

Informal learning of Spanish in a Chinese music fan community

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Abstract

In the context of digitalization and participatory culture, pop culture has sparked numerous online linguistic practices exhibiting the potential for informal language learning. This study centers around an online community consisting of Chinese fans of Spanish-language pop music. Adopting the virtual ethnography approach and using mixed methods including interviews and web-crawling of fan production, we collected data from one particular member who devotes his free time to translating Spanish-language song lyrics into Chinese, and we analyze how informal language learning takes place in this context. Our results indicate that 1) the flexibility of roles and collaborations within the community contribute to the co-construction of knowledge; 2) fan practices are fueled by the technology-facilitated fulfillment of emotional needs and the formation of a shared identity; and 3) systematic strategies appear when amateur online translators go about trying to translate colloquial expressions in a foreign language. Among these strategies are the triangulation of meanings across lyrics, the use of multiple online tools, a reliance on feedback from fellow community members, and a critical approach to sources with an eye to ensuring their reliability. These findings showing highly specialized information retrieval and critical literacy skills in fan practices could serve as inspiration for integrating lyrics translations into formal language education to enhance the acquisition of non-standardized vocabulary and the cultivation of critical thinking.

Keywords

Fan practices; Virtual ethnography; Lyrics translation; Songs; Informal language learning; Critical literacy; Chinese; Spanish; Colloquial expressions; Cooperation.

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1. Introduction

Digital technology has profoundly changed the consumption of pop culture, the dynamics of the social media, and the learning patterns of adolescents (Jenkins; Ford; Green, 2013). The newly created digital spaces such as websites and social media platforms have helped fans of popular performers and artists of all sorts to establish online collaborative communities and affinity spaces (Gee, 2005), in which these fans frequently immerse themselves in informal learning experiences, acquiring specific knowledge and skills such as language proficiency (Black; Castro; Lin, 2015). As a result, the topic of informal language learning has received increasing academic attention in the last few decades, especially in the fields of computer-assisted language learning (Vázquez-Calvo, 2021) and fandom linguistic practices.

While fan practices like gaming, watching videos, or writing fanfiction have been thoroughly explored, little is known about the relationship between fan engagement with pop music and informal language learning (Ludke; Morgan, 2022). This is probably due to the fact that conventional music streaming platforms restrict users' activity to listening to music individually, making it difficult to analyze practices that are communal in nature. In an attempt to address this gap, we conducted a case study of an online music community supported by a Chinese platform, *NetEase Cloud Music (NECM)*. This platform provides fans with many different opportunities for not just consumption but also sharing (commenting) and media production (e.g., lyric uploading, song translation), aligning with the concept of transmedia literacy (Scolari et al., 2018). Here we will use the term "community" to refer specifically to the group of fans who engage with Spanish-language songs on *NECM*. These individuals have a shared interest and a collective identity, frequently self-identifying as part of the "Hispanic Music Circle" in comment sections, thereby distinguishing themselves from fans listening to music in other languages. With a long-term ethnographic observation approach, we sought to analyze the organizational structure of this community, the motivations underlying its fan practices, and the strategies that members employed for informal language learning.

Listening to music not only is a widespread recreational activity but can also bridge the gap between formal and informal language learning (Ludke; Morgan, 2022). Although numerous empirical studies have confirmed the benefits of pop songs for the improvement of various specific language skills (Degrave, 2019), the use of music in the classroom still diverges significantly from what is advocated in theory (Engl, 2013). We hope that our study will suggest other ways in which the potential of music in formal language education can be more fully realized by examining the interactive and informal learning dynamics of adolescents outside classroom settings.

1.1. New digital literacies in affinity spaces

We adopt the conceptual framework of *digital literacies* (Buckingham, 2006) and *new literacies* (Barton; Lee, 2013) to investigate the literacy and language learning practices of music fans in a Chinese online community. With the advancement of information and communication technology (ICT), fans' literacy practices have quickly shifted to social media or online platforms (Sauro; Zourou, 2019). This not only has brought about changes in reading and writing habits (Livingstone, 2004) but has also implied a transformation of many entrenched ways of socializing, interacting, and learning (Rice, 2002). Above all, digital literacy requires fans to be proficient with technical tools for information retrieval (Buckingham, 2006). From the perspective of the new literacies, on the other hand, literacy refers to not only the cognitive process of decoding information but also the various ways in which different groups are embedded in sociocultural practices (Gee, 2015). Hence, we regard fan literacy activities as a cultural practice determined by community norms and values in a specific social context (Heath, 1983). In this context, fans use digital technologies to access information, interact, and discuss, in a process that naturally results in the enhancement of their language competence, cross-cultural awareness, and transmedia skills (Benson, 2015; Scolari et al., 2018).

ICTs have greatly expanded the space and opportunities for fan practices and facilitated the emergence of online communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Gee (2005) proposed the term *affinity spaces* to refer to the digital environments where individuals with a shared interest (Duffet, 2013) congregate to socialize and engage in a range of group-initiated practices. The appearance of mobile technology has dramatically increased interaction, collaboration, and cohesion among the members of the fan community (Thorne, 2015). Meanwhile, in the Web 2.0 era, users no longer just passively access information from websites, but also become content producers. The consequent social phenomenon of participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins; Mizuko; Boyd, 2015) has contributed to the transition of fan practices from content consumption to participation and creation (Vázquez-Calvo, 2021), and has even fundamentally changed the way knowledge is constructed and disseminated (Kessler, 2013).

1.2. Songs and second language acquisition

Our theoretical approach is also grounded in well-established theories of second language acquisition. According to the *affective filter hypothesis* (Krashen, 1982), negative emotions can impede language assimilation. Songs, however, can create a favorable learning environment by reducing anxiety and increasing motivation (Piri, 2018), as exemplified by fan engagement with music. In today's digital age, scholars are increasingly interested

“Digital technology has profoundly changed the consumption of pop culture, the dynamics of the social media, and the learning patterns of adolescents”

in the benefits of audiovisual input –audio and image with on-screen text such as L1 subtitles or L2 captions– in second language acquisition (Peters; Heynen; Puimège, 2016), especially with regards to the learning of vocabulary (Montero-Pérez; Peters; Desmet, 2018). As a globally widespread multimodal resource, songs can offer language learners meaningful and authentic input (Pavia; Webb; Faez, 2019). While many studies explore the effectiveness of song listening on vocabulary memorization (Coyle; Gracia, 2014), the impact of lyric translation on second language acquisition remains underexplored. Following task-based language teaching principles (Long, 2014), we argue that active engagement in tasks –in this case translating song lyrics and inquiring about their meaning– is likely more conducive to language learning than passive participation in the form of merely listening to songs or reading lyrics translations.

