



INSTAGRAM AS A LEARNING TOOL: TRENDS AND BENEFITS FOR ENGLISH STUDENTS' SKILLS

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Received: October 13, 2025 Accepted: November 17, 2025 Published: May 30, 2026

Abstract

In recent years, Instagram has become a popular platform that supports informal English language learning. This study examines how English language education students use Instagram as a tool to improve their language skills. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with fourth-semester students at Muhammadiyah University of Ponorogo. Thematic analysis revealed that Instagram enhances vocabulary, grammar, listening, and speaking skills. Features like Reels help improve listening and pronunciation skills, while text and comments support grammar and vocabulary development. Students also reported increased motivation due to Instagram's flexible and relevant learning environment. Despite potential distractions, they adopted strategies such as content filtering and goal-setting. This study contributes to a better understanding of how digital platforms like Instagram can be used to support self-directed language learning and motivation among students. These findings offer valuable insights for educators in designing informal learning activities integrated with technology that align with students' digital habits. Further research is needed through qualitative or quantitative approaches to explore in greater depth the effectiveness of Instagram in enhancing language learning outcomes and validating its role in English language education.

Keywords: Digital learning tools, Instagram, English language learning, Student engagement

INTRODUCTION

In the era of rapid technological advancements, digital platforms have revolutionized various aspects of human life, including education. Social media, in particular, has become an integral part of modern education, providing innovative and interactive ways to facilitate learning. Among the various social media platforms, Instagram has gained popularity as a potential educational tool, especially for language learning (Nasution, 2023). Instagram, a visually driven social networking platform, allows users to share images, videos, and text, making it a versatile tool for educational purposes (Rasyiid et al., 2021). Recent studies have shown that Instagram can enhance language learning by promoting student engagement, motivation, and collaboration (Maulina et al., 2021). For English language learners, Instagram offers diverse learning opportunities, such as vocabulary enrichment, writing practice, and interactive communication (Nasution, 2023). Additionally, students can

engage with authentic language content, participate in discussions, and receive feedback from peers and educators, making Instagram a flexible and effective learning medium.

The integration of Instagram in language education aligns with contemporary teaching methodologies that emphasize student-centered learning and technology-based instruction. Studies have demonstrated that social media platforms like Instagram contribute to a more engaging and effective learning environment by providing real-world language exposure and interactive learning experiences (Maulina et al., 2021). This is also supported by Maghfiroh et al. (2024), who argue that digital competence is an essential skill for prospective teachers in the 21st century and that integrating technology such as social media into the classroom is necessary to enhance pedagogical strategies and promote student motivation. Moreover, findings from Maghfiroh et al. (2024) in another study show that students benefit significantly from digital learning environments that incorporate multimedia elements, like images, videos, and interactive digital tools, which are inherent features of Instagram, contributing to students' metacognitive and cognitive strategy development in language learning.

Researchers have highlighted Instagram's potential as an interactive and engaging tool that supports language learning by offering multimodal content and opportunities for authentic communication. According to Maulina et al. (2021), Instagram usage can help students increase their autonomy and motivation in learning English by integrating visual and written language inputs in a flexible and learner-centered environment. Similarly, Sufi Ikrima and Suwastini (2021) argue that Instagram serves as a creative space where learners can develop various English skills, such as writing and speaking, through interactive and visually based tasks that reflect real-life communication. Recent evidence also supports this view, showing that Instagram promotes student motivation, communication, and participation, ultimately leading to higher learning satisfaction (González-Mohino et al., 2024) and that university students perceive Instagram as one of the most comfortable and useful platforms for learning activities (Garrido et al., 2025).

