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#LearnEnglish: Social media, language learning, and the need for critical digital literacy

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Abstract

This research aims to explore how English as a Foreign Language learners interact with English-language educational material on Instagram, using the framework of Critical Digital Literacy (CDL). Utilizing a qualitative approach, the study included 13 university students from diverse educational backgrounds, self-identified as English learners following multiple English-teaching Instagram accounts. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and digital diaries, which were gathered in a one-month period. The interviews and digital diaries were analyzed by thematic and content analysis based on key CDL constructs, including authorship awareness, ideological critique, and digital agency. Three prominent themes surfaced: (1) trust, credibility, and the problem of invisible authorship; (2) platform pressures and the influence of performative content; and (3) passive consumption and the limits of motivation. While the participants demonstrated some level of critical awareness, their evaluation and reflection practices were lacking and underdeveloped. The study indicates that it is crucial to explicitly integrate CDL principles into EFL teaching practices. This integration would provide learners with the ability to critically evaluate the credibility and educational value of informal digital learning resources. The research adds to the expanding literature on informal digital language learning and emphasizes the need for further empirical studies into teaching methods that promote reflective and engaged use of social media-based educational platforms.

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Introduction

In an age where language input is just a scroll away, millions of English language learners are turning to social media platforms for bite-sized lessons, such as vocabulary hacks or grammar reels (Gomes Junior, 2020). But behind the eye-catching visuals and elegant performances exists a pressing concern about what learners are absorbing and the potential costs involved. On the one hand, digital tools have opened new doors for informal language learning (Dressman & Sadler, 2020). On the other hand, they have also blurred the lines between entertainment, marketing, and education. Instagram used to be a purely visual playground. However, it has evolved into an unexpected classroom for language learners across the globe (Aslan, 2024). It contains quick reels and visually appealing language tips and has paved the way to unprecedented access to English-learning content outside traditional learning contexts (Gonulal, 2019). However, this new learning frontier has its own hidden complexities. These complexities include questions about who is granted the authority to teach, what norms are being reinforced through the content, and whether learners are developing the critical skills required to evaluate the overwhelming amount of material they encounter.

As the lines between entertainment, education, and advertising increasingly blur (Gui et al., 2024), it is crucial to examine how learners interact with and evaluate English content on Instagram. In the Iranian EFL context, formal learning remains largely classroom-based and examination-oriented, which limits learners' opportunities for sustained exposure to English beyond instructional settings (Sadeghi & Richards, 2015). Against this backdrop, Instagram has become one of the most widely used platforms in Iran and serves as a space where many learners encounter English-related content, such as short-form instructional videos, vocabulary posts, and materials shared by English-teaching influencers (Baleghizadeh & Saeedi, 2025). This research examines the ways Iranian EFL learners engage with English-learning material on Instagram through the perspective of Critical Digital Literacy. It aims to move beyond surface-level and investigate deeper than mere behaviors. In other words, this study focuses on learners' views regarding credibility, their understanding of authorship and ideological biases, and their capability to reflect on the performative pressures inherent in digital platforms. By contextualizing these insights within the CDL framework, the research highlights the skills and literacies that learners require, not only to access language input but also to navigate, critique, and excel in informal digital learning contexts influenced by visibility, virality, and platform dynamics.

Review of literature

Language learning in informal digital spaces

The advancement of technology has revolutionized the way individuals find information and acquire new knowledge. Language learning has been highly influenced by these developments which allow the learning process to occur outside traditional classrooms in informal contexts. The global use of social media as a digital tool has encouraged researchers in the field of language pedagogy to explore the potential of informal language learning in digital spaces (Lee, 2019a). Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), a subfield of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), investigates the potential of language learning outside the classroom and within digital spaces (Benson, 2011). Lee (2019b) defines IDLE as the informal learning of a language in a self-directed and unstructured way through the use of various digital tools, such as smartphones and computers, as well as different resources like websites, applications, and social media. Literature shows that out-of-classroom learning through exposure to technology can allow learners to improve their pragmatic competence and listening comprehension, as well as expand their vocabulary range (Lai & Gu, 2011; Lee & Dressman, 2018). In another study, Fauziah and Diana (2023) found that IDLE can create and enhance learner autonomy, which enables language learners to set their own learning goals and objectives.

As Guo and Lee (2023) reviewed, IDLE is rapidly spreading worldwide due to the ease of use and availability of technology and digital spaces. YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are among the popular digital platforms where IDLE significantly occurs. Due to their features, these platforms offer language learners a boundless amount of English content through livestreams, videos, images, captions, memes, and more. The visual and interactive nature of these applications promotes Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), which provides mobile phone and smartphone users with easy access to content without time or location limitations (Kukulska-Hulme, 2020).

The features of IDLE and MALL align with microlearning, which includes the easy delivery and accessibility of content in an interactive format that encourages informal and self-directed learning (Cronin & Durham, 2024).

Instagram and English language learning

In recent years, social media platforms have become extremely popular, with Instagram being one of the most widely used. Not only is Instagram a social networking platform, but it is also a tool for learning a variety of subjects, including the English language. Although students initially showed some hesitancy toward using Instagram as a language learning tool, it can be utilized as a microlearning tool to generate and receive English content which is supported by Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) (Al-Ali, 2014). Lee (2023b) also finds Instagram an appropriate tool for offering language learning opportunities due to its multimodal, mobile, instantaneous, and interactive features. The learning process can be facilitated by learners' everyday use of Instagram, which can serve as a supplementary tool to formal language learning and positively impact students' achievement (Erarslan, 2019).

