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## Instagram as a collaborative virtual language learning environment to foster EFL learners' writing skills

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### ABSTRACT

It has become common for people to share their own experiences of learning a language on Instagram. On English learning accounts, for instance, learners are encouraged to write down sentences and live comments on photos in the target language. Even though, it is not required advanced proficiency in the language to interact on Instagram, there are learners and teachers who usually give some guidance to scaffold others' learning. Based on that, the objective of this research is to discuss if Instagram is a collaborative virtual language learning environment and if Instagram fosters EFL learners' writing skills under the assumptions of collaborative learning principles of Sociocultural Theory. To achieve this goal, we elaborated a questionnaire with four closed questions and eight open questions. We applied the questionnaire to five Instagram users from five countries. The participants were contacted by Instagram, we sent them the questionnaire and then we received it back by email. The discussed results show that Instagram encourages language learners to collaborate with each other to write in English and build interactional competence.

**Keywords: Instagram; Virtual Learning Environment; Collaborative Learning Approach; Writing skills.**

### 1. Introdução

Over the last few years, millions of active Internet users have more than one Internet account that goes from personal to professional profiles. Anytime and

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anywhere, people can surf the Internet to access information, transfer files, pay any bill, book hotels, buy and sell, entertain, and take online courses.

Internet has also motivated English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to use social networking sites (SNS) to interact with each other, access texts and activities, and exchange learning experiences among themselves. For instance, Instagram is one of the most popular social networking sites used by EFL learners for learning purposes. There are more than 800 million users on Instagram who can post photos, add subtitles, share comments and videos, and chat from a smartphone. Instagram offers contextualized visual data, creative freedom, and connection with a community of users. According to the description on the site, “Instagram has become the home for visual storytelling for everyone, from celebrities, newsrooms and brands, to teens, musicians, and anyone with a creative passion” (INSTAGRAM, 2017).

Instagram promotes collaborative work among EFL learners who do not speak the same mother tongue. This condition has expanded affordances such as enabling students to interact with speakers and learners of English from other parts of the world as well as motivating them to share similar doubts about the language. Based on these features of Instagram, this study aims to discuss if Instagram may function as a collaborative virtual language learning environment to foster EFL learners’ writing skills.

To achieve this objective, a questionnaire was applied to five Instagram users to collect information about the frequency they use Instagram, the motivation that drives them to use Instagram to learn and whether Instagram contributes to improving their writing skills in a collaborative way. The data collected were analyzed qualitatively (quantifications done whenever necessary to refine the results of the analysis) under the assumptions of the collaborative learning principles.

## **2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

In this chapter, we aim to report a theoretical background about virtual learning environments, some behaviors EFL learners have to develop to interact on virtual

environments mediated by language, sociocultural theory on second language learning and motivation in L2 learning.

## **2.1 Virtual Learning Environment**

Boyd and Ellison (2007) define social networking sites as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or private profile with other users with whom they share contents. Later, Boyd (2010, p. 01) defines social networking sites as “networked publics” which embraces both space and imagined communities in which technology shapes how people gather for different purposes (make friends, do business, date, and so on).

In language field, scholars have investigated how students can improve their skills in foreign and second language learning on those virtual environments. Some practices of interaction on virtual environments include forum discussions, surveys, shared documents through online storage spaces, and so on.

According to Toscano (2006), virtual inclusion happens through digital literacy. If individuals were given opportunities for writing and reading in traditional ways in the past, now they are required to write and read digital texts as well. In addition, Zacharias (2016) affirms that digital literacy requires users to select the content to be posted on social networking and browse on reliable sites. Digital literacy, therefore, encompasses several skills such digital tool knowledge, critical thinking, sociocultural engagement, collaboration and the ability to find and select safe information. One of the most popular social networks which has been used for learning purposes is Instagram. Instagram was firstly designed for social purposes and its use as an English learning tool is recent. It is basically a photo-sharing and video-sharing site on which users interact with each other by leaving comments and direct messages on followers’ profiles. For its propriety of sharing information and being a communication channel