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1.3. Literature review

Although for a long time, fan practices remained underexplored and marginalized in scholarly research (Werner, 2018), in the last decade there has been growing awareness of the significant impact of popular culture on adolescents' daily lives, and especially on their *literacy practices* (Black; Castro; Lin, 2015). Many of these practices now occur in technology-based settings and “draw heavily on textual interpretation” (Sauro, 2017, p. 139), demonstrating the potential for online informal language learning (Sockett, 2014; Lee; Dressman, 2018). Therefore, the coupling of language skills with digital competence implied by these amateur practices has recently received keen attention from the fields of applied linguistics and computer-assisted language learning.

Language-rich fan practices have two major genres: fanfiction and fan translation. Fan fiction –sequels or adaptations written by fans of existing stories or characters (Jamison, 2013)– has been the focus of most studies on popular culture and informal language learning (Sauro, 2017; 2020). Research has centered on the empowerment of multilingual identity (e.g., Black, 2009; Thorne; Black, 2011; Schreiber, 2015) and the development of writing skills (e.g., Guerrero-Pico; Establés; Costa-Sánchez, 2022). In contrast, though fan translation has received less attention (Vázquez-Calvo *et al.*, 2019), it comprises rich subcategories such as fansubbing, fandubbing, and scanlation. In fact, translation deserves much deeper investigation as it is an essential component of communication in the multilingual world (Muñoz-Basols, 2019).

The principal cultural genres involved in fan translation studies are anime (Pérez-González, 2007; Shafirova; Cassany, 2019), manga (Valero-Porras; Cassany, 2015), and video games (Muñoz-Sánchez, 2009; Vázquez-Calvo *et al.*, 2019). Both anime and video games stand out for their integration of visual imagery with auditory components and emphasize the role of subtitles. Sokoli (2018), Soler-Pardo (2017, 2020), and Talaván (2013) highlight the utility of subtitling and dubbing in language learning, especially lexical acquisition. Moreover, because of the complexity and large volume of cultural products available online, these activities are usually carried out by well-organized groups of fans with a clearly defined division of roles and even a degree of hierarchy (Zhang; Cassany, 2019; Vázquez-Calvo, 2021). Research in this area has explored the organization of these communities, their translation processes, their use of linguistic tools (mainly dictionaries and software translators), and their acquisition of sociocultural knowledge about the target language (Sauro, 2017). Also of scholarly interest, given the audiovisual nature of most fan-translated material (Dwyer, 2018), are the linguistic techniques (e.g., omission, paraphrasing) employed by fans to adjust word counts to the space constraints of the screen.

However, there is as yet very little research about how music fans improve their linguistic proficiency (Ludke; Morgan, 2022) by engaging in a community centered around understanding, translating, and commenting on song lyrics. We believe it is necessary to fill this research gap for two reasons: listening to pop music is an important cultural entertainment activity (Werner; Tegge, 2021), and there is widespread consensus about the usefulness of music as a tool for language learning both outside (Jolly, 1975; Ludke, 2020) and inside the classroom (Bennett, 2019).

With regard to song lyrics, we will explore several topics that have not been examined in depth. For instance, though they form part of a closely integrated team, lyrics translators often work individually because the workload involved is rather small. Therefore, it is worth investigating the relationships among members of these relatively loose communities and the flexible ways in which they cooperate, their motivations, and how they go about constructing a collective identity.

In addition, it is generally accepted that pop songs use authentic language (Eng, 2013), with colloquial expressions (Akbari; Shahriari; Hosseini-Fatemi, 2018) and diverse linguistic varieties that are not normally found in standard language textbooks (Saraceni, 2017). Conventional dictionaries and translation software are often of little use to the fan translator in interpreting these expressions and varieties, and we will examine the methods and strategies employed by amateur lyrics translators to ensure the accuracy of their translations. Finally, the bulk of the research in this area has centered around translations from English (Sauro; Zourou, 2019; Ludke; Morgan, 2022); we will therefore focus our attention on a fan community whose central activity involves translating Spanish-language songs into Chinese.

In summary, we will answer the following two research questions:

- 1) What roles do members of a pop music lyrics translation community play, how do they collaborate, and what are their motivations?
- 2) What resources and strategies do they employ to understand the colloquial expressions they encounter in song lyrics?

2. Methodology

Our qualitative study adopts a virtual ethnography approach (Hine, 2015) to analyze how music fans use digital linguistic resources for informal language learning. Inspired by Androutsopoulos's (2017) online data collection toolkit, we use mixed data-collecting methods to triangulate data, including semi-structured interviews, web scraping, screencast recordings, follow-up chats, and field notes.

NECM, the Chinese counterpart of *Spotify*, was selected as our study context because of its unique community attributes, which facilitate large-scale amateur music translation. Unlike most Western music platforms, which only have a basic playback function, *NECM* is more akin to a social network. Based on the idea of "socialization through songs", users are encouraged to engage with each other through interactive activities such as uploading lyrics, translating songs, and posting comments. Involvement in these practices—especially translation—can have the incidental effect of enhancing language proficiency and intercultural understanding, just as happens in the fan community centered around game translation (Vázquez-Calvo, 2021).

2.1. The music community and Benito

Before collecting data, the first coauthor engaged for three months in participant observation (Springely, 2016) to establish contact with active members of the fan community. The criteria for qualifying as a participant in our study include having over one year's experience with the platform and contributing (uploading or translating lyrics) to at least 20 songs in the past year. In July 2022, we obtained the consent of one lyrics uploader and five translators by sending them private messages outlining our objectives. We then conducted semi-structured audio interviews with them via *WeChat*. We employed manual content analysis to analyze these interviews by identifying common patterns and insights, which provided us with a broad understanding of the community's practices, role distribution, participant motivation, and language learning strategies.

Following the snowball sampling method (Cohen; Manion; Morrison, 2007), two additional experienced translators who had translated over 100 songs were contacted based on the recommendations of the earlier contacts and we were granted access to this close-knit community. We decided to take one of the experienced translators, who goes by the pseudonym 'Benito', as the central point of reference for this study. Benito possesses a comprehensive perspective stemming from his extensive experience in the full range of roles: lyrics uploader, translator, commenter, and listener. The preliminary interviews with the other seven participants provided a foundational context, guiding our in-depth exploration with Benito. His insights echoed those of other interviewees but were more detailed and complete. For this reason, we have chosen to present only Benito's data in this paper.

Benito, a reggaeton enthusiast and a uniquely active member within this community, stands out for his productivity and linguistic skills. As a native Mandarin Chinese speaker, he is currently undertaking postgraduate studies in Chinese-English translation while teaching himself Spanish as a second foreign language. His contributions to the community are noteworthy; since 2019 he has translated into Mandarin more than 200 Spanish-language songs,¹ which have been listened to by over two million users. He is also knowledgeable about Latin American Spanish, a rare attribute in China, where the materials available for learning Spanish are mainly based on Peninsular Spanish. Benito is a minor influencer with over 1,300 subscribers and has forged friendships with a significant number of amateur translators and lyrics uploaders. He was delighted to share his translation experience with us and offered to maintain long-term contact because he regarded the first coauthor as a specialist in Spanish.