Different studies have investigated the educational potential of Instagram in the field of language education. Instagram's feed-based tasks can be quite beneficial for grammar learning through enrichment activities, and university professors also show a positive attitude toward this use (Teng et al., 2022). In another study, Gonulal (2019) found that learners consider Instagram an enjoyable platform for vocabulary development because it visualizes context effectively. Additionally, learners' communication skills are enhanced due to the opportunities for socialization with other learners. Through vocabulary development on Instagram, learners can also increase their cultural awareness by witnessing the use of specific vocabulary in appropriate contexts (Berti, 2020). Furthermore, Abdyrakhimova (2025) highlights that using Instagram as an informal English learning tool can encourage more student engagement and unintentional skills development; additionally, its visually interactive environment can enhance creativity in language learning.

However, there are some limitations regarding the use of Instagram as a language learning tool. Instagram can easily distract learners' attention due to its variety of content, and there is no effective way to assess learners' comprehension (Baleghizadeh & Saeedi, 2025). In addition, the highly interactive feature of Instagram can cause users to lose track of time and even lead to addiction; data consumption should also be mentioned as another challenge related to its use (Fitrianingsih et al., 2024). Furthermore, anyone can develop language learning content on this platform, and since there seem to be no restrictions for these developers, learners can easily be fed by incorrect input (Rezaie & Chalak, 2021). These concerns highlight the significance of learners' critical evaluation of the existing content in digital spaces.

Ideology and representation in language learning media

Learning English on social media platforms such as Instagram does not occur in an ideologically neutral way. As Gao and Liu (2023) investigated, English language teaching materials on Instagram strongly reproduce and represent the concept of native-speakerism. Native-speakerism is defined as unequal power relations between native and non-native English teachers, in which non-native teachers are marginalized and Western English language varieties and teaching methodologies are favored (Halliday, 2006; Kubota, 2011; Kamali, 2026). In the same vein, the importance of native-speakerism on social media is highlighted by South Koreans, particularly in relation to "correct" pronunciation (Ahn et al., 2020). The algorithmic biases of social media platforms such as Instagram seek to promote English teachers who follow native-speaker norms, granting them more visibility, and as a result, it reproduces the ideology that English competence is connected to resembling a native speaker (Ruecker & Ives, 2015).

In this digital space, English is not only considered a means of communication but also a product that can be marketed, and visible English teachers can make this happen for themselves. Therefore, many Instagram teachers try to market themselves by presenting their pedagogical skills, individual characteristics, and personal experiences (Curran & Jenks, 2023). As social media platforms are gradually becoming suitable environments for advertisement (Wang & Curran, 2024), teachers have started to use them as tools for self-branding (Aslan, 2024; Nejadghanbar et al., 2024). Properly utilizing self-branding techniques can assist teachers to outperform their more qualified and skilled peers in attracting attention and advertising themselves (Curran & Jenks, 2023). The p-

-promotion and self-branding of teachers who take advantage of algorithmic biases – such as following native-speaker norms – or use different advertising techniques raise concerns for language education. Learners may be exposed to unnecessary norms, and teachers may sense that in order to remain visible, they need to use techniques that may not be pedagogically acceptable.

These dynamics emerge within a digital ecosystem increasingly shaped by algorithmic and AI-driven mediation. Recent studies show that many media literacy frameworks have not adapted to these conditions (Van Wyk, 2025). Saliu (2024) argues that influential texts overlook key features of contemporary online life, from platform-level control to the growing communicative role of AI. Similar concerns arise in education. Sullivan et al. (2024) demonstrate that AI systems are not neutral tools; they are products of extractive data practices that can reinforce inequality and weaken pedagogical integrity. Together, these critiques highlight the need for stronger critical digital and AI literacy so that teachers and learners can better interrogate the ideologies embedded in social media spaces such as Instagram.

Critical Digital Literacy: Theory and application

The constant development of digital tools results in their application in education and language learning. Therefore, critical literacy for navigating these tools has become essential. CDL, as an evolving concept, stresses the development of digital content, and its evaluation in a reflective and critical way (Pandya et al., 2021). CDL goes beyond basic digital competence by assisting users to examine the structural aspects of technology and to analyze the potential commodification and exploitation existing in digital capitalism (Pötzsch, 2019). CDL is referred to as an individual's capacity to evaluate digitally developed content and to engage critically in digital spaces (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2018). Promoting CDL among learners raises their awareness of the existing ideologies in digital environments and how the representation of meaning in these environments can maintain or reproduce current power dynamics (Darvin, 2017).

Although there are many conceptualizations of CDL, its key dimensions include reflective practice, ethical awareness, evaluation of digital content, and critical thinking. Reflective practice and ethical awareness are defined by Mihailidis (2019). The former refers to an individual's ability to reflect on how they use digital tools and how this usage affects their understanding of the world. The latter is associated with ethical issues related to the application of digital tools, encompassing topics such as privacy, copyright, ideology, representation of meaning, and the digital divide. Leu et al. (2014) explain the other dimensions. Evaluation of digital content suggests an individual's ability to assess the reliability, validity, and quality of content that is developed in a digital space. Critical thinking is described as analyzing the content for misinformation, bias, and hidden agendas. Drawing from Hinrichsen and Coombs (2013), Mihailidis (2019), Pangrazio and Selwyn (2018), and Darvin (2017), this study operationalizes CDL through four key dimensions:

1. Authorship Awareness – the ability to question who produces content, under what authority, and with what intentions.
2. Ideological Critique – identifying values, norms, or commercial interests embedded in digital texts;
3. Reflective Practice – monitoring one's own engagement patterns and motivations in digital spaces;
4. Digital Agency – the ability to critically select, reject, or repurpose content as an empowered user.

