stereotype exclusive to the UK while teaching culinary vocabulary enhances the authenticity of the content by drawing on cultural stereotypes about the dominant Anglo group.

Another example that highlights authenticity through culturism is when Brian introduces a British slang expression in one of his reels. The video begins with a close shot of Brian uttering “He was so stupid” (Figure 6, Shot 1) accompanied by the caption “…kind of British” on the screen. Later, he offers an alternative pejorative slang expression “He was a

bloody doughnut" captioned with "…very British." (Figure 6, Shot 2) In both shots, the captions are preceded by a British flag sticker. Urban Dictionary[3] defines 'donut/doughnut' as a word referring to lacking

Figure 5. Oh, your meal is boring?

Figure 6. Bloody doughnut.

[3] https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=donut.

intelligence and common sense or a mild insult often used in the workplaces of southern England. Presenting such pragmatic and sociolinguistic variations of language use, Brian relies on the appeal of exclusivity to attract viewers and highlight his authenticity as British.

4.3 Authenticity through authority

Microcelebrity language teachers discursively foreground their nativeness as authority and present themselves as an 'exceptional' speaker of English that learners

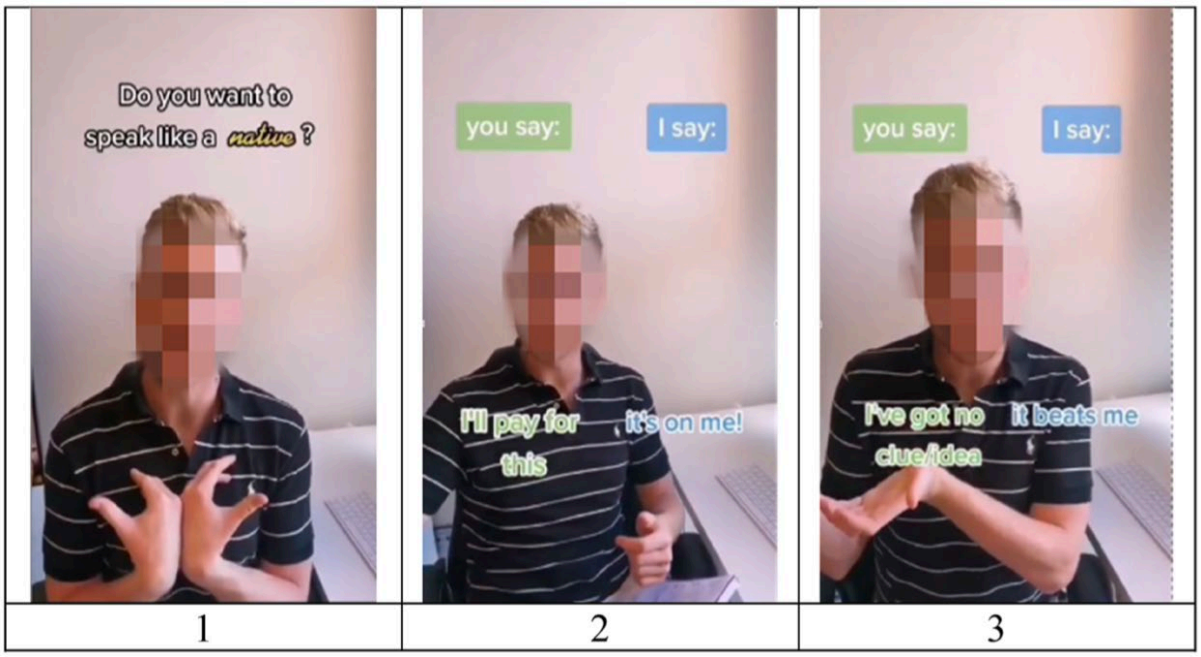


Figure 7. Do you want to speak like a native?

should model. For example, in a reel focusing on teaching expressions that would make one 'native' Brian asks the question "Do you want to speak like a native"? which is also displayed as a caption in the video (Figure 7, Shot 1). Here, the word native is in a different color (yellow) and italicized. This textual enhancement in the caption further reinforces the notions of exceptionalism and uniqueness that are associated with idealized nativeness. Additionally, he points his hands towards himself when he utters the word 'native' which contributes to the meaning-making process and his portrayal of authority.

