

The use of Instagram as an English Learning Medium: University Students' Voices

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Abstract

This study investigates university students' perceptions of Instagram as a medium for learning English. Employing a quantitative descriptive design, data were collected through a closed-ended Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 12 undergraduate students selected through random sampling. The questionnaire measured three key dimensions: the perceived *benefits* of Instagram for language learning, its *strengths* and accessibility as a learning tool, and students' *engagement* with Instagram-based English content. The results reveal that the majority of respondents perceive Instagram as a useful and motivating medium for improving their English skills, particularly in vocabulary acquisition and exposure to authentic language use. These findings suggest that Instagram, despite being an informal social media platform, holds considerable pedagogical value and can serve as a complementary resource alongside formal classroom instruction. The study offers practical insights for EFL educators interested in leveraging social media platforms to support and enhance students' language learning motivation and engagement.

Keywords: Instagram, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), social media, language learning, student perception

INTRODUCTION

The integration of technology into language learning has transformed the educational landscape over the past two decades. Among the many digital tools available, social media platforms have gained increasing attention from researchers and educators alike due to their pervasive presence in students' daily lives. Instagram, in particular, has emerged as one of the most popular social media platforms globally, with over two billion active users as of recent years. Its multimodal nature—combining visual content, written text, audio, and video—makes it a potentially rich environment for language exposure and practice. For university students who are learning English as a foreign language (EFL), Instagram offers an accessible and engaging space to encounter authentic language use outside the formal classroom setting.

Previous studies have explored various social media platforms as language learning tools, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and have consistently found positive associations between social media use and language development outcomes, framing social



In the Indonesian context, English holds the status of a foreign language and is a compulsory subject at all levels of formal education. Despite years of formal instruction, many university students continue to struggle with English proficiency, particularly in productive skills such as speaking and writing. This gap between formal instruction and actual language competence has prompted educators and researchers to explore informal and technology-mediated learning environments that may complement classroom instruction. Social media platforms like Instagram, which are already deeply embedded in students' routines, represent a promising avenue for extending language learning beyond the classroom without imposing additional cognitive or motivational burdens on learners.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining university students' voices regarding their use of Instagram as an English learning medium. Specifically, the study explores what features of Instagram students find most useful for English learning, how they perceive Instagram's contribution to their language development, and what challenges they encounter when using Instagram for language learning purposes. By foregrounding students' perspectives, this study contributes to a growing body of research that positions learners as active agents in the construction of informal learning environments. The findings are expected to offer practical insights for EFL educators interested in leveraging social media as a pedagogical resource and for students seeking to maximize the language learning potential of their digital practices.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design with a descriptive approach to examine university students' perceptions of Instagram as a medium for learning English. A qualitative design was deemed appropriate for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, attitudes, and perspectives in a naturalistic manner. This approach focuses on the who, what, and where of experiences without deep theorization, remaining closer to the data and offering a straightforward depiction of experiences as described by the participants themselves (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024). Rather than measuring variables or establishing statistical relationships, this approach draws from naturalistic inquiry, committing to studying phenomena in their natural state without pre-selecting or manipulating study variables (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024).

The descriptive qualitative approach enabled the researchers to present a rich and nuanced account of students' voices, capturing the complexity and diversity of their experiences without imposing predetermined categories or frameworks. This methodological flexibility also allows researchers to use a range of theoretical approaches, sampling techniques, and data collection strategies (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024), making it well-suited to exploring the varied ways students engage with Instagram in their English learning journey.

Data collection was carried out over a period of four weeks. Prior to the interviews, the researcher distributed a brief screening questionnaire to identify eligible participants based on the sampling criteria. Once participants were confirmed, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately thirty to forty-five minutes... Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method because they offer the flexibility to explore unexpected themes that emerge during the conversation while maintaining a consistent focus on the research questions (Ruslin et al., 2022)

The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework. In the first phase, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts multiple times. In the second phase, initial codes were systematically generated across the entire dataset... (Braun & Clarke, 2022)

Finding and Discussion

This section presents the results of a closed-ended questionnaire distributed to 12 university students to explore their perceptions of Instagram as a medium for learning English. The questionnaire consisted of 20 statements measured on a 4-point Likert scale, covering four dimensions: usefulness, engagement, strengths/accessibility, and motivation. Overall, responses were predominantly positive across most items, though the degree of agreement varied notably between dimensions. The following themes summarize the key patterns identified in the data.