## **2.2 Behaviors in a Virtual Learning Environment**

We believe individuals are supposed to develop some behaviors to succeed on VLE. Valdiviezo, Reátegui and Sarango (2013) affirm that it is possible to identify such behaviors on the number of times students view forums, add posts, see discussion in the forum, update posts, add a topic of discussion or debate, display tasks proposed by the Revista Tecnologias na Educação – Ano 11 – Número/Vol.30 – Edição Temática XI – I Simpósio Internacional e IV Nacional de Tecnologias Digitais na Educação (I-SINTDE 2019). UFMA - [tecnologiasnaeducacao.pro.br](http://tecnologiasnaeducacao.pro.br) - [tecedu.pro.br](http://tecedu.pro.br)

teacher, send or upload tasks, send message, write message, view message history, answer quiz and view questions. Therefore, the frequency of students' access to VLE reveals their high or low level of participation and interaction.

Likewise in Beluce and Oliveira (2015), online learning requires students engagement, autonomy, competence and the perception of belonging or relatedness. These factors are related to collaborative learning. The scholars affirm that in collaborative learning, group members contribute to achieving a common learning objective and thus solve a specified problem or proposed situation.

Collaborative relationship promotes an atmosphere of pleasure and safety as well as decreases the fear of rejection. According to Roy (2012, p.03), the environment of a virtual collaborative community enriches “debate issues, brainstorm, innovative, and share thoughts, experiences and ideas in a collaborative effort”. In other words, when students are actors and provide mutual assistance, they are collaborators of the social space.

According to Dillenbourg (1999), collaborative learning is that situation in which a pair, a small group, a class, a community learn or attempt to learn something together. On virtual learning environment, collaborative learning promotes social skills, develops metalinguistic awareness, encourages students to share strategies of learning and offers input and output (FIGUEIREDO, 2006; PAIVA, 2010).

### **2.3 Sociocultural Theory on Second Language Learning**

The Sociocultural Theory (SCT) has its psychological foundation on Vygotsky and on his colleagues' studies such as Wertsch, Leontiev, Luria and Bruner.

In early 20th century, Vygotsky turned attention to the relation between child development and learning. According to his studies, the development of cognition happens through interaction with others and then into individual's mental structure. Vygotsky used the terminology “cultural psychology” to name his assumptions.

In his turn, Wertsch (1994) used the term “sociocultural approach” to emphasize that all human mental functioning is mediated through cultural, institutional, and historical settings. In other words, SCT focuses on the role of culture at large in human cognitive development (behavior and biological activities).

Lantolf, Thorne and Poehner (2015) review the principles and concepts associated with SCT to focus on second language acquisition (SLA) as a mental process. The authors affirm that the use of material artifacts, psychological and symbolic tools/signs mediate the “relationship between the individual and the social-material world” (LANTOLF; THORNE; POEHNER, 2015, p. 04). According to the authors, the mediation in SLA comprises a sequence of three types of regulation: a) object-regulation, b) other-regulation, and c) self-regulation. Object-regulation describes the use of material tools to afford cognition, such as the use of translator and online dictionaries to look up unknown words. Other-regulation is the mediation by people, for example, corrective comments on writing assignments or guidance from a teacher. Self-regulation is the final stage in which the individual does not need external support to accomplish an activity, for example, self-correction of mispronunciation. The sequence shift of these three types of mediation/regulation is not stable, because language learners reaccess the stages whenever they are in a language learning context.

Based on these points, we outline some concepts to rethink second language acquisition in the light of Vygotsky’s studies: mediation, zone of proximal development and scaffolding, and private and inner speech.

### *2.3.1 Mediation*

According to Lantolf and Thorne (2007), the SCT framed the psychological aspect of humans for regulating their own mental activities. Through cultural, linguistic and historical artifacts, humans create means of mediation that connect themselves to the world. The authors notice that the capacity of creating artifacts to mediate actions pervades humans with a considerable advantage over other species. Lantolf and Thorne (2007) exemplify the human cognitive aspect of creating artifacts with a practical explanation: depending on the size of the hole, human would use a shovel or a mechanical digging device to do it more efficiently. Swain, Kinnear and Steinman (2011, p. 02 *apud* PAIVA, 2014, p. 129) warn that any artifact is not a means of mediation per se, but it offers learners affordances and constraints in its use.