Later in the same reel, Brian contrasts the audience's English ('you say,' implying non-native speakers) with his own ('I say,' as the native speaker) (Figure 7, Shots 2–3). Doing so, he introduces a series of expressions which would be used by a learner or a non-native speaker ('you say'), followed by what he would say as the native speaker ('I say'). The expressions are displayed in written form on the screen in different colors – 'you say' in green and 'I say' in blue. He also uses gestures to differentiate between the expressions, creating a further sense of opposition and exclusivity. While the 'you say' expressions characterized and implied as learner language appear to be formal and non-idiomatic, the "I say" alternatives are informal and idiomatic expressions.

In another reel focusing on pronunciation, Brian highlights his nativeness as authority by highlighting his English accent. The reel begins with him saying “Learn how to pronounce these words with my English accent” accompanied by the same caption on the screen (Figure 8, Shot 1). The phrase ‘English accent’ is presented in all caps highlighted in orange and followed by the UK flag sticker. In addition, he points to

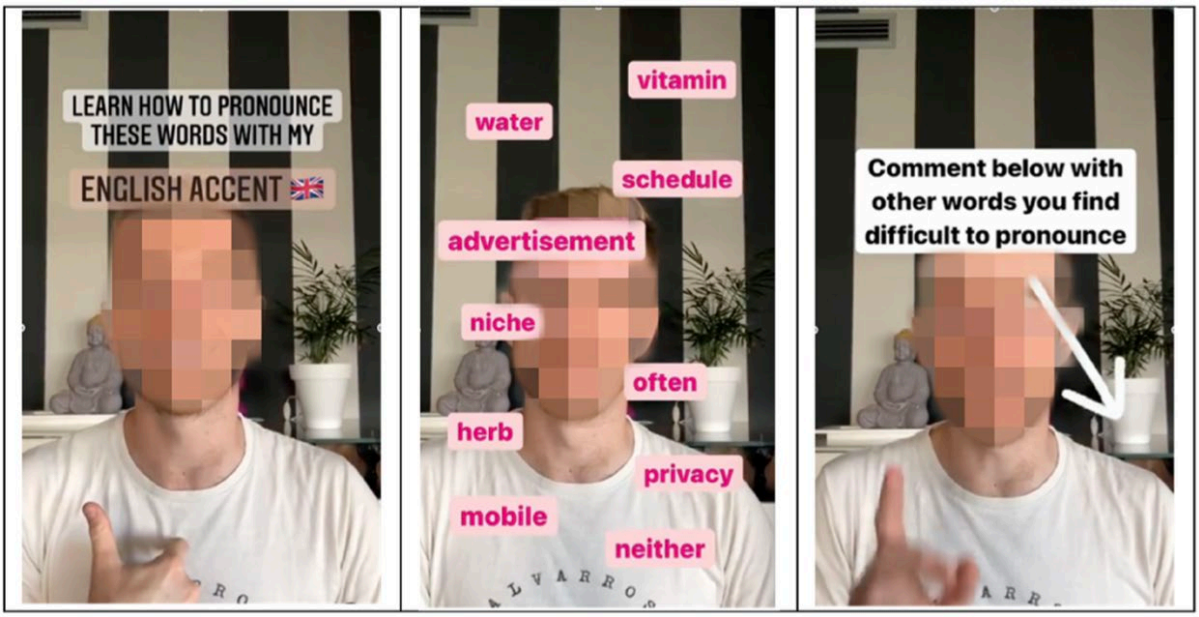


Figure 8. My English accent.

