

Digital Storytelling on Social Media for Language Learning: Students' Experiences and Perceptions

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Abstract:

Inspired by the digital storytelling (DST) of social media celebrities, language learners create their own DST to practise the language and engage with audience for intercultural communication. In this study, students' DST on social media attracted over 60,000 viewers, fostering intercultural exchange. Class observations and in-depth interviews reveal that factors such as wordplay, accents, dialects, and idioms, and the use of double meanings in different contexts significantly boost students' motivation to learn the language. Multimodality emerges as a powerful tool for language practice and intercultural engagement. Students describe this learning experience as autonomous and enriching, as it provides practical insights into everyday language use and cultivates greater cultural awareness. The findings highlight DST on social media as a promising method for language learning and intercultural communication, offering an enjoyable learning process while delivering meaningful and impactful outcomes.

Keywords: social media, digital storytelling, language learning, intercultural communication

1 Introduction

In the current digital world, technology, innovation, and active learning are among the top skills increasing sought after by employers, as graduates are expected to demonstrate these competencies (World Economic Forum, 2020). For university students to become effective contributors in their future careers, it is essential to developing language, cultural, and technological competence. Therefore, students need to be trained not only as language learners but also as language users and social agents. This shift in focus expands the objectives of language teaching to include intercultural communication, transitioning from the acquisition of linguistic knowledge to using language for meaningful intercultural exchanges.

This evolution underscores the importance of communicative competence, which integrates the ability to use the target language effectively and situates it within an intercultural communicative context. To achieve this, students need opportunities to actively engage with the language, participate in diverse communicative scenarios, and work within authentic and multimodal contexts. By using the language in real-world settings and interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds, students develop not only the ability to communicate effectively in varied contexts but also the skills to engage meaningfully with people from other cultures.

Digital platforms have emerged as vital tools to facilitate language practice and intercultural communication exchanges. O'Dowd and O'Rourke (2019) insightfully point out that Online Intercultural Exchange (OIE) as a pedagogical tool that connects people from diverse

cultures, enabling them to exchange information and share common interests. This conceptualization of foreign language learning as communication as a site for both communication and intercultural awareness development has positioned OIE as an appealing strategy in language education. Moreover, OIE provides a framework for students to develop not only language and cultural competencies but also a broad array of 21st century skills – often refer to as “non-cognitive skills,” “soft skills,” “transferable skills,” “transversal competencies,” “life skills” or “social-emotional skills” (GPE, 2020).

Within this context, this study adopts a digital storytelling (DST) approach on a multimodality platform to explore the aspects of social media influencers’ OIE that inspire language learning. It further examines how students’ creation of DST on social media can better prepare them for the demands of the modern workplace by cultivating essential 21st-century skills.

2 Literature review

In this study, literature will be reviewed from two aspects: the influence of social media celebrities on language learning and the role of DST with multimodality in language practice and intercultural communication.

Social media for language learning

Social media has become an integral part of lives (Gangwar, 2022), and social media celebrities -- also known as internet influencers, internet celebrities, web celebrities, microcelebrities -- are gaining significant popularity. Unlike movie stars who perform script roles, social media celebrities present themselves in natural and conversational ways, making their content relatable and accessible for language learners. Exposure to their speech patterns allows students to familiarize themselves with different dialects and accents, fostering a deeper understanding of the language. Additionally, these celebrities provide insights into the culture and lifestyle of the country they represent, making language learning a more immersive experience. By addressing current and youth-oriented topics, their content becomes a valuable resource for learners to engage with language and culture in meaningful ways. Moreover, the entertaining nature of social media content enhances learners’ enjoyment of the process.

The interactive nature of social media platforms like Tik Tok and YouTube further supports language learners in practising their language skills while engaging with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Ruth Page, the Perkins Prize winner in 2020, emphasizes in her new book *Narrative Online* the significance of influencers’ story telling as vivid examples of how social media can impact on everyday life. These stories, often rooted in personal experiences, enable viewers to relate them to their own lives, fostering a sense of connection. Social media’s interactive nature, such as ‘like’ buttons and comment sections, contribute to forming DST communities. These communities function as social groups with shared interests, fostering contextual affiliations that resonate with audiences.

Similarly, digital anthropologist and ethnographer Abidin (2018) contextualizes the rise of social media celebrities in contemporary culture. Her analysis highlight how online fame, driven by participatory culture and shared identities, enhance audience engagement, and the impact of social media celebrities.

Social media celebrities can also serve as role models for language learners. As Chang and Kabilan (2024) assert, “E-Portfolios have great potential in supporting students’ learning and development by providing an environment for them to reflect critically on their experiences and engage in meaningful dialogues” (p1-28). Influencers’ DST can act as e-portfolios, enabling learners to practice language skills while gaining cultural insights.

