

## Chapter 4

# Instagram as a Tool for Professional Learning: English Language Teachers' Perceptions and Beliefs

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of the current research is to investigate the potential of a social media tool, known as Instagram, for teacher professional learning. The chapter describes a three-year research project, which used Instagram, to investigate the perceptions and beliefs of 1,500 practicing English language teachers relative to their professional development experiences on Instagram. Six research questions (RQs) framed the study and determined how we viewed and analyzed the data. Qualitative data from six types of activity feeds were analyzed through the processes of open and axial coding. The results indicated that teachers' perceptions and beliefs about Instagram as a tool for professional learning were positive. The professional learning provided teachers with extensive opportunities to work with multimodal texts, create networks and connections with other teachers, and develop their reflective skills.*

### INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, we have witnessed numerous and dramatic advances in digital technologies. Only a few decades ago, the World Wide Web (hereafter, the Web) was a medium that was used to present read-only text and static factual information and resources, which were predominantly produced by experts. As such, these resources could be viewed by users but could not be changed or added to. Because of steady advances in digital technologies, more software tools, and more powerful computers and mobile

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devices, the Web has now evolved to include social media websites where individuals can interact with one another, create their own materials, and produce digital content in real time through the use of one of the web browsers. This conceptualization of the Web as a platform for collaborative interaction has been called Web 2.0 and has resulted in the proliferation of social media tools and platforms for facilitating discussion and sharing content through the use of text, audio, video, and images for use on computers and mobile devices. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and LinkedIn, are ubiquitous and have become part of the fabric of daily life for billions of people worldwide. According to the Pew Center (Perrin & Anderson, 2019), 3.1 billion people (42% of the World's population) are social media users.

At the same time, English has become a world language with an estimated 1.75 billion speakers (British Council, 2020), and it is being used increasingly for commerce, science, and technology. With the growth of English has come the demand for more qualified English language teachers. As a result, more English language teachers are seeking online courses that lead to a qualification, such as teaching certificates, endorsements, or degrees and professional learning activities online (Murray, 2013; Murray & Christison, 2017, 2018). Because of the flexibility that online learning affords, the number of opportunities for English language teacher professional development also continues to swell.

In addition, social media has now found its way into educational contexts in both K-12 schools and institutions of higher education and has been used for a number of purposes; for example, to create, share, and receive user-generated content online (Vivakaran & Neelamalar, 2018); to affect student engagement (Abney, Cook, Fox, & Stevens, 2018); to improve writing (Soviyah & Etikaningshik, 2018); to promote peer interaction (Manson & Rahim, 2017); and to increase motivation (Purnama, 2018). In addition, Facebook is now used by teachers to form communities of inquiry (COI) (Arnold & Ducate, 2006), and Google Docs is used by students to connect and complete written projects together online.

The purpose of the current research is to investigate the potential of the mobile assisted, social media tool known as Instagram for teacher professional learning. The chapter describes a three-year research project which investigated the perceptions and beliefs of practicing English language teachers relative to their professional learning experiences on Instagram. Five research questions (RQs) framed the research project and determined how data were viewed and analyzed. The RQs are as follows:

1. Why do English language teachers choose Instagram for professional learning?
2. What do English language teachers hope to gain from their professional learning experiences?
3. What types of activities on Instagram interested teachers the most?
4. What topics interested teachers the most?
5. What are teachers' beliefs about how their professional development and learning experiences on Instagram might ultimately affect their teaching?

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Like learning in face-to-face (f2f) classrooms, online learning must also be grounded in theory. Two of the most influential theories for online learning to date are Siemens connectivism (2005) and Downes (2006) distributed learning. *Connectivism* is a theory of learning that explains how internet technologies create opportunities for users to share and learn across the Web. It also provides a theoretical framework

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