

# Using Instagram Photo Caption to Encourage Students to Write in English: Benefits and Obstacles

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**Keywords:** Instagram, photo caption, writing.

**Abstract:** Social media has been part of students' life nowadays as the tool of communication. However, its use as learning media, especially to improve their English writing skills, has not been optimized yet. This study is aimed to analyze (1) the use of photo caption in Instagram as an effort to encourage student to write in English (2) the benefits of using photo caption in Instagram to encourage students to write in English (3) students' obstacles of writing Instagram photo caption in English. This study involves an English lecturer and 52 students in English Education Study Program in a university in Cianjur. A case study design was employed and the data were obtained from observation of four weeks learning process by integrating Instagram, questionnaire, and students' interview. The data then were analyzed qualitatively. The findings reveal that the use of photo caption in Instagram has benefited students in at least three aspects. In terms of writing stimulus, the presence of followers or audiences has motivated students to write effective, interesting, and memorable English caption. In addition, the presence of photo has aided the students in constructing their ideas in writing. Furthermore, by reading and learning from their friend's caption, the students admit that it can enrich their vocabularies and diction as well as other language features. However, the students face several obstacles in writing caption in English such as limited space of caption especially for high-achiever students, lack of vocabulary and grammatical constraint.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Many students admit that writing is much more difficult than speaking. It is not only because they do not yet have a good writing habit (Maolida & Nuraini, 2014) which likely results in poor writing fluency, but also because they face several problems of writing mechanics such as vocabulary and grammatical constraint (Maolida, 2015). Regarding this problem, teachers make various efforts to encourage students to write more, one of the efforts is through utilizing social media.

Nowadays, when social media has been an integral part of students' daily interaction and communication, there is a need for teachers to adjust to the ways students learn. In this case, Blair & Serafini (2014) state that today's students tend to demand more activities that are engaging so "as educators, embracing technology and using social media networks to leverage engagement these applications can improve the delivery of content and retention" (p.4). This is expected to be an effective tool to facilitate today's students, digital natives, to learn better. It is also hoped that by integrating technologies

in the learning process, students can be more active and more engaged (Sarkar et al., 2017).

Instagram is one of social media that is familiar and widely used among university students in our context. That was one of the reasons the lecturer utilized Instagram for students in learning process. Instagram is described as "a photo-sharing mobile application that allows users to take pictures, apply filters to them, and share them on the platform itself. Instagram has over 400 million active monthly users who shared over 40 billion pictures" (Alhabash and Ma, 2017 in Anggraeni, 2017, p.68). With its one of main features of photo sharing, Instagram can be used to support the learning process of second and foreign language writing by optimizing the image in the form of photo. In this case, Whiddon (2016) writes that role of image is supportive for L2 writing learning and her research shows that students have positive perception toward the effect of image on their comprehension of their friends' composition, also their friends' comprehension of their own composition.

In Indonesia context, Instagram has been used by teachers in various education levels, especially in

teaching writing. Listiani (2016) compared the effectiveness of learning writing through Instagram with learning writing by using teacher centered approach among low and high motivated students. In her case, the students learnt writing recount text in junior high school level. The results show that Instagram use was able to improve students with high as well as low motivation that led to their writing quality. In higher levels, Handayani (2017) conducted a research focusing on the university students' attitude toward Instagram in writing class. Her findings revealed that the students gave positive responses toward Instagram utilization. She stated that Instagram can guide students to write effectively and it facilitates students and teachers to communicate in and outside the classroom. Furthermore, she asserts that Instagram enables students to create writing ideas that are contextual and relevant as well as let students have an enjoyable learning experience. In line with this, Anggraeni (2017) confirms the benefits of Instagram use for learning writing as well as students' positive responses toward its implementation. However, she asserts, the use of Instagram also had its weaknesses such as technical problems that relate to wifi connection and other barriers.