However, despite these promising findings, much of the existing literature tends to focus on general advantages rather than providing a detailed analysis of how Instagram's specific features contribute to each language skill. While earlier research has generally highlighted Instagram's potential and positive reception among learners, it often lacks focus on the detailed mechanisms by which Instagram enhances particular language skills (Maulina et al., 2021; Suwastini et al., 2021). Furthermore, many studies do not fully explore how Instagram's features can be optimized across different learning contexts, both formal and informal (Nasution, 2023). Even in recent research, while Instagram has been shown to enhance engagement and satisfaction, its integration into language pedagogy remains underexplored (González-Mohino et al., 2024; Garrido et al., 2025). Moreover, there is a lack of longitudinal or comparative studies that evaluate its effectiveness against traditional learning methods (Maulina et al., 2021; Sufi Ikrima & Suwastini, 2021). This indicates a research gap that needs to be addressed by further exploring the trends and measurable benefits of using Instagram to enhance English language students' skills in more structured learning contexts.

To address the limitations identified in previous studies, this article aims to provide a more in-depth and structured investigation into how Instagram contributes to English language learning. Specifically, the study seeks to fill existing gaps by pursuing three main objectives:

(1) to find out how English language students are currently using Instagram as a digital learning tool; (2) to look at the clear benefits of Instagram to support language skills; and (3) to assess how Instagram engage, motivate, and succeed students' learning English. Through these objectives, this study intends to offer practical insights for educators and researchers in designing more effective, interactive, and student-centered learning environments that incorporate Instagram as part of digital pedagogy. Based on these objectives, the research questions are as follows: (1) how do you use Instagram to support your English language learning in general?; (2) which features on Instagram do you use the most in your learning process?; (3) which language skills do you feel have improved the most through your use of Instagram?; (4) can you give a concrete example of how Instagram has helped you improve one or more English language skills?; (5) do you feel more motivated or engaged in learning English when using Instagram? Why or why not?; (6) how does your interaction with the English learning community on Instagram influence your learning process?; (7) has your social environment (friends, teachers, family) influenced your decision to use Instagram for language learning? If yes, in what way?; (8) compared to other learning methods, how would you evaluate the effectiveness of Instagram in helping you improve your English?; (9) have you faced any challenges while using Instagram as a learning platform? How did you overcome them?; (10) is there anything else you would like to share about your experience using Instagram for learning English?

Based on various previous findings, this article starts from the argument that the use of Instagram as a medium for English learning can make a significant contribution to improving students' language skills, both in terms of motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. The main hypothesis in this study is that the integration of Instagram features such as captions, stories, comments, and short videos in a structured manner can improve students' English language skills, especially in terms of vocabulary, writing, speaking, and grammar (Nasution, 2023; Maulina et al., 2021). In addition, it is assumed that the use of Instagram in learning contexts, both formal and informal, can create a multimodal, interesting, and contextual learning experience, thus facilitating more effective language learning (Suwastini et al., 2021). Previous experimental studies have also shown that students who use Instagram show significant improvements in writing skills compared to students who do not use it (Aqilla et al., 2023). Therefore, this study will examine the extent to which the use of Instagram as a learning tool has a real impact on the development of students' English language skills, as well as how this platform can be used optimally to support creative and technology-based learning processes.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to explore students' experiences and perceptions of using Instagram as a platform for English language learning. This approach was considered appropriate because Instagram, as a multimodal and personalized social media platform, promotes dynamic, authentic, and context-based learning. A qualitative design allows for an in-depth understanding of learners' motivations, reflections, and subjective interpretations, which would be less accessible through quantitative approaches focused solely on numerical data (Putri et al., 2021; Dewi et al., 2022).

The participants of this study were three female fourth-semester students from the English Education Department who actively used Instagram to support their English learning. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, based on the following

criteria: (1) active Instagram users; (2) sufficient access to technology and a stable internet connection; (3) involvement in a digital-based learning environment.

Basic demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	English Proficiency (Self-Reported)	Instagram Usage Pattern
R1	Female	22	Upper-Intermediate	Uses Reels and captions to learn pronunciation and vocabulary; follows English learning accounts
R2	Female	21	Intermediate	Uses Stories for vocabulary quizzes, captions for writing, and Reels for listening and speaking
R3	Female	21	Intermediate	Uses Reels to learn idioms and pronunciation; interacts with English-learning communities

In addition to students, instructors who integrated Instagram-based activities into classroom practices were also consulted to obtain a broader pedagogical perspective (Purba et al., 2021).

The primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, conducted in both English and Indonesian according to participants' language preference. Each interview lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and was held online via Google Meet to ensure convenience and accessibility. The interview protocol was designed to explore students' motivations, perceptions, and experiences in using Instagram features. Supporting data were obtained from documentation, including screenshots and textual samples of participants' Instagram activities such as Reels, captions, and Stories used for English learning. These materials were used for data triangulation to validate and enrich the interview findings. To ensure the rigor and credibility of the findings, several strategies were applied: (a) triangulation: interview data were cross-checked with documentation of actual Instagram activities; (b) member checking: participants reviewed the interview transcripts to verify accuracy and authenticity of their responses; (c) peer debriefing: preliminary codes and themes were discussed with two fellow researchers familiar with qualitative research to minimize subjective bias; (d) audit trail: detailed notes on data organization, coding, and analytical decisions were maintained to ensure transparency and replicability.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework: (1) familiarization: reading and rereading interview transcripts to gain an overall understanding; (2) generating initial codes: identifying meaningful data units related to Instagram use, language development, and motivation; (3) searching for themes: grouping similar codes into broader categories or potential themes; (4) reviewing themes: refining, merging, or removing overlapping themes to ensure internal consistency; (5) defining and naming

themes: describing each theme clearly to capture its essence; (6) producing the report: selecting representative excerpts and constructing the final narrative.

Table 2. Coding Process

Raw Data (Interview Excerpt)	Initial Codes	Theme
<i>"I use Reels to listen to native speakers, so my pronunciation improves."</i>	Listening to native speakers; Pronunciation practice	Use of Instagram Features for Pronunciation
<i>"I follow pages that post daily idioms with examples; it helps my vocabulary and grammar."</i>	Learning idioms; Vocabulary growth; Grammar awareness	Vocabulary and Grammar Development
<i>"I feel more motivated because the content is fun and easy to access anytime."</i>	Motivation; Accessibility; Enjoyable learning	Increased Motivation and Engagement

This systematic process allowed the researcher to trace how raw data evolved into meaningful categories and overarching themes. A thematic map was developed to illustrate the relationships among codes, subthemes, and overarching themes.

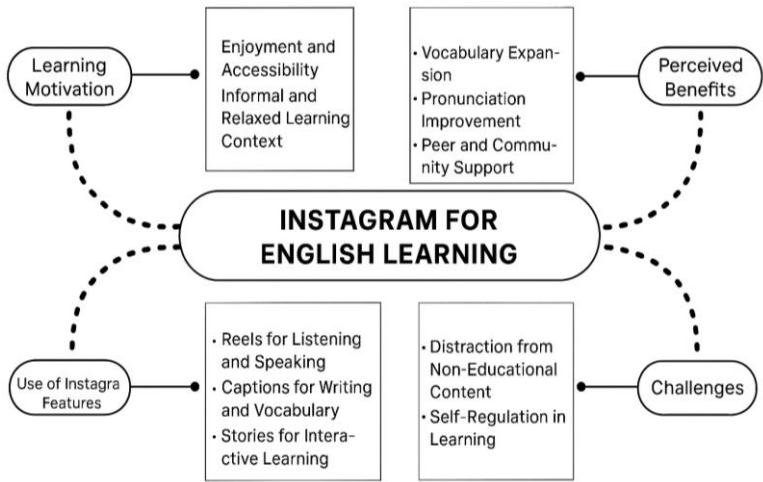


Figure 1. Thematic Map of Instagram-Based English Learning

This map demonstrates how students' Instagram engagement contributed to multimodal language practice and intrinsic motivation while also highlighting common challenges, such as distractions from unrelated content. It shows that learners effectively used Instagram features Reels, Stories, and Captions to integrate listening, speaking, reading, and writing in authentic and interactive ways. These activities promoted enjoyment, accessibility, and self-directed learning, which increased students' motivation, confidence, and exposure to real language use through peer and community interaction. Overall, the map reflects how Instagram serves as a dynamic and engaging platform that supports English language learning, provided that learners maintain self-regulation and focus amid its diverse content.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The Role of Instagram as a Supplementary Learning Platform

