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Learning Romance Languages with Influencers: Mission (im)possible?

Abstract: Influencers and their videos play a central role in young people's media consumption. These videos are watched for both entertainment and information purposes. In this paper, we will explore the question of whether influencer videos are suitable for second language learning, more specifically French, Italian, and Spanish, in schools, and which competencies and literacies are required for language learning with influencer videos. Empirical findings will not be discussed, but a framework for further scientific endeavors and empirical surveys will be established. The aim of the paper is to show the potential of influencer videos for the language learning process despite linguistic hurdles.

Keywords: Romance Languages, YouTube, influencers, Social Media, Media Literacy

1 Introduction

In the 21st century, social media apps have not only become important places of entertainment but also essential sources of information for people of all ages (cf. mpfs 2021, 40). Learning no longer only takes place in formal learning settings but ubiquitously. The boundaries between informal and formal learning settings are becoming increasingly blurred (cf. Uhl 2019).

Social media come with their own (set of) rules and develop continuously. Users of social media apps are not only consumers but also producers, so-called prosumers. The traditional triad of author, reader, and publisher, which could still be discerned in earlier times, has lost its significance in this particular context. In addition to traditional media providers, such as newspapers or broadcasters, a new important group of producers can be found on different social media platforms: individuals who have a high number of followers who these individuals provide with information. Through their reach and impact, they have become so-called influencers (cf. Aran-Ramspott et al. 2018).

For language learners, these influencers provide new opportunities to engage with authentic materials (cf. Buendgens-Kosten 2013). *YouTube* videos and *Instagram* reels, *Tik-Tok* videos and tweets are current, authentic artefacts that meet the demands of incidental consumption as they are usually very short (cf. Uhl 2019). To make learning effective, media and visual literacies are often necessary in addition to linguistic skills when trying to grasp the content. This is where the interdisciplinary potential but also the interdisciplinary requirements of language learning lie: when it comes to decoding visual and linguistic elements of a multimodal text, you need to identify the text's literary or cultural context and bear in mind the rules and affordances of the media itself.

There are only a few current publications in reputable international journals and anthologies on language learning with social media. They mostly focus on the use of vlogs, i.e. video blogs, and learning English in formal and informal language learning settings (e.g. Uhl 2019; Aloraini and Cardoso 2020; Pikhart and Botezat 2021). Therefore, this article will focus on learning Romance languages in a formal classroom setting from an Austrian point of view. We will critically evaluate the possibilities, challenges, and limitations of engaging with influencers in a language learning context. This will reveal which skills are necessary for dealing with social media and linguistic challenges, it help develop a framework for multimedia and competence-based learning. Based on these theoretical considerations, we will try to answer the question whether the use of authentic influencer videos in Romance languages is possible and which obstacles must be overcome.

2 Competence-based language learning

Foreign language teaching in the 21st century can be described by the call for skill-based learning (e.g. Brune 2020; Ehlers 2007; Hallet 2015b), task-based language learning (e.g. Brune 2020; Surkamp 2007) and authenticity (e.g. Buendgens-Kosten 2013; Ollivier 2018), among others. Many of these approaches go back to Weinert's (2001, 27–28) definition of *competence*. He describes *competence* as a set of cognitive skills that are acquired and used in different and diverse situations to solve problems. In addition to the subject-related competencies, which, in lan-

guage teaching, are the linguistic competencies of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, he also mentions cross-curricular competencies, such as problem-solving competence or the ability to work in a team, and action competencies, which cover the social, motivational, volitional, and moral components.

Weinert's definition of the concept of competence is a pedagogical and rather encompassing one and a basis of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), which focuses on a task-based understanding of competence in the context of language learning. For two decades, the CEFR has served as a basis for the development of foreign language curricula in schools, among other things, and as a guideline for language teachers and learners. In its current version, it presents itself as a complex construct of different areas of competence:

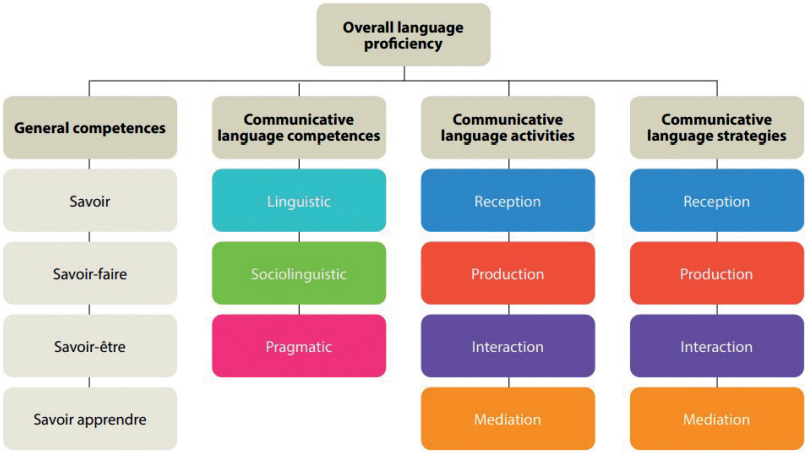

Fig. 1: The structure of the CEFR descriptive scheme (Council of Europe 2020, 32)

Whereas earlier versions of the CEFR came in the form of a matrix of four skills (listening, reading, writing, speaking) and three elements (grammatical structure, vocabulary, phonology/graphology), the current version emphasizes that "a move away from the matrix […] may promote communicative criteria for quality of performance" and that "the

distinction 'reception, interaction, production' recalls classifications used for learning and performance strategies and may well facilitate a broader concept of strategic competence" (Council of Europe 2020, 33). The performative approach still prevails, but the focus shifts toward accomplishing communicative tasks on an interactive and strategic level. The CEFR explains this shift by referring to authenticity and an orientation towards the real world, as the former matrix "has increasingly proved inadequate in capturing the complex reality of communication. […]. The [new] organization proposed by the CEFR is closer to real-life language use, which is grounded in interaction in which meaning is co-constructed" (ibid.).

To participate in a conversation (whether written or oral), one must possess receptive, productive and interactional skills; one has to react to what the other person says. To do so, mediation is needed, that is to say, "the two key notions of co-construction of meaning in interaction and constant movement between the individual and social level in language learning, mainly through its vision of the user/learner as a social agent" (Council of Europe 2020, 36). On a strategic level, mediation means "linking to previous knowledge", "adapting language" and "breaking down complicated information" (ib., 90). Mediating a text, hence, includes, for example, "explaining data", "translating a written text" or "analysis and criticism of creative texts" (ibid.). Creative texts, according to the CEFR, are not only written texts, but cover a wider range of works: "Film, theatre, recitals and multimodal installations are just some of the other types of creative text, as works of imagination and cultural significance" (ib., 105). To consume and understand multimodal texts, audio-visual comprehension is required to be able to co-construct meaning.

A competent language user must not only have knowledge and skills, but must also be able to use them actively in (interactive) speech acts. Verbal and non-verbal, as well as auditory and visual aspects, must be considered equally, especially in multimodal contexts. Language use, regardless of whether it is the first, second or third language, means recognizing, understanding, and contextualizing linguistic and non-linguistic signs, to understand and respond to them (in interactive settings). Successfully using a language is thus, amongst other things, linked to listening and visual comprehension. When it comes to the reception of audio-visual media, different codes must be taken into consideration.

According to Biechele (2010, 118), who refers to the semiotic status of films and different film genres in her article, audio-visual comprehension comprises perception, understanding and interpretation of both images and sounds (e.g. spoken language, background sounds, music) in their respective codes.

Nowadays Biechele's focus on films, however, is too restricted, since TV series and videos, for example on *YouTube*, *Snapchat*, *Instagram* or *TikTok*, are currently the central audio-visual elements of young people's lives (cf. mpfs 2021, 37–48). Nevertheless, the extension of the four skills originally distinguished in the CEFR by visual and audio-visual comprehension seems justified in a visually dominated "culture of digitality" (Stalder 2017). Biechele (2011, 15) correctly states, long before the most recent revision of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020), that pure listening comprehension in real life is quite limited (e.g. radio broadcasts, podcasts, or loudspeaker announcements). Consequently, audio-visual comprehension is a very important part of everyday life and therefore has to be focused on in language learning and teaching as well.

