

Instagram Based Arabic Vocabulary Learning among First Year Students

Mega Satria Nurul Falah¹, Awaliyah Ainun Niswah²

¹ International Open University, The Gambia, Africa.

² Yayasan Santri Cendikiawan, Jawa Timur, Indonesia.

*Correspondence to: awaliyahniswah@gmail.com

Abstract: This study aims to explore how first-year students experience and engage in Arabic vocabulary learning through Instagram at an International Open University. Using a qualitative descriptive-exploratory design, the study focuses on students' lived learning experiences rather than merely examining learning outcomes or media effectiveness. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten first-semester students and complemented by observations of their Instagram learning activities. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of perception, engagement, and meaning construction in students' learning experiences. The findings reveal three interrelated dimensions of Instagram-based vocabulary learning. First, students perceive Instagram as a contextual and relevant learning space that provides practical vocabulary connected to everyday communication. Second, the learning process is experienced as light, visual, and motivating due to the platform's multimodal content, which facilitates comprehension and reduces learning pressure. Third, students demonstrate selective and autonomous participation, primarily by viewing and saving posts rather than actively interacting. The study highlights that meaningful digital vocabulary learning is shaped not only by platform features but also by contextual relevance, affective experience, and learner autonomy, positioning Instagram as a complementary informal learning space that supports formal Arabic language instruction in higher education.

Keywords: Arabic vocabulary; Instagram learning; social media; autonomy; engagement.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, higher education has undergone significant transformation alongside the rapid development of digital technology and the widespread use of social media (Dhameria et al., 2025; Mukul & Büyüközkan, 2023; Timotheou et al., 2023). Learning processes no longer take place exclusively within formal classroom settings but increasingly occur in digital spaces that allow flexibility, interaction, and learner autonomy (Yang, 2023; Zolfaghari & Rashidi, 2023). Within the context of language learning, social media is no longer understood merely as a supplementary technological tool, but rather as a learning environment in which language is presented, practiced, and constructed through social interaction and visual representation (Alkamel, 2024; Lashari et al., 2023; Yousif, 2025). These platforms enable learners to access authentic input and participate in dynamic communicative exchanges beyond institutional boundaries (Lee & Roger, 2023; Tavassoli & Beyranvand, 2023; Teng et al., 2022).

One platform that has attracted considerable attention in language education research is Instagram, given its multimodal characteristics that integrate images, short videos, text, and interactive features with strong potential to support language learning.

In Arabic language learning, vocabulary acquisition constitutes a fundamental component, particularly at the early stages of higher education. Vocabulary serves as the foundation for students to comprehend texts, develop language skills, and engage with academic and scholarly discourse (Fauzia et al., 2025; Saadataen & Sopian, 2025). For first-semester students, learning Arabic vocabulary often presents challenges Almelhes (2024); Ulum (2020) as they are in a transitional phase from relatively structured learning environments to more autonomous forms of learning.

These challenges become more pronounced within the context of International Open University, where the learning system relies heavily on learner independence and the use of technology, accompanied by limited face-to-face interaction (Nguyen et al., 2022; Shimizu et al., 2022; Wang, 2023). Such conditions necessitate the availability of digital learning spaces that are not only easily accessible but also capable of supporting meaningful engagement and learning experiences for students. A few previous studies have examined the use of Instagram in Arabic language learning from various perspectives. A needs analysis study conducted by Sujefri & Habibah (2023) revealed that the use of Instagram in Arabic language learning is influenced by both internal and external factors, including learning motivation, digital literacy, and students' needs for language skill development.

From a pedagogical perspective, Zaza (2024) emphasized Instagram's role as a supplementary learning resource capable of presenting situational and cultural contexts authentically through multimodal materials, particularly in supporting reading skills and lexical comprehension. These findings suggest that Instagram holds substantial potential as a source of contextual and relevant language input (Alfaraj et al., 2025; Ceh & Benedek, 2025; Kathuria, 2024; Mucundorfeanu et al., 2025). Other studies have focused on content analysis of Instagram accounts used as media for Arabic language learning. Research by Fatimah et al. (2025); Rahman et al. (2025); Fuady et al. (2026) indicates that educational Instagram accounts can present vocabulary, grammar, and language practice materials in visually engaging and interactive ways, while also encouraging user participation through comment and direct message features.

