

# ENGAGING THE INSTA-GENERATION: INSTAGRAM-BASED ASSIGNMENTS FOR INDONESIAN TERTIARY EFL LEARNERS

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## Abstract

Principally motivated by how Instagram—a widespread social media platform among young users—may facilitate language learning, this paper explores the design and impact of using Instagram-based assignments in an introductory linguistics course at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia. Twenty-four students answered reflective questions through an online questionnaire, aiming at investigating the students' perspectives on the assignments, specifically on how the assignments might or might not affect their motivation and any challenges they encountered while working on the assignments. The students' responses generally informed that the Instagram-based assignments appealed to the students and could motivate them to work on the assignments. Besides, the students reported some personal and technical challenges. This paper should interest EFL teachers seeking to integrate Instagram into their language teaching practices.

**Keywords – Instagram, language learning, language assignments, language teaching, EFL**

## Introduction

Digital technologies are ubiquitous in different areas of human life, including language teaching and learning. English language teaching has been facilitated by digital tools, with more research done to investigate how different tools may impact language pedagogy in different contexts of computer-assisted language learning and, more specifically, mobile-assisted language learning. Indeed, technology-mediated language learning and teaching has witnessed how different technologies advance and how they benefit language teaching and learning. Dudeney and Hockly (2012), for example, have recounted the development of technology integration in language classrooms, describing the use of different tools, including multimedia materials, corpora, internet-mediated communication tools, websites, webquests, online resources, online groups or forums, Web 2.0 tools, interactive whiteboards, social networks, augmented reality, and game-based

learning media. Kessler (2018) has further added several other emerging tools, including collaborative wikis, blogs, and microblogs; mashup media; automation (e.g. automated speech recognition, automated writing evaluation, and chatbots); virtual reality; translation tools; tracking tools; and AI-enhanced as well as big-data-based educational tools.

English language teachers, however, should pedagogically evaluate any technology before selecting and adopting any tools. They must never separate the tools from pedagogy when evaluating the technologies (Chapelle, 2019). Further, Chapelle (2001, pp. 54-59) has listed several criteria for technology evaluation, including reliability and learner fit, authenticity and generalizability, construct validity and operationalization of learning conditions, language learning potential and operationalization of learning conditions, interactiveness and meaning focus, positive impact, and

practicality. Egbert and Chia Chang (2018) have also reminded teachers who intend to integrate technology and design engaging learning activities first to understand and use technologies which are familiar to the learners and meet their needs, abilities, and interests.

One popular technology in which young people nowadays are immersed is social media. English language teaching and learning has been facilitated by different social networking platforms, including Facebook (e.g. explored by Sumakul, 2014; Ulla & Perales, 2020), Twitter (Espinoza-Celi & Pintado, 2020; Taskiran et al., 2018), YouTube (Rodríguez-Peñarroja, 2022; Seilstad, 2012), and Blog (Bener & Yildiz, 2019; Lin et al., 2014; Mali, 2019).

Instagram is another popular social media app, especially among its young users. Released in 2010, this photo- and video-sharing social networking app has also been used in English language classrooms for different purposes. For example, Prasetyawati and Ardi (2020) have reported how Instagram engaged Indonesian learners in their writing classrooms while promoting learners' interaction, communication and collaboration. In Sari and Wahyudin's (2019) study, around one hundred students who took an English for business purposes course uploaded their video recordings to Instagram, and their friends responded by liking and commenting on the videos. In a different teaching context, Indriani (2022) has integrated Instagram to facilitate student teachers in their teaching practice. The students were asked to write and publish their online peer feedback on Instagram. Besides, Instagram has provided language learning opportunities in its informal and authentic context and promoted learners' autonomy at the same time (Gonulal, 2019).

This article presents my ideas on how I integrated Instagram into an introductory course on linguistics and how my students perceived such technology integration. The students were required to work in groups and publish their assignments on Instagram. They collaboratively created multiple-photo or carousel posts. Some insights were also drawn from students' responses to the online questionnaire I distributed to them, which hopefully will benefit teachers interested in integrating Instagram into their English language classrooms.

