

Voices to Be Heard: Using Social Media for Digital Storytelling to Foster Language Learners' Engagement

** * * On the Internet * * **

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Abstract

Many English language learners (ELLs) struggle to actively participate and claim their own voice in the classroom, which hinders their success in American educational settings (Núñez et al., 2016). This article draws on the second language (L2) motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014) and Dörnyei's Model of Student Engagement (2018b) as a supporting framework to suggest ways to incorporate Instagram as a multimodal digital storytelling tool in order to foster the engagement of college-level ELLs. In conjunction with a pedagogically-focused project design and implementation, Instagram could potentially be an effective tool for reflection on deeper learning for language learners. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate ways to incorporate Instagram as a multimodal digital storytelling tool to (1) foster college-level ELLs' motivation and engagement in language learning; (2) enhance ELLs' oral and writing proficiencies; and (3) help ELLs' stories and voices to be heard.

Key Words: digital storytelling, engagement, English as a second language, English language learners, Instagram, multimodality, motivation, social media

Introduction

The population of English language learners (ELLs) continues to increase in the United States. It has been projected that by 2030, 40% of students in the United States will be ELLs (U.S. Department of Education & National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2003). However, many ELLs struggle to actively participate and claim their own voice in the classroom, which hinders their success in American educational settings (Núñez, Rios-Aguilar, Kanno, & Flores, 2016). Often, their stories are not being told and their voices are not being heard. Important factors that prevent ELLs from participation are lack of opportunities and task implementations

offered in the classroom that do not motivate them to actively engage in conversations and group projects (Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei, 2018a).

Christenson, Reschly, and Wylie define student engagement as “effortful learning through interaction with the teacher and the classroom learning opportunities” (2012, p. vi). Sinatra, Heddy & Lombardi identify engagement as “the holy grail of learning” (2015, p. 1). This is why studies often report that students are not able to achieve their learning objectives due to negative attitudes and emotions such as feeling distant, bored, distracted, and disengaged in their learning (Pekrun, Goetz, Daniels, Stupnisky, & Perry, 2010; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider & Shernoff, 2003). This problem is not limited to ELLs; Gallup (2015) conducted a survey study of 900,000 public school students and the findings reveal that merely 50% of the students are engaged in their classroom activities while 29% of the students are not engaged and 21% are actively disengaged. The gap of disengagement and student learning has become a crucial issue for educators and school administrators.

Digital storytelling is an approach that could enhance the motivation of ELLs and foster engagement in not only academic activities but also social environments outside of the classroom (Chan, Churchill, & Chiu, 2017; Hur & Suh, 2012; Robin, 2008; Sadik, 2008). This approach allows ELLs to become creative storytellers and active participants in their learning, developing learner autonomy by taking charge in selecting topics that interest them, conducting research on the topic, writing a narrative, and claiming their own voice in their stories (Robin, 2008). In addition to enhancing ELLs’ motivation and engagement in learning, digital storytelling can add meaning to ELLs’ writing and help struggling writers improve their understanding of storylines, narrations, and spelling (Dreon, Kerper, & Landis, 2011). Students also develop their writing skills by negotiating meaning with their partners and enrich their experiences by communicating and collaborating with their peers (Morgan, 2014). For anxious speakers, digital images and graphics allow them to express themselves easily, especially with regard to the emotional aspects of a story. However, limited research has investigated to what extent digital storytelling fosters the engagement of ELLs in higher educational settings and how this approach can support their oral and writing proficiency.

The present article aims to develop a multimodal model of digital storytelling through the use of social media, particularly Instagram. The participants were international students from an arts and media college pursuing careers in creative industries. This multimodal project encourages the ELLs as young artists to acquire skills for telling their stories and promoting their work by branching out to online contexts outside of their everyday classrooms. In conjunction with a pedagogically-focused project design and implementation, Instagram could potentially be an effective tool for reflection on deeper learning for language learners.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to present art students using Instagram as a model for how to integrate popular social media practices in fields relevant to students’ future careers into the English as a second language (ESL) curriculum. This model demonstrates ways to incorporate Instagram as a multimodal digital storytelling tool to (1) foster the college-level ELLs’ motivation and engagement in language learning; (2) enhance the ELLs’ oral and writing proficiencies; and (3) help the ELLs’ stories and voices to be heard. This model could potentially be integrated into disciplines other than creative industries.