These studies can be regarded as well-established research efforts that illustrate how Instagram is utilized as a medium for presenting Arabic language learning materials in digital spaces. In addition, these studies demonstrate that Instagram-based learning content is often systematically organized to attract learners' attention and sustain engagement through consistent posting patterns and thematic categorization. However, when examined critically, these studies also reveal a relatively consistent limitation. Most existing research has concentrated on content description, media features, or material presentation characteristics, while the dimension of students' learning experiences as language learners has received limited in-depth exploration. Studies that examine learning outcomes, such as the experimental research on the use of Instagram Reels (Fang et al., 2025; Khairunisa et al., 2025) Khairunisa et al. (2025).

Meanwhile, Alotaibi (2023); Pangestuti & Uswah (2025) study in the context of English as a Foreign Language reports positive effects of Instagram on vocabulary development; however, these findings cannot be directly generalized to Arabic language learning, which involves distinct linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical characteristics. Furthermore, qualitative research that specifically examines Instagram-based Arabic vocabulary learning from the perspectives of first-semester students remains scarce, particularly within the context of International Open University. Students at this initial

stage of study are situated in a critical phase of developing learning strategies, independent learning habits, and long-term engagement patterns in Arabic language learning. The lack of studies exploring students' experiences, perceptions, and engagement in utilizing Instagram as a learning space highlights a significant research gap.

Based on this gap, the present study is both important and timely in addressing the limitations of previous research. This study aims to explore how first-semester students of the Arabic Language Studies Program at International Open University perceive, experience, and engage in Instagram-based Arabic vocabulary learning, with a focus on learning experiences, engagement, and student perceptions. Employing a qualitative approach, this study is expected to contribute novel, contextual, and empirical insights into how Instagram functions as a space for Arabic vocabulary learning within the learning environment of International Open University. In doing so, the study places students lived experiences at the center of analysis rather than merely examining learning outcomes or media effectiveness. It seeks to uncover how meaning is constructed through interaction with digital content and how students negotiate their roles as autonomous learners.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory design (Hollstein, 2011; Seaman, 2008). This design was selected because the research objective is not to test hypotheses or measure causal relationships, but rather to describe and explore students' learning experiences in depth (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Kim et al., 2017). The descriptive-exploratory approach enables the researcher to understand how Instagram-based Arabic vocabulary learning is experienced, interpreted, and practiced by students within the real learning context of International Open University, without manipulating learning variables. This methodological orientation is grounded in the assumption that learning experiences are socially constructed and therefore require interpretative inquiry. By emphasizing depth rather than breadth, the study seeks to capture nuanced perspectives that may not be visible through quantitative measurement.

The participants in this study were first-semester students of the Arabic Language Studies Program at International Open University. First-semester students were chosen because they are in a transitional phase toward more autonomous and technology-based learning, which constitutes a core characteristic of the learning system at International Open University. A total of ten students participated in the study and were selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included students who actively use Instagram and have experience utilizing the platform to access or learn Arabic vocabulary. To ensure confidentiality and research ethics, participants' identities were anonymized using coded identifiers throughout the data analysis and reporting process. The focus on first-semester students is particularly significant because this stage represents the foundation of their academic adaptation process.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted during the first semester of study. This interview technique was employed because it provides a flexible framework of open-ended questions while allowing the researcher to explore participants' experiences, perspectives, and meanings in greater depth (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Junnier, 2024). Each interview focused on students' experiences using Instagram as a medium for Arabic vocabulary learning, their forms of engagement with learning content, and their perceptions of the benefits and limitations of Instagram as a learning space. In addition to interviews, supporting data were obtained through

observation of Instagram-based learning activities and the types of vocabulary content accessed by students, to enrich the understanding of the digital learning context experienced by the participants.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Hill et al., 2022; Lochmiller, 2021). All interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed in several stages, including initial familiarization with the data, coding segments that reflected recurring patterns of meaning, and grouping codes into overarching themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was selected because it offers a flexible yet systematic framework for identifying patterns of meaning in qualitative data and for understanding how participants construct meaning from their learning experiences. The analysis process was iterative, involving repeated examination of the relationships between data, codes, and themes to ensure consistency and accuracy of interpretation. During the coding phase, significant statements were highlighted and categorized based on conceptual similarity. Emerging themes were continuously refined to ensure alignment with participants' narratives.