2.2. Data collection

2.2.1. Thirty-three songs

Using web crawling techniques (9-22-2022), we scraped the lyrics and Benito's translations of 33 songs as well as the listener comments associated with them. This set of 30 consisted of the songs he had translated most recently as well as the six songs he mentioned in the first interview as being the most impressive examples of his work (three songs fell into both categories). Most of these songs belonged to Latin American music genres such as reggaeton (23), Latin pop (5), or trap (2), with reggaeton clearly dominant, representing over two-thirds of the sample. The songs had a diverse linguistic-cultural profile since they were performed by 34 musicians from ten different Spanish-speaking countries, with the majority being Colombian. In addition, it should be mentioned that out of the 4,144 comments made on these 33 songs, we collected and analyzed only 67 of them directly related to Benito (see Table 1), such as comments posted by him or comments by fans that interacted with his comments.

2.2.2. Semi-structured interviews

We conducted two in-depth audio interviews in Chinese with Benito (see Table 1), which lasted a total of 6 hours, in the course of which we took 55 screenshots and made note of 16 links. Each interview lasted about three hours, as Benito had a wealth of personal observations and experiences to share. The first exploratory interview (7-19-2022) focused on a range of topics including his linguistic background, the sources of his motivation, the *NECM*'s community operations, how roles in it were distributed, his interaction with other community members, the process of song translation, and its effect on his language learning.

After the initial interview, we compiled the set of 33 songs translated by Benito and constructed a list of 54 colloquial Latin American Spanish expressions that appeared in the songs but were not included in *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (DRAE)*, the official reference dictionary for Spanish). We then prepared a more targeted interview (10-30-2022) in which we asked Benito to reproduce the process he had followed to determine the meaning of 13 expressions with polysemous or region-specific meanings which we had selected from the list. This gave us information about his word search strategies and critical application of technical tools. We also thereby gained an understanding of his perception of amateur song translation and the dynamics of his construction of an identity.

2.2.3. Other data

Interview data was supplemented in various ways. By January 2023, the first coauthor and Benito had maintained close contact via *WeChat* for six months through some 2,538 chat messages, the contents of which served to fill any lacunae in our understanding of Benito's literacy practices. Benito also provided us with a 49-minute screencast video created as he translated the song "Llorando en un Ferrari", in which he detailed each step of the translation process, from preparation to publication. Additionally, throughout the study, the first coauthor wrote field notes once a month to record the insights gleaned, which comprised in total 2,178 words and primarily focused on how the community operated, how roles were distributed in it, and how members interacted. The resulting corpus of data is summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Corpus of data

	Online texts		Interviews	Chat messages	Screen-cast video	Field notes
	Translations	Comments				
Number	33	67	2	2,538	1	7
Duration			6h 03m		49m	
Word count	17,523	1,543	77,689	26,639		2,178

2.3. Data analysis

We used the *Atlas.ti* application to store, organize, and classify our multimedia data. The functionality of this software is rudimentary, mainly limited to the encoding and retrieving of encoded texts. We first used *iflyrec.com* audio transcription software to process the two interviews due to the large amount of data (over 77,000 words transcribed) and our unwillingness to leave out any potentially relevant information. Then, based on the data-driven principle (Selvi, 2019), we applied content analysis procedures to code the content of the transcript and create categories (Schreier, 2014). The coding frame was continually reviewed, modified, and expanded as new data was added, which resulted in five main categories:

- linguistic background;
- fan practices;
- lyrics translations and tools;
- participation modes and roles in *NECM*;
- motivation and identity building.

These categories were further divided into 19 subcategories (see Figure 1).

3. Findings

3.1. Collaboration in the community

3.1.1. Roles and distribution of work

NECM encourages users to voluntarily contribute content. Except for the original song audio recording, all content is created by the users, who adopt at least one of four main roles:

- lyrics uploader;
- translator;
- commenter; and
- listener.

These four roles are dynamic and flexible as *NECM* is an open community and users are not limited to a fixed role.

The most noteworthy roles are those of the lyrics uploader and the translator, who are officially recognized as "contributors" by the platform. Lyrics and translations that are accurate and properly synchronized to the song clip can greatly

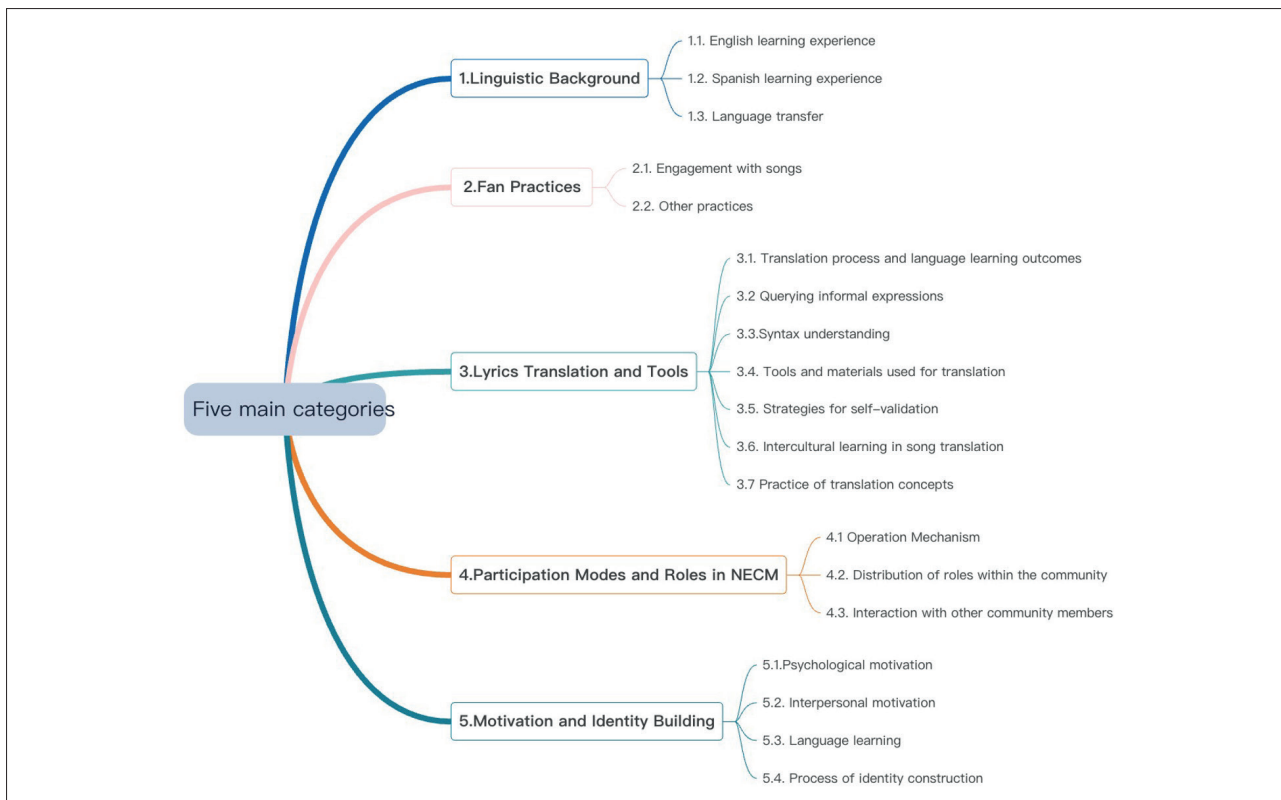


Figure 1. Thematic classification of data

help the audience to understand the songs. In addition, both roles require specialized skills, such as a sophisticated understanding of technical tools and high-level language competence, respectively.