The use of Instagram as a learning tool emerged from students' daily habits and voluntary preferences. All three respondents indicated that they use Instagram as a flexible and accessible medium to support their English learning. They actively follow educational accounts that provide content such as vocabulary, idioms, grammar explanations, pronunciation guides, and real-life conversations with native speakers. Among Instagram's features, Reels was consistently considered the most effective. As Respondent 1 shared,

"I learned the difference between 'home' and 'house' just by watching Reels."

Reels offer short, entertaining videos that help improve listening and pronunciation skills in a fun and natural way. In addition to Reels, captions, and stories are used to better understand grammar in context, while the comment sections allow occasional interaction with the English-learning community.

Respondents also preferred Instagram over other learning platforms. R2 and R3 stated,

"Instagram feels lighter and less boring. I can learn while relaxing and still get valuable content."

They found Instagram more engaging due to its informal atmosphere, visual creativity, and variety of content that fits their personal learning style.

Language Skills Development Through Instagram Content

All respondents reported improvements in vocabulary, grammar, and speaking skills through Instagram. Exposure to authentic content and native speaker usage helped them naturally acquire new expressions and sentence structures. R3 mentioned,

"I often heard idioms like 'hit the books,' and I finally used it during a classroom discussion."

Each respondent recalled specific words or phrases they picked up from Instagram content and successfully applied in real communication, reinforcing the platform's practical contribution to their language skills. Grammar learning was also enhanced by contextual input. As R1 and R2 expressed,

"Thanks to Instagram captions, I can understand correct sentence patterns without needing to open a grammar book."

Thus, Instagram contributed to the natural acquisition of new vocabulary, expressions, and grammatical structures through repeated exposure and authentic content.

Motivation and Emotional Engagement in Learning

All respondents described the learning experience on Instagram as more relaxed, engaging, and relatable than traditional methods. The content is visually attractive and uses conversational language that feels approachable.

"When I learn from Instagram, it doesn't feel like I'm studying. But eventually, I realized how much I've learned."(R1, R2)

"Learning on Instagram is more relaxed, and I get excited because the content is so relatable to real life."(R3)

The flexibility of the platform allowed them to learn in various settings while resting, lying down, or during commutes, making English learning a natural part of daily life.

Interactions and Social Dimensions of Instagram Learning

Although not all respondents actively engaged in the community through comments, they all recognized the positive presence of other learners and educators on the platform. This presence provided a sense of support and connection. Respondent 1 noted,

“Sometimes I read the comments from other learners, and it makes me feel like I’m not alone in this journey.”

Some learners used the opportunity to occasionally comment or message educators, which helped them practice writing in English. Others preferred to learn passively, focusing on absorbing content rather than direct interaction.

Challenges and Learners’ Adaptive Strategies

While Instagram provides accessible and multimodal input, one major challenge reported by participants was distraction from non-academic content.

“Sometimes I get distracted because funny or unrelated videos pop up” (R2).

To manage this, participants developed adaptive strategies such as following only educational accounts, turning off notifications, and scheduling specific study times.

“Now I only follow learning accounts so I won’t get distracted while scrolling through Instagram” (R1, R3).

These strategies demonstrate learners’ efforts to maintain focus and regulate their digital learning environment.

Instagram as an Effective and Enjoyable Learning Environment

All respondents agreed that Instagram serves as an engaging and effective platform for language learning, especially because it integrates visual, textual, and interactive features. Respondent 1 reflected,

“Instagram has become a fun learning space that keeps me motivated. It’s so different from rigid classroom learning.”