To ensure data trustworthiness, this study applied strategies addressing credibility and dependability. Credibility was established through member checking, in which participants were asked to confirm interview summaries and preliminary interpretations to ensure alignment with their experiences (Ahmed, 2024). Dependability was strengthened through systematic documentation of research procedures and data analysis processes, allowing the research process to be traced and evaluated clearly (Ahmed, 2024). Ethical considerations were also addressed by informing participants of the research objectives and ensuring the confidentiality of their data and identities throughout the research process. Transparency in methodological decisions was maintained to enhance research integrity. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the study without consequence.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that Instagram functions not merely as a supportive technological medium, but as a meaningful learning space in which students interpret, experience, and autonomously engage in Arabic vocabulary learning. These findings directly address the research objectives, which focus on the learning experiences of first-semester students in the Arabic Language Studies program at International Open University. Students consistently described Instagram as a contextual and relevant space for learning Arabic vocabulary that is closely connected to daily communication. Most participants stated that the vocabulary they encounter on educational Instagram accounts feels practical and immediately applicable. One participant (P3) explained, *"Most of the vocabulary I find on Instagram is related to daily conversation. It feels more practical compared to textbook vocabulary."*

This perception was echoed by P7, who stated, *"When I see vocabulary about daily activities or common expressions, I immediately feel that I can use it. It is not only theory."* These statements indicate that students value vocabulary that is functional rather than purely academic. They perceive Instagram content as more aligned with real-life language use. The relevance of vocabulary strengthens their sense of usefulness in learning. Students therefore interpret Instagram as a space that responds to their communicative needs. This interpretation is shaped by their repeated exposure to selected educational accounts. Rather than passively receiving information, students actively evaluate whether

vocabulary is meaningful for them. Consequently, contextual relevance becomes the primary factor that shapes their learning experience. In addition to contextual relevance, students emphasized that learning vocabulary through Instagram feels light, visual, and motivating.

All participants reported that multimodal content such as images, short videos, and captions helps them understand meanings quickly. Participant P1 noted, *"I don't feel like I am studying seriously, but I still learn new words. The pictures and short videos help me understand quickly."* Similarly, P6 stated, *"Learning from Instagram feels lighter. I don't feel pressured like when I memorize from books."* These responses reveal that students associate Instagram learning with reduced anxiety. The visual presentation supports intuitive comprehension without lengthy explanations. Students experience enjoyment while learning, which increases their motivation. The emotional comfort they feel contributes to sustained engagement. Learning becomes integrated into their daily scrolling habits. However, some students admitted that their motivation depends on how attractive and relevant the content appears.

Regarding engagement patterns, students reported that their participation tends to be selective and autonomous rather than highly interactive. Most participants mentioned that they prefer viewing and saving posts instead of commenting or actively interacting. Participant P4 explained, *"I rarely comment, but I save posts that I think are important. Later, I review them."* In line with this, P8 stated, *"I prefer to read and save. Commenting is not necessary for me to learn."* These findings suggest that visible interaction is not the main indicator of engagement. Saving posts functions as a personal strategy for future revision. Their engagement reflects self-regulated learning behavior. At the same time, several students acknowledged limitations of the platform. Participant P9 admitted, *"Sometimes I get distracted by other content. If I am not careful, I forget my purpose."* This statement highlights the dual nature of Instagram as both a learning resource and a potential source of distraction.

Interpreting Instagram as a Contextual and Relevant Space for Arabic Vocabulary Learning

The analysis reveals that students interpret Instagram not merely as a platform for entertainment, but as an alternative learning space that provides Arabic vocabulary closely related to everyday language use. All participants reported that the vocabulary they encountered primarily came from Arabic educational accounts and was considered relevant because it is frequently used in daily communication. This interpretation indicates that students establish a direct connection between Instagram content and their practical needs in learning Arabic, leading them to perceive the learning process as more functional rather than normative. This interpretation does not emerge passively; rather, it is constructed through students' repeated experiences of selecting, consuming, and evaluating vocabulary content they perceive as "useful" for real-life communication. Consequently, the meaning of learning is shaped not by institutional objectives, but by personally perceived relevance.

These findings extend previous research that emphasizes the effectiveness of Instagram in improving vocabulary acquisition Rahman et al. (2025); Linur & Supriani (2025); Falah & Niswah (2025) by adding a subjective dimension related to how students interpret Instagram's function as a learning space. While earlier studies focused primarily on what is learned, this study highlights how and why certain vocabulary is perceived as

meaningful. This suggests that learning sustainability is determined not only by outcomes, but by the alignment between content meaning and students lived experiences and needs. From a theoretical perspective, this interpretation aligns with a social-constructivist approach that views learners as active agents who construct knowledge through interaction with social contexts and personal experiences (Von Terzi et al., 2021; Yelmen et al., 2025).