Popular digital platforms like Instagram and Facebook allow social media celebrities to interact with diverse audiences using multimodal and multilingual repertoires. Ho, (2022) highlights that such interaction often leads to spontaneous communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

Safitri and Tari (2025) examined how learners utilize influencer content on social media platforms to enhance their language learning and found that influencers’ natural and conversational communication style immerses learners in authentic language use, enhancing both their motivation and proficiency. Learners particularly appreciate the relatable and entertaining nature of influencer content, which offers an interactive alternative to traditional classroom methods. Similarly, Tarigan et al (2021) identified Instagram as a highly effective platform for language learning. Their research demonstrated that Instagram provides an innovative learning environment where students take ownership of their learning and ideas. The platform serves as an effective tool for showcasing learning while fostering creativity and engagement, and cooperative learning, positively impacting material exploration, motivation, academic satisfaction, and achievements.

Social media for language learning has been flourishing to attract followers within the vast ecology of internet users. It has been used for Arabic language learning (Alwaely, et al 2023), for English language learning (Ali), for in-school and out-of-school literacy practices (Yeh and Mitric, 2023), and for language learning assessment (Alsaadi, 2021). However, scarcely any studies have been conducted to analyse the features of social media celebrities’ DST for learning and practising Chinese, a language spoken by one hundred forty million people in China, and this gap warrants investigation.

DST with multimodality for language practice and for intercultural communication.

DST, a multi-media narrative technique, has been identified as a powerful tool for facilitating meaning-making processes (Rolbiecki, et al, 2025). In language learning, DST integrates multimedia elements such as audio and video to enhance learners’ comprehension of vocabulary, phrases, and grammar structures. This method can also build learners’ confidence in using the language (Tecedor, 2023). By integrating these elements, DST further supports pronunciation and intonation. Writing narratives further supports vocabulary and grammar development, while visual aids like images and videos cater to diverse learning styles (Abdel et al., 2022).

DST is widely used in educational settings, from language classrooms to online and self-directed learning platforms. It promotes self-discovery and exploration of human experiences often absent in textbooks (Tecedor, 2023). By providing interactive and immersive learning experiences, DST serves as a bridge between language learning and intercultural communication.

Multimodality, the use of diverse modes – such as speech, writing, images, gesture, and gestures – to convey meaning, is central to DST. As Muntaha, et al, (2023) explain,

multimodal approaches to language teaching incorporates audio, visual, textual, gestural and spatial resources to facilitate language learning by fostering creativity and spontaneity. With the increasing adoption of educational technologies, multimodality has become a cornerstone of modern language teaching, enabling students to express themselves through diverse forms of communication (Dressman, 2020). Xie and Jiang (2024) further highlight how multimodality facilitates authentic and creative expressions in language learning.

In intercultural communication, multimodality enables the co-construction and negotiation of meanings across different modes of expression (Adami, 2023). A multimodal approach offers a holistic view of semiotic practices, illustrating how interlocutors use various resources to create and interpret meanings.

While existing research has explored various multimodal approaches to intercultural communication, these studies often focus on specific aspects, such as using drama for intercultural communication skills (Shang, et al, 2024), live interpreting via medium, mode and the modal (Gamal, 2023), and written communication in electronic formats (Guo and Stapa, 2023), limited attention has been given to the use of social media influencers' DST as a medium for language learning and cultural positioning. Furthermore, there is little research on students creating their own DST using multimodal resources. This study aims to address this gap by investigating how students can achieve cultural positioning and enhance intercultural communication competence through multimodal and multilingual DST. The following research questions drive this study:

RQ1: What factors in social media influencers' DST motivate learners to practice the language?

RQ2: How does multimodality contribute to students' own DST for practicing the language and facilitating intercultural communication?

3 Methodology

This empirical study investigates the potential of social media celebrities' DST as a tool for enhancing language learning and intercultural communication skills through the analysis of social media celebrity videos, students' DST performances, class observations, and in-depth interviews.

Social media celebrity video selection

Social media celebrities in this study include macro-influencers with over 100,000 followers (table 1.1, 1.4), micro-influencers specializing in niche expertise with more than 10,000 followers (table 1.3), semi-professional influencers with comparable followers (table 1.2), and ordinary individuals recognized for their specialized knowledge. These categories allow for a broad exploration of DSTs that foster intimate and relatable engagement for language learners.

While follower count served as a selection criterion, the primary goal of the study was to evaluate the utility of DST for language learning and intercultural communication. Therefore, the research employed the three Vs of communication—verbal, vocal, and visual (Azer, et al, 2022)—as a framework, encompassing language accuracy, structural clarity, and physical effects. Detailed criteria include: 1) language appropriateness with content suitable for language learners; 2) engagement with stimulating and relatable material; 3) humorous style

which enhances the enjoyment of learning; and 4) popularity with a substantial viewership (over 10,000 views) to qualify as ‘celebrity’. DSTs were excluded if they 1) were advertisements; 2) exhibited strong political biases; 3) lacked a focus on language or culture; or 4) were in languages other than Chinese.