## Methodology

### *The context of the course*

The course I taught was an introductory class on linguistics held in the first semester of 2022 at an English literature program at a private university in Central Java, Indonesia. As stated in the course syllabus, the course was designed to equip students "with the basic concept of language, history of language, and linguistics, especially phonology, syntax, and morphology." The students met me twice a week, each session lasting for 90-100 minutes. In total, there were thirty-two meetings during the sixteen-week period.

In the first weeks, my students (twenty-six in total) and I discussed some introductory linguistic topics, including human language and linguistics, grammar, gestures and sign languages, the origins of language, language history and change, written language, and language and culture. After that, three major sections on phonetics and phonology, morphology, and syntax were discussed. Table 1 summarises the topics discussed.

Table 1. Topics discussed in the course

Section	Subtopics
1	Introductory linguistics topics, including <i>human language and</i>

*linguistics, grammar, gestures and sign languages, the origins of language, language history and change, written language, and language and culture.*

- 2 Phonetics and phonology, including *place and manner of articulation, English consonants and vowels, and phonology*
  - 3 Morphology, including *morphemes and word formation, and word classification*
  - 4 Syntax, including *sentences, constituents, phrase structures, and tree diagrams*
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The Instagram-based assignments were related to the first three sections. Students were required to work in groups to create and publish their work on Instagram in the form of multiple-photo posts (Meta, 2023), popularly known as carousel posts (Sehl & Tien, 2022), and add some brief explanations in the caption as well. While carousel posts originally allow users to share up to ten photos in a single Instagram post, such posts have often been used to present textual information and short videos (up to one minute long). Besides, an Instagram post provides a space for its caption that may contain up to 2,200 characters. Therefore, such publication is an adaptation to a similar, potentially longer publication found in weblogging (Bener & Yildiz, 2019; Lin et al., 2014), and it is known as microblogging due to its more limited space compared to traditional blogging (Indriani, 2022). Considering their similar features of blogging, I designed the Instagram-based microblog assignments to promote collaboration and a sense of authorship that will also encourage students to address a larger audience (Henry, 2019; Kessler, 2018).

To foster multimodal learning (Gravin, 2018; Yi & Angay-Crowder, 2016) and to visually enhance the posts, I asked my students to be creative and use any relevant illustrations, graphics, and colours—this would also be graded using

rubrics, worth 15% of the total score, to motivate them to work on the visual. Students also needed to write a brief caption that introduced what their posts were about, tag my Instagram account as well as the faculty's and university's accounts, and add a few hashtags indicating the topics of the discussions.

All instructions and guidelines related to the assignments were posted on Google Classroom, the learning management system I used to also post and share other materials, updates, and information. I shared detailed instructions, and further, I also showed them a few examples of carousel posts on Instagram, including the ones that I made. That ensured that my students understood what they were required to do and familiarised them with the tools and the expected products (Marín, 2020).

Since students collaborated with their friends, I only asked one of the group members to post on Instagram, but each member had to share the link to the assignment post on Google Classroom. Besides, I allowed them to create or use a new account, possibly different from their main or private ones. Nevertheless, they had to make the accounts public, so everyone could access the posts.

### ***Data collection***

To investigate students' perceptions of the online assignments, an online Google Forms questionnaire was distributed to them. The questionnaire asks the following questions:

- (1) What do you think of using Instagram to publish your assignments? Please explain your answers or reasons.
- (2) Did using Instagram affect your motivation and engagement in your learning or doing the assignments? Why?

(3) Did you find any challenges when working on your assignments and publishing them on Instagram?

I asked the students to complete the questionnaire in the final meeting of the course, while also making sure that their responses would not affect their grades to encourage them to write their answers honestly and objectively. Twenty-four students responded to it. The responses were then thematically categorized and analysed.

### Finding and Discussion

In this section, I will first describe the design and instructions for the Instagram-based assignments. I will also showcase a few samples of my student's work. After that, the students' responses to the questionnaire will be discussed.