2.1 Multimodal reading comprehension

When text is integrated into multimedia content, reading comprehension also comes into play as a central point in the comprehension process (cf. Ehlers 2007). When it comes to reading, different goals can be pursued: the acquisition of different reading purposes (*skimming*, *scanning*, intensive and extensive reading), reading for comprehension, a promotion of personality development, the development of cultural and/or regional knowledge, literary-aesthetic competences and the improvement of vocabulary and grammar (cf. ibid.; Hallet 2007; 2015b; Surkamp 2007). According to Hallet (2007, 13), literature should be approached with a broader conceptual understanding that opens up the classical literary canon. He considers the integration of non-conventional literary texts into a literary-aesthetic education as a challenge for schools and names TV sitcoms, comics, graphic novels, videos, pop songs and films as examples of multimodal formats. According to Hallet's broader understand literature, the term does not only refer to a printed, text-dominated book, but also comprises numerous multimodal and digitally available formats. He considers picking up on new literary aesthetic experiences

and practices that are often part of youth and popular culture as a social responsibility of the language learning classroom.

Particularly in teenage years, there seems to be a certain lack of desire to read classical literature, even more so when it is written in a foreign language, as the linguistic challenges and cultural subtleties makes it even more difficult to read, understand and enjoy. The Austrian curriculum for language learning also suggests including authentic texts in addition to didactic texts in the textbook. According to Hallet (ibid.), authentic texts could or should also take multimodal formats into account. However, since the linguistic level in the second foreign language is lower than in English as the first foreign language (at least in Austria) and the predominance of English on *YouTube* and other platforms (Codreanu and Combe 2020, 166), it is difficult to find appealing and adequate texts. If we take the Austrian curriculum for secondary schools as an example: foreign language requirements for both the first and second foreign languages are still based on the four competence areas. The goal for English, as the dominant first foreign language, is the B2 level in all skill areas, whereas in the second foreign language the target level is B1 (except for reading competence in the six-year-system). (cf. Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung 2021). Texts of children's literature, for example, are often not appropriate for the corresponding age group, and texts of youth literature are usually too difficult in terms of language level. However, individualization and differentiation can help to maintain or even increase the pleasure of reading against linguistic barriers. This is especially true for older students who, for example, can be involved in the selection of texts and who contribute their real-world experiences to the reading process (cf. Hallet 2007, 34; Ollivier 2018).

According to Hallet (2007, 13), a proximity of the formats he cites as examples to more classical formats already considered in literary didactics, such as films, and new formats, can be discerned. Likewise, classical reading strategies can be applied in multimodal reading as well, even though one would then call the consumption process a decoding and not a reading process. Well-known methods can be applied to new literary and cultural artefacts (cf. ibid.): *Skimming*, for example, means the skimming of a (written) text to grasp the basic contents and thoughts, whereas *scanning* intends the targeted search for a specific piece of information in texts. However, these two reading strategies can also be

applied to multimodal formats such as video clips. The same holds for extensive and intensive reading approaches: both can be applied to serial formats, such as those offered on *Netflix* or by influencers. Serial formats are often chosen for pleasure and not for close reading and interpretation. Watching serial formats and videos by influencers are recreational activities, however, if watched in a different language than L1 these recreational activities can help increasing vocabulary and grammar knowledge as well as historical or social background knowledge. Depending on the learning objective when consuming a (written or/and spoken) text, different scaffolding strategies must be applied, inter alia, linguistic and thematic support, socio-historical and cultural backgrounds, biographical details, genre-specific information.

Beyond these goals and approaches, however, a debate has arisen about the direction in which literary-aesthetic learning should expand. On the one hand, there are those who argue that teaching literature is a means to an end, namely competence, and that linguistic output is the ultimate goal. On the other hand, there are those who believe in a general educational mission and for whom this mission is incompatible with the former view and the old version of the CEFR (for a deeper understanding of these discussions cf. Hallet 2007 and 2015b and Suhrkamp 2012). They are convinced that not everything in language teaching needs to or can be tested. A third group argues dialectically, such as Brune (2020), Hallet (2007; 2015b) and Surkamp (2012), and does not see any contradiction between competence orientation and the educational mission, but rather emphasizes the role of literary-aesthetic competence for personality development and the development of intercultural competences. The new edition of the CEFR (Council of Europe 2020, 105–108) supports and consolidates the position of the second group: mediation is precisely about consuming creative texts, understanding them, critically questioning them, and decoding and encoding them in one's own socio-cultural background.

