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Exploring the Impact of Instagram on English Language Skills: Student Perspectives

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Abstract

The integration of social media platforms into educational practices has become increasingly prevalent, offering innovative opportunities to enhance language learning. This study explores the role of Instagram in supporting English language development among ten senior high school students (ages 15–17) in Indonesia. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected over a two-week period through semi-structured interviews following task-based engagement with Instagram. Findings indicate that Instagram's multimodal features, such as captions, videos, and interactive elements, created an engaging and accessible environment that significantly supported vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension. However, improvements in writing and speaking skills were less evident, as they appeared to require more structured and intentional practice. While Instagram showed potential for enhancing receptive skills, its contribution to productive skills was more limited without guided activities. These findings highlight the importance of designing purposeful digital learning experiences to support well-rounded language development across all skill areas. This study offers practical insights for language educators and curriculum designers seeking to integrate social media tools into formal instruction. Limitations include the small, context-specific sample and the absence of direct skill assessment, suggesting the need for further research with more diverse participants and mixed-method approaches.

Keywords: *EFL; English competence; Instagram; social media; students' perceptions*

Introduction

In the 21st century, technology is developing so rapidly that it can affect the way people think. It also affects the way people interact with each other. People no longer need to communicate face-to-face, have to travel long distances just to chat with distant relatives, and even now, all work, teaching, and learning activities can also be done online.

The emergence of social media, which is considered the most important product of technological developments in the field of communication, allows people from various walks of life to feel the benefits. One is because social media provides an environment where people can socialize, share ideas, and provide feedback on the content created. In addition, social media has also influenced many fields such as health, banking, marketing, trade, defense, entertainment, and even education (Bolat, 2018). There are several social media sites that people usually access: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube, and others. (Ali, 2018; Bolat, 2018; Kavaliauskiene & Ashkinazi, 2014, Han,2022).

The integration of digital technologies, particularly social media, has increasingly influenced pedagogical practices, presenting novel opportunities to support language development in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Social media platforms, which incorporate multimodal features such as text, audio, and video, offer learners the opportunity to engage in authentic language use through commenting, interaction, and the reception of immediate feedback from peers and instructors (Alfahadi, 2017; Han, 2022). Additionally, these platforms facilitate self-directed learning by allowing students to access, exchange, and disseminate information at their own pace, thereby enhancing learner autonomy, motivation, and engagement (Abdalgane, 2022; Han, 2022; Al-Khalidi & Khouni, 2021).

Furthermore, empirical studies have demonstrated that the integration of social media into language education contributes positively to the development of various linguistic skills, including listening, speaking, writing, and vocabulary acquisition (Demir & Gokgoz-Kurt, 2024; Al-Khalidi & Khouni, 2021; Purwanti et al., 2022; Abdullah et al., 2022). Besides that, the integration of social media in support of their professional development, social media is encouraged to be a part of continuous and lifelong learning (Alberth, Mursalim, Siam, & Ino, 2018).

Instagram is one of the most widely used social media platforms, appealing to a broad demographic that includes children, teenagers, and adults. Its global popularity can be attributed to the diverse range of user-friendly features it offers, which support various forms of interaction and content sharing. In Indonesia alone, Instagram had approximately 90.183.200 users, representing 31.8% of the total population (Napoleon.cat, n.d.). Its key features are quizzes, polls, Q&A sessions, music integration, and short-form video content like Reels. These tools enable users to engage in interactive communication, such as asking and answering questions, composing captions for photos and videos, and accessing various content, including educational, inspirational, and humorous material.

Additionally, Instagram facilitates real-time communication through messaging, voice and video calls, and shared experiences like co-watching movies or listening to music together using up-to-date playlists. Given its multifunctional nature, Instagram is a platform for entertainment and social interaction and holds significant potential as a medium for learning English.

Several empirical studies have explored the integration of Instagram in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Research conducted by Lestari and German (2021), Tirani (2019), Pujiati et al. (2019), Aghayi and Christison (2023), Almohes and Altamini (2024), and Puspita and Subekti (2023) revealed that students generally held positive perceptions of Instagram as a tool for learning English. The platform effectively supported students' participation in English classes and online learning communities. Moreover, Instagram's diverse features, such as quizzes, English video content, caption writing, video creation (e.g., Instastories), and interactive commenting, offer learners multiple opportunities to engage with the English language in meaningful contexts (Mardiani & Ursila, 2024; Subekti & Damaryana, 2024).

