Understanding Students' Perceptions of Instagram in Enhancing and Supporting EFL Learner Autonomy

Mitha Saharani[1]([⊠]), Oktha Ika Rahmawati[2], Moh. Fuadul Matin[3]
[1,2,3]Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro, Indonesia
mithasaharani18@gmail.com[1]
oktha_ika@ikippgribojonegoro.ac.id[2]
fuadul_matin@ikippgribojonegoro.ac.id[3]

Abstract — This study aims to explore students' perceptions of using Instagram as a tool for enhancing and supporting autonomous learning in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and to identify the influencing factors. A descriptive qualitative method was used, with data collected through questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The participants were 20 English Education students from the first to fourth year at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro. The results show that most students positively perceive Instagram in autonomous English learning. Instagram is a tool that enhances motivation, enriches vocabulary, and provides flexible, engaging learning content. Features like reels, polls, quizzes, and Q&A support enjoyable self-learning routines. The factors influencing students' perceptions include content quality, interactive features, supportive learning communities, and Instagram's algorithm, which personalizes content based on user interests. These findings reflect the idea of digital learner autonomy, where students actively shape their learning environments based on their preferences and needs.
Keywords — students' perceptions, Instagram, autonomous learning, EFL

abstrak — *Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi mahasiswa terhadap penggunaan Instagram sebagai alat untuk meningkatkan dan mendukung pembelajaran mandiri dalam konteks Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL), serta untuk mengidentifikasi faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi. Metode deskriptif kualitatif digunakan, dengan data yang dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan dokumentasi. Partisipan terdiri dari 20 mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris dari tahun pertama hingga tahun keempat di IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar mahasiswa memiliki persepsi positif terhadap Instagram dalam pembelajaran mandiri Bahasa Inggris. Instagram merupakan alat yang meningkatkan motivasi, memperkaya kosakata, dan menyediakan konten pembelajaran yang fleksibel serta menarik. Fitur-fitur seperti reels, polling, kuis, dan tanya jawab mendukung rutinitas pembelajaran mandiri yang menyenangkan. Faktor-faktor yang memengaruhi persepsi mahasiswa meliputi kualitas konten, fitur interaktif, komunitas belajar yang suportif, dan algoritma Instagram yang mempersonalisasi konten berdasarkan minat pengguna. Temuan ini mencerminkan gagasan tentang kemandirian belajar digital, di mana mahasiswa secara aktif membentuk lingkungan belajar mereka berdasarkan preferensi dan kebutuhan mereka.*
Kata kunci — *persepsi siswa, Instagram, pembelajaran mandiri, EFL*

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of digital technology, especially in the realms of information and communication, has transformed various sectors, including education. Learning has become more flexible, accessible, and personalized due to the widespread use of smartphones and internet connectivity. Among the many tools that have emerged, social media stands out not only as a means of entertainment or social interaction but also as a potential platform for educational purposes. Instagram, with its visual-centric features, popularity among youth, and ease of access, has become one of the platforms with great potential in supporting English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning.

However, despite the increasing use of Instagram among students for academic purposes, the discussion around how this platform specifically supports autonomous learning, a concept where learners take full responsibility for their own learning process remains limited. Most existing studies have focused on motivation or general language learning outcomes through Instagram, without delving deeper into how the platform fosters self-directed learning behavior. This presents a clear research gap that needs to be addressed.

To tackle this problem, this study aims to explore students' perceptions of Instagram as a tool to enhance and support autonomous learning in the EFL context. It also seeks to identify the factors that influence students' perceptions of using the platform for educational purposes. The research is grounded in the belief that understanding students' viewpoints can offer valuable insights for developing more engaging and effective learning strategies through digital platforms. Every student employs unique learning strategies, and recognizing these personal approaches is essential to support their success in the learning process (Rahmawati & Tirtanawati, 2024).