These dimensions guide the coding, interpretation, and thematic construction in this study. CDL can be utilized to evaluate and investigate the perceptions of learners on the digital English learning content on Instagram. CDL enables learners to question why certain content and teachers, such as native speakers, are idealized, while non-native speakers are marginalized which aligns with the ideas of Ruecker and Ives (2015), who emphasize the reproduction of native-speakerism in digital spaces. Learners can also raise their awareness of algorithmic bias, ethics, and digital representations, as stressed by Pötzsch (2019). Through the lens of CDL, content on Instagram can be critically evaluated to examine the persona of the content developer, the ideology that underlies the content, and the structural framework that supports it. In this way, CDL generates a framework that encourages ,

critical, ethical, and reflective engagement with digital language learning environments. Prior research has explored the affordances of Instagram for language learning (e.g., Gonulal, 2019; Lee, 2023a). It has also acknowledged the benefits and challenges of informal digital spaces (e.g., Benson, 2011; Kukulska-Hulme, 2020) but few studies have critically examined how learners themselves evaluate, interpret, and reflect on such content through the lens of Critical Digital Literacy.

This study investigates how EFL learners evaluate and make sense of Instagram-based English learning content through the lens of CDL. Applying CDL as a conceptual framework, the study critically examines learners' awareness of authorship, values and norms, and their own agency when consuming pedagogical content on Instagram. This research is significant because it highlights the urgent need to equip learners with the tools to interrogate what they see, rather than merely consume it in a context where native-speakerism, performative aesthetics, and commercial motives often dominate language-related content. The findings contribute to the current literature on language education by showing that native-speakerism, performative aesthetics, and surface-level fluency do not suffice when it comes to informal learning on social media.

The current study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do learners perceive and respond to the visual, algorithmic, and performative features of Instagram that shape content visibility and appeal? (Ideological critique)
2. In what ways do learners evaluate content credibility and authorship on Instagram English-learning pages? (Authorship awareness)
3. How do learners reflect on their use of Instagram for language learning and demonstrate digital agency in navigating educational content? (Reflective practice & agency)

Method

Context and participants

This qualitative research involved 13 participants, all of whom were university students situated in Iran. The ages of the participants varied from 20 to 26 years, and they represented a range of academic fields, including English Literature, Translation Studies, Engineering, Psychology, Graphic Design, and Computer Science. All participants regarded themselves as English language learners with differing levels of experience, having studied English for durations between two to nine years. Their self-assessed English proficiency levels ranged from A2 to C1 according to the CEFR scale (See Table 1).

The sample size of 13 participants was selected based on the concept of thematic saturation in qualitative research (Guest et al., 2006). In this research, recurring themes started to appear after the 10th interview. The last three interviews confirmed thematic saturation. Since the emphasis was on depth rather than breadth, this sample size was adequate for gaining detailed insights into learners' engagement with language learning via Instagram through the framework of Critical Digital Literacy.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who (1) identified as English language learners, and (2) followed at least two Instagram accounts focused on English language learning. These requirements helped us ensure that the participants had consistent and personal engagement with informal language learning content on Instagram. This information was gathered prior to the interviews through informal chats and telephone conversations during the recruitment process. These initial interactions helped confirm participants' eligibility and willingness to reflect on their Instagram-based learning experiences. Moreover, all participants stated during the interviews that they used Instagram daily, often as part of their wider digital media usage. Although their engagement with the platform was not always explicitly for educational purposes, every participant noted that they commonly encountered, interacted with, or intentionally searched for English language content on Instagram. As a result, they were appropriate candidates to investigate how Iranian EFL learners actively or passively engage with English learning content in everyday digital environments.

Although the platform was officially banned for a period and subject to intermittent restrictions, it has continued to be accessed extensively through VPNs and alternative means. Instagram is considered one of the leading platforms for both socializing and informal education (Shahid Zadeh et al., 2024). Given the relative lack of oversight regarding educational material on Instagram, the Iranian digital environment offered a rich context for exploring the links between social media, language learning, and critical digital literacy.

This study adhered to ethical guidelines aligned with the Declaration of Helsinki (General Assembly of the World Medical Association, 2014) to ensure the rights and privacy of the participants. The participants were fully briefed on the purpose of the study, the use of their data, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Furthermore, informed consents were obtained before the process of data collection and to maintain confidentiality and anonymity, the participants' identities were replaced with pseudonyms. Finally, all the data were securely stored with restricted access.

Table 1. Participant overview table.

