

# Arabic Learners' Preferences for Instagram English Lessons

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the use of the social network Instagram to provide supplementary English language learning material to learners from Arabic speaking countries. The author was able to use his online account in Instagram to assess the needs of these learners through data analyses. The content made specific to Arabic speakers by offering translation in each post from English into Arabic and vice versa to foster their interest in the English language. The account was followed by more than 48000 learners. The study aimed to comprehend how Arab learners promote the process of learning English language via the use of the social network Instagram. The study found that Arab learners do not like complicated, lengthy information and, instead, prefer simple, brief explanations related to the English language. The results of this study suggest that a similar program of offering English lessons on Instagram in the future would have an even greater following if only simplified content was offered.

**Keywords:** instagram, learning tool, social media application, language learning

## 1. Introduction

In this era of mobile applications, many language instructors have investigated the use of software designed for social media as tools for academic purposes, in order to keep in touch with learners or to generate activities for them online (Zhang, 2013).

As these applications improve their features, they have become highly sought after objects of research, as teachers ponder and investigate how best to integrate them into language teaching. The recent increase in the number of social media applications makes learning possible and convenient anywhere students choose to carry their phones. Electronic devices empower teachers and learners to share many types of media such as videos, images and links to interactive activities (Moreira, Ferreira, Pereira, & Durão, 2016). Furthermore, many applications allow students to contribute their own content to the class and to find additional learning resources.

One example of this trend is the use of Instagram. Instagram is a social media application which allows its users to share photos and videos from their mobile phones. Users can 'follow' other users and see a feed of the photos and other content that were chosen to be shared. The researcher established an Instagram account for teaching general English to Arab learners. The account was created in 2015 and eventually had more than 48 thousand students following its feeds. Instagram was viewed as a favorable language platform for teaching English where videos, pictures and hashtags could be provided.

There are various activities that teachers can use to implement Instagram in their classes. The photos and videos posted on Instagram become writing prompts and encourage students to create their own sentences underneath the posted content. Furthermore, these sentences can be corrected by other students, which facilitates cooperative learning because the group is able to use its collective knowledge of grammar to edit comments (Al-Ali, 2014). There are also other ways to use Instagram as an educational tool. Firstly, digital storytelling can be promoted when students contribute their own content to an authentic audience and become engaged through the opportunity to showcase their creativity. Students can express their impressions by clicking likes and, thus, create a positive learning atmosphere (Spencer, 2012). Photo prompts to recall vocabulary can also be developed. Photos, art and learning content can be grouped for fast recall using hashtags, and for finding and documenting context within photos. Therefore, Instagram can facilitate autonomous learning (Hafner, Chik, & Jones, 2013; Barton & Potts, 2013). Few studies, however, have studied Arabic students' perceptions of the use of Instagram to learn English.

The study aimed to investigate how Arab learners view, share and react to English language educational content via Instagram. Providing English content to Arabic learners is important for several reasons. Firstly, many students have limited access to English. Secondly, many students are interested in American culture and phrases but cannot afford to travel there. The content may provide a substitute and a good example of cultural collaboration. The results of this study are likely to be of interest to all English language teachers who teach adults with access to wireless internet and smartphones.

## 2. Literature Review

Many researchers have conducted studies to investigate the impacts of social media applications on learning a language. Kroonenberg (1995) reported that second language students who were introverted and lacked confidence in speaking in class, could express themselves by using computer media. Undoubtedly, these students became motivated to participate in future discussions on the same topics. Some researchers have found that learners had much more participation in online discussions than in face-to-face interactions (Pratt & Sullivan, 1996; Warschauer, 1996). Beauvois (1998) stated that social networks encourage students to have more discussions in French classes. A broader perspective has been adopted by Blake (1998) who observed that, “technology can play an important role in fostering second language acquisition by electronically increasing learners’ contact with a wide array of authentic materials” (p. 210). Warschauer (2000) mentioned that online interaction makes the learners motivated to have more interactive conversations without concern about articulation or oral issues in the target language.

Kendle and Northcote (2001) claim that discussion in online groups and the process of searching for information online can give learners the chance to learn useful skills implicitly. Carmean and Haefner (2002) explained that social networks are applied online technologies which make second language learning more social and enjoyable with minimal stress. Integrating technology may lead students to gain a lot of confidence and, at the same time, more practical and at the same time can be more engaging, as students can experience content through visual, auditory and kinesthetic inputs using a computer, phone or tablet (Lee & Vail, 2005).