These activities have been shown to enhance students' grammar (Ikhsan & Fetriani, 2023), vocabulary acquisition (Alotaibi, 2023; Bestari et al., 2023; Ikhsan & Fetriani, 2023; Nurkhamidah Putri Wulandari, 2022; Putri et al., 2020; Rasyiid et al., 2021; Hikmah et al, 2024), listening skills and speaking skills (Mardiani & Ursila, 2024; Aini, 2024), and writing skills (Tirani, 2019; Pujiati et al., 2019; Bestari et al., 2023; Fahmi et al., 2021; Putri et al., 2020). In addition, the platform's interactive nature contributes to increased student motivation and engagement in the language learning process (Pujiati et al., 2019).

Although previous studies have primarily focused on university students or adult learners, the perceptions and experiences of senior high school students remain underexplored. This gap is particularly relevant in Indonesia, where English is a compulsory subject but is often delivered through traditional, exam-oriented instruction that may not promote communicative or interactive learning. Despite Instagram's popularity among teenagers and its educational potential, limited research has examined how high school students perceive its use for learning English, either within formal classroom settings or informal, self-directed environments. Additionally, little attention has been given to how Instagram use among students aligns with Indonesia's broader goals for digital literacy and its national education strategy toward Indonesia Emas 2045.

This study, therefore, aims to explore Indonesian senior high school students' perceptions of using Instagram to support English language learning in an EFL context. Specifically, it investigates how students engage with the platform to enhance their language skills, what features they find most useful, and how they perceive its role in their broader learning experience.

Method

This study employed a qualitative method, particularly a case study, since this research involves a small number of participants. Furthermore, a case study as part of qualitative methodology is "an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the 'case') in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be

clearly evident" (Yin, 2018, p. 43).

The data for this study were collected from ten senior high school students at a private school in Indonesia. To obtain rich and relevant insights, the study employed qualitative methods, including observations and semi-structured interviews. All ten students who initially participated also voluntarily took part in in-depth online interviews, conducted to ensure flexibility and convenience.

The in-depth interviews were conducted online via Zoom and Google Meet to provide flexibility and accessibility. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and followed a semi-structured format, allowing for both guided questions and open-ended responses. The interview protocol focused on participants' experiences, challenges, and perceptions related to using Instagram as a learning tool. Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to complete a series of tasks designed to simulate meaningful English language use in authentic social media contexts. These tasks, which were to be completed over one week, included:

1. Creating a picture story on Instagram with English captions,
2. Watching an English educational video or conversation,
3. Producing a short Instagram video story using English, and
4. Reading and responding to English posts from English-based accounts.

Table 1 below presents the participants' demographic background:

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Background

Participant	Gender	Age	Education Level	Instagram Experience
A	Female	16	Senior High School	Expert user
B	Female	16	Senior High School	Expert user
C	Male	16	Senior High School	Expert user
D	Male	16	Senior High School	Expert user
E	Male	16	Senior High School	Expert user
F	Female	15	Senior High School	Expert user
G	Female	15	Senior High School	Expert user
H	Female	15	Senior High School	Expert user
I	Male	17	Senior High School	Expert user
J	Male	17	Senior High School	Expert user

Ethical approval was obtained from [name of ethics committee or institution], and informed consent was secured from all participants and their parents/guardians, given the participants' minor status. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. Coding was conducted manually and iteratively to allow patterns and meanings to emerge directly from the data. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis, peer debriefing and investigator triangulation were employed. Additionally, selected interview transcripts were cross-checked by a second coder to ensure consistency and analytical rigor.

The researcher acknowledges their dual role as both investigator and interpreter. As someone with experience in English education and digital literacy, the researcher remained reflexively aware of potential bias throughout the data collection and analysis process. Field notes and memo writing were used to monitor subjectivity and ensure a transparent and rigorous inquiry process.