Participant ID	Age	Years of English Study	CEFR Level (Self-reported)	Instagram Use	Follows ≥ 2 English Learning Pages
P1	21	2	B1	Daily	Yes (5 pages)
P2	25	6	B1	Daily	Yes (4 pages)
P3	21	6	C1	Daily	Yes (2 pages)
P4	21	3	B1	Daily	Yes (6 pages)
P5	20	3	B1	Daily	Yes (2 pages)
P6	20	7	C1	Daily	Yes (4 pages)
P7	24	8	C1	Daily	Yes (3 pages)
P8	22	8	B2	Daily	Yes (2 pages)
P9	22	2	B2	Daily	Yes (3 pages)
P10	20	3	A2	Daily	Yes (5 pages)
P11	26	9	C1	Daily	Yes (4 pages)
P12	21	2	A2	Daily	Yes (2 pages)
P13	20	5	B2	Daily	Yes (3 pages)

Data collection

The study employed two sets of data collection tools, namely semi-structured interviews and digital diaries. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 participants, with each interview lasting between 20 and 35 minutes. The interviews were conducted individually and audio-recorded with the participants' permission to guarantee the accuracy and completeness of the data. They were conducted in Persian (the mother tongue of the participants) to make sure that the participants could express their thoughts and reflections with ease and clarity. This also helped us minimize potential misunderstandings related to language. This decision also allowed participants to reflect on their experiences more deeply and comfortably.

In addition to the interviews, the participants were asked to write a digital diary based on their English-learning experiences on Instagram over the past month. They were encouraged to describe specific posts that stood out to them, reflect on their learning behaviors, and share their thoughts critically. Each participant was also requested to provide one or two screenshots of the Instagram posts they engaged with, which served as contextual anchors for their reflections. These digital diaries and visual samples complemented the interview data and enriched the study through methodological triangulation.

After collecting the data, the audio recordings were fully transcribed. The transcripts were subsequently translated into English to facilitate thematic coding and analysis in the study's reporting language. To facilitate initial English translations of the Persian transcripts, the researchers used ChatGPT as a first-pass translation tool to improve efficiency. However, all outputs were meticulously reviewed, edited, and verified by the researchers and a professional bilingual translator. The translator conducted back-translations on key segments to ensure semantic equivalence. While AI tools provided linguistic scaffolding, final translation integrity was ensured by human oversight to maintain academic and ethical standards.

We developed the interview questions based on the theoretical framework of CDL to investigate participants' engagement with English-learning content on Instagram, their critical assessment of this content, and their views on content creators and the platform's influence. The complete interview questions are included in Appendix A.

The interview questions were designed to elicit insights across six key thematic areas grounded in CDL:

- Digital Language Learning Habits (e.g., frequency and purpose of Instagram use for learning)
- Engagement with Educational Content (e.g., preferences and interaction with posts)
- Evaluation of Content Accuracy and Credibility
- Authorship and Intentions Behind Content Creation
- Ideological and Representational Influences (e.g., appearance, accent, native-speakerism)
- Critical Reflection and Recommendations for learners and content creators

The themes were shaped by the four fundamental dimensions of CDL, which are highlighted in the literature: critical reflection, ethical awareness, creative agency, and evaluation of digital content (Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2013; Mihailidis, 2019). These frameworks acted as interpretive lenses during the thematic synthesis.

The researchers share linguistic and cultural backgrounds with the participants. As a result, reflexivity was essential throughout the study. Steps were taken to mitigate potential bias, including peer debriefing during coding, audit trailing of analytical decisions, and participant validation of interpretations.

Data analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). MAXQDA software was used to analyze the data collected from semi-structured interviews. This software helped us facilit-

-ate the coding process and organization of data.

To provide a theoretical foundation for the analysis, the process was further shaped by concepts of CDL, especially concerning learners' understanding of authorship, content reliability, ideology, representation, and digital engagement. Consequently, the study employed a hybrid coding strategy: codes were initially derived inductively from the participants' own expressions and experiences, then systematically organized deductively into conceptual categories consistent with the CDL framework.

All 13 transcripts were transcribed, translated, and read multiple times to ensure thorough familiarization. During the initial coding phase, significant phrases and ideas were emphasized, such as expressions of confidence in content creators, annoyance at misleading information, insights on visual design and fluency, and comments on motivation or its absence. These codes were maintained closely to the data at this stage to ensure the preservation of participants' voices.

In addition to interview data, content analysis was conducted on the participants' digital diaries and accompanying screenshots. These diaries provided reflective accounts of specific Instagram-based learning encounters, offering valuable triangulation to validate and deepen the themes that emerged from the interviews. Entries were treated as contextual reflections and coded using the same inductive-deductive procedure, enriching the analysis with further nuance and authenticity.

The second coding stage was informed by the CDL framework. Emergent codes from thematic and content analysis were clustered under four deductive categories: authorship awareness, ideological critique, reflective practice, and digital agency. This hybrid inductive-deductive approach ensured that the themes reflected both participants' lived experiences and key constructs from CDL theory. While the initial coding was conducted using MAXQDA to assist with data organization and code generation, the second (deductive) stage was carried out manually. At this stage, we reviewed and reorganized the codes by closely referencing the CDL framework to group them into conceptually meaningful categories. These categories functioned as a framework for identifying thematic trends across the dataset. Through ongoing comparison and constant reference to both the data and CDL theory, the coded segments were subsequently refined into a collection of key themes that reflected both the participants' shared experiences.

Findings

Thematic analysis of the interview and digital diary data revealed three overarching themes that illustrate how EFL students interact with English-learning material on Instagram. These themes investigate the mere behavioral observations to reveal learners' developing understanding of authorship, ideology, motivation, and platform influence, which are essential elements of CDL. This section outlines the findings in accordance with the CDL framework as defined by Cope and Kalantzis (2015), Janks (2009), and Buckingham (2008), while employing Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase thematic analysis approach to pinpoint and organize significant trends in the data (See Table 2).