Two researchers independently reviewed and rated DSTs on a scale of 1 to 10 based on these criteria. Selected DSTs are summarized in Table 1, detailing influencer names, viewer counts, video characteristics, and links.

Table 1 Social media influencer’ YouTube Videos

Name	No of viewers	Characteristics	YouTube links
1.1 Yang Bo	170k	one-liner	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFV5zaVvq44
1.2 Informal Talk	15k	play with words	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5uf_IJLZusY&list=PLHe2fSFRIYqTgvAgmLMXe9K45Z60h3xfK&index=2
1.3 Kevin	411k	comparison	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpgLeXa6enE
1.4 Doudou	200k	play with word order	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGqaTqP8G_g

These DSTs humorously address contemporary social issues, stimulating audience interest. Subtitles were added to facilitate reflection on linguistic nuances and cultural humour, particularly for the students in this study who had recently returned from a year abroad study in China.

Participants

Participants were voluntarily recruited from final-year Chinese-majored students at a UK university. Ethical approval was obtained from the university. The cohort consisted of 36 students (21 female, 15 male) aged 20-25 with varying Chinese proficiency levels: two students had passed HSK5 (equivalent to CEFR (European framework) C1, six students having passed HSK4 (equivalent to CEFR B2), and the rest did not take an international Chinese test.

Students were informed that social media celebrities’ DSTs would be incorporated into their learning materials, and that they would produce their own DST as part of their coursework. Peer and tutor feedback on DST presentations was encouraged, alongside self-assessment and commentary on both professional and student-generated DSTs. At the end of the semester, six students whose DST received the most comments volunteered for follow-up interviews. To ensure anonymity, the real names of the interviewees were omitted.

Classes were automatically video recorded by the university to accommodate students who were unable to attend classes and to support those with special needs.

Implementation

The study spanned 12 weeks in the first semester of 2023–2024.

Weeks 1–4: Students analysed internet influencer-generated DSTs, focusing on language, humour, and cultural relevance.

Weeks 5–6: Students created their own DSTs using multimodal formats (e.g., videos, mini-plays) and uploaded them to social media for intercultural communication practice.

Weeks 7–9: Students presented their DSTs in class, received feedback from peers and tutor, and incorporated revisions into their final submissions.

Weeks 10–11: Students submitted their DST to the language tutor as supplementary materials for oral examinations.

Students must compose DST in multimodality form and put their DST in social media to interact with the viewers for intercultural communication.

Data collection and analysis

Permission was obtained to use classroom recordings for research purposes. Focus-group interviews were conducted to enable dynamic discussions and encourage collective commentary on shared experiences. Semin-structured questions explored: 1) experiences and benefits of creating DST, 2) challenges encountered; 3) usability and interactivity of DST; 4) impact on linguistic development; 5) insights into the target culture; and 6) suggestions for improving DST use in language learning.

Interviews (30 to 45 minutes) were conducted in English and transcribed for thematic analysis. Open coding methods were employed to classify, tabulate, and combine evidence to answer the research questions. Themes were initially categorized into six areas based on keywords and the examples associated with them: 1) Playing with words making language learning enjoyable; 2) Accents, dialects, and idioms arousing students' curiosity; 3) The function of sounds and gestures in conveying meanings; 4) Double meanings of the same word used in different contexts; 5) Understanding cultural differences; and 6) Intercultural communications. After discussions between researchers and the language tutor, Themes 5 and 6 were merged to avoid overlap. The final coding schema is detailed in Appendix 1.

To ensure consistency, two researchers independently coded the transcripts and reconciles discrepancies through discussion with the language tutor. The rationale behind the coding rests on the study's exploratory nature and the nuanced, complex phenomena under investigation. Acknowledging the intrinsic variability in language learning experiences and outcomes, this research design leverages the depth and richness of data gleaned from a carefully curated coding to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of DST's utility in this context. The researchers selected students' comments, language tutor's observation notes, and video recordings around key words and dimensions. This approach aligns with the principle that the selection should be intrinsically tied to the study's objectives, design, methodology, and pragmatic considerations. Indeed, in exploratory research contexts, well selected materials for coding yield insightful, meaningful, and statistically significant outcomes.

Triangulating of data sources – including video recordings, class observations, student learning outcomes, and interview transcripts – enhanced the reliability and depth of analysis (interview questions are available upon request).

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Students' privacy was protected, and all data were anonymized.

Learning outcomes were assessed via oral examination scores, measuring content, structure, vocabulary, grammar, and fluency. Intercultural communication competency was evaluated during interactive Q&A sessions with tutors.

By triangulating multiple data sources, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the role of DST in language learning and intercultural communication.