Theoretical Frameworks

L2 Motivational Self System

As we have seen, the gap of disengagement and student learning has become a crucial issue for educators and school administrators. This article draws on the framework of the second language (L2) motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2009) to explore ways social media enhances ELLs' motivation and engagement in their language learning. This framework has been supported in the past decade by empirical evidence suggesting that future self-guides and the ideal L2 self predominantly serve as important factors for motivating language learners in a myriad of learning contexts, regardless of their ages and educational levels (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

According to Dörnyei (2018a), the L2 motivational self system consists of three elements:

1. the ideal L2 self — meaning the ideal self-image that the language learners picture themselves to be in the future;
2. the ought-to L2 self — meaning the traits and characteristics that language learners perceive they need to obtain to meet the expectation or to prevent negative outcomes during their language learning;
3. the L2 learning experience — emphasizing learners' present experiences in their immediate learning environment, namely, the teacher influence, the curriculum design, the peer interaction, and the successful experience.

This framework strengthens the concept of future self-guides indicating “vision of what might be” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 59). Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014, p. 2) further claim that “vision is one of the single most important factors within the domain of language learning: where there is a vision, there is a way.”

Based on this concept of future self-guides, Dörnyei (2014) proposes motivational strategies which focus on language learners' future vision. In many circumstances, the desire to learn a target language or develop identity in a foreign context professionally that have been motivated by future self-images fails because they are not able to be transformed into action.

Thus, a six-phase visionary training approach is proposed by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) which aims to enhance future self-guides to motivate action. The multimodal digital storytelling project described here applies the motivational strategies and follows the six steps elaborated below.

The first step is to assist language learners to develop deserved future selves. Learners construct visions of who they could become as artists in the target language creative industry and of what skills and knowledge they can add to their lives in their professional careers.

The second step is to strengthen each learners' vision by helping them to see their desired L2 self more clearly and lead to action. Learners start to practice ways to use hashtags to build networks with other artists on Instagram and learn ways to present their artwork in the digital wilds.

The third step is to sustain the vision which means learners should aim for their ideal L2 self-images in realistic expectations. As young artists in a foreign country trying to work their way into the professional creative industry, they need to understand the traits and trends of their fields and reach out to other artists to understand what other artists have been working on in their fields. In their digital storytelling projects, students are required to build networks with other artists through Instagram, and also interview other artists in the same field.

The fourth step is transforming the vision into action. To achieve this goal, viewing others' artwork and sharing their current artworks allow them to reflect on the gap between their current stage and their ideal self-image. Many of them talked in their final storytelling presentations about how they had started to reflect on their blueprint of concrete pathways that would lead to their goals to be successful as artists in the target language community.

The fifth step is to keep the vision alive which means that learners should achieve the vision frequently, so that they have a sense of accomplishment which will lead to a greater experience of success. The artworks learners shared on Instagram received many praises and compliments. Being "liked" or commented on by other artists or peers encourages them to share more and enhances their confidence in their work.

The last step is counterbalancing the vision, meaning that a desired future self is always counterbalanced by a "feared self". This feared self usually indicates a possibility of failure. The majority of the audience in this project was their peers but their posts were also available for the general public, particularly artists in their own creative fields. Therefore, learners were concerned during the project that their work would be criticized or disapproved by their peers. They might see this as a failure. How instructors help their learners to use this vision as a strength to help them achieve the true desired future self is crucial.

Model of Student Engagement

The L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2009) and a six-phase visionary training approach (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014) support Dörnyei's forthcoming work on a model of student engagement to explore ways social media enhances ELLs' motivation and engagement in their language learning. Here, Dörnyei outlines the relationship between antecedents and ecologies of learner engagement (see Figure 1). This model adds value to the L2 motivational self system theory and further elaborates the extent to which active student engagement in a wider context works within multiple learning environments, such as the relationships between the six antecedents and four ecologies.