Regarding the studies on Instagram use in learning process, Anggraeni (2017) suggests that there is a need of another investigation that is conducted in different context to deepen and add information regarding students' perspectives on Instagram use. In that case, this study focuses on the use of Instagram to encourage students to write in English and their responses toward the use of Instagram photo caption. It also reveals the challenges faced by the students in its implementation.

## 2 METHODS

This is a case study focusing on the use of Instagram Photo caption to encourage students to write in English. It involves two English classes consisted of 52 students and a lecturer. The data were mainly obtained from observation of 4 weeks learning process by integrating Instagram,. The observation

also included observing the students' postings in Instagram. In another words, students' captions in Instagram that related to the topics given as the task in the class were observed and some of them were documented.

Besides, questionnaires were distributed to dig students' responses regarding the benefits that they got from the use of Instagram caption to support their writing process as well as the obstacles in its process. Furthermore, some students from both classes were interviewed to confirm the answers collected from questionnaires and add some information needed for this study. The data then were analyzed qualitatively by integrating and triangulating the results from observation, questionnaires and students' interview.

## 3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 3.1 The use of photo caption in Instagram as an effort to encourage student to write in English

The task of writing English captions in Instagram to publish students' writing on specific topics was started with the introduction of Instagram as a learning media in the classroom and the explanation of the topic, brainstorming, outlining and discussion about several aspects that need to be included in their writing.

In this case, the students were asked to utilize their Instagram to publish their work with the hope that this technology integration motivate students to be more active and more engaged (Sarkar et.al, 2017) in communicating their ideas through writing. Since some students had not had an Instagram account, a brief explanation was given on the steps of signing up for an account, also steps and suggestions to optimize the caption to publish students' work including the explanation and the function of some features such as hashtags, tags, and other important features in creating a successful caption.

As a result, all students have Instagram account and publish their work by posting photo and its caption in Instagram.

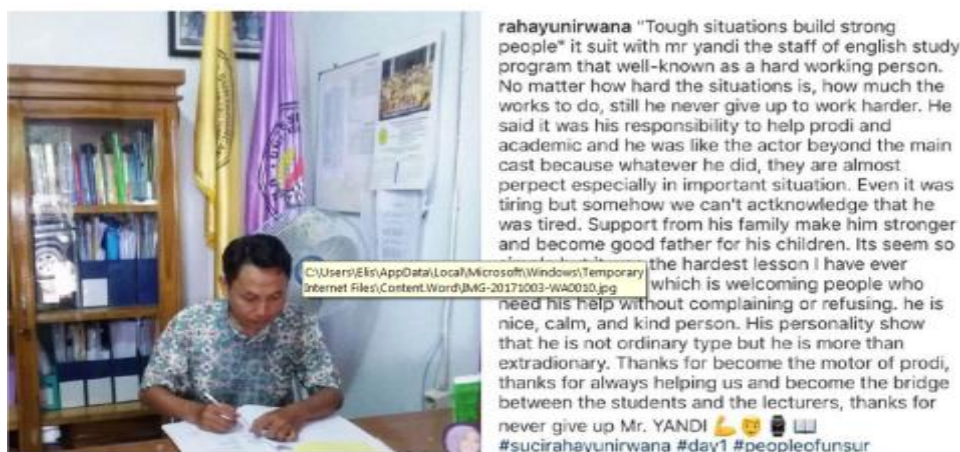


Figure 1: Example of Student's Photo Caption on Inspiring Person.

The figure shows an example of a student's photo caption. The captions tells the readers about her inspiring person, an administration officer in English Education department, whose work helps all students and lecturers. In her opinion, the officer is someone who works really hard to make everything works, especially in English department. She also mentions some of the officer's personal qualities that makes him deserve to be the inspiring person.

The other students post about many different figures as their inspiring person, start from those who choose their friends to be their inspiring person, their lecturers, family and other figures. When the students

publish their writing through photo caption, they tag their lecturer and their classmates so the writer can get comments, responses as well as feedback.

