Exploring Gen Z's Perspectives on English Learning in the Digital Era

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Abstract

This study explores how Gen Z perceives the role of Instagram in supporting their English learning in the digital era. As digital natives, Gen Z prefers interactive, visually engaging, and flexible learning experiences, making Instagram an appealing educational platform. This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews and observations with 15 university students in North Sumatra who actively use Instagram for learning English. The findings reveal that Instagram facilitates enjoyable learning through its visual and interactive features, allowing students to improve their grammar, pronunciation, and writing skills. Additionally, Instagram fosters collaborative learning and engagement through interactive tools such as comments, Reels, and live sessions. However, challenges such as multitasking and cursory content engagement can hinder the development of profound language skills. Instagram's potential as an extra learning resource is highlighted in this study, along with the necessity of its methodical incorporation into teaching methods. The results promote more research on social media optimization for language learning and advance our understanding of digital-based learning.

Introduction

In the digital age, Gen Z, especially digital natives, have been raised surrounded by technology, which has influenced both their way of life and how they approach education. These devices have an impact on their choices for learning new abilities, such as English, in addition to redefining how they engage with the outside world. Generation Z, or Gen Z were born between 1997 and 2012 (Twenge, 2016). Their characteristics include the need for quick response, preference for visual content, and a tendency to learn collaboratively through digital media.

The term "digital natives" was first used by Prensky (2001) to describe generations growing up in a digital environment; these are people who have been used to using digital technologies like computers, the internet, and mobile devices since they were young. They are known as the first generation to fully live in the digital age, where technology becomes an integral part of their lives.

Traditional English teaching methods often fail to align with Gen Z's digital habits. Many curricula still rely on outdated, non-interactive techniques, making learning less engaging for students accustomed to fast-paced, visual, and collaborative digital environments. While technology is widely accessible, classroom instruction remains largely passive, failing to integrate tools that resonate with Gen Z. This gap in teaching methods necessitates an exploration of digital platforms, such as Instagram, to understand how they can enhance language learning.

This study explores Gen Z's attitudes toward English learning and how Instagram influences their educational experiences. By comprehending these viewpoints, educators can more effectively create instructional strategies that include technology and successfully meet the demands of this generation in the digital age. Investigating how Gen Z's digital habits influence their views on efficient English learning strategies and figuring out how to match these viewpoints with pertinent teaching strategies are the challenges at hand.

Previous research, such that done by Warschauer (2000), has demonstrated that using technology to study a language can boost students' interest and motivation. In order to get the best outcomes, instructors must comprehend how Gen Z digital preferences might be adapted for language acquisition. As technology progresses, research indicates that social media platforms such as Instagram can play a great part in language acquisition. Aidah (2022) examines EFL students' perception of Instagram's use in practicing English in Surabaya. Research results show that students have a positive view of using Instagram as a tool to practice speaking. They feel more confident and motivated in learning English through the platform. This observation substantiates the view that integrating social media into language education could greatly improve student learning.

Despite much research on the use of technology in language learning, there are still some gaps that need to be bridged, especially in the context of Gen Z's perspective in English learning in the digital age. While previous studies have explored the general benefits of technology in language learning, research on how Instagram enhances specific English language skills remains limited. Most existing studies focus on social media's role in motivation and engagement, but few have examined how Instagram's features—such as captions, Reels, and interactive comments—specifically aid in improving grammar, writing, and speaking skills. Abi Hamid et al. (2020) revealed that while social media can improve students' learning motivation, its use in improving productive skills such as writing and speaking is still not empirically tested. This study addresses this gap by analyzing

how Gen Z utilizes Instagram's tools to refine these specific skills. To address this gap, this study aims to answer the question: *How do Gen Z perceive the role of digital platforms in their English learning in the digital era?*

According to Mayer (2021) in Multimedia Learning, visuals are crucial for language comprehension. The study indicates that the synergistic use of text and images in a learning activity helps one grasp abstract concepts more readily. Such findings apply to the use of Instagram, which deploys visual features, such as pictures and videos, to communicate English learning content. These visuals do not just draw the attention of students to the material but, also contribute to retention of that material being taught. Dabbagh & Kitsantas (2012) indicated that digital platforms facilitate effective collaborative learning. Language learning embraces collaboration through interactive features such as commenting, group discussions, or sharing of resources. They noted that students learning in a digitally mediated collaborative environment were not only more engaged but also achieved better learning outcomes compared to those who operated alone.

Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to understand how Gen Z utilizes Instagram in English learning. Bogdan & Biklen (1992) state that descriptive qualitative research focuses on collecting detailed descriptive data, including words, images, and actions. They emphasize the importance of accuracy and clarity in describing the context and characteristics of a situation or group. In previous studies, various digital platforms such as learning applications and social media have been studied as aids in language learning. But this research focuses more on Instagram because of its visual and interactive features that enable a more interesting learning experience for Gen Z.

Participants in this study include 15 Gen Z students, aged 21-22 in 2024, enrolled in the English Education program at a university in North Sumatra. They were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they had substantial experience in using Instagram for English learning. The inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be active Instagram users engaging with English-learning content at least three times per day, (2) have a minimum proficiency level of intermediate English based on self-assessment or academic records, and (3) be currently enrolled in an English education program. Students who used Instagram primarily for entertainment with minimal exposure to educational content or had limited English proficiency were excluded.

Semi-structured interviews and observation are the two main techniques used in data collection. The semi-structured interviews consisted of 10 open-ended questions designed to explore participants' experiences using Instagram for English learning. This format allowed flexibility, enabling participants to provide detailed responses while maintaining consistency across interviews. Some key

questions included:

1. How often do you use Instagram for learning English, and what types of content do you engage with the most?
2. Which Instagram features (e.g., Reels, Stories, comments, live sessions) do you find most useful for improving your English skills?
3. Have you noticed improvements in specific language skills, such as grammar, pronunciation, or writing, through Instagram? Can you explain how?
4. What challenges do you face when using Instagram for learning English?
5. How does Instagram compare to other digital learning tools you have used?

Interviews were conducted in person and lasted approximately 30–40 minutes per participant. The responses were transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and insights related to participants' language learning experiences. Researchers can better comprehend Gen Z's use of Instagram for English language learning and the difficulties they encounter by conducting interviews.

Thematic coding was applied to identify recurring themes such as 'digital natives' perspectives on Instagram learning,' and 'preferences for interactive and collaborative learning.' Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns or themes in the data. Braun & Clarke (2006) stated that thematic analysis can play a role as an essentialist or realist method that reports on participatory experiences, meanings, and realities, or as a constructionist method that examines the ways in which events, realities, meanings, and experiences are shaped by various discourses in society.

Observation results data are analyzed using digital content analysis (Kripendorff, 2004) to explore how participants interact with Instagram as an English learning tool. This analysis focuses on participants' engagement patterns with various Instagram features, such as Reels, Stories, comments, and Live sessions. The engagement metrics analyzed include the number of likes, comments, shares, and frequency of interaction with educational content. Content analysis also reviews the types of materials most frequently accessed by participants, such as grammar tutorials, pronunciation videos, or infographics. Observations are made for two weeks, with documentation in the form of screenshots and research notes to record participants' systematic interaction patterns. The digital content analysis approach allows this study to objectively describe the consumption trend of learning content, without relying on the subjective perception of interviews.

This study followed strict ethical guidelines to protect participant privacy and ensure data security. Before taking part, all participants provided written informed consent, confirming that they understood the study's purpose and agreed to participate voluntarily. To maintain anonymity, all personal information was removed, and participants were used the initials of their names instead of using their real names. Interview transcripts and observation data were securely stored on password-protected devices, with access restricted to the research team.

Participants were also given the chance to review their interview transcripts before analysis. This allowed them to correct any misunderstandings or clarify their responses, ensuring that their views were accurately represented. By taking these steps, the study upheld ethical standards and ensured that participant confidentiality was fully protected.

Results

Instagram was generally perceived as a useful and engaging tool for English learning, though participants also noted some challenges. Their experiences can be categorized into four key themes: preferred features, engagement with content, perceived learning benefits, and challenges faced.

