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Parasocial Relationships and Pedagogy: A Qualitative Study of ELT Influencers on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a powerful tool for language learning, yet little research has examined how ELT influencers use these platforms to design educational content and engage learners in informal language-learning environments. This study investigates the motivations behind ELT influencers' content, how they simplify English language teaching for diverse learners, and how they manage the demands of personal branding alongside educational integrity. Grounded in Engagement Theory and Parasocial Interaction, the study interviewed 12 ELT influencers and observed their Instagram profiles over three months. The findings reveal that these influencers are driven by a genuine desire to bridge the gap for learners who lack access to traditional language education. They simplify language rules using practical examples, storytelling, and step-by-step lessons designed for quick, accessible learning. Interactive tools like polls and live sessions encourage active learner engagement and participation. The study's main finding is that ELT influencers balance educational integrity with social media engagement by integrating entertainment with education while maintaining their pedagogical goals. They leverage personal narratives and interactivity to build trust and deeper engagement, supporting accessible, informal language learning through social media. This study contributes to the growing body of research on educational influencers by providing insight into the pedagogical strategies, engagement practices, and relationship-building approaches used by ELT influencers in digital learning environments. Future research should investigate how these influencers' methods evolve across different platforms and learning contexts, including their potential role in supporting international students.

Keywords: engagement theory, English language teaching, Instagram, parasocial relationships, qualitative interviews, social media influencers

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has changed how people access and engage with educational content (Perez et al., 2023). A key development in this area is the rise of educational influencers (Gil-Quintana & Vida de León, 2021), particularly in fields like English Language Teaching (ELT). Social media platforms have allowed ELT influencers to reach global audiences, offering informal, yet highly engaging content to help learners improve their English language skills (Izquierdo-Iranzo & Gallardo-Echenique, 2020). These platforms are particularly relevant for prospective and current international students, many of whom rely on digital resources to strengthen their English proficiency and academic communication skills before and during their studies abroad (Fass-Holmes & Paniagua, 2026). Despite their growing popularity, there is limited research on how ELT influencers maintain learner engagement and how their content supports informal language learning. This gap presents an opportunity to study how these influencers create content that keeps learners motivated while also making English language learning more accessible.

Much of the existing research on influencers has focused on their role in consumer behaviour and marketing, where they shape trends and preferences (Fowler & Thomas, 2023; Nor et al., 2025). However, in the context of education, especially ELT, influencers serve a different function. They act as both educators and content creators, balancing the need to teach effectively with the pressure to engage audiences through entertainment and personal connection (Carpenter et al., 2023; Iqbal et al., 2026). This combination of teaching and content creation is especially relevant for English language learners, including international students who increasingly use digital platforms to complement formal language instruction and prepare for academic study in English-medium environments (Xin et al., 2025). Understanding how these influencers design their posts, interact with followers, and maintain engagement is essential to better grasp their role in modern language learning.

The need for this research is rooted in the evolving nature of education in the digital age, where learners increasingly turn to online platforms for self-directed learning (Ansari & Khan, 2020). For many prospective and current international students, digital English-learning resources provide an accessible supplement to formal language instruction, helping them develop the linguistic competence and academic communication skills needed to study in English-medium environments (Tran, 2020).

Despite this growing reliance on social media for informal language learning, little is known about how ELT influencers design educational content, foster sustained learner engagement, and balance pedagogical goals with the demands of social media. Addressing this gap is important for understanding the pedagogical potential of these increasingly influential digital learning environments. ELT influencers, in particular, offer a bridge between formal education and more flexible, accessible learning methods. By studying their content, this study provides insights into the pedagogical strategies and engagement practices used by ELT influencers, extending current understanding of digital language education and offering a foundation for future research involving international student populations.

To guide this study, the following research questions have been developed:

- What are the motivations and pedagogical strategies employed by ELT influencers when creating educational content?