2.2 Multiliteracy

Following his broad, heterarchical and multimodal concept of literature, Hallet (2007, 31) emphasizes early on in his reflections the importance of multiliteracy, which, in a broader understanding, also includes visual

and, consequently, media literacy. This is a necessity in a participatory culture (cf. Stalder 2017) and at the same time provides the frame for "creating the learning conditions for full social participation" (The New London Group 1996, 61). Social participation requires a new, comprehensive literacy, which is to be understood as a complex and culturally shaped construct. As an example, visual literacy is twofold: Students should (1) be able to articulate content when analyzing (moving) images and (2) be able to recognize a wide variety of (moving) pictorial elements. This reception includes, among other things, the perception of space, time, movement, perspective. Authentic, as opposed to didactically designed, formats present greater challenges, but also possess the appeal of the non-artistic, the genuine (cf. Brune 2020; Hallet 2015a, 13–18). Visual literacy means having an awareness of the fact that a film, an image, a photograph is always subjectively shaped by the producer's perspective and cultural background; it consequently has a certain intention (cf. ib., 15). Decoding and mediating a text, in turn, takes place against the culture-specific background of the recipient (cf. Hallet 2007) and their literality (cf. Brune 2020).

3 Multimedia Learning

Decoding multimodal texts can be highly difficult as the reader's / recipient's working memory must process different pieces of information, i.e., auditive and visual information, at the same time. Mayer's (2014) *Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning* assumes that our working memory has only a limited capacity and that learning should happen in a focused way so that the working memory is not cognitively overloaded. In multimedia learning, cognitive capacity is challenged threefold: by extraneous processing, essential processing, and generative processing. The first "refers to cognitive processing that does not support the instructional goal and is caused by poor instructional design" (ibid.) and should therefore be reduced. The second "refers to cognitive processing aimed at mentally representing the presented material in working memory and is caused by the complexity of the material" (ib., 60) and should be managed in a balanced way. The materials should neither be too simple nor too complex. They should challenge the learners but not overwhelm

them. The third "refers to cognitive processing aimed at making sense of the presented material and is caused by the learner's motivation to learn" (ibid.). To facilitate the consumption and subsequent understanding of multimodal texts, such as videos, and to prevent possible cognitive overload, Mayer (ib., 63) names 15 principles for multimedia learning. They can be used by teachers as design and evaluation criteria for teaching and learning materials. The following eight principles grouped into three overarching categories seem to be most important when it comes to choosing and analyzing videos provided by influencers.

Principles for reducing extraneous processing in multimedia learning:

- *Coherence*: Elements that do not contain relevant information should be avoided. This applies, for example, to background music and sounds, pictures or graphics that are not relevant for the learning process. These elements are distracting and steer attention in a non-relevant direction.
- *Signaling*: Important information and elements are accentuated.
- *Redundancy*: Redundancy of seen and heard written information should be avoided. Written text should not contain the same information as spoken words.
- *Contiguity*: Pictures and words (written and spoken) should be used in spatial and temporal proximity.

Principles for managing essential processing in multimedia learning:

- *Segmentation and pre-training*: Complex content should be segmented into smaller units. If content is presented in multimedia and multimodal form, the cognitive load should be reduced through pre-reading/viewing activities. Prior knowledge and familiarity facilitate the comprehension process (i.e. scaffolding strategies).
- *Modality*: Multimodality relieves comprehension. However, if pictures and spoken words are combined, learners should not have to concentrate on two visual inputs at the same time.
- *Multimedia*: Pictures and words (written and spoken) should be used together where possible, with pictures taking on a function that supports understanding rather than a purely decorative one. This multi-codality is especially important when learners have little prior knowledge.

Principles for fostering generative processing in multimedia learning:

- *Personalization*, *voice*, and *image*: The language used should be adapted to the target group and be oral-informal (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985). Seeing the speaker in addition can facilitate the comprehension process but is not mandatory.

Due to the fact that several sensory channels are addressed and processed simultaneously in multimedia learning, audio-visual comprehension is understood as a complex mental process. The mental effort required can be enormous; learners may be overtaxed or concentrate on the visual or the auditory level, resulting in an incomplete comprehension process. The mental processes that are set in motion during the processing of multimodal input and thus during auditory-visual comprehension have already been recognized, researched, and described many times. Examples include the work of Ohler (1990), Thaler (2007), and Mayer (2014). Although the different approaches show different models of how auditory and visual inputs can be received and cognitively processed, the authors unanimously emphasize that the input becomes more varied and richer by addressing several channels, which can contribute to a better understanding and increase motivation. For this, however, it is important to build on already existing (prior) knowledge, which assumes a central function in the comprehension process. Through preparatory methods and methods of scaffolding, this knowledge must be activated and expanded to support the comprehension process and consequently facilitate the learning process.