Respondents reported that features like Reels, Stories, captions, and comment sections contributed to both linguistic and emotional engagement, fostering motivation and sustained learning interest. Students’ preference for language-learning-specific content demonstrates how adaptive technology and user agency intersect to shape learning trajectories in informal online spaces. To conclude, the learning process on English language development through Instagram can be summarized in the conceptual model shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Thematic Summary of Students' Experiences in Using Instagram for English Language Learning

Instagram Feature	Language Skills Developed	Learning Benefit	Motivational/Emotional Impact	Adaptive Strategy
Reels	Listening, Pronunciation	Exposure to authentic spoken English, short	Enjoyable, relaxing, and accessible way to improve listening	Watching only educational reels, turning

		and engaging input		off notifications
Captions	Grammar, Vocabulary, Writing	Learn sentence structure and word usage in context	Feels natural; doesn't require memorizing grammar rules	Repeated exposure and contextual understanding
Stories (Quizzes)	Vocabulary, Reading	Interactive quizzes promote retention; quick self- assessment	Visually appealing and engaging	Participating in quizzes from language- focused accounts
Comments Section	Writing, Reading, Interaction	Peer learning, exposure to informal and formal expressions	Sense of belonging in a learning community	Passive engagement or occasional commenting on posts
Integrated Use	Speaking, Vocabulary, Grammar	Learning becomes integrated into daily life, relaxed yet effective	Learning feels informal and enjoyable	Filtering content, following only educational accounts

Table 3 illustrates how specific features of Instagram contribute meaningfully to the development of various English language skills, based on students' lived experiences. Rather than functioning solely as a platform for entertainment, Instagram is perceived by learners as a dynamic, multimodal learning space that supports language acquisition in authentic and engaging ways. Reels, for instance, serve as short and impactful exposures to natural spoken English. These videos are often produced by native or proficient speakers, offering learners opportunities to improve listening comprehension and pronunciation by observing intonation, stress patterns, and conversational flow in real-life contexts. The short and visually stimulating format of Reels makes them particularly suitable for sustaining learner attention, while their algorithmic repetition reinforces auditory memory and phonological awareness. Additionally, some learners strategically manage their engagement by filtering their feed to show only educational content and turning off irrelevant notifications, thus enhancing the platform's effectiveness as a language learning tool.

Captions and comment sections further enrich students' exposure to the English language by providing authentic written input in diverse registers, from informal slang to more structured expressions. Captions enable learners to see vocabulary and grammatical structures used in real contexts, making grammar acquisition feel intuitive rather than rule-based. Repeated encounters with similar phrases across posts support the internalization of sentence patterns and lexical chunks. Similarly, the comment section fosters interaction and peer learning,

allowing students to observe how English is used in social exchanges, often incorporating emojis, abbreviations, and pragmatic markers. Stories, especially those featuring interactive quizzes, contribute to vocabulary development and reading comprehension through playful and self-reflective learning. They also offer immediate feedback, promoting metacognitive awareness. When these features are used in an integrated manner across reading, writing, listening, and speaking, learners report that their language learning becomes seamlessly embedded into their everyday routines. The informal and enjoyable nature of this process enhances motivation and emotional connection to the language, leading to a more sustained and self-directed learning experience.

Discussion

The findings indicate that Instagram functions not merely as a social media platform but as an informal learning environment that supports English language acquisition. The use of Reels, captions, Stories, and comment sections offers multimodal exposure that enhances vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and speaking skills. These findings corroborate Iswahyuni (2021), who emphasized Instagram's role in enriching vocabulary and grammar, and Nasution (2022), who highlighted its motivational effect through flexible, enjoyable learning. Similarly, Ebadi et al. (2024) confirmed that learners' engagement on Instagram, particularly cognitive and affective engagement, significantly predicts L2 motivation, demonstrating that Instagram fosters both language learning and motivational growth in informal digital contexts. Instagram's authentic and contextual input encourages natural language learning, aligning with Nasution (2022) notion that repeated, meaningful exposure is more effective than rote memorization. The learners' ability to apply phrases and idioms in classroom communication also supports the principles of communicative competence and comprehensible input (Stephen & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2021).