- How do ELT influencers engage with their followers, and what role does personalization play in fostering effective learning experiences?
- How do ELT influencers balance the pressures of maintaining social media engagement with ensuring pedagogical integrity in their content?

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, social media has become a powerful tool for both content creators and educators to reach vast audiences, allowing them to share their knowledge in accessible and engaging ways (Azhar et al., 2024; Schroeder et al., 2024). These influencers are individuals who use their personal expertise and authority in a subject to share educational content that can benefit their audience. While research has covered influencers in areas like beauty, fashion, and lifestyle (Alipour et al., 2025; Azhar, Wel, & Ab Hamid, 2025) extensively, educational influencers, especially those focusing on English Language Teaching (ELT), have received less attention in academic discourse.

Who Are Educational Influencers?

Educational influencers are individuals who use social media platforms to share information, tutorials, and tips related to a specific subject area (Carpenter et al., 2023). Unlike traditional educators who operate within formal learning environments, these influencers create informal learning opportunities through digital platforms (Carpenter et al., 2021). They often leverage their personal brand and storytelling abilities to build a community of learners who engage with their content regularly (Cooper et al., 2022). Educational influencers operate in diverse fields, including science, mathematics, health, and languages, offering learners an alternative to classroom-based instruction.

In the field of language education, influencers focusing on ELT are emerging as a new group of content creators who provide language learning resources through social media. These influencers teach grammar rules, pronunciation, and vocabulary through posts, reels, and videos. ELT influencers are particularly relevant in today's globalized world where English is widely regarded as an essential skill for communication, professional development, and access to information. Although studies have acknowledged the growing presence of educational influencers, limited attention has been given to how ELT influencers design pedagogically meaningful content, foster sustained learner engagement, and establish trusted relationships with their audiences. Addressing these issues is important for understanding the role of ELT influencers in informal language learning environments.

Engagement Theory in the Context of ELT Influencers

Engagement Theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the pedagogical strategies employed by ELT influencers in content creation. This theory emphasizes that learning is most effective when it involves active participation, collaboration, and interaction with content (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). According to the theory, meaningful learning occurs when learners actively engage with educational activities rather than passively receive information.

Research on digital education has emphasized that interactive content increases learner engagement, particularly when learners are encouraged to participate actively in the learning process (Azhar, Wel, Hamid, et al., 2025; Martin & Borup, 2022). ELT influencers leverage this by fostering two-way interactions with their audience, where followers contribute their thoughts, ask questions, and engage in discussions. This interactive approach not only enhances engagement but also makes learning more accessible, particularly for self-directed learners who turn to social media for flexible learning opportunities (Davis, 2023).

Moreover, storytelling and the use of personal narratives on social media profiles can further enhance engagement (Atiq et al., 2022). Research has shown that storytelling can significantly improve learning outcomes by providing context and relatability (Wu & Chen, 2020). ELT influencers often share personal experiences related to learning English, traveling to English-speaking countries, or navigating language barriers. These stories humanize the influencers and create a more approachable, relatable learning environment.

Parasocial Relationships

The theory of Parasocial Interaction, which explains how individuals develop one-sided relationships with media personalities (Horton & Wohl, 1956), provides further insight into the engagement strategies of educators using social media. ELT influencers, like other digital figures, cultivate parasocial relationships that make their audience feel emotionally connected to them. This connection is vital in building trust (Breves et al., 2021), which is especially crucial in the context of educational content. Learners are more likely to engage with, and trust, content that feels personalized and authentic (Dolan et al., 2019). This sense of connection allows influencers to guide learners through complex language topics while maintaining the feeling of a personalized learning experience.

However, this trust can be delicate, especially when influencers face the pressure of balancing authenticity with commercial interests (Audrezet et al., 2020). Many influencers are cautious about overwhelming their content with promotional material, such as sponsored posts or product endorsements, as this can erode the sense of trust they've built with their audience (Childers et al., 2019). Striking a balance between personal branding and authenticity is essential for maintaining strong parasocial relationships, which form the foundation of engagement for many influencers.