4 Media literate learning

With the Internet and modern technologies, information can nowadays be accessed anytime and anywhere; information is up-to-date and spreads very quickly; the production of knowledge has greatly increased (cf. De Bruyckere et al. 2015a). Learning has changed and is still changing: "Over the last twenty years, technology has reorganized how we live, how we communicate, and how we learn" (Siemens 2005, 3). Siemens particularly emphasizes the importance of informal as opposed to formal learning: "Informal learning is a significant aspect of our learning

experience. Formal education no longer comprises the majority of our learning" (ibid.). In his opinion, technological change has altered both the quantity of information and the quality of learning. Learning has become a ubiquitous act, no longer confined to institutional contexts (cf. Uhl 2019; Codreanu and Combe 2020). The smartphone provides access to information almost anywhere and at any time, and the distinction between information and entertainment is becoming increasingly blurred. The same applies to the quality of the information and learning materials used in the informal learning setting. Authentic materials, such as YouTube videos, are integrated into the informal learning process, but are neither checked in terms of quality nor necessarily aligned with didactic principles. Apart from this, the participatory aspect of social media blurs the classic triad of reader, author, and publisher. Anyone can consume a video on *YouTube* (as a reader), produce videos themselves (as an author), and share them with an international audience via *YouTube* (as a publisher). Content on social media is no longer editorially reviewed, contrary to the habitus of traditional journalistic channels (cf. Ollivier 2018). Information is shared at the click of a button; consequently, content must be checked for correctness, relevance, and timeliness by readers themselves (cf. Siemens 2005, 7). For this reason, there is a need for specific literacies that help to consciously select learning materials.

As early as the 1990s, Baacke (1996) identified four dimensions that, in his view and from an educational perspective, constitute media literacy: *media criticism* ('Medienkritik'), *media studies* ('Medienkunde'), *media usage* ('Mediennutzung'), and *media design* ('Mediengestaltung'). *Media criticism* means to examine social processes analytically, reflexively drawing consequences for one's own actions from this analysis and consequently acting ethically and responsibly in society. This is even more important as the media landscape is continuously changing and new phenomena, such as influencers and their videos, require new critical and meaning-making skills. *Media studies* include the knowledge of (traditional and modern) media and media systems as well as the ability to use these media, for example logging into different applications on the web. *Media usage* can be divided into a receptive and an interactive sub-dimension. The receptive level means, for example, the consumption of video clips, the interactive level involves creating one's own video

clips. *Media design* is also divided into two sub-dimensions: innovative and creative. Innovation means bringing about change within the media system while respecting its internal logic. The creative sub-dimension includes creative approaches to producing something new, even beyond an internal logic.

These dimensions are anchored in all three of the important media roles, i.e., reader, author, and publisher. Depending on the respective role, certain dimensions have a stronger or weaker impact. Baacke sees media literacy not as an individual phenomenon, but as a social one. Media literate people can act critically and maturely in a media-driven society.

5 Influencer Videos and Language Learning: Arguments and Counterarguments

Just as traditional print media have undergone adaptation to reflect logics of the online world, social media likewise continues to evolve. The boundary between the private and public spheres is blurring (Reckwitz 2019a), as is the dividing line between information and entertainment. While Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, 60–62), in their early classification of social media apps, still saw a difference between information and entertainment in the separation of self-expression and social proximity, nowadays not only a qualitative, but also a quantitative shift can be recognized. The content community platform *YouTube* may serve as an example.

Originally designed as a video platform just less than 15 years ago, *YouTube* has been discovered by young people who use it to spread messages in short videos. Today, it is impossible to imagine *YouTube*, or other social media, such as *Instagram* or *Twitch,* without influencers, formerly known as *YouTube* stars, providing an audience of millions with information and entertaining videos. There is a broad range of video formats: from funny videos and parodies to product tests, shopping videos, book tubes (cf. Höfler 2020a) to so-called *hauls* (cf. Höfler 2018), *Let's Plays*, and question-and-answer videos. The target groups are diverse. What the videos have in common is a staged proximity to and interaction with the audience, an everyday, colloquial language that provides many

aspects of a conceptual orality (cf. Koch and Oesterreicher 1985), the direct addressing of and interaction with the viewers, as well as a regularity in publication (cf. Höfler 2018; 2019; 2020ab). For young people, *their* influencers are not only role models and aspirational figures in terms of potential careers (cf. Ebner 2019); they also inform their opinions and shape their consumption (cf. Aran-Ramspott et al. 2018).