#### *The design of the Instagram-based assignments*

In the first assignment, I asked my students to create a carousel post presenting a specific linguistic or language topic or point of discussion relevant to the previously discussed topics or subtopics in the first section of the course. I created an assignment post on Google Classroom, where later, students would submit the link to their Instagram post, and I shared the instructions there. The instructions also included a detailed guideline of the necessary points to be presented in their carousel post, which mentioned,

*Your carousel post (10 pictures at most) must include the following points,*

- a.1 slide for the title and your members' name and student number*
- b.1 slide introducing why you are interested in discussing*

- the topic or why your reader needs to know it*
- c.1 slide briefly defining or explaining the key term(s)/ concept(s)/ definition(s)*
- d.3-5 slides presenting specific examples or cases or important relevant points of discussion*
- e.1 slide mentioning some interesting facts about the topic (similar to FYI or Trivia facts),*
- f.1 final slide listing the sources or references you use*

I spent a meeting with the students to allow them to form their groups and subsequently discuss and draft their ideas. I checked their drafts and gave some feedback as well. While I encouraged them to support their explanation with any relevant sources, I did not demand them to use any formal citation styles because they had not learned much about academic citation. Yet, I still asked them to mention any cited source links or article/book titles.

Figure 1 shows the pictures downloaded from one group's carousel post discussing obscene hand gestures (a better quality or higher resolution of the picture, as well as those of the next assignments, can also be accessed at <https://s.id/IGassignments>).



Figure 1. Pictures from a group's Instagram post for the first Instagram-based assignment

The second assignment was related to phonetics. Each group of students was randomly assigned three sounds: two consonants and a vowel. They had to discuss each sound: (1) describing the place and manner of articulation as well as voicing of the consonants and (2) describing tongue position and height as well as lip roundedness of the vowel.

Different from the first assignment, because this one was related to the articulation of English sounds, I asked the students to audio-record their explanations to let them articulate the sounds. The students also needed to find examples of English words in which the sounds possibly appear in different positions: initial, medial, and final. In addition, I asked them to create a short poem that used words with the sounds explained previously. Below is part of the instructions detailing what the students needed to show on each slide or picture of their carousel post.

*Prepare a multiple-picture Instagram post.*

*Picture 1: the title: the assignment title “An Exhibit of Phonetic Sounds”, your three sounds (use the IPA symbols), your names and student numbers*

*Picture 2: brief introduction telling your friend what your post is about*

*Picture 3: the description of your first consonant (with your audio explanation)*

*Picture 4: six words with the first consonant in them*

*Picture 5: the description of your second consonant (with your audio explanation)*

*Picture 6: six words with the second consonant in them*

*Picture 7: the description of your vowel (with your audio explanation)*

*Picture 8: five words with the vowel in them*

*Picture 9: your poem—highlight the words having the consonants and vowel*

*Picture 10: brief ending—don’t forget to thank your friends for reading your post*

A set of slides of the students’ carousel post are shown in Figure 2. In addition to using relevant graphics, the second assignment required the students to include an audio element, as they recorded their voices explaining the sounds. This allowed a multimodal learning practice and shifted the experience from a traditional text-based mode (Gravin, 2018; Yi & Angay-Crowder, 2016).



Figure 2. Pictures from a group’s Instagram post for the second Instagram-based assignment on phonetics

The third Instagram-based assignment was related to morphology. The students specifically discussed different types of word formation processes and found four examples of words belonging to each process. Below is a part of the assignment guidelines, particularly related to the Instagram post design.

Here is the outline of your Instagram post.

Slide 1 Title: [Name] and [Name]'s Secret Recipes for [Field]-related Word Crafting. For example, "Daniel's Recipes for Health-related Word Formation"

Slide 2 A brief intro: what your post is about

Slide 3 Inflection

Slide 4 Derivation

Slide 5 Borrowing

Slide 6 Compounding

Slide 7 Blending OR Clipping, choose one

Slide 8 Conversion OR Coinage, choose one

Slide 9 Acronyms OR Initialisms, choose one

Slide 10 Write a closing to your post.

On slides 3–9, first, provide a brief explanation and write four examples (provide a necessary but brief description for each).

Figure 3 shows the pictures from one group's Instagram post. Similar to the first assignment, the third did not require the students to add any audio explanation. Yet, students were encouraged to use any relevant illustrations.