The most powerful cultural artifact that humans possess is language because it “enables us to talk and think about entities and events that are displaced in both time and space, including those events and entities that do not yet exist in the real world”

(LANTOLF; THORNE, 2007, p. 201). Similarly, Mitchell and Myles (1998) consider language as a mean of mediation in mental activity. These authors state that through language we shape our thinking to some extend.

### *2.3.2 Zone of proximal development and scaffolding*

According to Vygotsky (1978), the development of mental function presents two levels. The first level is the actual development level that represents functions that have already matured in the child when the developmental cycle has already been completed. The second level is the zone of proximal development (ZPD) that defines the functions that have not potentially matured but they are in the process of maturation. The ZPD is determined through problems that a child cannot solve without a guided assistance of a more capable peer, adult or specialist. In Vygotsky's words (1978, p.38), ZPD defines those "functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state".

Following Vygotsky's line of thought, Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) explained the nature of the tutorial process and coined the term scaffolding based on Vygotsky's concept of ZPD. According to the scholars, by means of the tutorial process "an adult or 'expert' helps somebody who is less adult or less expert" (WOOD, BRUNER AND ROSS, 1976, p. 89). According to the authors, the intervention of a tutor involves more than modelling and imitation, it involves a kind of scaffolding which enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts. This scaffolding consists essentially of the adult "controlling" those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence (WOOD; BRUNER; ROSS, 1976, p. 90).

So, the process of having a less skilled person the opportunity to reach successive steps of a future knowledge or skill with the assistance of a more knowledgeable person has come to be known as scaffolding.

Scaffolding refers to techniques supported by collaborative activities such as peer-group work and teacher-student mediation in which students are motivated to move further on his/her learning process. During such a process, it is important to have a balanced specialist control to avoid excess of guidance or lack of enough assistance in order to promote self-regulation.

### 2.3.3 *Private and inner speech*

According to Paiva (2014) the private speech is a “silent” repetition of enunciations which control learners’ cognitive regulation. Utterances such as “What?”, “I can”, “I can’t do it”, “Wait!” serve to organize learners’ plans to interpret and carry out activities. Lantolf, Thorne and Poehner (2015) define private speech as an individual’s externalization of language for purposes of maintaining or regaining self-regulation.

The private speech is matured when learners do not base thought on words only, but on mental functions named inner speech. Inner speech is an internal conversation or a reflective self-directed dialogue which guides thought and helps learners overcome difficulties. Wiley (2013) also mentions terms such as inner language, self-talk and inner dialogue in reference to the term inner speech. In sum, according to Vygotsky (1981), private speech is on social plane, while inner speech is on psychological plane.

## **2.4 Motivation in L2 Learning**

Scholars have attempted to explain what motivation is in second language learning for the past 60 years. Understanding how impossible it is to give a simple definition of motivation, Gardner (2006) considers it as something more complex than the desire to learn the target language. In general, Gardner distinguishes language learning motivation and classroom learning motivation. Language learning motivation refers to the characteristic of the learner to seize any opportunity to learn L2. This kind of motivation is related to the individual’s desire to learn. Classroom learning motivation involves the specific language environment (the class atmosphere, the course content, the teacher, materials, the test to be taken, etc.) that influences the individual’s behavior.

Norton (2000) points to the necessity of developing a theory that integrates the language learner and the language learning context. She uses the term identity to refer a person’s understanding of himself/herself and of his/her relationship with the world.

As we can see above, motivation studies are increasingly turning their attention towards the person rather than the L2 learner. Ushioda (2012) points the shift in conceptual focus. If before there were attention to a bundle of abstract variables and

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generalized types of learners, now scholars are interested in how a person is situated in particular temporal, social and physical contexts in L2 learning process.