himself with his right hand when he says, ‘with my English accent.’ Using two different modes (written text and gesture), he highlights his linguistic identity and nationality which bears long-standing power and privilege. This display of authority about the English variety and culture to which he belongs may have contributed to his internet celebrity quality of exceptionalism, as evidenced in the huge number of followers he has accrued on Instagram. After presenting several words (e.g., vitamin, advertisement, schedule, herb) and demonstrating how they are pronounced in British English (Figure 8, Shot 2), Brian ends his video by asking his followers to share in the comments other words they find difficult to pronounce (Figure 8, Shot 3), offering his exceptional ‘linguistic capital’ as a credible authority on the English language.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this article was to explore the intersections between authenticity and nativeness in the English language teaching reels of two British micro-celebrity teachers on Instagram. The findings revealed evidence of claiming authority for linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge in various forms that draw on attributes of nativeness and exceptionalism. In this vein, authenticity is construed as ‘realness’ (Gilmore 2007) establishing a link between the ‘native speaker cultural capital’ and the learner. Discursive foregrounding of nativeness as a unique and idealized goal conflates authenticity and nativeness (Buendgens-Kosten 2013). Such ideologies can create negative consequences for both learners and teachers whose first language is not English. For learners, being exposed to

content that favors or encourages native-based linguistic performance can induce self-doubt and issues in willingness to communicate due to fears of making a mistake (Lee 2024). Similarly, teachers who identify as nonnative speakers of English may experience discrimination and develop negative professional identity and self-image issues (Curran 2023; Selvi 2014).

Additionally, the notion of exclusivity was evident in the way that the UK is presented as a space and place for the accumulation of cultural capital, likely perpetuating native speaker saviorism by associating nativeness in the English language with Western cultural norms and practices (Jenks and Lee 2020). This framing of the UK is problematic, as it positions the West as the authentic bearer of the English language and excludes other varieties of English and their speakers (Lowe and Pinner 2016). While previous research on native-speakerism has revealed diverse beliefs and attitudes towards native and non-native speaker teachers (see Selvi et al. 2023 for a recent comprehensive overview), more research is needed to explore the notion of authenticity and native-speakerism in platformized digital teaching spaces.

Finally, many of the reels featured exoticism that involved everyday aspects of life in the UK through contextualized explanations for linguistic units or enacted communication situations in authentic or simulated environments. Such spontaneous and creative enactments of communication situations, or what is also known as embodied enactment (Ho and Tai 2021; Tai and Brandt 2018) enable content creators to enhance authenticity and highlight cultural nuances by integrating their own personality and teaching pedagogy. Doing so, they may appear more approachable and relatable to learners of English in that the personalized, intimate, and multimodal content can increase engagement in learning. The findings of the present study also highlight the transformative effects of platformized social media environments on our understanding of the concept of authenticity in English language teaching. More specifically, once confined to classroom materials known as realia (e.g., newspapers, magazines, maps, tickets, brochures), authenticity in digital spaces can involve immersive and engaging learning experiences highlighting connections between linguistic units and the real world. In the changing landscape of online language learning and teaching, future research is needed to explore learners' perceptions of authenticity and engagement with microcelebrity language teachers.

Microcelebrity teachers' experiences under platformization have been seen as characterized by the 'vulnerable' and 'forced' nature of creating themselves as brands within the context of neoliberalism and the gig economy (Curran and Jenks 2023; Ho 2023; Nejadghanbar et al. 2024). Nevertheless, these studies also demonstrated how these teachers actively navigate the new trend of platformization and use it to their advantage by "resisting the rules of the game" (Nejadghanbar et al. 2024, pp. 16–18) and "rebranding [themselves] as a real teacher" by discrediting substandard content to showcase their 'realness'. Our study contributes to the understanding of the discursive and multimodal construction of authenticity by examining how microcelebrity teachers draw on different linguistic and multimodal resources to showcase their everyday lives and personalities and present themselves as 'authentic' teachers using cultural capital, culturism, and authority.