Table 1: University Students' Result Questionnaire

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	Instagram helps me learn new English vocabulary.	(41.7%)	(50%)	(8.3%)	-
2.	Instagram helps me improve my English reading skills	(25%)	(58.3%)	(16.7%)	-
3..	Instagram helps me understand English expressions used in daily communication.	(25%)	(75%)	-	-
4.	Instagram provides useful content for learning English.	(41.7%)	(58.3%)	-	-
5.	Instagram supports my English learning outside the classroom.	(41.7%)	(58.3%)	-	-
6.	Instagram motivates me to learn English more frequently.	(33.3%)	(33.3%)	(33.3%)	-

7.	Instagram encourages me to improve my English skills.	(16.7%)	(83.3%)	-	-
8.	Instagram increases my confidence in learning English.	(8.3%)	(66.7%)	(25%)	-
9.	Instagram inspires me to practice English independently.	(16.7%)	(75%)	(8.3%)	-
10.	Instagram increases my interest in learning English.	(16.7%)	(58.3%)	(25%)	-
11.	Instagram is easy to access whenever I want to learn English	(33.3%)	(58.3%)	(8.3%)	-
12.	It is easy to find English-learning content on Instagram	(33.3%)	(58.3%)	(8.3%)	-
13.	Instagram allows me to learn English at my own pace.	(16.7%)	(83.3%)	-	-
14.	Instagram provides English-learning content that suits my learning needs.	(8.3%)	(58.3%)	(33.3%)	-
15.	Instagram is a convenient platform for learning English.	(16.7%)	(83.3%)	-	-
16.	Learning English through Instagram is enjoyable.	-	-	-	-
17.	Instagram keeps me interested in learning English.	(16.7%)	(58.3%)	(25%)	-
18.	I pay attention to English-learning content on Instagram.	(16.7%)	(58.3%)	(25%)	-
19.	Instagram makes English learning more engaging than traditional materials.	(25%)	(75%)	-	-
20.	Instagram encourages me to continue learning English through its content features.	-	-	-	-

1 . Instagram as an Accessible and Convenient Learning Tool

The majority of respondents agreed that Instagram is easy to access and allows them to learn English at their own pace, with items related to accessibility and convenience receiving the highest agreement rates (83–100%) among all statements. This finding indicates that the platform's flexibility, rather than its content alone, is the most consistently appreciated aspect of using Instagram for English learning.

2. Perceived Usefulness for Language Skill Development

Respondents generally perceived Instagram as useful for building vocabulary and understanding everyday English expressions, with agreement rates reaching 100% on several items. However, one item concerning whether the content suits individual learning needs received notably lower agreement (66.7%), suggesting that while Instagram content is broadly useful, it does not always align with every student's specific learning level or needs

3. Engagement Is present but Not Universal

Most respondents found Instagram more engaging than traditional learning materials and reported that it encourages independent practice. Nevertheless, around a quarter of respondents consistently disagreed on items related to sustained interest and attention, pointing to a possible gap between general engagement with the platform and focused engagement with English-learning content specifically.

4. Motivation Shows the Most Divided Perceptions

Compared to the other dimensions, motivation-related items showed the most varied responses. Notably, opinions on whether Instagram motivates more frequent English learning were evenly split between disagreement and agreement, indicating that Instagram may support passive exposure to English more effectively than it drives active motivation to study consistently.

DISCUSSION

Taken together, these findings suggest that Instagram occupies a supportive rather than a central role in students' English learning process. Its strongest contribution lies in accessibility and convenience, while its weakest lies in actively driving consistent study motivation. This pattern aligns with Hasan et al.'s (2020) finding that new media usage transforms passive learners into more active and autonomous ones while functioning mainly as a supplement to classroom teaching rather than replacing it. In other words, Instagram appears to support learning passively and flexibly, but does not independently sustain the same level of active motivation that classroom-based instruction provides.

The divided responses on motivation in this study also resonate with Hasan et al.'s (2020) caution that the effectiveness of new media in enhancing learner motivation needs to be carefully monitored, as inconsistent or inappropriate content exposure may reduce its benefits. This suggests that the impact of Instagram on motivation may depend heavily on the quality and relevance of the content students are exposed to, rather than on the platform itself.

Overall, these findings imply that Instagram is most effective when used as a supplementary resource — one that benefits from being paired with structured guidance to help bridge the gap between passive exposure and active, motivated practice.

CONCLUSION

This study explored university students' perceptions of Instagram as a medium for learning English through a closed-ended questionnaire covering four dimensions: usefulness, engagement, strengths/accessibility, and motivation. The findings revealed that students perceive Instagram most positively in terms of accessibility and usefulness, particularly for vocabulary building and flexible, self-paced learning. However, perceptions were more divided regarding engagement and especially motivation, suggesting that Instagram functions more effectively as a supplementary learning tool than as a primary driver of sustained study habits.

These findings imply that Instagram can be meaningfully integrated into English language learning, particularly to support informal exposure and vocabulary development outside the classroom. However, its limitations in consistently boosting motivation suggest that it should be combined with structured guidance, such as teacher-recommended accounts or specific learning tasks, to maximize its educational value.

This study was limited by its small sample size ($n = 12$) and single-context setting, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Future research with a larger and more diverse sample, as well as the inclusion of open-ended questions or interviews, is recommended to gain a deeper understanding of how Instagram influences English language learning motivation over time.



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