### **3 THE RESEARCH CHOICES PROCEDURES**

This chapter is divided into two sections: the research context (the virtual environment and the informants) and the methodological procedures.

#### **3.1 The research context**

In this section, we report the virtual environment and the informants in order to describe the context this research was done.

##### *3.1.1 The virtual environment*

Instagram is a social networking site that lets people share photos, videos and messages with their followers from their mobile devices. The name Instagram is a combination of “instant camera” and “telegram” which was thought by its creators Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger. Instagram was launched in October 2010 in San Francisco, California. Currently, it has 1 billion monthly active users and 500 million daily active users from all parts of the world according to the site Digital GYD (2019).

For most people, Instagram is a space for learning purposes. For example, it allows people to learn English, expand vocabulary, practice and improve writing, speaking, reading and listening skills, review grammar and meet others who use the networking site to ask questions and exchange experiences about language. For this reason, Instagram is a virtual environment in which interaction between people builds knowledge in a collaborative way.

##### *3.1.2 The informants*

Twenty people from active accounts on Instagram were invited to be volunteers of our study. They received the invitation by direct messages on Instagram, however, only five users accepted to answer our research questionnaire. The five informants are non-native English speakers (three men and two women) who actively follow, reply and give opinions on others' posts related to English learning. Concerning their experience



with the language, all informants affirmed that they have already studied English before and that they have professional purposes to study the language. They also interact with others in their workplaces and, sometimes, in college with their friends in English.

Their ages vary from 21 to 39 years old as well as their nationalities, as it can be seen next:

Table 1: Informants

<b>Informants</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Profession</b>
Ahmed	Arabian	Male	39	Teacher
David	Indonesian	Male	24	Sales consultant
Maria	Russian	Female	35	Teacher
Nandini	Bangladeshi	Female	23	Journalist
Wilton	Brazilian	Male	21	English Teacher

### 3. 2 The methodological procedures

In order to conduct this study, our research was organized into three stages as it follows:

- We made a bibliographical research to choose the literature to support our investigation as well as the data discussions.
- We applied a questionnaire to collect data on the perspective of the qualitative paradigm (NUNAN, 1992). However, whenever necessary we quantified the data to refine our results.
- We mainly analyzed data to learn if Instagram is a collaborative virtual language learning environment to foster EFL learners.

Concerning the questionnaire, it consisted of twelve questions: four closed questions related to the frequency the informants use Instagram other than for learning purposes, the frequency they use Instagram for learning purposes, the frequency

teachers and others collaborate with them to write in English on Instagram. We used a table from 100% (always) to 0% (never) to refer to the frequency they do the actions.

The other eight questions were open, allowing the informants to inform their native language; when they started studying English; where they use English; how Instagram encourage them to write in English; if there is any difference between posting in English and in their native language; how teachers and learners help them write in English on Instagram; and if they will continue to write in English on Instagram.

#### **4. The data analysis**

In their answers to the questionnaire, the informants affirmed they use English on their daily basis including on social media as we can observe in the following responses:

(1) “I’m always using my English to teach my students. I also use, whenever I’m in class and I have to present something or just get involved in a classroom discussion. Sometimes I talk to my friends in English just for fun” (Wilton).

(2) “Sometimes [I use English] in my college with my friend and in my home with neighbours. Mostly, I use social media” (David).

The informants’ responses corroborate Boyd’s (2010) point of view that social media are used by both youth and adults to socialize with their friends, share information with others, do business and express their identity. Boyd (2010, p. 5) also states that on social media, “participants articulate who they wish to connect with and confirm ties to those who wish to connect with them”. Such behavior is confirmed in

(3) “I feel more comfortable using English because sometimes I do not want everybody understands the message” (Wilton).

All the informants affirmed they ask others for guided assistance as well as give them support whenever it is necessary. This certifies that Instagram is a collaborative learning environment that encourages learners to provide mutual assistance with engagement (BELUCE; OLIVEIRA, 2015) as we observe in the following responses:

(4) “I sometimes give tips or learn through a user. He’s a teacher (...) There are some transitional markers, or stuff from academic language that if I’m not

feeling comfortable to use a specific word or I have some questions I just send a message to him, and he's always there" (Wilton).