4 Results

The findings are categorized into the following five aspects: 1) playing with words making language learning enjoyable; 2) accents, dialects, and idioms sparking students' curiosity, 3) the role of sounds and gestures in conveying meaning, 4) double meanings of the same word in different contexts; and 5) understanding cultural differences for intercultural communication. Finding 1 through 3 address Research Question 1: What factors in social media influencers' DST motivate learners to practice the language? Findings 4 and 5 pertain to Research Question 2: How does multimodality contribute to students' own DST in practicing the language and facilitating intercultural communication?

Finding 1: Playing with words making language learning enjoyable

Students found the playful use of words in social media celebrity DSTs engaging and fun, contrasting with traditional textbook-based language learning.

For instance, in the first DST (table 1.1), the social media celebrity cleverly reversed word order in '记录真实 to record the truth' and '真实记录 to truthfully record' the shift the meaning. The photographers want to make fun of the celebrity by filming him in an awkward position of getting into the water in a public bath with the excuse of "truthfully recording". To avoid his embarrassment, the celebrity reversed the word order, indicating that they do not need to record everything because what is photographed is true is sufficient without recording everything that is true.

This playful linguistic manipulation led to class discussions, where students explored other wordplay examples, such as: 朋友圈 circle of friends, 圈朋友 to gather friends into the circle, 学生会 student union 会学生 meet students, 鸡蛋 egg 蛋鸡 chicken that can lay eggs, 大学生 university student 升大学 go up (from middle school) to the university.

Students also delved into humorous idioms and slang, such as replacing '压力 pressure' with '鸭梨 pear' which has the same pronunciation to reduce stress humorously. Another example was '程序员 programmer' transformed into '程序猿 program monkey, playfully depicting programmers' work routines. Students also found adding new meanings to the existing words interesting, e.g., to replace '多行不义必自毙 to do more things but not righteous is equivalent to killing yourself' with '多行不疫必自毙 to go out more during the pandemic is equivalent to killing yourself. The former is a well-known idiom, but because the pronunciation of 'not righteous' is the same as 'pandemic' and to replace 义 with 疫, the idiom becomes. Because the original idiom is well-known to every household, a change of one word with another word with the same pronunciation makes everybody aware of the

consequences of going out during the pandemic. Students enjoy playing with words and they learn more meanings associated with the words.

In interviews, students highlighted their enjoyment of wordplay. Examples like ‘上课 attend class’ vs ‘课上 during the class’, and ‘一生爱你 lifelong love for you’ vs 爱你一生 love you forever’ sparked discussion about poetic nuances and romantic expressions in Chinese.

Finding 2: Accents, dialects, and idioms sparking students’ curiosity

Social media DSTs introduced students to diverse accents, dialects, and idiomatic expressions, fostering curiosity about regional linguistic and cultural differences.

In one example (table 1.1), the celebrity shows that it is hard for people from other cities to find a job in Shanghai (the biggest city in China). He described an anecdote that he went to a job interview in Shanghai, and could not understand the interviewer’s accent, so he asked, “Could you please not to use your Shanghai accent?”, as he thought that Shanghainese deliberately used Shanghai accent to show that they are superior to people from other places, but the interviewer said, “I was speaking English” (to tease the interviewee that he does not understand English). The interviewee said “but this is in China” indicating why you are showing off your English with Chinese people in China. The interviewer said, “the interview is to recruit an interpreter”. Students get the sarcasm in the dialogue and taste the power of playing with the accents or dialects of the language. This DST led to class discussions about regional accents and stereotypes.

Another DST (table 1.2) explored idioms. A Chinese idiom ‘吃醋 eat vinegar’ means ‘jealousy’, which resonated with students’ personal experience. For example, one student related this idiom to Shanxi 山西 region’s tradition of drinking vinegar. In the old days, vinegar was more expensive than wine, and people stored vinegar in barrows or jars instead of in bottles. People could tell if a family was wealthy or not by counting how many vinegar barrows or jars a family had. Even now, the local people have a glass of vinegar instead of a soft drink before a meal. The student recalled that her language partner took her to China Town and tasted some vinegar in a Chinese restaurant “it is not bad, a bit sour, a bit sweet, tasty”. She explained to other students that the idiom indicates that the one with more vinegar causes other people sour (jealous). Cultural practices relate to linguistic expressions.

Discussions expanded to other idioms, as can be seen from the class observations. A student from Ireland said “I heard a story that in the old days in China, a woman was having an affair with a man living at the other end of the village. When her husband went out of the village wearing a green hat, the man at the end of the village knew it was a hint from the woman, so he could come to the woman’s house. The idiom of ‘戴绿帽子 wearing a green hat’ means a wife or girlfriend is having an affair. But I am an Irish man. Whenever we have a big festival, we wear big and fat green hats”. Another student recalled that he likes eating bean curd since his childhood, but people should not say eating bean curd because it symbolizes the tenderness of a girl’s breasts, so ‘eat bean curd 吃豆腐’ means taking advantage of a girl. When the student said this idiom in a live show of 非诚勿扰 with 106,000 viewers, the comments in the social media were ‘Wow, he even knows this’. ‘His Chinese is brilliant’. ‘His Chinese is unbelievably good’, and the student said he never gets such comments when using the Chinese learned from textbooks.