The lyrics uploader is responsible for finding the original song lyrics online at sites like *Genius* and *AZLyrics*, and then converting the plain text downloaded from the internet into LRC format using editors such as *LRC maker* to add time tags at the beginning of each line using the format [mm:ss.xx], where mm is minutes, ss is seconds, and xx is milliseconds. In order to insert these tags accurately, the uploader must have a good understanding of the basic pronunciation rules of the language in which the song is sung. This format allows listeners to see the scrolling lyrics synchronized with the audio track as they listen to the song (see Figure 2).

It is the translator’s work that is most highly valued since a good translation is crucial for listeners to properly understand the meaning of a song. Because most amateur translators lack knowledge of music, they primarily focus on the accurate transfer of meaning rather than preserving the musicality of the lyrics. To ensure the translation’s accuracy, they rely on a large number of linguistic resources, such as dictionaries, online language forums, etc. (see Learning Strategies below). It is predominantly in this process that language learning occurs.

By the norms of the community, translations may be uploaded only after the scrolling lyrics are provided, ensuring proper synchronization between the translations, original lyrics, and audio track. This fosters collaboration between uploaders and translators, who frequently work simultaneously, tightly coordinating their respective tasks through private messages on the platform or other instant messaging apps in order to be the first team with translated lyrics ready to roll out. This is because the platform only chooses the first submission of translated lyrics, and different translators may be independently inspired to translate the same song.

Alternatively, the lyrics uploader may post the synchronized lyrics, leaving the song untranslated until another member puts forward a translation. Despite not always having personal acquaintances, the uploader and the translator jointly contribute to the understanding and dissemination of the song. Occasionally users of the platform assume hybrid roles, acting as both lyrics uploader and translator.

Medallo City MV 极高音质

专辑: [PAPI JUANCHO](#) 歌手: [Maluma](#) 来源: [搜索页](#)

Que con este álbum yo le' metí gol
用这张专辑 我给人们“打进一球”

Como un calidoso, como una fiera
我如一个善人 又如一个野兽

En Medallo City pa'l planeta tierra
在麦德林城 而面向整个世界 (Medallo为麦德林的地方话表达)

Música de la lleca
来自街头的音乐

De Medellín pa' todo el planeta
从麦德林直到整个星球

Para que sepan cómo e' la tauvel
让他们知道 现在已是何种境界

Vengo de tefrén con todo el power

Figure 2. The lyrics scroll down the screen as the song plays, with the central line in black boldface the line being sung at that moment.



Figure 3. Emoticons created by *NECM* and a screenshot of a posted comment in which they have been used.

Contributing comments, on the other hand, requires no particular skill since comments are in Mandarin, the language of the community members, and any member is welcome to post one. Comments typically critique the quality of the translation, elaborate on the song's context, or discuss linguistic and cultural issues related to the lyrics. Thus, commenters are likewise "contributors" to the community, albeit their contribution is far less important than that of uploaders or translators.

Finally, almost all *NECM* users assume the role of listener. The mass audience not only receptively benefits from reading the translated lyrics but also actively provides its own input by reporting errors in synchronization or translation, thereby helping uploaders or translators further sharpen their respective skills, or by just posting a "like" or "dislike".

To increase users' sense of belonging, *NECM* intentionally promotes the formation of a collective identity. First, the platform has created a set of emoticons (see Figure 3) based on the platform mascot called *duoduo xixi* (多多西西), which refers to the musical notes "do" and "xi". Users gradually develop a shared identity as they learn to use these unique emoticons. Second, *NECM* has given users a collective nickname. When the platform first appeared, some users nicknamed *NECM* "Cloud Village" (云村) and called themselves "villagers" (村民) because the collaborative atmosphere in the community made them feel like they formed part of a small tightly-knit rural community. The platform has since given official recognition to this nickname by renaming the interface where users publish postings "Cloud Village Square" (云村广场).

3.1.2. Co-construction of knowledge

Traditional fan literacy practices often depend on the direct, hierarchical collaboration of various participants, to co-construct knowledge. In contrast, the *NECM* platform conforms to a more horizontal structure, where collective intelligence is harnessed organically and spontaneously. In his groundbreaking discussion of the concept of collective intelligence, Lévy (1999) noted that digital technology facilitates the movement from personal to collective and cosmopolitan knowledge. By dividing up tasks and offering users the possibility of participating autonomously, a vibrant exchange of knowledge take place, even if there are no direct interpersonal interactions among most members. As members immerse themselves in the platform's content—whether through listening, reading, reflecting, or contributing—they generate a dynamic knowledge-sharing ecosystem. While active participation visibly contributes to knowledge construction, the silent participation of most ordinary users—characterized by passive internalization, reflection, and potential dissemination of information—further enlarges and enriches the shared pool of knowledge.

Benito's understanding of the polysemy of the Spanish word *perro* illustrates this dynamic. In our corpus, *perro* is used with three different meanings (Table 2). The standard meaning 'dog' Benito had learned early in his acquisition of Spanish. The other two more colloquial meanings he had learned by reading the work of other translators. The use of *perro* in the song "Medallo City" by Maluma reminded Benito of the colloquial use in English of "dawg" (dog) to refer to a friend, which he felt made sense in the context of a song in which the singer pays tribute to his hometown through the extensive use of slang, as he noted in the course of an interview (all quotes have been translated from Mandarin):

While active participation visibly contributes to knowledge construction, the silent participation of most ordinary users—characterized by passive internalization, reflection, and potential dissemination of information—further enlarges and enriches the shared pool of knowledge

“I’ve known for a long time the use of *perro* to mean ‘friend’. Most probably I learned it by reading other song translations... I know that the informal spelling of ‘dog’ in English, ‘dawg’, is used in a similar way... Maluma wrote this song on behalf of his country, so I thought that here *perros* must be friends, otherwise it doesn’t make sense” (Benito, 30/10/2022).

In the song “7 de Mayo”, on the other hand, Benito interpreted *perro* as meaning a womanizer because in the same line, the singer (J Balvin) refers to being part of a threesome. This reminded him of the use of *perra* (the feminine form of “perro”, lit. ‘bitch’), which he had learned previously from another song by J Balvin:

“I translated it as ‘bastard’, not a literal translation; in fact, this *perro* refers to lecherous men... *hice tríos* is an obvious indication. In the song ‘Perra’ by J Balvin, *perra* is used to allude to ‘slutty women’. In this context, this *perro* seems to have a similar meaning” (Benito, 30/10/2022).

Table 2. Three meanings of *perro*.