Educational influencers carry the responsibility of providing accurate, reliable content while sustaining audience engagement. Trust is central to this relationship because followers rely on influencers' expertise to support their learning. Excessive promotional content can weaken that trust and reduce an influencer's credibility as an educational source. As a result, educational influencers must carefully balance personal branding with pedagogical integrity to maintain learner confidence and engagement.

Figure 1: *Conceptual Framework*



This balance is especially important for ELT influencers, whose content supports learners in developing English proficiency for education, professional communication, and everyday interactions. Because followers depend on the accuracy and credibility of this content, authenticity plays an important

role in sustaining engagement and encouraging continued participation in language learning. Promotional content or endorsements that diminish educational value may weaken learners' trust and reduce long-term engagement with the content.

RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative study utilized a combination of semi-structured interviews and systematic observation of social media profiles to investigate how ELT influencers create educational content and engage with their followers. Combining these methods provided complementary sources of data, allowing the study to examine both influencers' reported perspectives and their observable content creation and engagement practices. The study's data were analysed using NVivo to facilitate the systematic coding and thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and observational data.

Participants

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit 12 ELT influencers for the study. The inclusion criteria required that each influencer had a minimum of 10,000 followers on Instagram and regularly posted content focused on English language teaching. Purposive sampling was selected to recruit participants with established experience in creating ELT content and engaging audiences through social media. Influencers were selected based on their active engagement with their followers, their ability to simplify complex English language concepts, and their use of varied content formats (e.g., posts, reels, stories, and live sessions). To ensure diversity, the participants represented different regions, including the USA, UK, Australia, India, Brazil, Pakistan, France, Malaysia, and others, thus providing a broad range of perspectives on language teaching, audience interaction, and content creation strategies. All participants were contacted directly through social media platforms, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation.

Table 1: *Participants Profiles*

Influencer	Country	Level of English Teaching	Number of Followers (in 000s)	Primary Teaching Focus
P1	USA	Intermediate	20	Grammar Rules
P2	UK	Advanced	15	Pronunciation
P3	Australia	Beginner	35	Basic Vocabulary
P4	China	Intermediate	22	Tenses
P5	India	Beginner	25	Speaking Practice
P6	Brazil	Advanced	18	IELTS Preparation
P7	USA	Intermediate	30	Listening Skills
P8	UK	Beginner	28	Vocabulary Building
P9	Pakistan	Advanced	12	Pronunciation
P10	France	Beginner	32	Daily English Usage
P11	Malaysia	Intermediate	19	Writing Skills
P12	USA	Advanced	26	Business English

Instruments

Two primary instruments were employed in this study:

- Interview Protocol: A semi-structured interview guide was designed to explore influencers' motivations and strategies for content creation. The interviews included open-ended questions that focused on the following key areas:
  - Motivations for Creating Educational Content: The influencers were asked about their reasons for producing content related to English language teaching and how they perceived their role as educators in the online space.
  - Pedagogical Strategies: Questions probed the methods they used to simplify complex English language concepts, especially how they adapted these concepts to fit short-form social media formats.
  - Engagement and Parasocial Relationships: The interview explored techniques the influencers used to foster engagement with their followers and build parasocial relationships that enhance their online presence and interaction.
  - Balancing Personal Branding and Educational Goals: Influencers were asked how they navigated the balance between maintaining their personal brand and providing value-driven educational content.
- Observation Checklist: A structured checklist was developed for the systematic observation of social media profiles. This checklist included categories such as the type of content shared (e.g., reels, live sessions, posts), frequency of posts. Observations focused on how influencers presented educational material and maintained follower engagement. The observation process was conducted over a period of three months, with weekly monitoring of each influencer's profile.