The idiomatic and colloquial use of the language is what people say in their everyday life, which cannot be ignored. Once students are interested, they would like to explore more meanings attached to the words and more idiomatic use of the language and in this way, their language skills and cultural understanding are enhanced.

Finding 3: Double meanings of the same word in different contexts

DSTs highlighted how identical words could have varying meanings in different contexts, prompting students to consider nuances in language.

For instance, a DST (Table 1.3) demonstrated cultural differences in interpreting the same social phenomena. The exaggeration makes the DST entertaining but after a laugh when the audience digests it, there is an element of truth, that is, people from different cultures might see the same thing but from different angles. For example, the third DST shows that some western people have learned some Chinese four-word idioms (the most popular and classic expression) and think they have learned a lot, but it is only a drop in the sea, as for Chinese people, there are a lot more similar words in the idioms with subtle differences to be used for precise descriptions. This helps students realize that it is important to know the nuance when learning a language, as similar-looking words may have meanings completely different.

Students discussed contrasts more in-depth, as seen in the class observation that from some words that Chinese and western people have different concepts, e.g., discipline or not discipline preschool children, parents in both east and west believe that children should have some reading before going to sleep. Chinese parents tend to arrange for children to recognize some characters and recite some famous poems, while western parents might personally read one or stories next to the children's bed to make it easier for children to sleep.

A heritage student recalled in the interview that when she was at school, she had to do additional homework assigned by her mom, including reading, writing, history, geography, etc. To complete the homework, she had to get up early, 'early 早' to Chinese people means 6 o'clock or before while to her English peers, 'early 早' might mean 8 o'clock or later.

Another heritage student recalled In the interviews that at a family gathering talking about future. She said 'My dream is to become an interpreter in the United Nations. My grandparents gave me a black look. Later, my parents told me that dream in Chinese context is something unrealistic that you can never achieve, while in western context, it is a goal, your personal goal that you should follow'. Other students commented that linguistic and cultural connotations help us understand how language and culture intertwine. The more students know about the cultural differences, the more they can understand why people say the language in a certain way and the connotations behind the words. This experience highlighted the importance of understanding linguistic and cultural connotations.

Finding 4: Understanding cultural differences for intercultural communication

The interplay between language and culture was evident in DSTs, where words carried different meanings based on context. For example, 老(old) could mean 'old and useless' when referring to iron and steel but 'long-standing and reliable' when describing friendships. The same is true with the word 铁(iron). When used in the context of iron and steel, it means the physical material itself, but when used to refer to friends, it means the friendship 老铁(old

iron) is as strong as iron, and therefore when the two words 老铁 are used together it means friendship between old friends is strong and solid in Chinese culture.

Students further discussed other regional expressions, such as ‘大咖 big coffee’, originating from Minnan (one of the minority groups in the south) dialect to describe influential figures. Over time, this term gained popularity in formal contexts, illustrating how dialectal expressions evolve into mainstream language.

An interesting phenomenon was highlighted during in the interview: young people today often use a mixture of codes in social media communication. A student explained “The + sign means ‘add,’ and U stands for ‘you.’ The pronunciation of U sounds like 油 (petrol) in Chinese. Combining + (add) and U (petrol) gives 加油 (add petrol), means ‘to cheer up’ or ‘keep going’. People often feel encouraged and uplifted after seeing these symbols. Students are well-acquainted with their meanings and frequently use the symbols in their social media. These examples demonstrated how cultural nuances and linguistic creativity enrich communication.

Finding 5: The role of sounds and gestures in conveying meaning

DSTs often utilize sounds and gestures to enhance communication. For instance, in one DST, a celebrity mimicked the sound of a Hoover to humorously describe poor service at a barber shop. The sounds from the Hoover made students feel that they could see the barber moving a Hoover around a customer’s head and neck to get rid of the hair after a haircut. Students commented that sometimes, sounds and gestures speak more than words, and students started to apply sounds and gestures to their own presentations. Indeed, with the auxiliary means, students can convey their meanings more quickly, more clearly, and more powerfully.

Inspired by this, students incorporated sounds and gestures into their own DSTs. In one case, a student used a low tone to mimic the drum rhythms of Shanxi 陕西 province, captivating the class with a local rap performance. He talked about it in the interview that when he heard it from his Chinese flatmate for the first time, he was fascinated by the local culture. From social media platforms, they saw how people live in a vast area full of bare mountains. Local people must walk miles to go to the school, market, animal stock, etc. On the way, they have nothing else to do but to sing in the local dialect and their singing travels far and wide. These multimodal elements allowed students to express ideas more effectively, fostering creativity and engagement.