Proposed Model of Student Engagement

(Mercer & Dörnyei, in preparation)

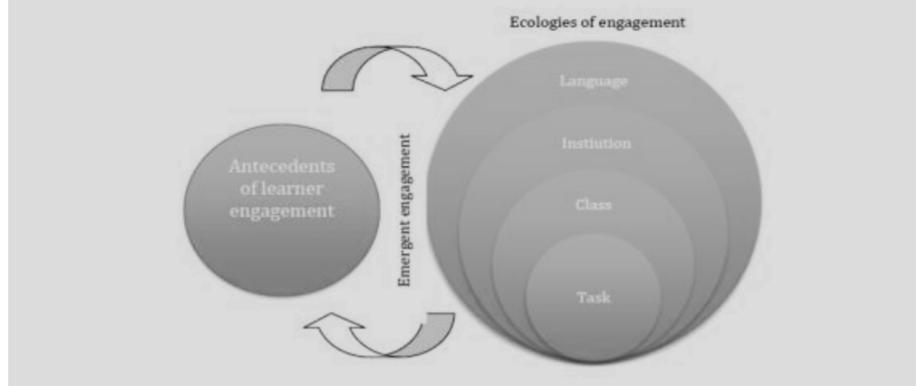


Figure 1. Proposed model of student engagement. Reproduced from Dörnyei, 2018b, with permission.

Antecedents refer to three facilitative conditions in terms of school and classroom culture, teacher-student relationships, and the learner’s mindset. Ecologies of engagement include four components: task, class, institution, and language. The model defines active student engagement as engaging within multiple contexts: (1) school context, (2) foreign language environments, (3) course materials and syllabi, (4) learning tasks, (5) peer relationships, and (6) teacher-student relationships (Cambridge University Press ELT,2018).

These facilitative conditions and ecologies are also supported by the motivational strategies framework (Dörnyei, 2001) that emphasizes the importance of (1) how teachers create basic motivational conditions by developing a supportive teacher-student rapport and creating a communicated group learning environment; (2) how teachers generate initial motivation by building students’ confidence, sense of accomplishment, and positive attitudes towards learning; (3) how teachers maintain and protect motivation by fostering students’ learner autonomy; and (4) how teachers encourage positive retrospective self-evaluation by providing opportunities for constructive and effective feedback, and enhancing self-esteem and satisfaction. In this study, Dörnyei investigated the effects of motivational strategies on student motivation and revealed that there was a strong relationship between motivational teaching practice and student engagement. The findings showed that by applying different motivational techniques and strategies, students are more inclined to pay attention in class, actively participate in discussions, and volunteer during teacher-fronted oral activities.

Dörnyei (2018b) emphasized that “If a student is ‘engaged’, this means that he/she is not only motivated, but that his/her motivational drive has succeeded in cutting through the multitude of distractions and alternatives” (p. 3). The relationship of motivation and engagement is that motivation is a crucial component of preparing the ‘deal’ and engagement is one of the most critical factors of “sealing the ‘deal’” (p. 3). Therefore, he proposed the formula $\text{Engagement} = \text{Motivation} + \text{Implementation}$. Similarly to Dörnyei (2018b), Jang, Reeve and Deci (2010) claim that, “In classroom settings, engagement is particularly important because it functions as a behavioral pathway through which students’ motivational processes contribute to their subsequent learning and development, including the skills they develop and the grades they make” (p. 1). Along with

motivation, implementation is key to achieving engagement and active participation. Motivation alone cannot help students become active learners throughout the entire language learning process because students encounter constant distractions in the digital age. Thus, educators need to develop practices and implementations that help learners fully and actively engage in their learning.

A primary challenge for educators in the 21st century is how to create learning environments that trigger active, sustained engagement. The L2 motivational self system provides a framework for this current multimodal digital storytelling project. Further, Dörnyei's (2018b) Model of Student Engagement also adds value to the L2 motivational self system theory and further elaborates how active student engagement in a broader context as engaging within multiple areas including the six antecedents and ecologies of task, class, institution, and language. Through the use of Instagram as an implementation tool, this article emphasizes ways this model could enhance the ELLs' motivation and lead to deeper and more meaningful learning that creates active and sustainable engagement.