Influencers are part of young people's everyday lives and contribute to their knowledge. This real-world reference provides an important source of prior knowledge for decoding (cf. Hallet 2007, 34) and creating (cf. Ollivier 2018) cultural artefacts and this reference is hence important for mediating texts (Council of Europe 2020, 90) and reducing extraneous processing (Mayer 2014, 59). These cultural artefacts, i.e. the videos, offer different options to be integrated into formal and informal learning contexts: Many of the videos are staged like short plays, playing with authenticity, information, and entertainment. They can be read like inner monologues, short moral treatises, or autobiographical narratives. Like the authors of the *Moral Weeklies* in the 18th century (a relationship that requires further scientific study and can only be briefly touched upon here cf. also https://gams.uni-graz.at/context:mws/sdef:Context/get?mode=about&locale=en), the influencers pursue a specific, latent, or obvious intention that needs to be decoded. Their videos follow what Ollivier describes as "dual authenticity", namely "situational authenticity and interactional authenticity" (2018, 50); they are not didactic and do not pursue any learning goals. They are designed to inform and entertain viewers and to generate revenue through clicks.

Influencers are part of everyday life and the informal learning processes of young people (cf. mpfs 2021, 40 & 48). Their videos combine (narrative) content with self-disclosure or self-dramatization on a pictorial level. On a linguistic level, information and entertainment are mixed. To be able to understand these videos, in addition to linguistic skills, especially audio-visual comprehension and mediation skills, specific media literacy skills are needed. It is difficult to give a general answer to the question of the potential of the influencers' videos for language learning because the videos are very different and heterogeneous and allow for different readings – depending on the learning goals (cf. Höfler 2020b). The following paragraphs mention some general observations that apply to many videos, certainly not to all of them, and show research desider-

ata and therefore a gap that a future corpus-based, empirical study of the observations could address. The *YouTube* channel of Cyprien, one of the best-known French YouTubers (https://www.youtube.com/c/cyprien/), serves as the basis for the following considerations; "Le CLASH des consoles" (https://youtu.be/OxTicIgXyKw) is used as an example.

5.1 Mayer's (2014) principles of multimedia learning

Influencer videos are neither designed as artefacts for multimedia learning following Mayer's (2014) principles nor for a target group that learns the language spoken in the video as a foreign language. Extraneous load is high and might exploit or exceed the learner's cognitive capacity. The spoken text and the images shown do not necessarily have a close relationship in terms of time and place. Even though Mayer's (2014) principles are not applied consciously in the editing and conceptualization processes, they are, nevertheless, a useful framework for considering the potential of videos to promote or hinder learning.

The interaction of image and text varies according to the influencer's individual style; sometimes textual insertions are made that support the content, sometimes they rather contradict it. *Let's Play* and *haul* videos are examples of this. The former shows a video gamer during the game, who may or may not comment on his moves and cheats. Here, the principles of contiguity, redundancy and coherence are mostly followed. *Hauls* (cf. Höfler 2018) show mainly female influencers opening their shopping bags after shopping, presenting, and describing the items purchased and explaining their purchase decisions. These videos, too, seem to adhere to the three aforementioned principles. The brand and the price might be shown – as text, which can be seen as a signaling mechanism according to Mayer (2014, 63). Learners who like to play video games and learners who like to talk about their purchases can draw on their real-life knowledge in these videos. This frees up cognitive resources in the learning process.

In "Le CLASH des consoles", Cyprien discusses the pros and cons of different gaming consoles. The consoles are shown with their brand logos, following the *modality* & *signaling* principles according to Mayer (2014, 63) (e.g. 4:10, 7:02), as important information is hereby accentuated. In this video, Cyprien chose clothes that match the style of the respec-

tive console ‚according to his subjective interpretation (e.g. retro-style at 2:11). This refers to Mayer's (2014, 63) presentation style principle: Cyprien functions as the thread and framework of the story, simultaneously staging himself as different game consoles. The games mentioned are also shown in short sequences and in quick editing (e.g. 2:30; 7:22). Learners who are more familiar with gaming consoles and games can follow the argumentation more easily because of their prior knowledge than learners who are unfamiliar with the world of gaming consoles (*Pre-Training* Principle according to Mayer 2014, 63). No redundancy can be seen in the video (cf. ibid.).