Students’ own DST

Encouraged by social media celebrity DSTs, students created their own DSTs, incorporating wordplay, dialects, sounds gestures, and multimodal elements. They are proud of what they have produced, as they are their own products and thus, they feel they have a sense of achievement. Examples are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Students’ own DST

 <p>二手生活</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qe54u7M_K8k</p>	 <p>微视界</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKMs1fAnfOw</p>
 <p>充足电 电充足</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W0WIZzoIXWM</p>	 <p>走吧</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHG-wV8rrLw</p>

In the first DST, the students accounted that as an eco-friendly choice, buying second-hand clothes can reduce the demand for new clothing and reduce the amount of waste generated in the factories, thus reducing pollution. Also, it is cost-effective for students who like to stay on top of the latest fashion trends but don't have the budget to buy new clothes all the time. By making this DST, students enjoyed the experience in that they could express their second-hand sale concept by acting as models themselves, showing their everyday life on campus, the backgrounds, the scenes, the actions, and the words they spoke, all means of multimodality orchestra together to make a coherent and harmonious effect, which was just what they wanted to achieve.

The strong point in the second DST is the witty use of words. The meaning she expresses is to use VR to see the world in the current digital context. The first character 微 means micro, the middle word 视 means 'see' when used alone, but when used together with the last word 界, the pronunciation can make it '世界 the world' and thus the three characters put together means 'to use the micro glasses to see the world', which is exactly the theme of her DST.

The strength of the third DST is a combination of graphs and Chinese characters. The idea that the student wants to express is that with the increasing reliance on mobile phones in people's daily lives, a mobile charger has become essential. With a mobile charger, people no longer worry about their phone running out of battery, as people can get their phones charged at any time to avoid missing important calls or messages due to a low battery, and this peace of mind is particularly useful for people who rely on their phones for work or other important activities. The character 电 looks like an electric box with wires, and the student connects one end of the wire with the charger device and the other end of the wire with a mobile. To play with word order '充足电 to charge fully' and '电充足 fully charged' makes the DST cute, and the combination of the graph and character perfectly illustrates the function of the charger.

The highlight of the fourth video is the visual impact. The background of the mountains indicates outdoor activities, and the footprint tells that the activity is walking. The characters of the walk and bar illustrate the paths for walking. People might have heard of ‘酒吧 pub’, and ‘网吧 internet hub’, but this 吧 is a place where people gather for a ‘走 walk’ and therefore it is called ‘走吧 a walking club’. This app shows who is available and the best paths for a walk, then click the app, and friends can gather and go out for a walk, especially when under academic pressure.

Language is a social phenomenon, which reflects what is happening in society. The advance of new technology brings in new words or new meanings to the established words which are created to reflect the new phenomena. It is good to see that students can keep abreast with the advance of new technology, the progress of society, and the modern use of the established language.

The most conspicuous advantage of students’ DST results from multimodality which can be seen by a comparison between DST by social media celebrities and by students. Social media celebrity DST talks about accents and dialects on the stage while student DST1 takes the audience to the campus proudly showing off their second-hand clothes in their everyday life. They used a northern accent and southern accent, etc., to show that people everywhere wear second-hand clothes, which are much more vivid and closer to life. Social media celebrity DST talks about food with vinegar and related words and idioms. Students DST2 not only talks but also shows different parts of China, including the local food, folk music, minority ethnic dresses, and special dialects, and all these contribute to the multimodality with a combination of visual, verbal, and gestural means, which makes the audience feel that they are there in China. Social media influencer DST plays the word order vocally on the stage, while the student’s DST3 is vocally and visually. As he talks about the electricity charger, he shows the image as well which is more powerful than just words. The social media celebrity DST mimics the sounds of a Hoover, the DST4 uses the image of footprints and the background of mountains and rivers to hint at walking outdoors, which is easier to understand and more appealing.

Students’ DST was more personified by the dynamic interaction with the aid of multimodality. The advent of multimedia, digital, and communication technologies led to a new epoch regarding the place, mode, and configuration of the stories. Digital technology, especially social media has transfigured the creation, performance, experience, distribution, and reception of indigenous media. The multimodal nature of student DSTs provided a dynamic platform for language practice and intercultural communication, demonstrating the transformative impact of combining digital tools with language learning.

5 Discussion

In answer to RQ1: What factors in social media influencers’ DST motivate learners to practice the language? findings from this study reveal that wordplay, accents, dialects, and idioms play a pivotal role in sparking students’ curiosity and making language learning enjoyable. Additionally, the multimodal nature of social media platforms, where influencer DSTs are delivered, enhances engagement and interaction as highlighted in Finding 5.