Theme 1: Trust, credibility, and the problem of invisible authorship

This theme reflects the dimension of *authorship awareness* in CDL, as it explores how learners interpret credibility and expertise in online content. A key trend identified is the learners' inclination to trust content based on surface characteristics – such as fluency, confidence, accent, or visual attractiveness – rather than on transparent qualifications or teaching credentials. This theme corresponds to the authorship element of CDL, which highlights the necessity of questioning who generates knowledge, and under what authority (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015). In digital spaces where anyone can publish, learners must cultivate a critical perspective to evaluate not just the content but also its creator, the method of delivery, and the intended purpose.

The participants consistently relied on perceived expertise rather than verified teaching background. For instance, P1 stated, "If the post looks professional and the speaker sounds natural, I tend to trust it," while P2 added, "I don't know who they are, but if they speak well, I assume they're right." Such statements illustrate a reli-

Table 2 Summary of findings: Themes and participant insights.

Theme	Summary of Findings	Example Quote
Trust, Credibility, and the Problem of Invisible Authorship	Learners often judge Instagram content credibility based on accent, fluency, or appearance rather than pedagogical accuracy or qualifications.	"If the post looks professional and the speaker sounds natural, I tend to trust it." – P1
Platform Pressures and the Influence of Performative Content	Instagram's algorithm and visual aesthetics encourage repetitive, oversimplified, and influencer-driven content, often at the expense of pedagogical depth.	"Most pages feel like they're focused more on growing followers than on teaching." – P7
Passive Consumption and the Limits of Motivation	Despite high engagement with Instagram, learners seldom return to saved content or critically reflect on it. Motivation is momentary and not sustained.	"I save a lot of posts, but I almost never go back to review them." – P5

-ance on performative markers of credibility. This reliance is a trend that Buckingham (2008) critiques as characteristic of media-saturated environments where learners must learn to question not only the message but the messenger.

Although some of the participants developed skepticism after negative experiences, such as P4's dissatisfaction with a paid course, this reflection was typically reactive. Learners like P3 and P10 showed an emerging awareness of the difference between fluency and pedagogical expertise. P3 explained, "If they're just someone with good English skills and no teaching background, I'll be more critical." This indicates an intuitive but underdeveloped recognition that not all content creators are educators, and that instructional credibility is not guaranteed by language proficiency alone.

Moreover, eight of the participants reported learning to be more discerning over time, particularly when exposed to conflicting information. P5 noted, "I've seen a lot of grammar explanations that contradict each other. Sometimes I search them on Google or check a grammar book, but it takes time." This behavior aligns with the early stages of what Cope and Kalantzis (2015) describe as epistemic agency, which is the ability to navigate, verify, and evaluate sources rather than absorb content passively.

Participant 1 noted in their diary:

What struck me wasn't just the pronunciation but how confidently he claimed the 'correctness.' ... Maybe because the tone was confident, the visuals clean, and he sounded like a teacher. But isn't that part of the algorithmic trick too — polished delivery builds authority? I enjoyed it, but I'm also trying to look behind the content these days.

The learners tended to rely on fluency and appearance as markers of credibility. Their behaviors reflect on awareness of authorship, which is a critical component of CDL. Learners were often confused between performative formative fluency and pedagogical expertise to decide which content is reliable. This confusion points to a broader issue of how digital spaces distort the lines between authenticity and authority. The reliance

on performative aspects of learning content, such as accent or appearance, is in line with Buckingham's (2008) critique of media saturation. According to this critique, individuals are often unable to distinguish between content presentation and content quality.

Participant 2 wrote in a diary:

Thinking critically, I wonder how these influencers decide what content to make. Maybe the algorithm pushes 'travel English' because it looks nice visually? It's funny that I didn't search for this kind of post—it just came up. Maybe Instagram knows I'm planning a trip this summer. Creepy, but useful?

This theme underscores a limited development of authorship awareness. Although the participants occasionally questioned the source, this was not a consistent practice. To ensure that EFL learners can engage with digital content critically, there is a clear demand to embed source evaluation, credibility assessment, and questioning strategies into EFL pedagogy. Without such support, learners may continue to conflate fluency with authority, which may leave them vulnerable to misinformation or shallow pedagogy disguised as educational innovation.

Theme 2: Platform pressures and the influence of performative content

This theme illustrates *ideological critique*, which focuses on learners' perceptions of algorithmic bias, performative pressures, and commercial influences in content. This theme centers on the students' awareness of how Instagram's layout and commercial framework affect the nature of educational material. The participants exhibited a growing comprehension of the algorithmic and visual factors that favor brevity, entertainment, and virality over pedagogical depth. This aligns with Janks (2009), who highlights the ideological role of literacy – how power and representation are embedded in the production and circulation of digital content.

Most of the participants criticized the repetitive and oversimplified formats used in English-learning posts. P9 stated, "They post '5 ways to sound fluent' over and over, with no depth or context," while P7 noted, "Most pages feel like they're focused more on growing followers than on teaching". These statements point to an understanding of platform logic. This understanding is what Cope and Kalantzis (2015) refer to as the hidden curriculum of digital media that shapes user expectations. The participants also highlighted the role of appearance and performance in determining a creator's popularity. P12 commented, "A lot of creators are young, attractive, and confident. Sometimes they look more like influencers than teachers". The visual dominance of influencer-style educators illustrates what Buckingham (2008) refers to as the conflation of media spectacle and educational credibility.