5.2 Linguistic challenges

Although the videos seem to be aimed at a non-specific audience, a common linguistic and cultural basis is assumed. The language is directed at a peer group and can, therefore, be described as a language of proximity according to Koch and Oesterreicher (1985). It is conceptually oral and fluctuates in its realization between orality and textuality, with a tendency towards spoken language. Sentences remain incomplete, the style is rather paratactic, interjections and onomatopoeia are used. The discourse is not clearly structured. Although the texts are prepared, they simulate spontaneity and naturalness. The rate of speech is very high, the vocabulary is colloquial or even vulgar and shows characteristics of youth language (e.g. 0:37–0:48; 1:16–1:30). The linguistic structures are oral; coherence and cohesion are accordingly low. (Inter-)cultural allusions and allusions to daily political and economic events are not uncommon (e.g. the information that new gaming consoles tend to appear in November, 0:59–1:05). Understanding the videos requires a high level of global knowledge, culture-specific knowledge, and linguistic skills.

If we look at the descriptors of the *CEFR Companion volume* (Council of Europe 2020), it is noticeable that the can-do-statements necessary for decoding videos require competences at least at level B2. In the category *Overall oral comprehension*, the expectation is that the learner: "Can follow extended discourse and complex lines of argument, provided the topic is reasonably familiar, and the direction of the argument is signposted by explicit markers" (ib., 48). If we look at the category of *Understanding as a member of a live audience*, the descriptors say: "Can follow complex

lines of argument in a clearly articulated lecture, provided the topic is reasonably familiar. Can distinguish main themes from asides, provided the lecture or talk is delivered in standard language or a familiar variety. Can recognise the point of view expressed and distinguish this from facts being reporting" (ib., 50). "Le CLASH des consoles" is an authentic video whose topic might be familiar (to gamers) and whose content is multi-coded, but it uses non-standard language and can, therefore, not be wholly assigned to level B2. The category *Watching TV, film and video* would probably categorize these videos at the C1 level: "Can follow films employing a considerable degree of slang and idiomatic usage" (ib., 53). The cognitive load is even higher when the videos have a quick pace or are recorded in an authentic situation with a smartphone, and when background noise usually makes comprehension even more difficult.

The can-do statements show that the linguistic level of such videos is higher than the requirements for Romance languages in a formal pimary and secondary education context (i.e. level B1 in Austria, cf. above). Although the learners are familiar with the video formats and the content and can, therefore, draw on a broad (formal) knowledge, the linguistic content might be too demanding in many cases and lead to cognitive overload.

5.3 Media Literacy

Since these videos, in addition to their informational and entertainment values, are also intended to engage viewers and gain channel subscriptions and clicks, they are designed to be personal and to influence behavior on both formal and content levels, as well as on an audio-visual level. They subtly aim to persuade viewers to buy things, such as in *haul* videos. Influencers are sometimes paid by stores, brands, and companies for their posts, just like Cyprien in his video "Le CLASH des consoles" (e.g. 07:59–08:10). Although this advertorial / marketing content must be explicitly marked as such on social media channels, subtle influences also result from the setting and camera angles (cf. for example Cyprien's background at 0:03 or "le carton de la honte" at 1:25). We see a seemingly randomly placed decorative object on the bookshelf, the open bag of chips on the kitchen table, the gaming chair. They are not directly mentioned as objects in the video, but the setting draws the eye to them.

Especially when influencers take a stand on topics such as nutrition or fitness, or even daily political events, they convey their own opinions or their own levels of knowledge. A review of the content by third parties does not take place or only in the comment section under the videos. Regardless as to the accuracy of the videos, the opinions and interpretations are usually not questioned by the audience. This is the reason why YouTubers are now called influencers. They influence their audience through their appearance, their self-portrayal, their consumption and lifestyle habits and their language (cf. Aran-Ramspott et al. 2018). As these are often artificially created personalities, the pressure on the audience is growing. People want to emulate their role models and achieve the same goals. The "society of singularities" described by Reckwitz (2019a) sets unattainable standards in the participatory and algorithmic "culture of digitality" (Stalder 2017) and leads to a "logic of the particular" (ibid.) through the "culture of the authentic" (Reckwitz 2019a, 11) and the "culture of the attractive" (ibid.). These new cultures and their affordances often lead to body image distortions and a sense of inadequacy (cf. Reckwitz 2019b, 204–206). In the case of "Le CLASH des consoles", a desire may arise in the young viewers to own the latest gaming console, even if they don't have the financial means. A feeling of not belonging to the gaming peer group might be the result: One can no longer participate in conversations about the newest games that are only playable on the newest consoles.