- *Preferred Features*

-Twelve out of fifteen participants preferred Reels, citing that short videos helped them understand vocabulary and pronunciation more effectively.

- Ten participants found Stories useful for interactive quizzes and quick grammar tips.

- Eight participants regularly engaged in Instagram Live for real-time discussions with instructors and peers.

These findings indicate that visual and interactive content is more appealing than traditional text-based posts.

- *Engagement with Content*

- Most participants followed educational Instagram accounts dedicated to English learning.

- Many reported likings and saving posts related to grammar and pronunciation for future review.

- Some engaged in comment discussions, though they were hesitant to post their own writing in English.

While Instagram fosters passive learning, active participation (e.g., posting in English) remains limited.

- *Perceived Learning Benefits*

- Nine participants believed Instagram helped improve their grammar and pronunciation through short, visually engaging content.

- Eleven participants felt more motivated to practice English daily because Instagram made learning feel effortless and entertaining.

This supports previous research (Hwang et al., 2018), which found that visual media increases motivation and engagement in language learning.

- *Challenges Faced*

- Six participants admitted that distractions from non-educational content made it hard to stay focused.

- Five participants said multitasking (e.g., checking messages while watching videos) reduced their ability to retain new vocabulary.

This aligns with concerns raised by Al-Ali (2014), who noted that social media's fast-paced nature can hinder deep learning if not used mindfully.

Discussion

Thematic encoding and digital content analysis revealed key patterns in how participants use Instagram for English learning. For interview data, thematic encoding is applied to categorize recurring themes and insights. Data was transcribed, encoded, and categorized into broad themes, such as engagement with digital learning, difficulties utilizing Instagram to learn English, and the value of visual content in language retention, in accordance with Braun & Clarke (2006) methodology. For observation data, a digital content analysis was conducted to check the types of English learning materials involved on Instagram.

This involves systematic analysis of their interactions with posts, Reels, Stories, and other interactive features. Finding out which content types participants found most helpful, how involved they were, and how they learned on the platform were the main goals. This analysis provides an objective insight into how participants incorporate Instagram into their English learning routines. This combination of methodologies strengthens the validity of the findings and provides a clearer picture of how Gen Z students use the digital platform as a language learning media.

In a previous study, Al-Ali (2014) examined Instagram's function in language learning and discovered that its interactive and visual elements improve student interest. According to the study, exposure to real-world language input through pictures, captions, and brief videos helps students learn more effectively and enjoyably. These results are consistent with the current study, in which participants thought Instagram was a fun and adaptable way to get better at English. Al-Ali also pointed out a possible disadvantage: consuming passive content might prevent deeper language learning. To fully utilize Instagram's educational potential, structured learning techniques are necessary.

Rather than assuming students will naturally use Instagram for productive learning, educators can take a more structured approach by integrating it into formal instruction. For example, teachers can assign students to create Instagram posts where they explain a grammar rule, summarize an article, or share a short pronunciation tip. Instagram Stories can also be used for quick quizzes or polls to reinforce key language concepts in an interactive way. Live sessions provide an opportunity for real-time discussions, allowing students to practice speaking in a more engaging and informal setting. Encouraging participation in comment sections under educational posts can also help develop students' writing skills in a practical, real-world context. By incorporating Instagram into classroom activities with clear learning objectives, teachers can make the platform a meaningful tool rather than just a passive source of content.

This study showed that Instagram could develop the English skills of its participants. According to Miftah (2013), any learning media well designed constitutes an extended opportunity for students' proficiency transfer. This study revealed that learners perceived the use of Instagram as facilitating their improvement of grammar knowledge, pronunciation, and skills in writing. For example, short videos enable participants to learn the pronunciation of certain words, while photo posts together with texts provide a deeper understanding of the structure of sentences. All these posts allow for not only the enhancement of learning but also enabling participants to apply the theory in practice in their daily life.