Factors in influencers’ DST that stimulate learners’ interest to practice the language

Among the factors identified, wordplay emerged as the most engaging for students. It facilitated lively discussions and highlighted linguistic and cultural nuances. Students noted that puns, rhymes, and alliterations made vocabulary more memorable. For instance, a student recalled the Lunar New Year greeting ‘年年有余 have abundance year after year’, where ‘余 abundance’ shares its pronunciation with ‘鱼 fish’. To have fish every year means to have plenty of fortune every year. This clever use of homophones connects language to cultural traditions, enhancing retention and comprehension.

Wordplay also aligns with speech act theory (Ashraf et al, 2025), which emphasizes the use language, humour, and performance to engage audiences. This theory underscores the dual role of language as both entertainment and a medium for reflection, making wordplay a valuable tool for language tutors to create engaging and memorable learning experiences.

Accents and dialects further enhance students’ understanding of linguistic diversity and regional variations in Chinese. Northern accents, characterized by a strong ‘er’ sound and southern accents often struggle with retroflex sounds like ‘zh’ ‘ch’ and ‘sh’, provide opportunities for exploration. In class presentation, students exaggerated these features, blending humour with sociolinguistic insight. This not only deepened their understanding of accents but also sparked discussion about the social identities and cultural contexts associated with language use, as emphasized by Muqowwam et al (2025). Language tutors can use these insights to lead discussion on the sociolinguistic dimensions of accents and dialects, helping students connect linguistic features to broader cultural and society identities, as “Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is a reflection of complex social identities and cultural contexts” (Muqowwam et al, 2025:513).

Multimodality’s contribution to students’ own DST

In response to RQ2: How does multimodality contribute to students’ own DST for practicing the language and facilitating intercultural communication? findings indicate that multimodal communication – including visual, auditory, textual, and kinesthetic elements – creates a rich and engaging learning experience.

Students discovered that incorporating the three Vs of communication (verbal, vocal, and visual) into their DST added depth and creativity. For instance, the use of homophones and numeric substitutions, such as ‘888’ (fortune, fortune, fortune) and ‘518’ (I will make fortune), not only entertained viewers but also provided cultural insights into Chinese linguistic traditions. These playful elements encouraged students to explore language in a low-pressure, dynamic manner, fostering creativity and engagement.

Double meanings in different contexts also revealed cultural nuances. For example, the phrase ‘我牛 I am cow’ in Chinese colloquially means ‘I am awesome’, contrasting with its negative connotations in English. Probably because cows are one of the strongest among domestic animals that made great contribution in agriculture in Chinese context. This exemplifies how understanding cultural context can deepen students’ engagement with language, as they learn to navigate subtle differences in meaning. Creating presentation with these factors fosters creativity, which can make learning feel less mechanical and more dynamic. Language tutors and give students creative tasks like inventing DST with these factors.

Multimodality integrates linguistic, auditory, visual, and kinaesthetic resources to convey information, as noted by Kress and van Leeuwen (2010). This approach looks at the many different modes that people use to communicate with each other and to express themselves. In language education, it refers to the practice of using multiple modes of communication, such as visuals, audio, gestures, text, and spatial elements, to enhance language acquisition by engaging learners through different sensory channels and learning styles, creating a richer and more dynamic learning environment.

Multimodality in language education includes verbal system comprising linguistic codes such as printed word, speech, and non-verbal system encapsulating the non-linguistic world of images, pictures, concrete objects, or events, symbolizing the structural and functional properties of language and the non-linguistic world, respectively. A representation in one system can activate an associated link or connection in the other, as pointed out by Guenier (2022) that the utilization of a multimodal approach empowers educators to connect various meanings of linguistic terms to specific contexts by structuring learning activities. This context-driven understanding can leave a lasting impact on students and enhance their comprehension through interactions involving multiple modes of communication by extending learning to other educational settings with a wider array of multimodal pedagogical tools beyond films, TV series, and Tmall websites.

This mode of learning is also embraced by Rohi and Nurhayati (2024) that multimodal learning in students' acquisition enhanced understanding, improved retention, encouraged participation and motivation, and accommodated different learning styles. By broadening the options within a learning environment, multimodality allow students to share knowledge and experience using more than one mode. Compared with learning a language with texts as fundamental units for understanding language structures, multimodality integrate various resources to provide students with more opportunities to understand the texts and to express themselves. Visual aids can enhance students' understanding (Lim and Kessler, 2024), auditory activities with immersive language experiences can improve students' auditory competency (Harsa et al, 2020), and kinesthetic like gesture and physical movement offer practical experiences that significantly enhance language learning (González-Carriedo et al., 2020).