(5) "I want other people to know it [English] better" (Maria).

(6) "When I learn English with other learners it's kind of fun! Cause we can share what we learn about post something, about grammar and the others" (David).

Besides interacting with others, we observed that learners regulate their own learning process without the external support. When the individual externalizes words to regulate her or his own learning process, s/he helps herself or himself to overcome difficulties. It corroborates the ideas of Lantolf, Thorne and Poehner (2015) that second language acquisition is a mental process. The sequence of object-regulation, other-regulation and self-regulation is not standardised. The same person might be confident about some points of the language as s/he needs assistance with other points:

(7) "Sometimes we discussion about the content in English and share our opinion" (David).

(8) "The first thing I know about English, we have to learn and improve our grammar first and learn how to used that" (David).

Considering the concept of digital literacy, it is through digital texts that individuals are being sociocultural engaged to post on social networking sites and motivated to create online pages. According to Toscano (2006) and Zacharias (2016), learners are dealing with multiple digital contexts and being more autonomous in their own learning process nowadays. For example, Nandini is thinking about creating an account to post her writings on Instagram.

(9) "I follow BBC English and I am also looking forward to open an account based upon my various writings ..." (Nandini).

Concerning students' motivation, the feeling of belonging and relatedness to the English speaking community motivates 80% of the informants to express themselves in English on Instagram. They feel more comfortable when posting in English than posting in their mother tongue. Dornyei (1998) asserts that L2 learners desire to be part of L2 culture so they use language to mediate their identities, behaviors, and thoughts. This is reflected in participants' point of views in the excerpts below:

(10) “I believe in comfort zones so I rarely post in my native language” (Nandini).

(11) “Some sentences are more meaningful in English than in Portuguese” (Wilton).

All informants affirmed they will continue to post on Instagram in English because it promotes enjoyment (responses 12 and 13) and mediates their connection with the English speaking community and society (responses 14, 15 and 16) as we can observe in some of their comments:

(12) “Yes forevermore. As English will remain my enjoyment” (Nandini).

(13) “I think I will cause I like it” (Maria).

(14) “I will continue cause English language it’s a bridge for society” (Ahmed).

(15) “Yes, I will. Whenever I have something to say and I notice that this “thing” should sound better in English, I will post it” (Wilton).

(16) “ Yes, I will. I will not stop studying about english until I can speak in english. Cause I always dreamed to study abroad and going to other country in the world! Until I find someone friend who talks in English, I think Instagram will be the good media to talk with somebody or learn with the other learners” (David).

In sum, the informants’ answers to the questionnaire attest that Instagram is effective as a motivational virtual environment to foster EFL learners writing skills. This environment encourages learners to interact in the target language, build knowledge together by writing in English, share information and help each other in a collaborative way.

## **5. Final considerations**

The objective of this research was to discuss if Instagram, as a virtual language learning environment, encourages language learners to foster their writing skills in the light of Collaborative Learning Approach.

The study revealed that EFL learners feel motivated to collaborate with each other to write in English on Instagram. Whenever it is necessary, they help and ask for

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help to encourage mutual assistance on their writing performance. Therefore, besides improving learners' writing skills in a collaborative way, the use of Instagram helps EFL learners develop the required interactional competence to participate in virtual learning environments.

The results of this research showed that language learning is a mental and a sociocultural process in which learners reflect on language to regulate their learning process and desire to be part of L2 culture to mediate their identities, behaviors, and thoughts. In this sense, Instagram proved to be a virtual environment which promotes this feeling of belonging and relatedness.

In sum, Instagram promotes ongoing opportunities to learn English. Once we download the app, it is possible to access Instagram anywhere and be fully immersed in an English environment. By uploading photos with captions and comments in English, learners can communicate and foster their writing skills through a familiarized context that is part of their own experiences and daily routines. This work intended to contribute to language learning practices, providing a discussion on the importance of developing interactional and collaborative competences on virtual environments.

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