Figure 3. Pictures from a group's Instagram post for the third Instagram-based assignment about morphology and English word formation

**Students' perspectives on the Instagram-based assignments**

When asked about their perspectives on publishing their assignments on Instagram, most students use different words that represented their positive attitude: *engaging, fun, innovative, creative, good, very good, great, positive, easy, effective, interesting, and exciting*. Many specifically mentioned the app being popular among nowadays' Internet users. Besides, other students commented that the assignments allowed them to see the relevance and integration of Instagram in their learning. Further, one student specifically wrote that "the assignments were fun, and it's more like making content than completing assignments." This confirms the need to find familiarity and relevance of technology to be integrated into language classrooms (Mali & Timotius, 2018).

The students further highlighted the positive impact their posts might have on their friends and followers. More specifically, they thought that the audience, including those Generation Z members familiar with Instagram, might also learn something new related to what they had shared. Besides, such posts might also help promote the university or institution. One student highlighted that people also gave positive responses to the post.

'I think posting this class' assignments on Instagram is quite engaging, actually. By far, my followers on Instagram responded positively to my posts.' [Student #1]

That shows the students developed their authenticity and authorship while making meaning in their language learning. Chapelle's (2010, pp. 56-57) authenticity and impact criteria were consequently met as learners' language learning and communication went beyond the task and classroom. This also supports Henry's (2019) and Kessler's (2018) arguments when discussing the significance of promoting blogging or microblogging practices with language learners. Also, this finding corroborates Prasetyawati and Ardi's (2020) research that discovered how students reached a greater audience and felt motivated to more carefully craft their writings before publishing them on Instagram.

The Instagram-based assignments might have also met certain individual learner differences (related to Chapelle's *learner fit* criterion, 2001, pp. 55-56), especially for those who are interested in visual design—that might also mean that such assignments promoted learner-centeredness (Bremner, 2021). One student specifically wrote,

‘As a pragmatic person and an aesthetic lover I am, I would always try to communicate my topic in the most effective way possible while at the same time maintaining the clearness and neatness of the design. Instagram, with its own perks, increases my creativity to produce a fun and good-looking assignment.’ [Student #23]

Students' responses also highlighted the familiarity as well as ease of access and use of Instagram, which then allowed the students to work on and publish the assignments conveniently. This aligns with what CALL practices

require to engage learners, as highlighted by Egbert and Chia Chang (2018). Technology integration in EFL classrooms should include tasks that are relevant to learners' interests and lives outside school walls. Besides, Instagram was adopted since learners are immersed in the apps. Making sure that learners are familiar with a digital tool to use in class is essential to ensure effective learning while building students' confidence and reducing their anxiety, as reminded by Mali and Timotius (2018).

The **second question** in the questionnaire addressed whether the students felt motivated or engaged while working on the assignments and in their learning in general.

The students felt motivated when they were required to share some insightful information or content, while also agreeing on the ease of use and access on Instagram. One felt motivated since integrating Instagram into the language classroom allowed different learning practices from conventional activities or assignments. One student explained that as an Instagram user, commonly they access and read other users' content passively. However, publishing their assignments on Instagram encouraged them to “[create] or share insights [with] other people as well.” This kind of engagement was also reported in Prasetyawati and Ardi's (2020) study as the learners experienced a new language learning environment and experience.

Preparing the posts and content encouraged them first to understand the topics and content. Therefore, they also felt motivated to understand the topics more and better as they were required to explain their points as well. Besides, they could easily access and



read their friends' work; a few reported this as motivational. Having the urge to reach a wider audience got their attention and build their motivation as well. This again relates to authenticity, collaboration, and authorship (Henry, 2019; Kessler, 2018; Prasetyawati & Ardi, 2020)

In addition to writing meaningful content, a few addressed being motivated to engage in the publication of their work. Such an activity might make their Instagram feed look cool or aesthetic. As students included not only text-based information but also graphics and audio, they engaged in multimodal learning opportunities (Grapin, 2018; Yi & Angay-Crowder, 2016)

Several students thought that publishing their assignments on Instagram did not necessarily motivate them. One further added that they did not feel confident to publish the posts, but it was because they were more worried about privacy issues rather than the content, which was also addressed in the next question. The other four students did not specify any reasons for not feeling motivated to publish their work on Instagram.