Procedures

The research was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the 12 influencers over Zoom. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and transcriptions were prepared for analysis. The interviews explored the influencers' motivations for creating content, their teaching strategies, and the ways in which they engage with their followers.

The second phase involved the systematic observation of the influencers' social media profiles. Over a three-month period, weekly observations were made to document the types of content being posted and the engagement strategies used. Special attention was given to how the influencers interacted with their followers, such as responding to comments or using interactive tools like polls or quizzes. Detailed notes were taken on the frequency of posts, the format of the educational content, and the level of audience engagement.

Data from both the interviews and the observations were analysed using NVivo. The interview transcripts and observation notes were imported into NVivo and coded to identify recurring patterns related to pedagogical strategies, learner engagement, and content creation practices. Codes were subsequently grouped into broader themes through thematic analysis, with themes reviewed iteratively to ensure they accurately represented the data across both sources. Integrating interview and observational data enabled the findings to reflect both influencers' reported perspectives and their observable social media practices.

Results

Interviews

The thematic analysis identified six key themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews and profile observations of ELT influencers. These themes provide insight into their motivations, teaching strategies, engagement methods, and the challenges they face balancing personal branding with educational

goals. Each theme addresses the research questions, which explored influencers' motivations, strategies for simplifying English language concepts, and their approaches to engagement.

Theme 1: Motivations for Creating Educational Content

One of the primary motivations for ELT influencers was the desire to provide accessible English language education, particularly for learners in non-English-speaking regions. Several influencers expressed the view that traditional language learning resources were often inaccessible or overly complicated, driving them to create content that could fill this gap.

> *"There are people who don't have access to formal classes. My content is for them—it's a way to break down those barriers." – P6*

> *"A lot of people from rural areas or underprivileged communities message me saying that my content is their only way of learning English, and that really drives me to keep going." – P9*

Additionally, many influencers connected their motivation to their personal struggles in learning English, feeling a sense of responsibility to make language learning less daunting for others. This personal connection to their content creation not only fuels their passion but also reinforces their commitment to offering practical, learner-friendly content that addresses common pain points in language acquisition.

> *"I know what it feels like to sit in a class and not understand anything, and I want to make sure others don't go through the same frustration I did." – P1*

> *"When I receive messages from followers thanking me for helping them pass an exam or ace a job interview, I feel like I'm making a real difference in someone's life." – P12*

Theme 2: Simplifying Complex English Concepts

ELT influencers emphasized the need to simplify complex grammatical and linguistic concepts for their audience, employing various strategies to achieve this. Many influencers used real-life scenarios, storytelling, and practical examples to illustrate difficult topics such as tenses, conditional sentences, or idiomatic expressions.

> *"A lot of learners struggle with tenses, so I use examples from everyday situations. It makes abstract grammar rules easier to grasp." – P3*

> *"I never teach an entire grammar structure in one go. Instead, I focus on small parts, gradually building complexity as learners get more comfortable" – P2*

Moreover, influencers reported adopting a step-by-step approach, often segmenting their content into short, digestible lessons. This method allowed learners to process information gradually and build on their understanding, making the learning process more manageable and less intimidating. The use of relatable examples and bite-sized lessons ensured that even the most challenging concepts could be simplified and understood.

> *"When I teach difficult concepts like conditionals or phrasal verbs, I use everyday examples that my followers can relate to, like shopping or social media." – P10*

"Using visuals is essential in my lessons. A simple image can explain what words sometimes can't, especially when explaining things like prepositions or sentence structure" P1

Theme 3: Fostering Engagement Through Interactive Content

Engagement was a critical area of focus for ELT influencers, who implemented various interactive strategies to maintain follower interest and participation. Many influencers used social media features such as polls, quizzes, and live sessions to create a two-way dialogue with their audience.