From a motivational standpoint, the study confirms that visual and interactive affordances of Instagram enhance engagement and emotional connection, consistent with Gonzalez-Torres et al. (2023) and Obeso et al. (2023), who found that social media fosters learner satisfaction through microlearning and enjoyment. Moreover, Yu and Egger (2021) argue that emotional tone and visual design directly affect learners' attention and retention, an observation evident in this study's participants, who described Instagram learning as "fun" and "relaxing." The social dimension of Instagram, although used passively by some learners, contributes to a sense of community and exposure to authentic discourse. This echoes Vassey et al. (2020), who emphasized social presence and familiarity as key factors in sustaining engagement, as well as Martoredjo (2023), who noted that social media in the digital age promotes interaction, collaboration, and creative participation when used responsibly within educational settings.

However, despite these advantages, the study also revealed challenges related to distraction and attention fragmentation, reflecting findings from Obeso et al. (2023) and Chan & Yang (2023). Participants' adaptive behaviors, such as curating their feeds and managing notifications, demonstrate digital mindfulness and learner autonomy, aligning with frameworks like DigCompEdu (Maghfiroh et al., 2024). This shows that successful Instagram-based learning requires not only engaging content but also self-regulated learning strategies. Overall, the findings highlight that Instagram's value in EFL contexts lies in its integration of language input, emotional engagement, and learner autonomy. When used intentionally, it promotes self-directed, authentic, and enjoyable learning experiences that complement formal education. Thus, Instagram can be viewed as both a supplementary

platform and a transformative digital learning environment, capable of embedding language practice naturally into learners' daily routines.

Additionally, Instagram has been recognized as an effective tool for improving specific language skills, particularly vocabulary acquisition. Misnawati et al. (2022) explored the positive impact of Instagram feed-based tasks and peer feedback, noting that peer interaction fosters motivation in students with varying levels of proficiency. The interactive elements of Instagram, such as comments and direct responses, facilitate a collaborative learning environment, enhancing engagement and boosting language learning through real-time feedback (Misnawati et al., 2022). This aligns with the findings from Instagram's role in vocabulary development, as highlighted by Ismail et al. (2025), where Instagram Stories demonstrated a significant improvement in students' English vocabulary mastery through interactive, multimedia-rich lessons. Students showed measurable gains in vocabulary understanding after participating in Instagram-based tasks like quizzes, charades, and interactive visuals, making learning more engaging and contextually relevant.

Moreover, Instagram Reels have proven effective in improving speaking skills, as evidenced by research from Chadafi & Khasanah (2024). This medium supports both the production and presentation of language, allowing learners to practice their speaking in a dynamic and low-pressure environment. The study by Chadafi and Khasanah (2024) found that students using Instagram Reels displayed higher post-test scores in speaking proficiency, affirming the platform's potential to enhance speaking fluency in informal learning contexts. These findings echo those of previous research, emphasizing Instagram as an innovative medium for fostering speaking skills and learner confidence in real-life contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Instagram serves as a supportive and engaging platform for enhancing English language skills among university students. It effectively contributes to vocabulary enrichment, grammar improvement, and the development of listening and speaking skills through its multimodal features such as Reels, captions, and comments. These findings address the study's objectives by confirming that students not only use Instagram actively in their language learning but also find it motivating and adaptable to their learning preferences.

From a pedagogical perspective, this research advances current understanding by illustrating how a popular social media platform can be purposefully integrated into self-directed and informal language learning. It provides educators and curriculum designers with insights into how digital habits of students can be aligned with language instruction outside traditional classrooms. However, this study is limited by the small and homogeneous sample. Future research is recommended to expand the participant pool across different learning contexts and demographics. Moreover, combining qualitative insights with quantitative measures such as language proficiency tests or content analysis of students' Instagram interactions may provide a more comprehensive evaluation of Instagram's effectiveness as a language learning tool. Such studies can also explore long-term impacts and the potential of social media platforms in formal education settings.

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