Results

Instagram as a Medium to Improve English Language Skills

All participants acknowledged that Instagram positively influenced their English language skills. Five participants (A, C, D, E, and F) reported that using Instagram can increase their English vocabulary, particularly by reading English captions and text-based content regularly. As stated by participant A,

> "...scrolling and then reading some captions written in English helps me improve my reading skills and increase my English vocabulary." (Participant A)

Participant C further stated,

> "…. I like how Instagram presents the information, not only written but also video, where I learn a lot of new words just by watching the content and reading some captions." (Participant C)

Besides that, Instagram was perceived as a valuable tool for enhancing listening skills. Participants B, D, H, and J noted that features like Reels, Stories, and video posts allowed them to hear natural English usage in varied contexts, including conversational speech, pronunciation demonstrations, and vocabulary explanations.

The findings reveal that a majority of participants (A, B, C, D, E, F, and J) did not report significant advancements in their writing and speaking abilities. Specifically, Participants A, B, and D acknowledged a limited engagement with writing in English on the platform. Similarly, Participants C, E, and F expressed that their speaking proficiency did not markedly improve, attributing this to a lack of confidence when speaking English in public contexts.

Nevertheless, these participants recognized the potential of Instagram to facilitate improvements in both writing and speaking skills if they engage in consistent practice. Activities such as composing captions or comments in English

could foster enhancements in sentence structure, vocabulary utilization, and overall written fluency.

Perceived Benefits of Learning English Through Instagram

The findings reveal that all participants identified Instagram as an advantageous tool for English language acquisition. Compared to traditional learning methods, Instagram offers a more efficient, flexible, and accessible approach to developing language proficiency. Its availability on mobile devices allows learners to integrate English learning into their daily routines without requiring formal classroom settings.

Furthermore, Instagram's multimodal features, including images, videos, captions, and interactive elements, create a dynamic and engaging environment that enhances students' motivation to learn English. Data from the study demonstrates that 80% of participants (8 out of 10) reported increased engagement and enjoyment when using Instagram as a learning tool. Participants A, C, D, E, and F specifically noted that regularly reading English captions and watching video content significantly contributed to their vocabulary expansion. For instance, Participant A stated,

"Scrolling through posts with English captions helps me improve my reading skills and build my vocabulary." (Participant A)

Similarly, Participant C emphasized that Instagram's multimodal format supports effective learning, explaining,

"The combination of videos and written captions makes it easier to understand new words in context." (Participant C)

The study also highlights Instagram's role in improving listening skills. A majority of participants (B, D, H, and J) expressed that features such as Reels, Stories, and video posts provided them with valuable opportunities to hear native speakers communicate in English. This exposure enables students to experience varied accents, conversational speech, and pronunciation nuances, thereby strengthening their auditory comprehension skills. The findings indicate that 70% of participants felt that listening to native English speakers through Instagram videos was beneficial for their comprehension skills. Participant B noted,

"Listening to different accents in Instagram videos helps me get familiar with how native speakers talk, which improves my understanding." (Participant B)

Participant H added,

"You know, Instagram's users are diverse, and they speak different languages. Sometimes I joined Instagram live with native Americans, and sometimes I watched American content, it's really interesting." (Participant H)

Moreover, Instagram's interactive features contribute to an enjoyable and stimulating learning environment. Participants indicated that the entertaining formats of short videos and reels helped maintain their attention and reduced boredom associated with conventional learning methods. Data analysis reveals that 90% of participants agreed that engaging with interactive elements such as polls, quizzes, and comment sections made learning English more enjoyable.

Despite these advantages, the study also identified certain limitations. While receptive language skills, such as vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension, were enhanced through Instagram use, fewer participants reported significant improvements in writing and speaking skills.

Discussion

Instagram as a Medium to Improve English Language Skills

The findings indicate that Instagram can be an effective tool for expanding students' vocabulary, aligning with previous studies (Alotaibi, 2023; Bestari et al., 2023; Ikhsan & Fetriani, 2023; Nurkhamidah Putri Wulandari, 2022; Putri et al., 2020; Rasyiid et al., 2021). Instagram's multimodal features, such as Live, Reels, and posts, enable learners to engage in meaningful activities that support vocabulary acquisition (Alfahadi, 2017; Han, 2022; Agustin & Ayu, 2022).

In terms of listening skills, the exposure to authentic language use through Instagram's video-based content supports auditory comprehension. This aligns with Purwanti et al. (2022), who emphasized the benefits of real-world language exposure. The entertaining nature of short videos and stories also helps maintain learners' attention and reduce boredom (Agustin & Ayu, 2021), creating an enjoyable learning environment.