Participant 6 stated in the digital diary:

It reminded me how much passive scrolling can become active learning if we choose the right pages to follow. I trust Cambridge more than other pages, maybe because I know it's an institution, not just a person. That gives me some kind of security, like 'this is correct English.' But at the same time, the post was very simplified. It made me realize that some pages use 'educational aesthetics', clean design, and minimal language, just to get likes.

Additionally, several participants expressed concern that the platform's emphasis on aesthetic appeal leads to a homogenization of content. This is where originality and depth are sacrificed for algorithmic visibility. P11 reflected, "They post the same idioms or expressions, just with different backgrounds and trendy music. It's like seeing the same lesson in ten different costumes." Such comments indicate a potential awareness of how content creation is often shaped more by metrics than by learning outcomes. Moreover, the ideological dominance of American English also emerged as a point of tension. While some learners were happy with the familiarity of American norms, others expressed discomfort with the lack of representation of other English varieties. P13 remarked, "You rarely see pages teaching British English or global varieties. It's always American TV accents." This supports Janks's (2009) assertion that literacy is inherently political. In other words, choices about language, accent, and representation are not neutral but ideologically loaded.

Participant 5 reflected in the digital diary that:

I think that's why Instagram feels more real sometimes. Teachers like her fill in the blanks left by formal education. But it also made me think — who decides what gets left out? Why are some phrases 'invisible' in mainstream English teaching?

Participant 9 commented:

"An Instagram page had a reel explaining how adding 'the' can change a sentence's meaning completely. For example: 'There's a fly on the picture' instead of 'There's a fly on a picture.' It honestly blew my mind. ... Instagram gives these mini-lessons that stick, often more than long textbook units."

This theme highlights that learners are not simply passive consumers of content. They are starting to become aware of the structural elements, such as commercialization, visual bias, and algorithmic selection, that influence what educational content becomes visible and valued. However, this recognition does not always lead to alternative engagement strategies. The results indicate a need to enhance learners' platform literacy. This literacy helps them to comprehend, maneuver through, and question the performative demands of Instagram. Teachers and course developers could integrate reflective conversations about media consumption, representation, and the commercial aspects of social media into language learning programs to foster this critical understanding.

Theme 3: Passive consumption and the limits of motivation

This theme pertains to *reflective practice* and *digital agency*, examining how learners engage with and act upon Instagram content in their language learning journeys. Although the participants acknowledge Instagram for its accessibility and appeal, they stated that their engagement with English-learning content was mostly habitual and non-reflective. The learners frequently used Instagram as a background tool, a tool which is convenient, stimulating, and omnipresent. However, they hardly ever saw English-learning content as a transformative tool. This theme is about the learner agency dimension of CDL, which emphasizes the importance of intentional, reflective, and strategic use of digital tools (Cope & Kalantzis, 2015; Luke, 2014).

The participants said that they saved posts with good intentions, but they rarely followed through. P5 admitted, "I save a lot of posts, but I almost never go back to review them," and P8 added, "I use the save feature a lot – although I admit I don't go back and review as much as I should." These confessions point to a pattern of low-engagement behaviors. Therefore, according to the data gathered from the interviews, language-learning content is mostly consumed passively rather than acted upon critically.

Participant 2 stated in the digital diary that "I saved the video and tried repeating the sentence a few times. What I liked most was how natural it felt, like someone talking to a friend, not teaching a lesson. It didn't feel like a textbook at all." Moreover, we discovered that short bursts of motivation were common among the participants, although they were often fleeting. P1 shared, "Sometimes I watch a reel and get super motivated for five minutes, and then it disappears," while P2 remarked, "They push me to act, but I don't always follow through." These comments reflect a tension between emotional engagement and sustained learning behaviors. Learners were aware of the gap between their momentary inspiration and their actual learning habits, but few of them had strategies in place to bridge that gap. Participant 5 also expressed in the digital diary that "I saved the reel and I actually repeated the sentences while fixing things in my apartment! It felt so relevant."

Despite these limitations, learners expressed appreciation for Instagram as a supplementary learning tool. P13 described it as "background input which is always around, but not central," while P6 mentioned, "It's a nice way to get exposed to idioms I wouldn't hear in class." This suggests that Instagram plays a peripheral but persistent role in shaping learners' exposure to informal and culturally embedded language-learning content. However, according to Buckingham (2008) and Lankshear and Knobel (2011), having access alone does not associate with learning. In other words, exposure to digital pedagogical content on Instagram may reinforce superficial understanding rather than deep acquisition without critical engagement. Furthermore, some learners acknowledged that the convenience of social media also leads to complacency. P10 reflected, "It feels like I'm lea-

-ring, but when I actually try to use the expressions, I forget them. Maybe I need something more structured.” This comment reflects the need for instructional design that connects social media interaction with structured and intentional learning activities.

In the realm of passive consumption, students stated that they save posts with positive intentions but seldom come back to them. This pattern reveals a deficiency in their ability to actively integrate what they find on Instagram into their language learning activities. While learners tend to experience brief moments of motivation, these feelings rarely lead to prolonged efforts. From a CDL standpoint, this underscores the necessity for learners to cultivate more strategic, self-directed learning habits that extend beyond simple content exposure and engage in the thoughtful use of digital tools (Leu et al., 2014). Implementing self-monitoring strategies like digital journaling or goal-setting exercises may assist learners in transforming passive content engagement into active learning practices.

