



CALL RESEARCH BRIEF

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Title: Summary of Using Visual Social Media in Language Learning to Investigate the Role of Social Presence

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Rationale/Overview of the study

This study investigates the pedagogical value of visual social media platforms, specifically Instagram, for the development of the online social presence of language classes. Social presence helps to build social and emotional connections and, as such, is vital to the development of classroom community. In this study, we looked how Instagram can be used to facilitate language practice outside of the classroom while promoting community. Students in intermediate university-level French and Italian classes used Instagram for a six-week period to reply to a series of questions prompted by the instructor as a way to engage in interaction with their own classmates. The results of the study will help language instructors to design activities that strengthen the development of students' online social presence within face-to-face classes.

Research methods

Participants include 39 students enrolled in intermediate French and Italian classes at two different large research universities in the United States (Fall 2017).

Data collection tools and analysis. Through a mixed-methods approach, we performed a content analysis of the captions and comments of the Instagram posts coding for social presence (see Rourke et al., 2001). We also conducted a qualitative visual analysis (Rose, 2001) of a set of representative posts to observe whether their visual elements complemented or contradicted in terms of social presence the meaning of the textual elements. Finally, we analyzed pre-activity questionnaires to capture students' demographic data and prior experience with Instagram.

Results – In non-technical terms, what does the study show/suggest? How sure can we be?

- Posts revealed high levels of self-disclosure, which may be due to the nature of Instagram as it encourages the sharing of details of life outside of class. Not surprisingly, comments presented more instances of social interaction than captions and encouraged affective and cohesive responses.
- The visual and textual elements of a post complemented each other in terms of social presence. Images and captions presented either very similar meanings (i.e., a picture portrays a number of novels on a bookshelf and the caption suggests that the user enjoys reading novels in her free time), complementary meanings (i.e., a funny facial expression adds humor to a caption that talks about exam stress), or contradictory meanings (i.e., a colorful bird stock image with a caption that expresses dislike for birds).

- Data from our study suggest that students did build social presence and their interaction can lead to the development of a Community of Inquiry. Students enrolled in French and Italian classes performed in similar ways, which may be a result of the tool rather than the language and context.
- The posts that included a mobile-phone photo and presented curious but relatable information fostered more interaction in terms of likes and comments and, thus, helped to promote the establishment of social presence.

Practical Implications – *What are the implications for learning and teaching? What pedagogical suggestions are there that apply the results?*

- Social media technologies provide outlets for sharing personal information, for expressing personal opinions and feelings, and for documenting details of daily life. These tools can change the way information is shared within the language classroom: Classroom discussion with opportunities to practice language usage outside of the class meetings allows students opportunities to disclose information and to build community.
- Visual social media can change the way students share information within the language classroom, giving them the opportunity to produce multimodal texts.
- Language tasks that promote social connections beyond regular classroom meetings can change students' perceptions and motivation for a course and can positively influence the experience for the language community.

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