However, the limited improvement in writing and speaking skills contrasts with prior research suggesting Instagram enhances these productive skills (Ariza & Tresno, 2024; Bestari et al., 2023; Fahmi et al., 2021; Tirani, 2019; Pujiati et al., 2019; Putri et al., 2020). This discrepancy may stem from differences in how students use the platform, passive engagement versus intentional practice.

Future studies could explore the impact of guided Instagram-based exercises designed to promote written and spoken fluency. Additionally, confidence-building initiatives, such as using voice notes, live interactions, and video responses, could help learners feel more comfortable expressing themselves in English.

In conclusion, Instagram presents a promising avenue for enhancing students' English competence, primarily in receptive skills. However, realizing its full potential in productive skills requires intentional and structured use of the platform. Future research and practical interventions should focus on maximizing Instagram's capabilities for holistic language development.

Perceived Benefits of Learning English Through Instagram

The findings suggest that Instagram offers a flexible and immersive environment for English language learning, particularly in enhancing receptive skills. The platform's accessibility and integration into daily life make it a practical tool for informal learning. This supports the idea that mobile-assisted language learning can complement traditional methods by providing continuous exposure to the target language.

The positive impact on vocabulary development and listening comprehension aligns with previous research indicating that social media platforms expose learners to authentic language use (Alotaibi, 2023; Bestari et al., 2023; Ikhsan & Fetriani, 2023). Instagram's multimodal content, combining visuals, text, and audio, facilitates contextual learning, which is crucial for vocabulary retention and listening skills.

The high engagement levels reported by participants also reflect Instagram's potential to motivate learners through interactive and entertaining content. This supports findings from Mardiani & Syifa Ursila (2024) and Pujiati et al. (2019), who emphasized the role of social media in promoting active learning and sustained motivation.

However, the limited improvement in productive skills such as writing and speaking highlights a gap in how Instagram is currently used by learners. While the platform provides exposure, it may lack the structured practice necessary for developing these skills. This suggests a need for more intentional use of Instagram features, such as composing captions, participating in live discussions, or creating video responses, to foster productive language development.

Encouraging learners to engage in these activities could bridge the gap between passive consumption and active language use. Future research might explore how guided tasks on Instagram can support writing and speaking proficiency, especially when combined with confidence-building strategies.

Conclusion

The study highlights Instagram's potential as a valuable tool for enhancing students' English competence, particularly in vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension. Its multimodal features, including captions, images, videos, and interactive functions, provide an engaging and accessible learning environment, making English learning more enjoyable and immersive. Participants acknowledged that exposure to authentic language input via Instagram posts and videos contributed significantly to their receptive language skills, reinforcing previous research on social media's role in language acquisition.

However, while Instagram proved effective in developing receptive skills, improvements in writing and speaking skills were less pronounced. A lack of intentional practice and confidence in verbal communication were key challenges reported by participants. Although Instagram provides opportunities for

productive language use, its effectiveness in enhancing writing and speaking requires structured engagement, such as composing English captions, participating in discussions, or engaging in video-based speaking exercises.

While this study offers valuable insights into the use of Instagram for English language learning, several limitations should be noted. First, the sample size was limited to ten senior high school students from a single private school in Indonesia, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied on self-reported data through interviews, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Third, while qualitative data provided in depth, the absence of pre- and post-testing limited the ability to measure actual language gains. Additionally, students' familiarity with Instagram may have varied, and the study did not account for differences in digital literacy levels. Future research could incorporate a more diverse sample, mixed-method approaches, or longitudinal data collection to assess the long-term impact of Instagram-based learning.

The findings of this study carry several practical implications for educators and curriculum developers. First, teachers can integrate Instagram as a supplementary tool for vocabulary building and listening practice by encouraging students to follow educational accounts, caption photos in English, or respond to video content. Second, to support productive language skills, educators should design structured Instagram-based activities, such as weekly speaking challenges using stories or reels, and peer feedback on written captions, to create more intentional language use. Third, schools and educational stakeholders should consider including social media literacy in digital competency frameworks to help students use platforms like Instagram responsibly and effectively for learning. Finally, teacher training programs can include modules on integrating popular social media into communicative language teaching to foster engagement and learner autonomy.

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