Online social applications are being utilized substantially not only by college students, but also by instructors for different reasons (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007; 2009). Shield and Hulme (2009) indicated that, “mobile technology can assist learners at the point of need and in ways that fit in with their mobile lifestyles” (p. 162). Facebook encourages students to do their homework (Kitsis, 2008) and eases learning foreign languages (Abidin, Ahmad, & Kabilan, 2010). It impacts academic settings for both teachers and learners (Villano, 2007). In addition, Facebook has become a valuable tool to improve interaction between teachers and their students (Godwin-Jones, 2008; Sturgeon & Walker, 2009).

Researchers have noted that affective responses or views of social media applications for educational purposes are also usually addressed in both positive and negative aspects. For example, one study found that the Facebook social network allows students to overcome their shyness in asking questions outside the classroom, and they feel unrestrained by boundaries between lecturers and themselves, creating some measure of good rapport (Bosch, 2009). In term of oral fluency, chat rooms have a great impact on the experimental group who outperformed the control group who did not. Hence, using chat rooms in the EFL context can be recommended as an efficient technique in improving this attribute among EFL learners (Khalili & Baradaran, 2009). Hamilton (2009) found that Facebook can make an appropriate environment to connect teenage readers and publishers, and increase inclusive literature circles around them. Other investigators have investigated the impact of Facebook on academic environments. Schaffhauser (2009) has suggested that Facebook and other social networks eliminate restrictions of communication between students and help them to identify information for communication (Elliott, Maguth, & Yamaguchi, 2010). Reinders (2009) claims that technology reshapes current language classroom practices.

Social media applications can be used as reliable learning environments to enhance students’ participation in the learning process (Mazman & Usluel, 2010). There are, however, some misuses and abuses of social media to guard against in online activities between teachers and learners, as these can cause negative impacts on teachers themselves, including student obsession over social networking or false teacher-student relationships (Vasagar & Williams, 2012; Bloxham, 2010). Social media applications are thus associated with an escalating tendency for young learners to multitask, to depend on a “digital juggling” of daily activities and commitments (Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011). Viberg and Grönlund’s (2012) reported that studies of mobile technology use in different aspects of language learning support the hypothesis that mobile technology can enhance learners’ second language acquisition (p. 1). Similarly, in the past, some researchers claimed that learning of a second language would become easier in the future because of social media applications. Indeed, computer networks can

be used by second language learners who are restricted because of barriers such as age, economic disadvantages, and gender, to learn language at home via computer media (Selfe, 1990).

One of Keln's (1992) students cited advantages of computer media, stating, "I think I participated 100 times more during the (electronic discussion) interchange than (orally) in class. Believe it or not, I really do not like to speak up in class. I'll bet my other professors think I'm a mute" (p. 444). Salomon (2013) and Tekulve and Kelly (2013) also explain their university libraries' successful experience in using Instagram to reach their young audience as compared to other social media tools. Bell (2013) described her attempts at using Instagram for college students' field trips in a library science course. A new approach in learning is having learners post a photo based upon a list of lessons or concepts from the curriculum, using 'photo prompts' to involve students in writing responses based upon the photos, or taking pictures of a "step-by-step process" while adding a caption to each photo (Laponsie, 2013). Alfaki and Alharthy (2014) found that using social websites as English classes in order to improve language proficiency was more efficacious than the traditional classes where learners feel freer to interact with resource itself. Ferlazzo (2014) claimed that the Instagram application can help learners to improve their capacity for learning academic vocabulary. Al-Ali (2014) wrote that "Instagram eased the process of providing students with contextualized content they could relate to and use to produce further content that made sense to them" (p.12). This perspective towards Instagram was supported by Kelly (2015) who found that, "the analyses of interview data show that all five participants exhibited positive attitudes in this regard and used descriptions such as, 'improved,' 'helped' and 'getting better'" (p. 70). A comparison study conducted by Alhawiti (2015) at the community college of Tabuk measuring the effect of using WhatsApp in learning English. The result obtained from the experimental group demonstrates better progress than the control group. Encouraging students to use Instagram as an educational tool outside the classroom through the exchange of ideas and vocabulary between students and teachers makes the learning process unique, playful and insightful (Kirst, 2016). Handayani (2016) emphasizes that, "using Instagram allows students to generate ideas with contextually-relevant content and offers them a learning experience that they enjoy" (p. 326). Language learners hold views that Instagram plays an essential role in alleviating the frustration that attaches with learning an obscure language (Paz, 2017).