Furthermore, students' DST on social media fosters multiple literacies not confined to academic and linguistic literacy but also including technological and media literacy (Cheung and Shi, 2025), cultural awareness (Shi & Cheung, 2024), and a 'third space' for the students to share their stories, identities and cultures (Guenier and Ge, 2022). Students' own DST in this study becomes a medium of self-expression, a way to communicate a human experience that is not often portrayed in textbooks and other mainstream instructional materials. Furthermore, students producing their own DST serves to bridge the gap between university classes and students' future professions, as well as prepare them with digital skills which are required in the digital era.

Students' own DST in multimodality for intercultural communication

Social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube provided the perfect venue for students to share their DSTs, enabling real-time feedback from viewers worldwide. This genuine interaction with diverse audiences enriched students' intercultural communication skills. For example, one student created a mini video showcasing her Chinese learning

journey, incorporating calligraph to explain how Chinese characters resemble mountains and rivers. Her DST attracted over 60,000 viewers globally, boosting her confidence and motivating her to create more content. This aligns with Tecedor's (2023) findings that DST is a particularly helpful way of engaging viewers in the content. The design and development of DST call for many of the skills required of citizens in the 21st century, and as such, they represent a significant instructional tool for incorporating a multiliteracies pedagogy into the classroom. Indeed, language learners need technology-enabled learning activities for real-life communication, rather than to access the learning materials from paper to digital materials online. Therefore, the focus of language teaching needs to move beyond linguistic ability toward workplace-based and academic literacy practices integrating digital information, and visual and multimodal modes. Students need to have self-presentation practices and skills that include discursive competence, content production skills, and the ability to engage audiences through creativity and effectivity. Content creators must build and nourish social relationships to create a sense of friendship with the audience, as it helps them appear to be socializing.

Students' own DST incorporating multimodality elements, including videos, images, audio, voices, and gestures into their mini talk, which becomes a more engaging and memorable learning experience. Students juxtapose different dialects, accents, discourses, styles, and approaches, and they gain substantively in meta-cognitive and meta-linguistic abilities and in their ability to reflect critically on complex systems and their interactions, which indicates that multimodality can be a powerful tool to facilitate DST for language practice.

The study results also highlight the role that social media plays in making language learning enjoyable. Students' DST on social media encourages exploration of not just language, but also the subtle cultural elements that shape communication. This finding is consistent with Abidin's (2020) concepts that current social media ecosystem serves as an icon in understanding communicative and visual practices which reflects today's digital social media cultures.

Language tutors can leverage social media as a learning resource, encouraging students to use it for language practice. Page's (2020) insights on shared stories highlight the impact of social media on everyday life, reinforcing its potential as a platform for engaging and meaningful language learning.

Limitations and implications

This study was conducted with advanced students who had recently returned from their residence abroad study in China, providing them with substantial cultural knowledge and experience. Future research could explore whether DST-based methods are equally effective for students with lower language proficiency. If proven successful, this approach could benefit a wider range of learners.

A practical implication is that students already engage with social media in their daily lives. Leveraging this familiarity for language learning offers access to dynamic, up-to-date learning resources. Additionally, interactions with global audiences provide invaluable opportunities for real-life intercultural communication. For example, one participant's DST garnered over 60,000 viewers, demonstrating how DST can enrich language learning experiences and enhance intercultural communication.

6 Conclusion

This study investigated the factors in social media celebrities' DST that influenced students' language learning and explored the role of multimodality in students' own DST for practicing the language and intercultural communication. The findings highlight that elements such as wordplay, accents, dialects, and idioms significantly contribute to students' motivation to learn, practice and enjoy the language. The study also demonstrates the impact of multimodality in enhancing students' own DST. The use of double meanings in different contexts, combined with direct communication with audiences and viewers, fosters intercultural communication and a deeper understanding of cultural differences. Multimodal elements, including sounds and gestures, emerged as critical tools for conveying meaning and making language learning more engaging and interactive. These findings address a gap in prior research by providing empirical evidence of the benefits of students creating their own DST on social media. The study underscores how this approach enables students to develop and master the multimodal skills essential for effective communication in today's increasingly interconnected digital world. Future research could explore the integration of AI into DST, investigating the potential to further enhance language practise language and intercultural communication competence. This direction offers exciting possibilities for leveraging emerging technologies to deepen and expand the impact of DST in language education.

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Appendix 1 Coding schema with corresponding examples

Codes	Examples
Wordplay making language learning enjoyable.	I find playing with words good fun.
Accents, dialects, and idioms sparking students' curiosity.	Accents and dialects make me even more interested in regional culture.
The role of sounds and gestures in conveying meaning.	Sounds and gestures help a lot in understanding the message.
Double meanings of the same word in different contexts.	I feel excited when I discover something that has different interpretations in different cultures.
Understanding cultural differences for intercultural communication.	By directly messaging with viewers of different cultures, I feel more confident in intercultural communication.