Moreover, these findings resonate with the concept of meaningful learning in digital environments, which emphasizes that digital learning becomes meaningful when learners can connect content with their own life realities (Bhardwaj et al., 2021; Chen, 2025; Mystakidis et al., 2021). In this context, Instagram functions as an informal learning space that bridges academic Arabic with everyday communicative practices. However, these findings also challenge the implicit assumption in some prior studies that position Instagram as a neutral platform with inherently positive educational effects. As noted by Akkaş & Turan (2025), Instagram also carries the risk of distraction and unfocused content consumption. This study demonstrates that meaningful learning is not inherent in the platform itself but depends on students' digital literacy in selecting educational accounts and managing their learning attention.

Without such selectivity, Instagram may instead reinforce shallow and fragmented learning. Furthermore, the findings reveal a limitation of Instagram as a vocabulary learning space, namely its tendency to prioritize popular and practical vocabulary, while academic and conceptual lexicon receives less attention. This observation is consistent with Nasution (2022); Van Anh & Dan (2024); Martunis et al. (2024) who argue that social media-based language learning tends to strengthen functional language use but provides limited support for academic vocabulary development without pedagogical scaffolding. Therefore, Instagram is better positioned as a complementary learning space that supports formal instruction, rather than as a full substitute for structured language learning (Lee, 2025; Lucas-Palacios & Gómez-Trigueros, 2025; Redyantanu, 2025; Salehudin et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2022).

Experiencing Vocabulary Learning as a Light, Visual, and Motivating Process

The analysis shows that students experience Instagram-based Arabic vocabulary learning as a process that feels easy, visual, and motivating. All ten participants reported that learning through Instagram is simpler and more enjoyable than book-based learning or traditional memorization, as multimodal elements (images, text, and videos) help them intuitively grasp vocabulary meanings without lengthy explanations. This visual experience not only facilitates comprehension but also fosters emotional engagement in the learning process. These findings both reinforce and extend previous studies. Linur & Supriani (2025); Pratama & Andriana (2025); Priyono (2008) emphasize that Instagram's visual and interactive features enhance motivation and vocabulary retention, while (Agustina et al. (2023); Andriana et al. (2025); Rahman et al. (2025) demonstrate that visually contextualized content contributes to increased motivation in Arabic language learning.

However, unlike these studies, which are primarily outcome-oriented, this research places students lived learning experiences at the center of analysis. The findings are also consistent with Maryam et al. (2025), who report high levels of motivation and satisfaction among students accessing Arabic content on Instagram, particularly in vocabulary development and academic dimensions. Nevertheless, whereas their quantitative approach conceptualizes motivation as an outcome, this qualitative analysis reveals

motivation as a situational experience shaped by students' emotional interactions with visual content more complex and contextual than motivation measured through satisfaction scales. Thus, motivation is understood not as a static condition, but as a dynamic process negotiated through everyday learning experiences.

From an affective perspective, students' motivation is not solely triggered by Instagram's technological features, but by feelings of comfort, relaxation, and reduced learning pressure. Students do not simply "like" Instagram as a platform; rather, they enjoy the learning experience it enables. This finding aligns with Ebadi et al. (2024), who report a positive relationship between Instagram-based engagement and L2 motivation, particularly when learning occurs in enjoyable and learner-centered environments. Moreover, these findings are consistent with perspectives on informal digital language learning that position enjoyment as a key mediator between motivation and learning engagement (Lee & Lee, 2021; Liu et al., 2024). Enjoyment serves as a bridge between initial attraction to digital platforms and sustained learning engagement, highlighting the importance of affective experience in understanding how students experience Instagram-based vocabulary learning.

Nevertheless, critical analysis indicates that enjoyable learning experiences do not necessarily correspond to deeper vocabulary mastery. Students tend to focus on practical and frequently used vocabulary, while academic, structural, or linguistically complex vocabulary receives less independent exploration. This reflects an intrinsic limitation of Instagram as a platform designed for fast and informal consumption rather than structured and progressive language learning. In addition, students' motivation appears to be fluctuating and highly dependent on content aesthetics and contextual relevance. When content is perceived as visually unappealing or irrelevant to their needs, engagement tends to decline. This phenomenon can be associated with the novelty effect, whereby initial enthusiasm for digital media diminishes over time if not accompanied by meaningful and reflective learning experiences (Lee et al., 2025; Falah & Niswah, 2025).