### 3. Method

The study involved approximately 48000 learners from multiple nationalities of the Arab world. The names of all participants were made anonymous for the purposes of this study. The researcher established an online account in Instagram. Firstly, the account was created and English language learning content was shared, which lasted 16 seconds. No participants were invited. However, people began to follow the account. This is because participants were attracted to the title which was "i\_english\_m" and the Arabic description of the account. The description translated into "learn American expressions from America" and, therefore, this was suitable for Arabic speaking students who wanted to further their knowledge about English language and to develop their vocabulary. The account was very successful and was eventually followed by more than 48000 students and by this stage the researcher was able to offer content of one minute in duration. The investigator was able to use his online account in Instagram to evaluate the perception and satisfaction towards two different levels of difficulty of English lessons through data analyses. This included observing their responses to what was posted. However, a basic understanding of their reactions was mainly gathered by analyzing the number of times participants clicked 'like' or wrote positive or negative comments on each post to indicate their satisfaction. The researcher made content specific to Arabic speakers by offering translations in English and Arabic in the lesson itself and also in the description of each lesson. The researcher also offered his comments on the comments made by participants of each posts in the account.

For the purposes of the study, the same topic was offered at two different levels of difficulty. Examples of these posts are shown in Table 1. For other posts, only one level of difficulty was offered, usually because it was not possible to offer content in both easy and difficult formats.

Table 1. Content at different difficulty levels (S) simple (C) complicated

<i>Content</i>	<i>Simple</i>	<i>Complicated</i>
Have for possession(S)	I have a car.	I have received a message.
Have as an auxiliary verb(C)		
Used to as modal	I 'used to' drink Pepsi.	I am 'used to' drinking Pepsi.
Conditional sentences: Type Zero(S), Type3 (C)	If we play well we will win.	If I had found her address, I would have sent her an invitation.
Active and passive voice	Shakespeare wrote Hamlet.	Hamlet was written by Shakespeare.

The following steps were taken for each post in order to gather data. Firstly, the researcher posted a post which contained a simple level of information about the English language. For example, these instructions were simple idioms, understandable expressions, uncomplicated phrases and daily words where no detailed information was involved. Secondly, the researcher posted a post which he had judged to be more complex for Arabic learners from his previous teaching experience, such as complex sentences and less frequently used structures and lessons with a greater use of grammatical terminology about English, where more detailed information was revealed. These sorts of posts encompass a wide range of academic vocabulary, deep structures, and complex sentences. Lessons were planned and generated by the researcher on the basis of a degree of difficulty. The researcher posted one lesson a day on his account for two weeks.

The author gave no instruction to followers. Followers were not informed about the experiment to retain the basic core of this study which is eliciting the mechanisms of perception and satisfaction. The researcher wanted to avoid any possibility of the Hawthorne effect, which is the tendency of participants changing their behavior from knowing they are being observed (Zdep & Irvine, 1970). For example, participants may click 'like' more than they would normally do if they knew their comments were counted. Therefore, it was decided to not give any instructions to participants or to notify them that they were part of a study. The purpose of this technique was to gather information and to conduct a statistical analysis comparing the views, comments and likes of the two different types of posts by the author. The participants used the Instagram application to explore what was posted every day. The only methods of communication between the participants and the researcher were through their comments underneath the author's post or private messages to the author. In case somebody had the need to know further information about the posts, they were able to communicate with the author privately.

#### 4. Results

Table 2 illustrates an overview of how the participants interacted more actively when the simple structures were posted. Table 3 illustrates how the followers participated less actively in the deep structure posts. Most of the followers participated more in simple structures than in the complicated structure instructions. When a learner's processing capabilities encounter complicated structures, the learner is less inclined to participate actively online, perhaps due to the greater processing demands on understanding the more complex structures (Crain & Steedman, 1985, Altmann & Steedman, 1988). The responses of the students suggested that they preferred the uncomplicated lessons over the more challenging content. They preferred to avoid the posts that delve into deep instructions, seemingly due to the complexity of these posts. For example, in simple structures 'view' responses were 17,512 'likes' were 1919 and 'comments' were 162, as shown in 'Post 1,' as opposed to deep structures which received about 10,853 'view', 1426 'likes', and 151 'comments,' as shown in 'Post 2'. Participants in Table 2 were much more enthusiastic and more passionately involved with the post by clicking many likes and views and comments that supported these sorts of lessons. Those in Table 3 interacted less with the content, indicated by clicking less likes and views and comments, expressing their dissatisfaction about these sorts of lessons. By comparing the two means, noticeable differences were in favour of views, likes and comments of simple structure lessons (Table 2, 3).

This study shows strong evidence of differences in post participation between the two approaches. This tendency elucidates the way of perceiving information, which might only be consciously realized by the participants in order to achieve their goals in learning. However, some of the most important differences observed between the two types of formats were found in a way in which the students interacted with the content. For instance, they preferred quickly understood information and easy-to-learn expressions, and they also liked completing

sentences in simple structures. These preferences were noted from the pages viewed and liked by the students. When the author posted something easy, they clicked the icon for like, but when posting something difficult like a deep structure analysis, which requires more details to explain and more analysis to learn, they did not click on like or view the page as often.