As much as using social media platforms to create or establish professional brands, some social media-based influencer teachers also promote their own individual tutoring business (face-to-face or online) independent from the social media platform. Oftentimes, teaching on social media platforms can be seen as a promotional tool for teachers' teaching practices beyond social media, such as signing up for their online or offline language lessons (e.g., trips in London or one-on-one and face-to-face tutoring sessions) which generate monetary rewards. Many teachers, including the two teachers we focused on in our study, have their own (offline) language teaching business. While the boundaries between online and offline teaching spaces can be blurry or they may be embedded (see Bhatt 2024; Wang and Canagarajah 2024 for a discussion of the postdigital context), platformization provides new pathways for teachers to sustain their careers and allow greater ownership of their own teaching pedagogies and content.

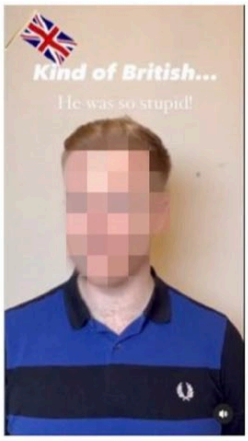
This study has several limitations. Firstly, our analysis is limited to two teachers and their Instagram content. Given the multitude of social media platforms and individuals taking part in online language teaching, there is bound to be variation in how authenticity is manifested in teaching content. Additionally, our study only focused on British teachers. It would be interesting to explore the accounts of other Anglophone and non-Anglophone English teachers as well as languages other than English . Another limitation has to do with the lack of the analysis of the teachers' own perspectives on their digital pedagogy. Despite our best efforts, we were unable to receive a response to our invitation to interview from the two teachers whose accounts we focused on in this article. Finally, it is important to note that teaching on social media platforms such as Instagram allows for various kinds of interactions between teachers and learners, such as leaving comments after watching the video either to ask questions or to engage in prolonged discussions about the lesson. This is an affordance of commenting free from the constraints of time and space, enabling teachers and learners to take on different roles such that "the traditional 'teacher-student' expectations are negotiated, contested and even reversed" (Ho and Tai 2021: 19). Our analysis did not focus on student perspectives of authenticity, so it is important that future research explore user comments and/or learners' perceptions of authenticity.

The findings have several pedagogical implications, one of which relates to quality control. While there are many experienced and qualified English language teachers are on social media, there are many others creating content with little to no teaching qualification. In addition, the teaching is not based on clear pedagogical principles, and the content delivered is usually unstructured. Another issue is related to the bite-sized nature of social media content, which is generally condensed into 1 min or less (particularly on Instagram); such content poses challenges for teachers to present meaningful content. Therefore, we need to better equip teachers with the necessary digital literacy skills to establish their own brand on social media platforms and survive in precarious digital spaces (Selvi 2025). More specifically, teacher education programs must offer training opportunities that will help teachers obtain the necessary digital literacies to master multimodal design and content creation. In other words, we need to shift our focus from teachers who wish to integrate

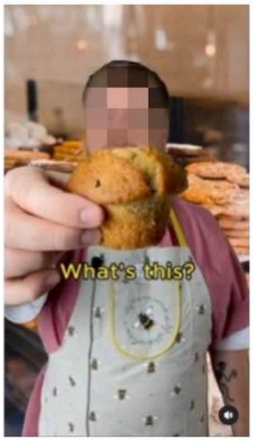
technology into their classes to those teachers who wish to integrate themselves into platformized online language teaching spaces.

Appendix: Examples of multimodal transcription

Example 1.

Time	Speech	Text on screen (subtitles)	Screen-capture	Sound effect	Camera angle	Mode
00:01	He was so stupid	Kind of British… (preceded by a British flag sticker) He was so stupid		No sound effect	Close up	Gaze: looking at the camera
00:05	Ah, he was a bloody doughnut!	…very British (preceded by a British flag sticker) He was a bloody doughnut!		No sound effect	Close up	Gaze: looking at the camera

Example 2.

Time	Speech	Text on screen (subtitles)	Screen-capture	Sound effect	Camera angle	Mode
00:01	What's this	What's this?		Mellow accordion music in the background	Close up shot	Directly looking at the camera
00:02	It's a muffin	It's a muffin.		Mellow accordion music in the background	Close up shot	Directly looking at the camera

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