Several theoretical perspectives support this inquiry. According to Benson (2013), autonomous learning involves the capacity to control one's own learning in terms of content, process, and evaluation based on learning needs. Learning needs are closely connected to a person's goals and intentions for study and learning. They act as a continuous motivational force that encourages individuals to participate in learning activities (Matin, 2023). Meanwhile, studies such as Handayani (2015) highlight how digital platforms like Instagram, through their interactive and visual nature, can serve as supportive environments for self-regulated learning. The platform's features such as Reels, Stories, Feeds, and IGTV offer various forms of content delivery that align well with the characteristics of autonomous learning. Instagram also enables communication and collaboration through comments and direct messaging, making it a suitable space for informal yet meaningful learning.

Based on this foundation, the research objectives are: (1) to explore students' perceptions of using Instagram to enhance autonomous learning in the EFL context, (2) to examine how students perceive Instagram as a supportive tool for self-directed learning, and (3) to identify the factors that influence these perceptions. It is expected that the findings of this study will provide theoretical contributions to the field of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and practical recommendations for educators and learners who aim to optimize social media as part of their learning strategies. Ultimately, this research aspires to highlight the pedagogical value of

Instagram, particularly in empowering students to take charge of their own English learning journeys.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section outlines the methodological framework employed to conduct the study, which aimed to explore students' perceptions of Instagram as a tool for enhancing and supporting autonomous learning in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The study adopted a descriptive qualitative design, as this approach allows for an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and perspectives in a natural context. Qualitative research is particularly useful for examining social phenomena and uncovering the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This method was chosen because it aligns with the study's goal of capturing nuanced insights from students. As Mack (2005) stated, qualitative research is highly effective in collecting culturally and contextually rich data, especially concerning attitudes, values, and behaviors.

The study was conducted at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro, East Java, from March to April 2025. The participants were 20 students from the English Education Study Program, with five students purposively selected from each academic level (1st to 4th year). This purposive sampling ensured that the selected participants had relevant experience with using Instagram for educational purposes, particularly English learning. The sampling criteria included students who actively used Instagram, frequently accessed English-related content, and were willing to participate. Etikan et al. (2016) highlight that purposive sampling is ideal for selecting individuals with specific knowledge relevant to the research focus.

Data were collected using three techniques: questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The questionnaire, distributed via Google Forms, consisted of 15 items divided into four sections: personal information, Instagram usage, perceptions of Instagram for autonomous learning, and influencing factors. Participants responded using a four-point Likert scale: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. This method is considered effective for obtaining individual perspectives (Roopa & Rani, 2012). Semi-structured interviews allowed for deeper exploration of the participants' experiences and perceptions. Each interview lasted over five minutes and followed a flexible guide to ensure alignment with research objectives while allowing for probing and elaboration (Kvale, 2009). The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Additionally, documentation was used to capture photographs during interviews and data collection sessions as supporting evidence. According to Bowen (2009), documentation can serve as a valuable source for verifying and enriching qualitative data.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model by Miles and Huberman (1994), which includes three steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Data reduction involved coding, summarizing, and categorizing the information to focus on what was relevant to the research questions. The reduced data were then organized visually through tables and matrices to identify emerging themes and patterns. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified iteratively by revisiting the data and comparing interpretations to ensure accuracy

and consistency. This process allowed the researcher to develop a comprehensive and credible understanding of students' perceptions.

To enhance the validity and credibility of the findings, triangulation was applied. The study employed both data triangulation—using multiple methods (questionnaires, interviews, and documentation)—and source triangulation—gathering information from students across different academic levels. Triangulation helps minimize bias and strengthens the reliability of qualitative results, as emphasized by Carter (2014). Through this methodological approach, the study ensured that the data reflected diverse experiences and provided a rich, contextualized understanding of how Instagram is perceived and used for autonomous English learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and interprets the findings related to students' perceptions of using Instagram as a tool for enhancing and supporting autonomous English language learning. The results are derived from in-depth interviews with 20 students and are supported by questionnaire data. The discussion integrates the findings with broader educational perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of how students perceive Instagram as a learning tool in the context of English language education.

1. Enhancing Autonomous Learning through Instagram
    a) Language Skill Development

    A dominant theme that emerged from the interviews was the enhancement of language skills. 85% of students (17 out of 20) reported that Instagram helped them improve vocabulary, listening, pronunciation, and even grammar. Through daily exposure to English content—especially Reels, Stories, and infographics—students experienced passive and active learning simultaneously.