Song title	Original lyrics (and our literal translation)	Benito’s translation (and our literal translation)	Learning source
De 100 a 0	<i>Soy perro</i> y quiero ser tu gato. (I’m a dog and I want to be your cat.)	想做你的猫 哪怕我自己是只小狗 (I want to be your cat, even if I am a puppy .)	Prior familiarity with general Spanish
Medallo City	<i>Con todos los ritmos y</i> <i>con todos mis perros.</i> (With all the beats and with all my dawgs .)	带着所有的节奏 带着所有的朋友 (With all the beats and with all my friends .)	Other song translations
7 de Mayo	<i>Que fui perro,</i> que hice tríos porque hacía frío (I was a womanizer that did threesomes because it was cold.)	我曾经是个坏蛋 我曾经做过许多风流之事因为我内心冰冷 (I was a bastard that had many love affairs because I was cold.)	“Perra” by J Balvin

Benito’s silent participation, evidenced by assimilating and reflecting upon others’ knowledge contributions, coupled with his active participation in interpreting, remixing, and disseminating knowledge, exemplifies the platform’s dynamic of knowledge co-construction.

3.2. Motivations for learning Spanish

Compared to traditional offline learning, the lack of external supervision in the e-learning environment means that those who start out with the intention to learn a language online often give up quickly. It was therefore of interest to investigate what motivated Benito’s persistence in translating more than 200 songs in four years in order to learn Spanish. He reported his four main sources of motivation as being: 1) his liking of particular singers; 2) the satisfaction he gained from having his skills recognized; 3) the sense of belonging he felt as part of the online community; and 4) a desire to increase his competitiveness as a translator.

Being a devoted fan of reggaeton musicians such as J Balvin or Maluma is one of Benito’s most deeply felt identities. Translating songs has become for him a way to feel close to his idols despite the boundaries of space and time. As he puts it,

“I do this out of love for these singers. Fans like us are far away from Spain and Latin America. Half a world away! We’re trying to really get to know them instead of treating them as idols online. Many fans don’t have the opportunity to travel, so how can they satisfy their passion? Doing lyrics translation is one way to do that, right?” (Benito, 19/07/2022).

Additionally, platforms such as *NECM* make translations available to a wide audience, giving Benito the opportunity to fulfill both his desire to share and his sense of obligation to support his idols in expanding their popularity.

In the fandom, providing translations is viewed as a contribution. Song translators have higher visibility and influence than ordinary fans, who only passively consume products. Veteran translators even gain their own fans because of the quality of their work. Benito created a song list for the songs he translates which has accumulated over 10,000 plays and helped him gain over 1,300 followers. In the comments section, Benito has received a great deal of positive feedback, including compliments and expressions of gratitude, and has had honorific titles bestowed on him such as大神 (Guru) or 大佬 (Goat), fandom terms that refer to an expert or influencer. Moreover, the platform gives active translators special privileges as a way of showing recognition; for example, Benito can post his translations directly without going through the usual review and approval process. This feeling of accomplishment is an important source of motivation for him: “I am happy to be recognized by others” (19/07/2022).

Two favorable conditions for satisfying the emotional needs are the positive feedback received from the fan community and the ease of online interaction

Another point is that it is difficult to find people who are interested in Spanish in China, where English is still the predominant foreign language. Therefore, Benito has turned to the online community, which provides a convenient opportunity for people with similar interests to congregate. Through his online exchanges or collaborations, he has developed friendships with various like-minded people. One of our other interviewees, who goes by the online pseudonym of Uncle Dragon, is an influential lyrics uploader with whom Benito usually collaborates. This collaborative connection has transitioned into a more intimate personal social connection and has become a friendship.

Since only a handful of Chinese speak Spanish, Benito thinks that knowing Spanish confers “cool” prestige on him. Considering its large number of speakers worldwide, he believes that Spanish is an influential language, and hopes that being competent in it also will increase his competitiveness professionally.

“I think knowing Spanish is probably the coolest thing in the world. How can I find my strengths as a Spanish learner? I want to start with my favorite area –songs– and learn more and more deeply than others. I want to be a little different from other people” (Benito, 19/07/2022).

However, there is no financial reward to be gained from online fan translation; rather, it is the fulfillment of emotional needs like being part of a community –as well as the sense of achievement– that is the deepest driving force for Benito. Two favorable conditions for satisfying these emotional needs are the positive feedback received from the fan community and the ease of online interaction.

3.3. Online language learning strategies

As a veteran lover of Spanish-language songs, Benito exposes himself to a vast amount of music in two ways, by seeking out fellow collaborators of his favorite artists and by browsing the updated Latin American music playlists posted weekly on *Spotify*. This intense exposure has a significant impact on his language acquisition. While listening, he enjoys singing along, and conscientiously reads and memorizes the lyrics.

3.3.1. Integration of linguistic data by association and analogy

Benito is proficient at correlating comparable instances of words or expressions and deriving linguistic patterns from them by using all the lyrics he knows as a corpus. For example, when he was confused about the meaning of Rosalía’s new song “Despechá” but unable to find any explanation online, he recalled another song whose title has a similar non-standard ending “Arrebatá”, of which he found an English version on the *lyricstranslate100.blogspot.com* website, where the word *desacata* (a spelling of the participial adjective *desacatada* which reflects the way it is pronounced informally) is translated as “uncontrolled” (see Figure 4).

Consequently, he conjectured that *despechá* is a particular way to write of the past participle *despachada*, and he searched for examples of comparable forms to support this. He came up with several similar examples such as *cuidao* instead of *cuidado* in the song “Cuidao por ahí” by Bad Bunny and J Balvin and *mirá* for *mirada* in the song “Pienso en tu mirá” by Rosalía (Figure 4). The second example demonstrates the fact that the double “a” changes into a single “a” accented after the loss of the “d”.

Basing himself on these various examples, Benito verified the loss of the intervocalic *-d-* in past Spanish participles and nouns ending in *ado/ada*, and the corresponding writing conventions, thus confirming his conjecture that *despechá* was a truncated form of *despachada*.