"I often ask my followers what topics they're struggling with, and that shapes my content. It feels like a partnership in learning." – P11

"I always ask questions during my live sessions or posts because it keeps the learners thinking and interacting. It turns passive learning into active participation" – P5

Another key method was the incorporation of regular feedback loops, where influencers would solicit input from their followers to tailor their content to the learners' evolving needs. This responsive, interactive approach fostered a deeper connection between influencers and their audience, positioning the influencers as more than just content creators—they became facilitators of a community-driven learning experience.

"These sessions are crucial because they allow me to address specific concerns that my learners might not get answered elsewhere." – P7

"I use polls and feedback forms to understand what areas of English my audience wants to focus on. It's about making them feel heard and part of the learning process" - P12

Theme 4: Personalizing Content for Learner Needs

Many influencers also focused on creating personalized content, aimed at addressing the specific language challenges that individual learners faced. Influencers described how they would receive direct messages from followers asking for help on particular topics and would create custom lessons based on those requests.

"Someone reached out about pronunciation, so I made a video breaking down those tricky sounds. It's important to be responsive to their needs." – P11

"I get a lot of messages asking for tips on IELTS preparation, and I try to cater to those individual requests in my videos." – P6

This personalization not only increased engagement but also helped learners feel seen and understood in their educational journey. The influencers recognized that a tailored approach to content creation enabled them to connect more meaningfully with their audience, making the learning experience feel unique and highly relevant to each learner.

"Personalization is key to keeping learners motivated. I regularly ask my followers what their biggest challenge is and use their responses to shape my next series of lessons, ensuring the content addresses their specific pain points." – P6

"I try to address individual learning styles by offering different types of content: videos for visual learners, polls for those who like hands-on learning, and podcasts for auditory learners. It's all about creating an experience that fits everyone." – P11

Theme 5: Balancing Personal Branding with Educational Integrity

A challenge frequently discussed by influencers was the balance between building their personal brand and maintaining the educational integrity of their content. While influencers acknowledged the importance of personal branding for visibility and follower growth, many stressed that the quality of education must come first.

> *"I never want to compromise my lessons for more likes or shares. My value as an influencer comes from how well I teach, not just how many people watch." – P3*

> *"Yes, I need to grow my brand, but that can never come at the expense of the quality of my lessons. My audience trusts me because I stay true to my educational mission." – P1*

Several influencers also described the pressure to constantly create content that would generate high engagement, but they remained committed to ensuring their lessons were pedagogically sound. This balance required careful navigation, where they prioritized trust and authenticity in their educational content over viral trends that might dilute the substance of their lessons.

> *"There's always a temptation to follow the latest trends to get more likes and shares, but I remind myself that my main goal is to help learners improve their English, not just entertain." – P2*

> *"Sometimes I see viral content and wonder if I should be doing the same. But I don't want to compromise the educational value of what I'm teaching just for the sake of going viral." – P8*

> *"Engagement is important, but trust is more important." – P10*

Theme 6: Resilience in Content Creation

Influencers discussed how maintaining resilience is crucial when facing the competing demands of educational value and the high expectations for engagement on social media. One influencer expressed how they maintain their focus on their teaching goals by celebrating small wins, explaining,

> *"It can be tough when a video doesn't perform well in terms of views or likes, but knowing I helped even a single person grasp a challenging concept makes it worthwhile." - P8*

This mindset helps influencers prioritize the impact of their educational content over the fleeting nature of viral success. Another influencer highlighted the importance of pacing themselves and setting limits to avoid burnout:

> *"There are times when the pressure to produce more content becomes overwhelming, but I've learned that taking breaks is necessary. These breaks allow me to come back stronger and more focused on creating content that truly benefits learners." – P4*

Additionally, influencers found motivation through the positive feedback from their followers. One remarked,

> *"Hearing from learners about how my content has helped them overcome a language hurdle reminds me why I do this. It's not about chasing viral trends but about making a difference in someone's language journey." - P5*