Participants appreciated the flexibility of Instagram, as it allowed them to learn at their own pace. Many reported using the platform in their free time, such as before bed or between classes, making it a convenient supplement to formal learning. For instance, Instagram Live allowed participants to attend classes or discussions in real-time without being physically present, while posts kept permanently on educational accounts gave the participants the possibility to revisit the lessons any time they required, thus making the learning experience flexible and independent.

All the good features of Instagram, when compared to any other media of instruction, were found to be much more favorable. Using Instagram as a learning tool comes with certain ethical and practical challenges that need to be considered. One major concern is data privacy—Instagram collects and personalizes content based on user activity, which means students could be exposed to unwanted ads or non-educational material. Educators should guide students on how to adjust their privacy settings and be mindful of the personal information they share online. Another issue is Instagram's algorithm, which prioritizes content based on engagement rather than educational value.

Even if students follow English-learning accounts, their feeds may still be dominated by entertainment content, making it harder for them to stay focused. Without intentional effort, learning through Instagram can become more about passive scrolling than active engagement.   Additionally, the risk of distraction is high. While short videos and interactive features can be useful, they also make it easy for students to lose focus and drift toward unrelated content. If Instagram is to be used in education, there needs to be a balance—structured activities can help, but students also need to develop self-discipline in managing their time online.

The participants preferred Instagram over textbooks or other social media like Facebook and Twitter. Textbooks frequently are considered boring because they present information in a limited manner without stimulating visuals. Gen Z's perspective on English learning reflects how their digital habits shape their expectations of the learning process. According to Prensky's (2001) Digital Natives theory, this generation prefers fast-paced, technology-driven learning methods, but

they also face distinct challenges compared to previous generations. Despite these benefits, this study has several limitations.

The small sample size of 15 university students from North Sumatra limits the generalizability of the findings. Different age groups, such as high school students or working professionals, may have distinct digital learning habits that were not captured in this study. Another limitation is the potential for social desirability bias, as participants might have overstated Instagram's benefits due to the generally positive perception of technology in education.

Future research should also take a longitudinal approach to better understand how consistent engagement with Instagram impacts English proficiency over time. Rather than relying on short-term observations or self-reported improvements, studies could track students' language development over several months or even years, analyzing their progress in grammar, vocabulary retention, pronunciation, and writing skills. This would provide clearer insights into whether Instagram-based learning leads to lasting improvements or if its effects are only temporary.

A longitudinal study could compare students who use Instagram in a structured, guided way—such as through teacher-led activities—with those who engage with the platform independently. This could help determine whether structured integration within a curriculum produces better learning outcomes than self-directed use. By examining these factors over an extended period, researchers could offer stronger evidence on the long-term role of Instagram in English language learning.

Conclusion

According to the research findings, Instagram's dynamic, adaptable, and visually appealing material has made it a useful tool for Gen Z English language learners. Participants who were exposed to Instagram's features, including Reels, Stories, and live chats, reported improvements in their writing, grammar, and pronunciation. This fits with their inclination for dynamic, aesthetically pleasing digital learning. Instagram's interactive features, such as comments and direct messaging, encourage group learning and motivation. However, difficulties like multitasking and cursory content engagement could hinder the development of profound language skills.

This study emphasizes how crucial it is to combine Instagram with organized learning techniques in order to maximize its advantages. According to the study, social media's role in education is changing, and teachers should create lesson plans that take use of Instagram's advantages while minimizing its drawbacks. These results advance our knowledge of digital learning and urge more research into the ways that various social media platforms can improve language learning in the digital age.

This research has some limitations. First, the study only includes a small sample of North Sumatra students, who might not be entirely representative of the Gen Z population as a whole. Second, while other social media platforms might offer distinct or complementary advantages, this study solely concentrates on Instagram as a learning tool. Third, this study uses self-reported information from observations and interviews, which could be influenced by individual factors. For further research, it is recommended to conduct a comparative study comparing the effectiveness of Instagram with other digital platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, or language learning applications to understand the advantages and limitations of each media.

Longitudinal studies can be carried out to examine the long-term effects of Instagram use on enhancing English proficiency. Studies with more diverse participants from various educational backgrounds, age groups, and geographic areas can provide a more comprehensive insight into trends in digital learning.

Acknowledgement

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