    This finding aligns with Al-Ali (2014) and Sharples et al. (2007), who argue that mobile applications like Instagram support Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) by enabling language input outside formal settings. Learners voluntarily accessed content in their own time, fulfilling key aspects of autonomy described by Little (2007), such as responsibility and self-initiated learning. With strong self-regulation, students are more capable of learning independently and managing their own learning process, which can positively impact their academic achievement (Rahmawati & Tirtanawati, 2024)

    For example, Khoir (Level 4) mentioned:
    "It really helps me improve my vocabulary, pick up new words, and get familiar with new pronunciations."

    Likewise, in the questionnaire, 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that Instagram enhances their ability to learn independently and boosts their confidence in using English.

b) Independent Exploration and Content Search

Based on the findings, 90% of the participants stated that Instagram encourages independent exploration of learning materials. Students explained that once they find educational content that fits their needs, they often follow those accounts and continue learning through them.

This pattern demonstrates the learner autonomy framework proposed by Palfreyman (2003), in which students engage in goal-setting, resource selection, and reflective learning. Students utilize Instagram not as passive users but as active seekers of knowledge—a key indicator of autonomous behavior.

Eka (Level 2) explained:
"Instagram makes me more independent in finding study materials because there is a lot of content."

Puput (Level 2) added that she "scrolls through Reels, checks creators' accounts, and decides to follow if the content is helpful."

In the questionnaire, 85% of students agreed with the statement that Instagram allows them to learn in their own way, reinforcing its role as a personalized autonomous platform.

c) Adoption of New Learning Strategies

Instagram's dynamic nature inspired 75% of students to adapt new strategies such as microlearning, repetition, and visual-based learning. Students described how they began learning English through short videos, quizzes, and language-based entertainment content. The development of new learning strategies aims to provide knowledge and foster language experiences that facilitate language learning (Matin, 2023)

This behavior supports Thanasoulas's (2000) concept that learners take control of their learning process when they use strategies suited to their preferences. Moreover, the use of Instagram aligns with Generation Z's learning style, as explained by Leaver et al. (2020), who emphasize short, visual, and engaging formats.

Zilvia (Level 2) noted:
"Now I learn through Reels and join English quizzes."

Amel (Level 1) said:
"Books are boring. Instagram is better for Gen Z. I learn English without feeling like I'm studying."

These findings confirm that Instagram promotes strategy flexibility, a core aspect of autonomous learning (Little, 2007).

2. Supporting Autonomous Learning through Instagram
    a) Interactive Engagement and Motivation

    Instagram supports autonomy not only through content availability but also by motivating learners via its features. 80% of participants stated that features such as quizzes, comments, and interactive Reels kept them engaged.

    This reflects Robbins et al.'s (2015) notion of digital scaffolding, where learners rely on platform features as guided input before internalizing the content. Additionally, Belarbi & Djaballah (2023) suggest that social media can foster learner confidence and motivation through informal yet purposeful engagement. Motivation plays a crucial role in the success of the learning process. When students are motivated, their learning tends to become more effective and efficient (Rahmawati et al., 2021).

    Uus (Level 1) enjoyed story quizzes that provide immediate feedback.

    Mella (Level 1) and Rosa (Level 4) preferred Reels for their engaging video format.

    From the questionnaire showed that 95% of students believed multimedia content helped them understand English better.

    b) Habit Formation and Consistent Learning

    Based on the findings, 70% of respondents explained that Instagram facilitated habitual English learning due to its algorithm and content frequency. Students described how exposure to English content became part of their routine, often without deliberate intention.

    This finding supports implicit learning theory, where repeated exposure to target language input builds understanding naturally. It also aligns with Sharples et al.'s (2007) claim that MALL enables language learning across contexts and without formal boundaries.

    Fatim (Level 1) described how her FYP is filled with English content that appears daily.

    Mella (Level 1) prefers relatable Reels, such as "A Day in My Life" videos that teach English in real-life scenarios.

