



## The Instagram Identity Project: Improving Paragraph Writing through Social Media

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### Abstract

*Social media offers new platforms for digitally native students to learn, engage, interact and collaborate [3] [7] [10]. Increasingly, higher education faculty across the globe are taking advantage of social media platforms as spaces to bridge formal and informal learning through student writing composition, content analysis and digital identity formation [13]. Although many studies have investigated educational uses of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, there is currently relatively little literature on using Instagram in language classrooms. In the Arabian Gulf context, using Instagram is a popular pastime to the point where it can be a distraction in the classroom. One challenge is to utilize such a popular tool for teaching and learning. This article presents the findings from a mixed-method study which investigates how Instagram can be used as a motivating tool for paragraph writing. The study takes the form of classroom-based enquiry, and gains the perspectives of thirty Emirati university students in an English foundation program. Instagram was used as part of a six-week project on the theme of identity, which involved posting pictures and paragraphs weekly on a private class account and giving and receiving peer feedback. The final week of the project involved students making a short movie from this content to be shared with the class. From pre-test and post-test questionnaires and semi-structured focus groups, using Instagram in this way was viewed as motivating and engaging. The majority of participants felt the peer feedback they had received on Instagram had encouraged them to spend more time and effort on their paragraph writing. An additional benefit was the improved rapport felt as a class due to the sharing of important aspects of their identities.*

*Key words: social media, Instagram, mobile learning, writing, motivation*

### 1. Introduction

The rise of mobile technologies is a global phenomenon that has resulted in changes in communication patterns as well as English-language use [12]. Informal English-language learning through technology is taking place outside classrooms in the form of watching television series and movies, online dictionaries and the use of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and WhatsApp. The fact that technology penetrates so many aspects of modern life means that it is difficult to ignore its importance both outside and inside the classroom. Rather than social media being a distraction in class, the aim of educators is to harness its popularity, and effectively use it as a teaching and learning tool.

### 2. Background

There are many forms of social media one could use in the classroom for language learning. For the current study, Instagram was chosen for three main reasons. Firstly, since its creation in 2010, it has been a popular social media tool worldwide. In April 2017 the platform reached 700 million users [11] and it is especially popular with Emirati university students, who prefer it to other options. Secondly, it is multifunctional allowing for a wide range of uses such as creating accounts, posting content, applying filters, adding captions, tagging users, adding locations, adding hashtags, liking content, adding comments and following others' accounts. Finally, although a number of studies have investigated educational uses of social media platforms such as Twitter [9], Facebook [5] [3] and WhatsApp [8], there is currently relatively little literature on using Instagram in language classrooms thus creating a marked gap in the knowledge base.

From the few previous studies investigating the use of Instagram as a learning tool, findings showed improved learner-engagement and community-building as well as its ability to redefine learning tasks [1] [2]. Such studies had several limitations, however. For example, Al-Ali study [1], which explored the use of Instagram as a production tool for a holiday writing project with 16 Emirati foundation-program university students used personal Instagram accounts, which significantly inhibited student

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participation due to privacy issues. Similarly, in Al Bahrani and Patel's study [2] with Economics students, privacy concerns were a major issue. Further limitations in Al-Ali's study [1] relate to low participant numbers and poor attitudes during the focus group sessions, where participants were silent or gave only yes/no answers, negatively affecting the depth of qualitative data. The current study aims to address such limitations by using private university Instagram accounts, including a larger participant group and promoting lively discussions in three focus group sessions.

### 3. The Study

The current study takes place in a large university in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE). It is a mixed-method classroom-based enquiry, gaining perspectives on the use of Instagram as a learning tool from thirty Emirati university students ( $n = 30$ ) in three English foundation-program classes (two upper-intermediate female classes ( $n = 21$ ) and one intermediate male class ( $n = 9$ ). Cluster sampling was used as the classes were already in existence and contained a cross-section of the university's foundation-program students. The study investigates three main research questions:

- How does the use of Instagram affect Emirati university students' paragraph-writing?
- How does the use of Instagram affect Emirati university students' levels of motivation?
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of using Instagram as a language learning tool from the perspective of Emirati university students?