Different with previous study that focused on writing recount text (Listiani, 2016), through the caption, the students in this study do not only describe the picture but also support their description with strong arguments. With various personalized topics such as inspiring person, the best place to eat in Cianjur, the best movie I have ever watched, and some local issues, the students are expected to be able to write argumentative text which is supported with a good description.

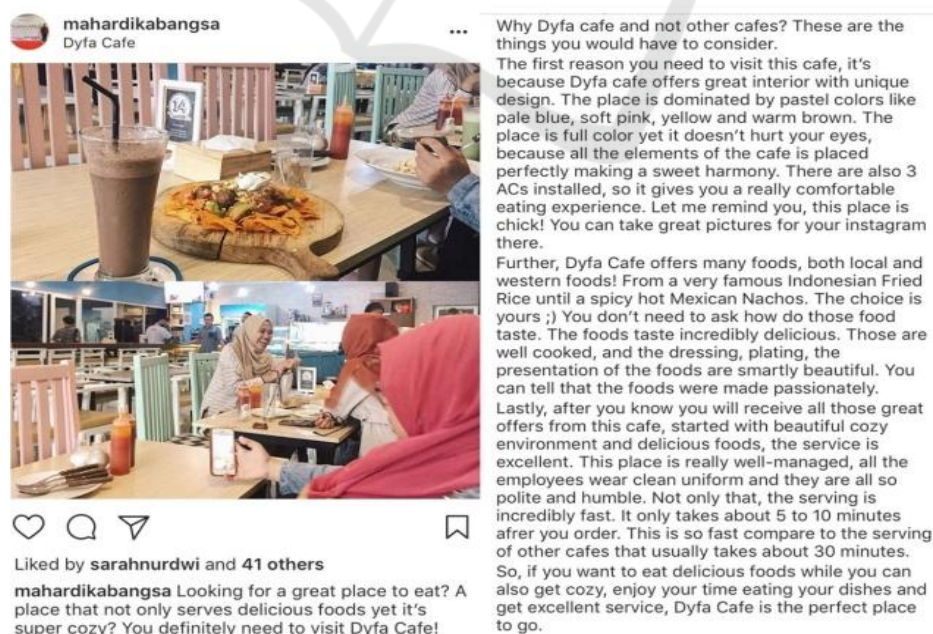


Figure 2: Example of Student's Photo Caption on The Best Place to Eat in Cianjur.

Figure 2 shows a student's photo caption about the best place to eat in Cianjur. The student describes the

place and writes his reasons and arguments of why the place deserves to visit and why this place should be considered as the best spot for food.



Figure 3: Example of Student's Photo Caption on Three Reasons Why You Should Watch the Movie.

The picture illustrates how a student posts a picture of her favorite movie 'Habibie and Ainun', creates a caption that describes what the movie is about and the rationales why this movie is worthwhile to watch.

### 3.2 The benefits of using photo caption in Instagram to encourage students to write in English

The results of observation, questionnaires and students' interview reveal that the students obtain several benefits of using Instagram photo caption in encouraging and optimizing their efforts to write in English. First benefit relates to its strength of the presence of more audience to stimulate and motivate students to give their optimal effort to write an efficient and interesting English caption with the provided character space. One of the students states:

*When I want to update a picture on IG I have to think what the caption that reflect the picture and I want to make it so memorable. So the caption is needed and in the end I end up think how to write good and my followers enjoy my pictures with good caption. And it helps me in writing skill #Student 2#.*

Similar with the statement, many students admit that since their caption will be read by audience/readers that they tag, including their lecturer as well as their followers who may also read the caption, they feel that they need to write better

posting than they usually do. Comparing to only submitting their writing to the lecturer, publishing their work through instagram has more strength in pushing the students to have more preparation before they publish their writing. The role of wider audience than they usually find in the class give the students more force to write better English writing.