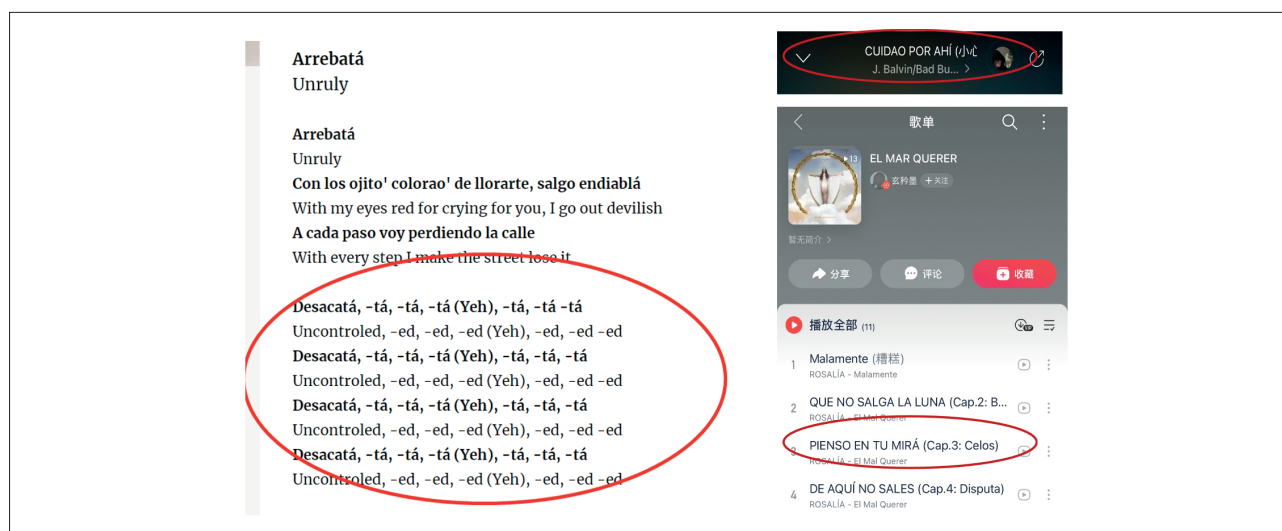


Figure 4. Using a lyrics corpus to explore the spelling changes undergone by *despechá*.

3.3.2. Cross-validation by using multiple sources

The process of searching for unfamiliar words while translating also provided an important learning opportunity. Never having studied Spanish formally, Benito was obliged to research meanings fairly often, augmenting his reading input, especially since in his search for clarification he reported always prioritizing Spanish-Spanish materials over Spanish-English or Spanish-Chinese ones. On the other hand, many of the informal expressions that appear in reggaeton songs are difficult to find in conventional sources such as official dictionaries, which forced Benito to consult alternatives such as online forums and editable dictionaries co-authored by native speakers to cross-validate the accuracy of his interpretation.

Benito's flexible use of such tools is illustrated by his discovery of syllable inversions in spoken Latin American Spanish through searching for the word *lleca*, which appears in the song "Medallo City" and does not appear in the *DRAE*. First, he ruled out the possibility that a fan had uploaded a flawed version of the Spanish lyrics on *NECM* by confirming that the lyrics posted on the authoritative lyrics website *Genius* contained the same form.

Next, using *Reverso Context*, a multilingual online corpus that provides authentic contexts for any word entered, he confirmed that *lleca* was a word in actual use and that its English translation was "street". Finally, he checked different online dictionaries and discovered that *lleca* was the result of the syllable inversion of *calle* 'street', a common word-formation practice in the slang of Latin American. The process by which Benito clarified the meaning of *lleca* is broken down in Figure 5.

As shown in the example above, Benito was adept at combining a variety of tools to interpret verbal expressions, including search engines (*Google*), lyrics websites (*Genius*, *LyricTranslate*), digital dictionaries (*Urban Dictionary*, *Diccionario Libre*, etc.), forums (*WordReference*, *Spanish Language Stack Exchange*, etc.), corpora (*Reverso*), and machine translation (*Google Translate*). Among them, the tools he used most and found most effective were the editable digital dictionaries and online forums that emerged with the support of Web 2.0 technologies, which enable readers to discuss informal language use directly with native speakers. In these last two sorts of tools, moreover, the nationality of the informant is usually displayed, which is useful for comparing the use of vocabulary across regions. However, an obvious disadvantage of this tool-combining approach is that the information is decentralized, there being no single forum or dictionary that covers all issues.

Benito was cautious about the use of machine translation tools like *Google Translate*. Although it is widely used by self-learners of foreign languages, it was the tool Benito used least. He felt that the machine translators had difficulty coping with the special problems presented by translating spoken lyrics, such as 1) predicting verb subjects that had been elided; 2) analyzing syntax in the context of multiple unconventional line breaks; and 3) identifying the elision or aspiration of syllable-final /-s/ (often transcribed in Spanish lyrics as an apostrophe).

Many of the informal expressions that appear in reggaeton songs are difficult to find in conventional sources such as official dictionaries, which force to consult alternatives such as online forums and editable dictionaries co-authored by native speakers to cross-validate the accuracy of his interpretation

Step 1. Genius

[Coro]
Música de la lleca
De Medellín pa' todo el planeta
Para que sepan cómo e' la tavuel
Vengo de tefren con todo el power
Música de la lleca
De Medellín pa' todo el planeta
Para que sepan cómo e' la tavuel
Vengo de tefren con todo el power

Step 2. Reverso Context

lleca

Sugerencias: lleco

Traducción de "lleca" en inglés

Adjetivo Sustantivo

street

Vestido de mina en la lleca. Dressed like a girl in the street.

Entonces, de a poco, empecé a odiar a las parísilas y parisinos, por lo impecables que se mantienen a pesar del clima, mientras yo lucía como si perteneciera a la "lleca" (calle) según mi cuñado. Then, I began to hate the Parisian male and female, for being able to remain so impeccable despite the weather, while I looked as if I belonged to the "lleca" (street) according to my brother in law.

LLECA ofrece internados y una plataforma productiva subterránea para artistas nacionales e internacionales. LLECA offers internships and an underground productive platform to national and international theater artists.

Step 3. Two dictionaries

A. Diccionario Dominicano

21-febrero-2009 · Publicado por : anónimo

162. lleca

es calle pero al revez

Ejemplo :
yo soy de la lleca

ME GUSTA NO ME GUSTA

B. Diccionario Libre

Lleca

Por: MelMed

enero 18, 2021

Calle. Es un juego de la palabra calle.

Ejemplo

1. Hoy voy para la lleca.

Figure 5. The three steps taken by Benito to clarify the meaning of the slang term *lleca*.

3.3.3. Receiving feedback

Since lyrics translations are accessible to all of *NECM*'s millions of subscribers, Benito received a great deal of feedback in the comments section or via private messages. Though most often Benito simply passively received this feedback on his work, it also created opportunities for him to interact with and learn from his peers. In the comments section for "Medallo City", for example, Benito took the initiative to write about the challenges he had faced in translating *Ileca*. His explanation of the syllable inversion phenomenon prompted 32 responses, 21 of which showed gratitude or praise while seven other responses led to complex interactional sequences, one of which is reproduced (in translation) in Table 3.

Table 3. Online chat exchanges about the syllable inversion phenomenon in the *NECM* comment section for "Medallo City".

Turn	Commenter	Comment literally translated into English
1	Benito:	My first translation of Maluma's song was uploaded successfully [Crying emoji] This is possibly the most difficult of all the Spanish songs I have translated... Maluma sings many words in reverse (<i>Ileca</i> = <i>calle</i> , <i>tavuel</i> = <i>vuelta</i> , etc.). Reading the lyrics is like deciphering the code... [Crying emoji]
2	(A):	Thanks for the translation! I feel like the words are sung backward to rhyme. [Surprised emoji]
3	Benito @ 2:	But why did he write <i>chimba</i> as <i>bachim</i> ? [Face with tears of joy] Obviously, the rhyming is worse hahaha.
4	(A) @3:	Hahaha then I really don't understand.
5	(C):	Why do they read the words backward? [Crying emoji]
6	(D):	It must be the same as the <i>verlan</i> in French, which is mainly used in the street/daily life.
7	(E):	"Expresándome con jerga local, represento a Medallo a nivel global" (By expressing myself in local slang, I represent Medallo on a global level).
8	(F) @ 3	In Latin America, they like to speak that way, e.g. nepe, nopor.