These phenomena and the mechanisms used should be exposed as such, which is why the four dimensions of media literacy by Baacke (1996) should be applied to video consumption. Some exemplary reflections on Cyprien's video:

- *media criticism*: Viewers question their own media use. They see the different consoles and ask themselves which of them they use and whether they might not purchase on one or the other.
- *media studies*: Viewers are aware that Cyprien was paid for the video. This circumstance may affect the message of the video, the information given, and a possible call to action to play the game.
- *media use*: Viewers are prompted to subscribe to the channel at the end of the video, which refers to the interactive sub-dimension of media use. On the one hand, viewers need to know how to sub-

scribe to a channel and, on the other hand, they need to recognize the interactive possibilities that arise from the subscription.
- *media design*: Cyprien appears to pay a lot of attention to detail: He promotes the consoles through his clothing and language, and he placed decorative objects around his apartment to convey a certain message about his lifestyle as well. In analyzing these features of the video, viewers get to know one possible method of storytelling.

In addition to its entertainment value, the information conveyed in such a video should always be subjected to critical scrutiny. This seems more difficult when the language barrier means that the verbally encoded content cannot be (fully) understood or can only be understood to a limited extent.

6 Mission impossible? A plea instead of a conclusion

Following a brief introductory analysis of the different competences needed to understand influencer videos, the suspicion arises that they may not be suitable for use in the foreign language classroom, particularly when it comes to Romance languages. Further obstacles are added to this analysis: Since there are hardly any teaching materials in this area, the challenge for teachers is to create adequate materials. This requires time, especially since teachers often do not know enough about the influencer scene to have the expertise that would facilitate the selection of videos and the creation of materials. The real-world argument, which attempts to justify the use of (digital) media by arguing that they are part of the real world of young people and should, therefore, find a place in the classroom, does not go far enough, as De Bruyckere et al. (2015b) point out. However, does this mean that even though influencer videos are part of the informal learning biography of young people, they cannot be used in Italian, French, and Spanish lessons?

It is a fact that influencers are an international phenomenon and part of the everyday life of adolescents all over the world (cf. Aran-Ramspott et al. 2018; mpfs 2021). Their videos are authentic and up-to-date, and they address topics that interest, occupy and move young people. Influencers seem to speak to them as equals, and therefore, influencers have

a great impact on young people's opinions and consumer behavior, but also on their body image and life choices. This influence is even bigger because influencers use the (social media) channels that are important to young people. Against this backdrop, these videos should rather be discussed in the classroom once too often than not often enough. The *perfect* world in which, for example, financial or health concerns hardly seem to play a role, is often fiction and does not reflect reality.

At the same time, authenticity also helps to overcome the language and culture shocks that learners sometimes experience when they hear native speakers for the first time: they are overtaxed by their encounter with different accents, language registers, and rates of speech. So, the use of influencer videos provides learners with a first impression of authentic language use.

It is important to emphasize that barely any didactic considerations and resources or empirical studies on the use of influencer videos in language teaching exist. A clear research gap can be identified here. However, some general recommendations can be derived from these first considerations:

- Based on the learning goals and the type of video, the video can first be watched without sound to focus on visual comprehension and the images. The students form hypotheses, then the video is watched with sound and the hypotheses are verified (cf. Mayer 2014, 63).
- There are different ways of decoding influencer videos that align with different learning goals (cf. Höfler 2020b). This ranges from a purely entertaining consumption of the content to a critical and informative examination.
- Technically, pre-viewing activities to lessen the cognitive load can also be achieved on *YouTube* by reducing the speed or inserting subtitles, although doing this partly contradicts Mayer's (2014, 63) principles.
- Students can contribute video suggestions based on their expertise. This relieves the teacher of the task to find interesting videos and transfers some of the responsibility to the students, who actively shape the lessons and practically train their media literacy (Baacke 1996) and their mediation competence (Council of Europe 2020, 90).

Although the linguistic hurdle may be difficult to overcome, there are possibilities of integrating these authentic videos into one's lessons as one of many types of (multimodal) texts. The aim should not be to base lessons on influencers, but to make them a topic in class, e.g. by examining their activities critically in a media literacy sense, and to arouse or, in the best case, further strengthen the students' interest, in target language artefacts.

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