Besides, the presence of photo/picture in instagram helps students in constructing their writing ideas as described by the following statement:

*I learn to make a good caption using English language and I try to create a suitable caption for every picture I upload in my IG #Student 10#*

In this case, many studies have unveiled that picture often helps students to create writing concept as well as develop it (e.g., Whiddon, 2016). This benefit is also admitted by the students that the picture that they post along with the caption helps them to avoid the writer's block because what they write represent the picture. By looking at the person's picture that they write about, it helps the students to imagine and remember the details about the person including their personal qualities that most students describe in their caption. Furthermore, some students also feel more confident since their writing is complemented by a picture so they feel the picture can help them convey the message that they write in the caption to the readers.

Furthermore, the students disclose that the task of publishing their work through instagram caption to

certain extent, helps them enrich their vocabulary, diction and other language features due to the opportunity to read other classmates' captions, as revealed by the following statement:

*I read my friends caption from their Instagram account and it makes me get some vocabularies #Student 9#*

In this case, the curiosity to read others' captions because they are tagged or not, has led the students to compare what they have written with their friends' writing and this, helps students get new vocabularies, diction, idioms, and other language expressions from their friends' posting.

Those three benefits of utilizing Instagram as a learning media in writing class confirm the findings from previous studies (Anggraeni, 2017; Listiani, 2016; Handayani, 2017). The combination of more audience and opportunity to read and learn from their friends' captions, for example, have motivated students to learn many aspects such as diction and grammar, also write better captions and it can lead to what Listiani (2016) mentions as improvement of their writing quality. Besides, the role of picture has helped students to construct their writing ideas and concept so the students can write content that is

termed by Handayani (2017) as contextual and relevant.

### 3.3 Students' obstacles of writing Instagram photo caption in English

In the process of writing and publishing the result through photo caption in Instagram, the students faced some obstacles. The first obstacle is due to the limited characters provided by Instagram. This obstacle is revealed by some students, especially those who are high achievers.

*Another problem is about the limited space to write, so when I got my mood to write more but the words space limited. In my previous assignment, I was trying to decrease or deleted some words or even sentences because of it. #Student 11#*

Some students state that it is challenging to describe a picture in Instagram caption since Instagram limits the characters that they can type. They have more ideas and words to express but some of them should be omitted for space reason. For few students who do not want to limit their ideas, they even post the caption twice with the second caption continues the ideas they write on the first caption.



Figure 4: A Student Posts Two Captions to Describe a Picture due to Limited Space.

The figure shows how a student writes two continuous captions to support the posted picture, voicing his arguments about a growing number of factories in his city that lead to several negative effects for society. The student finally decides to posts two captions since he needs more space to express his ideas in describing the picture and his arguments.

Another obstacle relates to their writing skills in general such as limited diction and grammatical constraint.

*Choosing the diction, also when I compose a caption in English I feel my grammatical should be correct and it is a burden for me #Student 3#.*

In this case, some students admit that they have ideas in their mind yet they do not know how to express those by using appropriate and proper vocabularies. Moreover, their grammar constraint adds the problem, many students admit that they are not good at grammar so they often feel unsure whether the grammar they use in their writing is correct or not. Those vocabulary and grammatical problems also become obstacles in other EFL writing classes (Maolida & Nuraini, 2014; Maolida, 2015). Sometimes, the diction and grammatical barriers decrease students' writing confidence. Those problems are admitted to influence their writing mood and bad writing mood worsens their writing creativity.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

This study focuses on instagram photo caption use to encourage students to write in English including its benefits for students and the obstacles faced by the students. The results show that the students got several advantages from the implementation. First, it stimulates and motivates students to write an English caption that is efficient and attention grabbing since there are audiences and followers who are assumed will read the caption. Besides, the use of photo in instagram together with caption helps students create and develop their writing ideas. Additionally, instagram photo caption is admitted to help them in enriching their vocabularies and diction since they can read their friends' captions so they can learn from each other. In spite of this, students admit that there are obstacles as well as weaknesses of writing caption in English in Instagram such as limited characters provided in making caption, students' limitation of

vocabulary and diction, insufficient grammar which sometimes influence their mood of writing.

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