This complex sequence of eight comments posted by six participants demonstrates that language learning emerges from the negotiation of meaning and the exchange of information. Benito's first comment contributes to the subsequent discussion and dissemination of knowledge about syllable inversion. (A) argues that this linguistic phenomenon is designed to rhyme. However, (A)'s opinion is challenged by Benito's inquiry. After the negotiation between (A) and Benito, it becomes clear that syllable inversion is not intended to facilitate rhyme. Since the doubts remain unresolved, a third commenter, (C), reiterates the question, which elicits three more responses. (D) adds new information by referring to "French *verlan*" and explains the context of its use. (E) quotes the original lyrics, where the singer points out that he is intentionally using hometown slang. Finally, (F) confirms this practice by offering a few more examples.

Benito describes syllable inversion at the beginning, but it is comments 6 and 7 that provide new insights and transform the conversation into a public learning resource. By sharing their knowledge, users collectively discover that syllable inversion is a common feature of South American street slang (with parallels in French) and that it is used by the singer to emphasize his identity, not to facilitate rhyming. In interviews, Benito admits that it was this conversation that allowed him to fully understand this linguistic phenomenon. This exemplifies how online interaction can play a facilitating role in language learning.

3.3.4. Critical reception

It is worth noting that the information sources on which Benito was most dependent were knowledge-sharing platforms that rely on voluntary participation, such as Genius, *NECM* itself, forums, open dictionaries, etc. However, the lack of rigorous content review on such sites inevitably leads to some misinformation, requiring Benito to remain vigilant and examine the information critically.

Benito's critical approach is reflected in the following precautions he reported taking as he carried out his online research into language issues:

1. Not blindly accepting any information of doubtful veracity or provenance until he had verified it through other sources.
2. Paying attention to the reliability and authority of the informant based on, for example, his/her name or lack thereof and place of origin.
3. Bearing in mind that there are many varieties of Spanish but understanding that there is also considerable exchange and interaction among singers from different countries (for example, though Rosalía is a Spanish singer, many of her songs draw on Latin American slang speech and spelling).
4. Using the context of use as a higher criterion for interpreting the meaning.

The first, third, and fourth of these points are illustrated in the following example. Benito was intrigued when he discovered that the word *yeca* in "Qué calor" by Major Lazer and J Balvin (Figure 7) was translated elsewhere online as referring to a cigarette, because there was no hint of this notion in the original text, so he searched forums to verify whether there was a cigarette brand "Yeca".

“The lack of rigorous content review on such sites inevitably leads to some misinformation, requiring people to remain vigilant and examine the information critically”

1. Example of *yeca* in “Qué calor”

Que Calor MV 极高音质

火热

专辑: Que Calor 歌手: Major Lazer / El A... 来源: 搜索页

Por favor, que ca
来吧 热

En la discoteca
在这夜店里

Que calor, yeca
热火朝天 点支烟

Para la muñeca por favor
递给那位姑娘

3. Example of *yeísmo*

7 De Mayo MV 极高音质

专辑: 7 De Mayo 歌手: J. Balvin 来源: 搜索页

Dios te bendiga y te tenga como joya
愿上帝保佑你 将你视作珍宝

Sé que mi música te soya
我知道 我的音乐会让你疯狂 (soyar: 哥伦比亚方言)

Yo crecí escuchando a JAY-Z y a Beyoncé
我听着Jay-Z和Beyonce的音乐长大

“soyar” should be written as “sollar”, which is a manifestation of *yeísmo*

2. Meaning of *yeca*

S Dictionary
Open and Collaborative
Home page

Spanish ▾ 🔍 +

Meaning of *yeca*

yeca ¹²
Graphic dissimilation of lleca (to make it more suko).

furoya

It means experience, knowledge, expertise, skill, ability, knowledge. Also in the street language yeca or lleca mean Street, away from home.

Daniilo Enrique Noreña Benitez

Figure 6. The process followed by Benito to verify the mistranslation of *yeca*.

However, instead of finding any explanation related to cigarettes, he discovered by browsing the discussions on a digital dictionary that *yeca* might be an alternative spelling of *lleca* (Figure 6). Since he had previously observed the phenomenon of *yeísmo* in Spanish (where the letter *ll* is written as *y* because no distinction is made in their pronunciation) in J Balvin’s song lyrics (Figure 6). Combined with his knowledge of syllable inversion learned from *Medallo City*, and the fact that both J Balvin and Maluma were Colombian, he determined that *yeca* was the result of two processes, syllable inversion and the replacement of *ll* with *y*.

In summary, Benito employed various strategies to ensure the accuracy of his interpretation of colloquialisms, such as seeking clues in authentic texts, cross-validating across multiple sources, receiving external feedback, and critically weighing the authority of sources.

4. Discussion

Although we conducted interviews with a total of eight Chinese fans of Spanish pop music who participated in the *NECM* community, we elected to analyze in depth data from only one of them, Benito. Dependence on data from a single representative participant carries inherent limitations in fully capturing the experiences of all community members. Nonetheless, given the confirmatory nature of the other interviews and observations, we argue that our findings about the community’s operation, role distribution, and participant motivation, are fairly representative of the community as a whole.

Responding to RQ1, first, our data provide evidence that this music community is open and dynamic, with participants assuming clearly defined roles but in a fluid manner, with no fixed assignation of labor. In contrast to previously reported fan-led hierarchical groups with high entrance barriers, such as the fan translation group of Catalan gamers (*Vázquez-Calvo*, 2021), here it is the platform that divides up the task of song translation into four parts, providing the corresponding interface and defining the roles of the individuals who carry out each part (lyrics uploader, translator, commenter, listener), so that members of the community have the autonomy to choose how and how much they wish to participate in accordance with their own abilities and preferences.

This system maximizes the potential of the participatory culture (*Jenkins*, 2006) by fostering mass participation. Beyond direct collaboration between individuals, we see here another kind of co-construction of knowledge (*Kessler*, 2013) that arises from indirect collaboration on a large scale. Although here, as in previous studies of fan practices, we have focused on active participants, our results also reveal how ordinary and skill-deficient audiences can benefit from an online pool of collective intelligence.

Second, these interviewees exhibited two levels of motivation that significantly impact the sustainability of fan practices in a digital community-based environment. From the individual perspective, besides the empowerment of identity (*Sauro*, 2017), which is mostly related to self-confidence, we have also noted the fulfillment of various deep emotional needs. At the same time, from

From the collective perspective, cohesion and cooperation are supported by a shared identity that is generated simultaneously by group-internal conformity and differentiation from external communities

the collective perspective, cohesion and cooperation are supported by a shared identity that is generated simultaneously by group-internal conformity and differentiation from external communities.