This theme calls attention to the need for educational interventions that promote critical digital self-regulation. Language learners need to move from passive recipients of pedagogical content to active and strategic users. Without such support, learners risk remaining stuck in a cycle of inspiration without transformation. To bridge this gap between exposure and application, it is important to integrate micro-tasks, reflective journals, and self-monitoring checklists into mobile learning practices. To conclude, from the lens of CDL, it became clear that having access to digital language content on Instagram does not suffice. This means that language learners need explicit pedagogical support to be able to interrogate the following aspects of language content on Instagram:

- What is being presented?
- Who is presenting it?
- Why is it being disseminated?
- How does such content align with or distort broader educational goals?

Therefore, the themes underscore the urgent need to include digital engagement not only as a technical skillset but as a practice that develops critical and epistemic awareness. Although there were instances where the participants exhibited moments of critical reflection by questioning the value and validity of a post and the credibility of the creators, these insights were not sufficient to support transformative learning. To be more accurate, the participants were partially aware of issues, such as source credibility, platform bias, and their own motivational gaps, but they did not have the tools and skills to act upon these insights strategically. This highlights the importance of integrating CDL principles into EFL instruction. This integration is not considered an ancillary topic anymore; it must be a core component of digital-age language education. Language learners need to develop authorship awareness, platform critique, and content evaluation to succeed in a complex and algorithm-driven environment of Instagram.

Discussion

This study applied the framework of CDL to investigate how Iranian EFL students utilize Instagram as a casual digital space for language acquisition. The results revealed that while learners actively consume English content on Instagram, their engagement is primarily characterized by surface-level assessments, adherence to performative norms of the platform, and limited strategic involvement. These results correspond with and build upon existing research within four related spheres: informal digital language acquisition, Instagram as a learning tool, ideological impacts in online environments, and the broader theoretical context of CDL. Moreover, this study extends existing literature by not only describing learners’ behaviors but also analyzing them through a structured CDL framework, an approach rarely applied to social media-based English learning. Whereas prior work has highlighted learner enjoyment or motivational gains from platforms like Instagram, this study problematizes these platforms as ideologically embedded environments and reveals learners’ emerging but often underdeveloped critical capacities. In doing so, it bridges the gap between IDLE studies and critical pedagogical concerns in digital education.

The tendency observed in participants to save posts while seldom revisiting them, or to rely on visually appealing content without verifying its authenticity, mirrors patterns previously noted in the literature concerning Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) (Lee, 2019a; Benson, 2011). Despite the wide recognition of digital environments for fostering self-directed learning (Kukulska-Hulme, 2020), this study highlights a notable gap between learners' access to these resources and their critical engagement with them. The participants frequently demonstrated passive or routine interactions with educational materials. These behaviors confirm Cronin and Durham's (2024) concern that microlearning tools, despite their promise, may become superficial if not paired with reflective practices. Moreover, the findings of this study challenge the optimistic view of IDLE. Lai and Gu (2011) found that out-of-class exposure could improve pragmatic competence and vocabulary. However, our study revealed that this exposure was rarely translated into strategic and meaningful learning behavior. Rather, language learners often use pedagogical content impulsively and emotionally. This confirms Fauziah and Diana's (2023) warning that autonomy in digital environments needs scaffolding to be truly effective.

The second theme revealed the extent to which the participants were aware of Instagram's algorithmic and commercial structure. Having such awareness, they could recognize how Instagram prioritizes content that is visually engaging and performative. These insights validate and verify the critiques of Instagram that claim that Instagram is an ideologically loaded platform. This means that Instagram is a site where learning is shaped mostly by platform dynamics instead of pedagogical intent (Gao & Liu, 2023). The overrepresentation of American English, which is considered the dominance of confident and attractive influencers, and the repetitive structure of content align with what Ruecker and Ives (2015) describe as the digital reproduction of native-speakerism.

The fact that the participants were able to recognize these trends, though often intuitive rather than analytical, supports Halliday's (2006), Kubota's (2011), and Kamali's (2026) claims about the marginalization of non-native speaker identities in digital ELT materials. The current study adds new depth to these findings by showing how learners' perceptions might be influenced by algorithmic visibility and self-branding practices on a platform like Instagram. Several learners expressed that influencers tend to prioritize "looking the part" over actual teaching effectiveness. This point is supported by Curran and Jenks (2023), who argue that Instagram's commercial ecosystem encourages teachers to market themselves more than to educate. The mentioned points were particularly evident in the ways learners interpreted credibility through performativity, such as accent, camera quality, and charisma, rather than expertise or training. This echoes Mihailidis's (2019) concept of ethical awareness and representation in CDL and affirms the need for learners to be equipped to analyze who gets seen and why in digital environments.

Perhaps the most critical finding in this study was learners' limited attention to authorship and credibility. Many of the participants based their trust on the content due to its superficial indicators like fluency or production quality. This issue mirrors Pötzsch's (2019) concerns about how digital capitalism commodifies expertise. Only after their negative experiences (e.g., purchasing low-quality courses) did some of the participants begin questioning content quality and author background. This finding powerfully illustrates the underdevelopment of reflective and evaluative practices, which are key dimensions of CDL as conceptualized by Bacalja et al. (2021) and Leu et al. (2014).