Table 2: *Themes and Key Insights*

Research Question (RQ)	Theme	Key Insights
RQ1: Motivation and Pedagogical Strategies	Theme 1: Motivations for Creating Educational Content	ELT influencers are motivated by a desire to make English accessible to those in non-English-speaking regions. Their personal struggles drive content creation. Influencers feel responsible for reducing language learning challenges for others, especially in underprivileged communities.
	Theme 2: Simplifying Complex English Concepts	Influencers use real-life scenarios and practical examples to break down difficult concepts like grammar rules and tenses. Visuals, storytelling, and step-by-step approaches help influencers simplify complex content into more digestible lessons.
RQ2:Engagement and Personalisation	Theme 3: Fostering Engagement Through Interactive Content	ELT influencers use polls, quizzes, and live sessions to create interactive, two-way dialogues with followers, fostering active learning. Influencers seek feedback and adjust their content based on their audience's needs, increasing engagement and making followers feel heard.
	Theme 4: Personalizing Content for Learner Needs	Influencers tailor lessons to individual requests from followers, creating personalized content that resonates with specific learning challenges. Personalization builds deeper connections, as influencers customize their content to cater to various learning styles and unique learner needs.
RQ3: Pedagogical Integrity	Theme 5: Balancing Personal Branding with Educational Integrity	ELT influencers face pressure to generate high engagement but prioritize educational integrity over viral trends, maintaining trust with followers. Influencers resist compromising their lessons for popularity and remain focused on their educational mission, maintaining long-term trust.
	Theme 6: Resilience in Content Creation	Influencers maintain resilience by pacing their content creation, using follower feedback to stay motivated, and avoiding burnout.

Observations

The observations provided valuable insights into the posting behaviours and content strategies of the 12 influencers studied. The profiles of these influencers were monitored over a three-month period, focusing on content categories, types of media shared, and engagement through specific features like live sessions and personal posts. The data revealed patterns in how educational influencers balance content aimed at learning, entertainment, and personal engagement.

The analysis of content categories showed that educational posts accounted for 39% of the 488 observed posts. However, there was substantial variation in how much each influencer focused on education. For example, P1 posted 22 educational posts, accounting for 42% of their total content, while P5 had only one educational post, representing just 2% of their overall content. Entertainment posts comprised 15% of the total posts observed. Influencers like P12 posted a high number of entertainment posts (22), while others, such as P4, shared 8 entertainment posts alongside 12 educational posts. These differences indicate variation in the types of content prioritised by individual influencers.

A notable category that emerged from the observations was content that combined both educational and entertaining elements. These posts accounted for 36% of the total content and were observed across all 12 profiles. Influencers like P5 showed a strong focus on this category, with 75% of their posts blending educational content with entertaining aspects. This pattern suggests that combining instruction with entertainment was a common content strategy, although the study did not directly assess its effects on learners. Sponsored posts made up a smaller portion of the content, comprising only 3% of the total posts. Seven out of the twelve influencers had no sponsored content at all. This suggests that commercial promotion was relatively limited among the influencers observed, although their motivations for posting cannot be determined from these figures alone. Influencers like P5 and P12, who did engage in sponsored posts, still kept the number relatively low, with P12 having six sponsored posts, representing 10% of their total content.

Personal posts, which allowed influencers to share more intimate or personal aspects of their lives, made up 10% of the total content. Influencers like P9 shared 16 personal posts (26% of their total), while others like P6 and P7 shared none during the observation period. This variation suggests that while some influencers use personal content to connect with their audience on a deeper level, others maintain a more educationally focused online presence.

Engagement Through Live Sessions Live sessions were another aspect of the observations. They accounted for 6% of the total observed content and offered opportunities for real-time interaction between influencers and their followers. Influencers like P11 stood out with 8 recorded live sessions, equivalent to 57% of their reported post count, while several others did not use live sessions at all. This disparity indicates differing strategies among influencers in how they engage their audiences, with some relying more heavily on direct, live interactions to maintain engagement.