    These examples confirm that Instagram facilitates incidental and habitual learning, especially in autonomous learners.

    c) Social and Community Support

    Based on the findings, 65% of participants expressed that they felt inspired or motivated by Instagram creators or peers. The social aspect of the platform made learners feel connected to others with the same goals.

This reflects the idea of social presence in online learning environments (Garrison, 2007), where peer interaction and modeling behavior foster persistence and engagement.

Ima (Level 2) said:
"Seeing people who are fluent in English motivates me."

Putra (Level 3) regularly shares English content with classmates:
"If I find useful English videos, I post them in my group chat."

According to questionnaire, 100% of respondents agreed that social support on Instagram motivates continued learning.

3. Influencing Factors on Students' Perceptions
   a) Accessibility and Flexibility
      All participants (100%) agreed that Instagram's ease of use makes it a convenient tool for learning anytime and anywhere. Features like Threads, Reels, and Channels allowed students to access materials that matched their pace and schedule.
      This supports Sharples et al. (2007) and Al-Ali (2014), who argue that mobile learning promotes learning beyond classroom boundaries, enabling continuous engagement.

      Puput (Level 2) stated:
      "I like Threads. I read English lessons anytime."

      Danny (Level 4) emphasized flexibility in choosing "when and how to engage."

   b) Alignment with Gen Z Learning Style
      Based on the findings, 80% of students found Instagram suitable for their digital-native habits. They preferred fast-paced, visually rich, and informal learning modes over traditional textbook instruction.

      Sekar (Level 3) said:
      "Books are outdated. Instagram is more enjoyable."

      Puput (Level 2) prefers short video clips with "trendy expressions and modern translations."

      This confirms findings by Krzysztof & Porada (2022) and Leaver et al. (2020) that Instagram supports the microlearning behavior typical of Gen Z.

c) Content Personalization and Account Choice

The finding states that 90% of students selectively follow accounts based on goals and interest, indicating high levels of self-direction.

Nita (Level 1) commented:
"I ask questions in the comments and get replies. It helps me understand."

Fatim (Level 1) follows both local and international accounts like@kampunginggris and @englishbygiovana.

According to questionnaire, 85% of students agreed that the quality and accuracy of content influence how effective they perceive Instagram to be.

4. Summary of Integrated Findings

This section presents a summary of the most significant findings from both interview and questionnaire data, organized thematically to show the patterns that emerged across all three research problems. The table below integrates the key aspects of students' perceptions of using Instagram for autonomous English learning and highlights the percentage of students who expressed agreement with each theme. These percentages reflect both behavioral engagement (from interviews) and attitudinal agreement (from the questionnaire).

Tabel 1. Summary of Integrated Findings

Key Aspects	% of Students Agreeing
Instagram improves English skills	85%
Encourages independent content search	90%
Adopts new learning strategies	75%
Engagement via features (quizzes, Reels)	80%
Learning habit formation	70%
Motivation from creators/peers	65%
Accessibility & flexibility	100%
Gen Z learning style fit	80%
Content personalization	90%

The integrated findings highlight that Instagram is widely perceived by students as a beneficial tool for promoting autonomous learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The highest agreement (100%) was observed in terms of accessibility and flexibility, which shows how mobile learning platforms fit students' lifestyles. Additionally, 90% of students appreciated the opportunity to personalize content and explore material independently. Skills enhancement and new learning strategies were also emphasized by the majority, reflecting Instagram's potential as both a source of input and a space for learning experimentation.

Moreover, aspects like habit formation and motivation through social influence were acknowledged, although to a slightly lesser extent. These findings suggest that while Instagram is not a complete replacement for formal learning, it effectively complements it by supporting student autonomy, increasing language exposure, and aligning with Gen Z's digital habits and preferences.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion in the previous chapter, it can be concluded that students perceive Instagram as an effective tool for enhancing and supporting autonomous learning in the context of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The research revealed the following key conclusions:

1. Instagram Enhances Autonomous Learning

    Students found that Instagram helped them improve their English skills, especially in vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, and speaking. Instagram also encouraged independent exploration of learning materials and motivated them to adopt new, more flexible learning strategies. The platform's multimedia content, including Reels, stories, and educational posts, offered engaging and repeated exposure to English in authentic contexts.