Taking place over the period of a semester, the study involved four distinct phases: a pre-test survey, a six-week class project named the Instagram Identity Project (IIP), a post-test survey and three semi-structured focus group sessions involving fifteen students ( $n = 15$ ). The theme of 'identity' was chosen for the project due to its close connection to social media in the literature [14]. It was also seen as a student-centered and personalized theme which was suitable for practicing paragraph-writing using Instagram. Details regarding the four phases of the study are outlined below.

**Phase 1 - Pre-test survey:** The IIP was explained to the students. They were then given the pre-test survey which contained a series of Likert scale questions on the topics of technology use, project value and identity.

**Phase 2 – The IIP:** The students created a university Instagram account before beginning the IPP as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Stages of the IIP

Weeks	Task
1-4	Students chose four aspects of their identities (e.g. university student, Emirati, older sister, artist). They posted ten pictures relating to one aspect of their identity on <i>Instagram</i> each week. Classmates 'liked' and commented on each other's posts. Students then chose one of the pictures to write a 100-word paragraph about each week. Each paragraph began with 'I am....' (e.g. I am a university student). Classmates gave peer feedback through <i>Instagram</i> comments.
5-6	Students used their 40 pictures and four paragraphs to make a short movie about their identities. They use the application <i>Adobe Voice</i> to make this movie. They shared this movie with the class in Week 6.

**Phase 3 - Post-test survey:** Students completed a post-test survey which contained Likert scale questions on the same themes as the pre-test survey as well as open-response questions on the benefits and drawbacks of the project.

**Phase 4 - Focus groups:** Five volunteers from each class participated in focus groups which lasted 20 minutes and covered the survey themes in greater depth.

### 4. Findings and discussion

From the researcher's perspective, the IIP was successful. Research journal notes made throughout the project showed students to be highly engaged. Many appeared to take pride in sharing aspects of their identities through weekly pictures and paragraphs. Having both teacher and peer online feedback



encouraged students to increase their efforts. A typical example of photographs (Emirati traditional tea and street art) and a paragraph (passion for fashion) produced as part of the project can be seen in Figure 1.

### Example photos



### Example paragraph

I am a fashion lover. I started to like the fashion when I was a child. I followed a lot of accounts on Instagram. Such as, makeup, clothes, and hair styles. When there is a festival or event I watch the red carpet and focus on the celebrities clothes. Most of my family love fashion. Sometimes I see what my favorite celebrities wear and i screen shoot the picture then I go to the mall and I get a similar shirt or dress. Moreover, in my free time I watch beauty bloggers talk about their experience with makeup or their lifestyles.

Figure 1: Example IIP posts

From the participants' perspectives, the IIP was well-received. Expectations were high from the outset and these expectations were exceeded across a range of categories, as can be seen in Table 2. The vast majority of participants felt that the IIP had improved their writing skills, speaking skills and overall learning of English, as well as strengthening their sense of identity, and enjoyment in writing about aspects of their identity.

Table 2: Quantitative data

Likert scale questions	Agree		Neutral		Disagree	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
The IIP will improve /has improved my writing	23	26	7	4		
The IIP will improve / has improved my speaking	22	25	6	5	2	
The IIP will be /has been useful for learning English	22	28	8	2		
I enjoy writing about aspects of my identity	15	24	13	6	1	1
I have a strong sense of identity	13	18	11	8	6	4

Focus group discussion comments echoed the post-survey responses in that they were overwhelmingly positive. A further prominent theme arising from the qualitative data was an increased sense of community and rapport felt in the classes, as seen by students' comments below.

*'I learned how to write well and I know a little bit about myself and make a lot of friends'  
'I enjoy when I write about what I love and I enjoy this project so much because it's a new idea'*



*'It is a great project to know the identities of my classmates and get feedback from my teacher. This project helped me to overcome the stress and to feel comfortable when I work'*

Only two of the participants voiced criticisms, commenting on WiFi problems and shyness over sharing the movie in Week 6.

## 5. Conclusion

It is clear that effective learning depends on high levels of motivation [6]. According to Benson and Avery [4], digital natives learn differently from previous generations and are most comfortable with accessing information and interacting with others online. The study's findings support this notion with the use of Instagram not only benefiting language-learning but also increasing levels of engagement and sense of community in the classroom. It should be noted that although clear patterns emerge from the data, as the study is relatively small in scale, one should be wary of making widespread conclusions.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my co-investigator Randy VanArsedale for his support with this research project.

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