Table 3: *Observations from Instagram Profiles*

Influencer	No. of Posts	Educational	Entertainment	Both (Educational and Entertaining)	Sponsored Posts	Personal Posts	Live Sessions
P1	52	22 (42%)	2 (4%)	22 (42%)	1 (2%)	6 (12%)	4 (8%)
P2	33	10 (30%)	3 (9%)	11 (33%)	2 (6%)	3 (9%)	2 (6%)
P3	69	33 (48%)	5 (7%)	21 (30%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
P4	22	12 (55%)	8 (36%)	2 (9%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
P5	44	1 (2%)	2 (5%)	33 (75%)	3 (7%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
P6	52	22 (42%)	3 (6%)	12 (23%)	0 (0%)	5 (10%)	0 (0%)
P7	22	11 (50%)	2 (9%)	10 (45%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (14%)
P8	33	16 (49%)	4 (12%)	6 (18%)	0 (0%)	3 (9%)	6 (18%)
P9	61	26 (43%)	8 (13%)	22 (36%)	4 (7%)	16 (26%)	2 (3%)
P10	28	11 (39%)	9 (32%)	14 (50%)	0 (0%)	2 (7%)	0 (0%)
P11	14	7 (50%)	3 (21%)	3 (21%)	0 (0%)	3 (21%)	8 (57%)

Influencer	No. of Posts	Educational	Entertainment	Both (Educational and Entertaining)	Sponsored Posts	Personal Posts	Live Sessions
P12	58	21 (36%)	22 (38%)	19 (33%)	6 (10%)	8 (14%)	1 (2%)
Total	488	192 (33%)	71 (15%)	175 (36%)	16 (3%)	47 (10%)	27 (6%)

During the observation period, several patterns emerged in the influencers' posting practices that corresponded with themes identified in the interviews. For example, many influencers shared short videos breaking down complex English language rules into short, manageable lessons. One influencer, P3, frequently posted 60-second reels simplifying grammar concepts, such as the difference between "their" and "they're," using colourful graphics and humour to present the material in an accessible format.

Another notable pattern was the use of interactive content to engage followers directly, particularly polls and question boxes on Instagram Stories. P8, for example, frequently posted polls asking followers about common English language challenges they faced, such as "What's more confusing: past perfect or future perfect?" These features enabled the influencer to collect feedback on learners' difficulties, which could inform subsequent content. This observation was consistent with the personalisation strategies described during the interviews.

Additionally, some influencers used personal anecdotes to connect with their audience while sharing educational content. For instance, P9 combined storytelling with lessons, sharing personal experiences of learning English as a second language to make the content more relatable. These posts addressed common language-learning challenges, including pronunciation, and provided examples of how personal experiences were incorporated into educational content..

Discussion

This study explored how ELT influencers create educational content, engage their audiences, and balance personal branding with their educational goals. The findings suggest that ELT influencers combine pedagogical strategies, interactive engagement, and personal branding to create accessible forms of informal language learning through social media. These findings extend existing research on educational influencers by demonstrating how teaching practices and audience engagement are integrated within digital learning environments.

The interviews and observations indicate that participants viewed educational value as their primary objective while recognising the need to maintain audience engagement in a competitive social media environment. Rather than treating education and entertainment as competing priorities, many influencers integrated both within the same content to sustain learner interest without compromising their educational goals.

A prominent finding from both the interviews and observations was the frequent use of content that combined educational and entertaining elements. This pattern is consistent with Engagement Theory (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998), which emphasises active participation as an important component of learning. ELT influencers frequently used relatable examples, humour, and interactive features, such as quizzes and polls, to make complex linguistic concepts easier to understand. These practices illustrate how social media affordances can support learner engagement by encouraging interaction and contextualising language instruction within familiar, everyday experiences.