The behaviors we have seen taking place contradict the traditional perception of the lack of interactivity in music (Sockett, 2014) because, as we have observed, the platform provides opportunities for media production (e.g., song translation), sharing, and consumption (Scolari *et al.*, 2018). These primary activities can in turn provide concomitant opportunities for informal language learning when the music consumed is in a foreign language.

In answering RQ2 we concentrated on the interpretation of vocabulary in lyrics. We discovered the application of systematic professional-like search methods to unlock the meaning of informal expressions and rigorous validation schemes, driven by high levels of motivation. Compared to the deciphering of unfamiliar words from the general lexicon, which can be accomplished using a single language tool such as standard dictionaries and translation software, Benito's search for informal expressions demonstrates more sophisticated skills, to wit, the ability to: 1) cross-reference lyrics and interpret their content as linguistic data through association and analogy; 2) combine multiple tools such as media platforms, search engines, or language tools while understanding their strengths and weaknesses; and 3) take advantage of the community's collective intelligence to actively seek feedback and learn from it.

Benito has been able to develop this array of skills due to three factors: 1) his sophisticated knowledge of translation theory and language tools as a master's student in English-Chinese translation; 2) his devotion of a considerable amount of passion and time to the translation of lyrics, motivated by his fan identity; and 3) the fact that he receives enormous emotional and technical support from the fan community. Benito acknowledged that although translating songs greatly facilitated his language learning, progress in the various language skill areas remained uneven. On the one hand, he judged his listening and reading skills as being somewhere between the B2 and C1 levels, thanks to his extensive auditory exposure and consultation of textual materials. However, he felt that his speaking and writing skills were comparatively weak, due to the lack of practice opportunities.

Our observations provide evidence that the user-generated content enabled by web 2.0 technologies has not only driven the paradigm shift in social platforms but also facilitated the creation of innovative language tools. For instance, the appearance of online dictionaries constructed through mass participation, which breaks with the tradition of compilation by authoritative experts, has been of great benefit for recording, storing, and consulting informal or dialectal expressions.

We have seen here that the diversity of geographical and sociolinguistic varieties of Spanish, with its many polysemous expressions, means that the translation of meaning implies not a simple task of information retrieval but rather, as exemplified by Benito's work, a complex set of critical literacy skills such as 1) knowing how to exploit authentic text resources and corpora such as lyrics, native speakers' explanations, and *Reverso Context*; 2) cross-validating by using multiple sources; and 3) critically filtering all information, with close attention paid to the reliability of information sources.

Few previous studies have addressed informal learning strategies, with the focus instead tending to be on the typology of informal learning, as categorized, for instance, along the four dimensions (subject, time, space, relationship and roles) proposed by Scolari *et al.* (2018). Here, on the other hand, the focus has been on the strategies employed by individuals to successfully achieve informal learning. We suggest that there are two crucial skills involved, information retrieval and critical thinking, and it is the latter that is the key to transforming information into knowledge (Buckingham, 2006).

5. Conclusions

The *NECM* platform, unlike conventional music streaming platforms, emerges as a pioneer of music-centric social media, fostering both user interactivity and collaborative content generation, thus converting it into an informal learning setting. This innovative communication medium has not only redefined music consumption patterns but has also catalyzed the formation of music fan communities in affinity spaces. Contrasting with the hierarchies of other fan communities, this platform's horizontal structure allows members to exercise agency in role selection, thus promoting collaboration in content creation and engendering a decentralized approach to knowledge accumulation.

Our research not only underscores the evolving dynamics of language learning in digital fan communities but also offers profound insights into formal language education. This study suggests that intrinsic motivation –such as the passion observed within *NECM* community– plays a crucial role in language acquisition. To cultivate an environment of active participation, educators might occasionally permit students to select the pop culture materials they wish to study or introduce more activi-

Our observations provide evidence that the user-generated content enabled by web 2.0 technologies has not only driven the paradigm shift in social platforms but also facilitated the creation of innovative language tools

Contrasting with the hierarchies of other fan communities, this platform's horizontal structure allows members to exercise agency in role selection, thus promoting collaboration in content creation and engendering a decentralized approach to knowledge accumulation

ties driven by interest. The authenticity of materials, demonstrated by the efficacy of song lyrics, significantly aids in capturing non-standardized vocabulary (Akbari; Shahriari; Hosseini Fatemi, 2018) and understanding the nuances of linguistic varieties. Therefore, educators could integrate popular song lyrics or other pop cultural resources as supplementary pedagogical materials and teach students the sophisticated strategies employed by Benito to decode colloquial expressions.

Pop culture is an excellent medium for raising learners' awareness of linguistic diversity due to the authenticity of its texts and the inclusive atmosphere it engenders

At present, the variety of Spanish taught in China is Peninsular Spanish, still regarded as the prestige or "standard" variety, leading to a lack of knowledge of Latin American Spanish (Lu; Zheng; Ren, 2019). However, in the online fan community, the varieties of Latin American Spanish are valued for their association with youth and popular culture. This suggests that pop culture is an excellent medium for raising learners' awareness of linguistic diversity due to the authenticity of its texts and the inclusive atmosphere it engenders.

As noted, this study suffers from the obvious limitation that it relies heavily on data from a single individual, making it in effect a case study. Although this is a common approach in studies exploring informal language learning in online fan communities (Sauro; Zouruo, 2019), it inevitably implies a lack of generalizability (Zainal, 2007). However, it is difficult to quantitatively analyze the language learning outcomes of fans as a collective. We appeal to future innovations in research methods to enable the gathering of large amounts of data regarding fan practices and the completion of follow-up studies.

Several new lines for future research are suggested by our findings. Drawing on Sauro and Sundmark's (2016) design of instructional tasks associated with fanfiction, further research could develop and test other ways to integrate the fan translation of pop song lyrics into formal language education. More specifically, the fact that the primary musical genre featured in this study was reggaeton reflected the participants' strong affinity for this genre. From both linguistic and documentary perspectives, reggaeton holds particular significance because it is rich in colloquialisms, dialectal variations, and culturally situated expressions. These complexities present challenges for understanding, translation, and interpretation, especially for fans located in culturally and geographically distant regions like China. Moreover, *NECM* is a rich repository that offers listeners access to various musical genres, including not only pop but also rock and folk music, etc. Fan translation of lyrics linked to these various genres –which would undoubtedly tap into very different populations– also represents an area of potential research interest. Here we have focused on translation from Spanish into Chinese but given the international fan base of Asian pop music genres like K-pop, J-pop, and C-pop, exploring the translation of lyrics from Asian languages into Spanish also merits investigation. Finally, given the multimodality of songs, it might be of interest to examine how fans cover foreign-language pop songs, a process that implies retaining both the musicality and the meaning of a song.

In short, technology-enhanced fan practice is a fertile ground for informal language learning that merits wider academic scrutiny attention.

6. Note

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