While prior research has emphasized the pedagogical opportunities of Instagram (Lee, 2023b; Gonulal, 2019), our findings draw attention to its pedagogical vulnerabilities. Without CDL training, learners are unlikely to distinguish between charismatic presentation and qualified instruction. Rezaie and Chalak (2021) warned us about this issue. They stated that unchecked access to unregulated educational content is considered a major risk that has been confirmed through the current study. Nevertheless, it was interesting that a few participants did express growing skepticism and the beginnings of a critical digital habitus. These habits were mostly shaped by repeated exposure to unreliable content.

Not only does the contribution of this study lie in describing learner behavior, but it also attempts to contextualize it within the wider framework of CDL in EFL settings. This means that, although much of the existing CDL research has focused on school-age learners in general digital environments (Darvin, 2017; Mihailidis, 2019), our study applies these principles specifically to informal language learning on social media, w-

-here pedagogical oversight is minimal, and learner responsibility is paramount.

Ultimately, the findings from this research indicate that various aspects of CDL, including the assessment of authorship, understanding of digital ideology, and self-reflective regulation, are inconsistently exhibited among language learners using Instagram. However, these aspects often appear in disjointed or instinctive manners. As a result, there is ample opportunity to create pedagogically sound interventions that assist learners in comprehending Instagram not just as a source of content, but also as a platform deeply intertwined with social and ideological contexts.

Conclusion and implications

Interpreted through the framework of CDL, this study investigated how EFL learners engage with English-language content on Instagram. Three major themes were revealed through thematic analysis of the interviews with 13 university students: superficial trust and lack of authorship awareness, the influence of Instagram's algorithmic and performative culture on educational content, and the passive nature of learner interaction with this content. Instagram has been valued for its accessibility and exposure to informal language input. However, learners often lacked the necessary critical awareness to evaluate content credibility, ideological bias, and pedagogical value. Through linking these findings to existing literature, this study emphasizes the urgent need to promote critical digital awareness in informal learning spaces.

One limitation of this study is its relatively small and localized sample. Our sample includes 13 university students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other sociocultural contexts. Additionally, since we employed in-depth qualitative methods, the study relied on self-reported perceptions instead of observational or performance-based measures of learner behavior. Future research could expand to include comparative studies across countries. Additionally, it could integrate quantitative approaches or investigate the perspectives of content creators to offer a more holistic understanding of digital language learning ecosystems. Finally, the CDL behaviors observed in this study may have been influenced by participants' English proficiency levels, as learners with lower CEFR profiles may rely more heavily on perceived "experts" on social media and engage less critically with digital content.

The findings carry important implications for learners, teachers, and curriculum designers. Engagement of language learners with digital content requires structured opportunities to develop CDL skills because learners need to be able to question authorship, evaluate accuracy, and recognize ideological influences on social media. Teachers and teacher trainers should integrate critical digital literacy practices into formal curricula to bridge the gap between informal and academic learning. Moreover, content creators and platforms should consider adopting ethical guidelines to improve the pedagogical integrity and transparency of online educational content. Furthermore, policy makers also play a key role. They should consider national or institutional frameworks that recognize CDL as a core 21st-century literacy and provide schools with resources and teacher training opportunities. Policies that promote safe and ethical digital participation can help standardize expectations across educational systems. Finally, parents, who are increasingly involved in learners' digital lives, need awareness of CDL principles as well. Supporting parents through workshops, informational materials, or school-community initiatives can help them guide young people toward more responsible and reflective online behavior.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT3.5 in order to edit some parts for clarity and accuracy. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Section A: Digital Habits and Language Learning Background

1. Can you tell me a little about your English learning journey?
2. How often do you use Instagram, and what do you usually use it for?
3. Do you follow any Instagram pages for English learning? Which ones?

Section B: Engagement with Instagram Learning Content

4. What kind of posts do you usually engage with? (e.g., grammar tips, vocabulary lists, pronunciation videos, memes, reels)
5. Can you describe a post that you found especially helpful or memorable? Why did it stand out to you?
6. How do you usually interact with this kind of content? Do you save, like, comment, or share posts? Why or why not?

Section C: Evaluation and Content Validity

7. Do you usually check if the information in a post is accurate or reliable? Why or why not?
8. How do you decide whether a post is correct or worth using in your own learning?
9. Have you ever seen a post that you thought was wrong, misleading, or confusing? Can you give an example?
10. Do you follow any pages run by teachers or professionals? How does that affect your trust in the content?

Section D: Awareness of Authorship and Purpose

11. Do you ever think about who creates this content and why they are doing it?
12. Do you feel that some pages are trying to sell something, promote themselves, or get followers more than teach?
13. How important is it to know who the author is when you're learning something from a post?

Section E: Ideology, Representation, and Power

14. How is English usually presented in these posts? For example, do they focus on one kind of English (e.g., American, British)?
15. Do you notice anything about the accents, appearance, or backgrounds of the people featured in these posts?
16. Do these pages ever make you feel more or less confident about your own English?

Section F: Critical Reflections and Suggestions

17. How do these Instagram pages influence your motivation or learning habits?
18. Do you think English-learning content on Instagram should be more critically reviewed or designed? Why?
19. What advice would you give to learners using Instagram to study English?
20. What would you say to content creators who want to teach English on Instagram?

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