The **last question** investigated any challenges the students encountered while preparing and publishing their assignments on Instagram. While two responses did not mention any challenges, in general, other responses discussed the preparation of the content or information presented in the posts, the visual design, and other personal or technical challenges.

The students previously admitted that the Instagram-based assignments were fun, but a few found them challenging in terms of the much time they had to spend visually designing or editing their posts. Quite many wrote about

being motivated while challenged because they had to be careful in designing the content as well as how their posts would look. Related to the first assignment, finding specific topics to discuss posed a challenge for a student. Thinking about how to creatively write or grab the audience's attention was also a challenge. One wrote about the drafting, checking, and revising stages they chose to be involved in because they wanted to make sure the content was the best they could produce. The students perceived such an experience as challenging, while it might have actually revealed how much they were involved in the making of their Instagram posts, similar to what Prasetyawati and Ardi (2020) have reported. In a more high-technology integration learning context, Henry (2022) has identified such engagement as learners' being immersed in the learning experience.

A few other students discussed the issue of privacy—one admitted that switching their private Instagram account to its public mode, which consequently lets people see their posts, caused them discomfort. They did not want any potentially risky Instagram users to stalk their accounts and posts. Privacy is one of the issues Lam (2020) highlighted when he reminded teachers willing to invite students to upload their work online. One student appreciated my permission to create or use a different or alternative account instead of their main or private account.

Regarding the requirement to visually design the posts, a few students reported their personal urge to create neat posts. A similar urge for creating a satisfying look for Instagram posts was also reported by a few students in Indriani's (2022) research. Some of



my students further admitted that they were not familiar with or good at graphic design although they could easily access some popular graphic design tools, e.g. Canva.

‘... even though we have templates on Canva, sometimes I still struggle with using or editing a template.’ [Student #12]

One specifically addressed their individual learner’s differences by mentioning their being a perfectionist. They wrote about their struggles while designing the content and the look while also thinking about the caption to include.

### **Conclusions**

Instagram and other specific digital tools, being integrated into language classrooms, will never be the panacea for successful foreign language learning. Nevertheless, teachers should always consider integrating digital technologies, including Instagram or other social networking applications, and designing purposeful as well as meaningful learning opportunities, thanks to the pervasiveness of such tools.

Teachers who are interested in creating multimodal and authentic learning opportunities while leveraging students’ motivation and engagement might consider integrating Instagram into their language lessons, specifically by encouraging students to publish their work on Instagram. The assignment design I created might have engaged the students, demonstrated by their responses which mentioned their being motivated and enjoying working on and publishing the assignments on an online platform popular among their generation.

Moreover, related to Chapelle’s (2001, pp. 54-59) criteria for educational technology evaluation, the Instagram-based assignments were found to provide language learning potential focusing on both form and meaning, be appropriate for the students’ characteristics, maintain authenticity and correspond to the outside world, leave a positive impact for the learners, and be able to be easily performed. However, I realize that the assignments required careful and deliberate design, one significant factor ensuring the success of learning material design (Gedera & Fester, 2023).

Despite that, teachers should also be aware of and anticipate several issues, specifically related to privacy and individual learner differences. Familiarity and technical issues related to the access and use of graphic design apps to facilitate the designing process should also be addressed, possibly by ensuring that at least a member of the group is skilful enough to do that.

While in fact, the students worked collaboratively in their groups, they did not address any challenges related to group work. Therefore, future research should investigate whether collaborative Instagram-based language tasks may lead to specific group work dynamics. Besides, the assignments were set in Indonesian socio-pedagogical context with young people very familiar to the use of social media, including Instagram. In different English language learning contexts, language teachers might also anticipate other possible challenges because of different personal, technical, or social factors, e.g. how would learners from different countries or cultures respond to such Instagram-based assignments, whether or not they will be willing to use their Instagram to publish their assignments, what teachers should anticipate if students are not familiar with Instagram, or what social networking sites teachers should use as an alternative

for Instagram to ensure similar assignment design and learning experience.

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