Table 2. Simple structure

	<i>Views</i>	<i>Likes</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Post 1	17512	1919	162
Post 2	16320	1380	130
Post 3	15447	1633	141
Post 4	17065	1578	142
Post 5	16782	1647	163
Mean	16,625,2	1631	147.6

Table 3. Complicated structure

	<i>Views</i>	<i>Likes</i>	<i>Comments</i>
Post 1	8621	1061	191
Post 2	10467	1285	86
Post 3	10853	1426	151
Post 4	10282	1282	58
Post 5	9823	1163	93
Mean	10,009.2	1,243.4	115.8



Post 1. Simple structure



Post 2. Complicated structure

The main reason why Arabic English learners prefer simple and ready-to-use expressions, over more difficult-to-learn expressions, is probably related to how much time is required for these two types of study approaches. For example, one commentator argued that the environmental surrounding demanded basic principles of English for communication. It is somewhat surprising that no impressive comments were noted in complicated structures posts as compared with simple posts. Comments underneath posts show that most students responded negatively to complicated lessons and thus they did not show much interest in this way of learning (Table 3). Contrary to expectations, subjects' comments in simple lessons demonstrate that student show

a positive response when they satisfactorily increased their skill in learning English. The Arab students are reluctant to engage in learning complicated structure as shown in Table 3. While looking at the reactions on the Instagram account, it is clear that they became excited with easy language topics as opposed to difficult ones, based on the data collected.

From the findings of this study, it is conspicuous that the linguistic needs of Arab learners who are exploring resources for entertainment and learning English in this fashion need to be re-evaluated, as their preferences may change over time. In the analysis of the data collected, the participants were found to be actively engaged in surface structure analyses as interpreted by the comparison of comments that were posted in both approaches.

#### **4. Discussion**

The central aim of this study was to determine the impact of Instagram as a platform for learning English among Arab learners. The findings demonstrate the credibility of Instagram as a tool which has a major impact on Arab learners of English. It can be an effective tool in learning English in accordance with the results that were aggregated from the research data. Al-Ali (2014) claimed that although Instagram has a restrictive policy which limits its functions, it can be useful in language learning and in language classrooms. Also, it seems possible that using Instagram inside the classroom equips the learners with new vocabulary which has been shared by outsider learners. The present results seem to be consistent with studies which have found that using Instagram augments students' vocabulary control and can be used for receiving remedial feedback (Kelly, 2015). Connecting with outsiders and native English speakers via social networks can make a significant contribution to the new knowledge that learners acquire and when they consider their experiences online to be successful and enjoyable.

One unanticipated point was that some learners and family members used comments to mention to their friends about the account and the English lessons in particular, with encouraging words. I noticed one day that a mother had mentioned to her son about the account with a supportive comment, which was: "My son, apply yourself and follow this account to learn more about English." After a while, he replied to his mother with "done mom". This online collaboration may help them to select materials sensibly and have an impact on how best to employ the online materials they encounter. It is clear that Instagram has become an influential mode of communication for exchanging ideas and is serving as a learning resource for individual learners, including in school settings. In accordance with the present findings, recent research has highlighted that learners agree that it is enjoyable to post writing assignments on Instagram and that it is interesting to give feedback via Instagram (Handayani, Cahyono, & Widiati, 2018).

After an evaluation of the collected data and mean scores, a major finding includes the daily need of simple lessons as the biggest factor in promoting a participant's motivation for learning. Approximately 6,000 more views were for the simple lesson posts than for the complicated lesson posts. The research suggests this 'quick-fix' approach is appealing to these Arab learners of English. It is clear from the summary statistics that participants preferred simple English lessons. While stated implicitly already, 'a simple lesson' in this case is defined as one which does not contain detailed explanation or information which would require considerable time and effort on the learner's part to grasp the grammatical point. Therefore, the presentation is simple and clear and that seems to be what Arabic learners demand from Instagram posts. When the participants focused on learning the simple structures their exposure to English is limited. However, the impact of the simple structures on the individuals is more effective compared to that of the deep structure posts. This type of learning habit has an important impact on the language learning progress of the post followers.

This study has investigated the educational, language learning interactions of Arab participants through a social media application. It is feasible to assume that actual classes with varieties of international students may produce completely different results than what was elicited from our data. In addition, the only form of communication with the participants was through comments stored underneath the posts which provided only limited interactions. Thus, there is a need for more studies on why these students, using modern technology, prefer not to engage in more cognitively demanding language lessons via social media.

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