The interviews further indicated that participants placed strong emphasis on maintaining the educational value of their content despite the ongoing demands of social media content creation. Many described educational objectives as guiding their content decisions, even when this approach did not maximise engagement metrics such as likes and shares. This finding differs from influencer marketing research, which often emphasises audience growth and engagement metrics as primary drivers of content creation (Lowe-Calverley & Grieve, 2021). Instead, the participants described balancing personal branding

with educational integrity, suggesting that audience engagement was viewed as a means of supporting learning rather than an end in itself.

The findings also underscore the importance of parasocial relationships in educational content creation. Participants consistently described building personal connections with followers as an important strategy for fostering trust and sustained engagement. Parasocial Interaction Theory (Horton & Wohl, 1956) provides a useful framework for understanding how perceived closeness between influencers and followers may encourage continued engagement with educational content. Within the context of ELT, participants associated authenticity with educational credibility and recognised that excessive commercial content could weaken learners' trust in their expertise. These findings suggest that parasocial relationships support engagement by reinforcing perceptions of authenticity and credibility rather than by replacing pedagogical quality.

Resilience also emerged as a recurring theme. Participants described the challenge of maintaining a consistent flow of educational content while responding to the demands of social media platforms. Rather than pursuing short-term visibility through viral trends, they emphasised consistency, educational purpose, and positive learner feedback as motivations for continued content creation. This finding suggests that sustained engagement in educational influencing depends not only on platform metrics but also on creators' commitment to their educational objectives.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study provides insights into the strategies used by ELT influencers, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study focused exclusively on Instagram, which limits the scope of analysis. Platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook provide different affordances for content creation and audience interaction, which may influence how educational content is designed and delivered. Expanding future research to multiple platforms would provide a more comprehensive understanding of educational influencing across different social media environments.

Another limitation relates to the qualitative nature of the study. Although the interviews and observations provided in-depth insights into influencers' practices, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. Future research could adopt mixed-methods approaches by combining qualitative data with quantitative measures, such as engagement statistics, longitudinal analyses of audience growth, or surveys examining learners' perceptions of educational content.

The study also examined the perspectives of ELT influencers rather than those of their followers. Consequently, the findings reflect influencers' reported experiences and observed practices but do not capture how learners interpret, engage with, or benefit from the content. Future research should incorporate learners' perspectives through interviews, surveys, or focus groups to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social media-based language learning.

Finally, although this study highlights the potential relevance of ELT influencers for informal language learning, it did not include international students as participants or evaluate language learning outcomes directly. Future research could examine how international students use ELT influencers alongside formal language support and explore the influence of social media-based learning on language development, academic communication, and educational adjustment.

Significance and Contribution

This study contributes to the growing body of research on educational influencers by examining ELT influencers as a distinct group within digital language education. While previous research has largely focused on influencers in consumer-oriented domains, this study explores how ELT influencers integrate pedagogical strategies, audience engagement, and personal branding within social media environments.

The findings provide insight into the ways educational content is designed and delivered through informal digital learning spaces.

The study also contributes to the application of Engagement Theory and Parasocial Interaction Theory within the context of ELT influencers. The findings suggest that interactive features, such as quizzes, polls, and personalised communication, are used to encourage learner engagement, while perceptions of authenticity and trust support sustained audience interaction. These findings extend existing discussions of digital learning by illustrating how pedagogical practices and relationship-building strategies intersect within social media-based language education.

From a practical perspective, the findings offer insights for educators and content creators seeking to use social media as a supplementary language-learning environment. The study highlights approaches used by ELT influencers to present educational content in accessible and engaging ways while maintaining credibility and authenticity in their online interactions. Although the study did not examine international students directly, the findings are relevant to digital language learning in contexts where learners supplement formal instruction with online educational resources. As increasing numbers of prospective and current international students use social media to develop English language skills, the pedagogical strategies identified in this study provide a foundation for future research examining how ELT influencers may support informal language learning alongside formal educational settings.

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