2. Instagram Supports Autonomous Learning

    Instagram's features, such as interactive quizzes, visually engaging videos, and motivational content from English-speaking creators, provided consistent exposure to English and fostered a daily learning habit. Students felt that the informal and entertaining nature of Instagram helped them learn in a more relaxed and natural way, which increased their motivation and persistence in learning English independently.

3. Factors Influencing Perception

    Students' positive perceptions were influenced by several factors:

    a) Accessibility and flexibility of Instagram allowed them to learn at their own pace and convenience.

    b) Suitability with Gen Z learning styles made Instagram content more relatable, fun, and easier to consume.

    c) Flexibility in choosing content and accounts enabled students to personalize their learning according to their goals, whether focused on grammar, vocabulary, or exposure to native speakers.

In conclusion, Instagram is not merely a social media platform, but a powerful learning tool that aligns well with the principles of autonomous learning, especially for Generation Z learners in EFL contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

2. The 20 English Education students from levels 1 to 4 at IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro who willingly participated in the interviews and questionnaires, providing insightful data for this study.
3. Fellow friends and peers, whose moral support, motivation, and assistance helped the researcher stay focused and complete this project successfully.

The researcher is deeply grateful for all the support, without which this study would not have been possible.

REFRENCES

Al-Ali, S. (2014). Embracing the selfie craze: Exploring the possible use of Instagram as a language mLearning tool. *Issues and Trends in Educational Technology*, *2*(2).

Benson, P. (2013). *Teaching and researching: Autonomy in language learning*. Routledge.

Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, *9*(2), 27–40.

Carter, N. (2014). The use of triangulation in qualitative research. *Number 5/September 2014*, *41*(5), 545–547.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2017). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Sage publications.

Etikan, I., Musa, S. A., & Alkassim, R. S. (2016). Comparison of convenience sampling and purposive sampling. *American Journal of Theoretical and Applied Statistics*, *5*(1), 1–4.

Handayani, F. (2015). Instagram as a teaching tool? Really? *Proceedings of ISELT FBS Universitas Negeri Padang*, *4*(1), 320–327.

Indian Orthodontic Society, *46*(4_suppl1), 273–277.

Krzysztof REJMAN, A.-J., & Porada, M. (2022). Social media-a new era of communication. In *Humanities and Social Sciences 2022 Research Journal* (Vol. 29, Issue 2).

Kvale, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. Sage.

Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual social media cultures*. John Wiley & Sons.

Little, D. (2007). Language learner autonomy: Some fundamental considerations revisited. *International Journal of Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, *1*(1), 14–29.

Mack, N. (2005). *Qualitative research methods: A data collector's field guide*.

Matin, M. F. (2023). Analysis of Student's Needs in Speaking Skill for Secretarial Student. *Prosiding Seminar Nasional Pendidikan FPMIPA*, *1*(1), 528–533.

Miles, M. B. (1994). Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook. *Thousand Oaks*.

Palfreyman, D. (2003). Introduction: Culture and learner autonomy. In *Learner autonomy across cultures: Language education perspectives* (pp. 1–19). Springer.

Rahmawati, O. I., & Tirtanawati, M. R. (2024). Investigating grammar learning strategy employed by student english study program. *PROJECT (Professional Journal of English Education), 7*(4), 946–952.

Rahmawati, O. I., Nurdianingsih, F., & Fitrianingsih, A. (2021). Motivating Students to Read Uses Online Digital Module. *Prosiding Nasional Pendidikan: LPPM IKIP PGRI Bojonegoro*, 2(1), 236–240.

Roopa, S., & Rani, M. S. (2012). Questionnaire designing for a survey. *Journal of*

Sharples, M., Taylo, J., & Vavoula, G. (2007). *A Theory of Learning for the Mobile Age. In the Sage Handbook of Elearning Research; Andrews, R., Haythornthwaite, C., Eds*. SAGE Publications: London, UK.

Thanasoulas, D. (2000). What is learner autonomy and how can it be fostered. *The Internet TESL Journal*, 6(11), 37–48.