Thus, Instagram-based Arabic vocabulary learning is multidimensional: not merely enjoyable or informative, but meaningful when students can connect content with their needs, emotions, and personal experiences. These findings move beyond the normative claim that "Instagram is effective for language learning" by explaining how and why the platform is subjectively experienced as a motivating learning space, while also revealing its pedagogical limitations. In this sense, the effectiveness of Instagram cannot be reduced to measurable vocabulary gains alone, but must also be understood through the lens of learner perception, affective engagement, and contextual relevance. The platform's multimodal affordances create opportunities for exposure and reinforcement, yet meaningful learning depends largely on students' ability to regulate attention, select relevant content, and integrate digital input with formal instruction.

Engaging in Learning through Selective and Autonomous Participation

The analysis indicates that students' engagement in Instagram-based Arabic vocabulary learning tends to be passive-selective, characterized by viewing and saving content for later study rather than active interaction such as commenting or content creation. Six of the ten students reported frequently saving posts for future reference, while four primarily engaged in browsing. This form of engagement differs from collaborative participation models often assumed to indicate active engagement in digital learning environments. This pattern of passive-selective engagement is not merely a result

of low interest but reflects an autonomous learner strategy adapted to Instagram's informal and unstructured learning environment. It aligns with the concept of learner autonomy, wherein students regulate their learning time, intensity, and depth according to personal needs rather than formal curricular demands.

In this context, students construct personal learning networks (Arsarkij & Laohajarsang, 2021), that allow them to collect and organize vocabulary independently based on individual learning preferences. These findings support Andriana et al. (2025), who emphasize Instagram's role in self-directed learning, while also challenging the common assumption that social media inherently promotes collaborative interaction. Ebadi et al. (2024) further demonstrate that cognitive engagement, reflective thinking about content is a strong predictor of learning motivation on Instagram, which aligns with students' preference for saving and reflecting on content rather than engaging in visible interaction, illustrating a pattern of selective engagement in informal language learning. Moreover, passive engagement can be understood as an adaptive strategy to manage potential distractions and exposure to non-educational content on Instagram.

By limiting open interaction, students maintain learning focus and reduce the risk of irrelevant content exposure. This aligns with research on informal digital learning, which emphasizes that quality of engagement often has a greater impact on learning outcomes than sheer quantity of interaction. However, this dominant pattern of passive-selective engagement also presents pedagogical challenges. While it supports autonomy and flexibility, limited active interaction such as analytical discussion, productive use of vocabulary, or peer feedback, may constrain the development of higher-order linguistic skills (Dao et al., 2025). Consequently, Instagram-based informal learning may be effective for receptive vocabulary development, but less optimal for productive and interactive language skills without additional instructional scaffolding.

Furthermore, the findings show that students use Instagram primarily as a personal repository of vocabulary rather than as a space for constructing public academic identities or collaborative learning communities. This contrasts with studies on social media and self-presentation (Cuevas et al., 2024; Şurariu et al., 2025; Zillich & Wunderlich, 2024), where platforms are used for expression and networking. In this study, Instagram is utilized instrumentally and functionally for language learning, reinforcing the idea that autonomy in learning is not aimless individualism, but a reflective strategy guided by personal learning goals. As a final reinforcement, this study demonstrates that Instagram-based Arabic vocabulary learning is interpreted, experienced, and enacted by students as a meaningful, affective, and autonomous process, characterized by strategic content selection and self-regulated engagement.

These findings enrich research on Arabic language learning through social media by centering students' lived learning experiences, particularly within the context of open higher education such as International Open University, and affirm that Instagram should be positioned as a strategic and contextual learning support space rather than a complete replacement for formal instruction. By foregrounding students' perspectives, the study highlights how meaning is constructed through everyday interaction with digital content. It demonstrates that learning effectiveness cannot be understood solely through measurable outcomes but must also consider subjective interpretation and engagement. The findings emphasize the importance of contextual relevance in sustaining learner motivation. They also underline the role of affective experience in shaping positive learning

attitudes. Furthermore, the study illustrates how learner autonomy influences patterns of participation in digital environments.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that Instagram-based Arabic vocabulary learning is perceived by students as a contextual and relevant learning experience, affectively experienced as light, visual, and motivating, and enacted through selective and self-directed engagement. These three interconnected dimensions demonstrate that Instagram functions not merely as a vocabulary source, but as an informal learning space that is personally interpreted and meaningfully integrated into students' academic and emotional learning experiences. The main contribution of this study lies in offering a comprehensive understanding of how learners experience, interpret, and manage social media assisted Arabic language learning. The findings extend existing literature by showing that meaningful learning is shaped less by the intensity of social interaction and more by contextual relevance, affective experience, and learner autonomy.

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