Multimodal Digital Storytelling Project

Instagram is changing the culture of the art world and has been commonly used for promoting and showcasing artists' artwork, telling stories about their art, networking, building professional profiles, constructing their identity as an artist, and referencing art inspirations. The multimodal digital storytelling project in this article was designed to explore ways Instagram could decrease the ELLs' language anxiety and enhance their motivation and active engagement.

Traditional paper-based reading and writing are not the only ways for communication and learning. Learners in the current generation conduct meaning and express themselves through multiple modes, such as written, oral, visual, aural, and other multimedia forms. With rapid changes brought about by the digital age, easy access to various semiotic and online resources is a norm (Jewitt & Kress, 2003). Educators should be aware that "knowledge is multimodal, co-constructed, and performed or presented" (Miller, 2007, p. 65). Multimodal literacies in terms of the skills in consuming, critically analyzing, and producing multimodal content have become one of the new media literacies that should be emphasized for academic and social purposes (Choi & Yi, 2016; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Yi, 2014).

This project was developed at a liberal arts college specializing in arts and media disciplines in an urban setting. With a significant population of ELLs at many universities, it is essential for educators to scaffold experiences that enable these students to fully participate in not only language classrooms but also their general classes and in the target culture outside of class. As ELLs often feel embarrassed to speak up in a class, they are anxious or unwilling to participate in class activities (Calderón, Slavin, & Sánchez, 2011). Understanding these students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds and the academic learning styles they were exposed to in their home countries helps instructors better prepare curricula and materials that meet students' needs. Some ELLs respond to "individually-directed teacher solicitations," rather than self-initiating responses in classroom discussions (Sato, 1982). As a result, social media such as Instagram could lead to lowering language anxiety and building confidence and motivation (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010). Thus, Instagram could improve participation and engagement beyond classroom settings and help students venture into creative industry environments.

Procedure

This section illustrates ways an English as an Additional Language (EAL) program in an arts and media university in the midwestern U.S. offers a practical framework for integrating meaningful instruction through social media (in this case, Instagram) into its EAL curricula. The following are the procedures of the project in the assignment guidelines.

Step one. The students chose a creative industry topic that interested them. They were encouraged to select themes and issues that were relevant to their professional careers, such as film, acting, dance performance, arts management, theatre, art institution, interior design, or music.

Step two. Instagram workshop: The students were required to register for a new Instagram account, separate from any personal accounts. In this case, students were able to keep their private information safe, and they were able to see all the posts from their classmates at once and not mixed with their personal friends' posts (Fornara, 2018). The students were instructed to follow their instructor's course Instagram account so that the instructor was able to track and evaluate their postings. The students then submitted their Instagram username to the instructor.

Step three. The instructor then led a learner training workshop to familiarize the students with this platform. The students conducted a genre analysis where they examined five to ten popular accounts within their chosen field and made observations about the purpose, types of posts, and intended audience. The students then identified the common keywords people use for hashtags in the creative industry they selected. Groups of students with similar creative industries were formed to talk about similarities and differences among their selected artist accounts, as well as common hashtags. Having created their own accounts and examined the practices of other artists, students then decided the purpose, target audience, and type of posts they will be sharing for their project.

Instagram tasks

Instagram task one. For each of the main tasks of this project, the students were required to post an image on Instagram along with a short paragraph (50 words) that described the image or information about their topic. The students used the hashtag indexing function to connect with other artists, research other popular and relevant content, and discover who has been working in similar fields. For this first task, the students identified an artist or posting that was in the same creative industry field and reposted the image on their course Instagram forum. The paragraph for this first task should tell the audience about (1) why this artist's work was appealing or inspiring, or could be a critique about the work, and (2) how the image they reposted relates to their own creative industry work. When they posted their image, they were required to use the class hashtag and other relevant hashtags so they could branch out to other networks.

Instagram task two. For the second task, the students explored neighborhoods and events in Chicago related to their topic and documented these data through Instagram. The students were required to submit one image or video with a description that told the audience the story behind the image and how it connected with the creative industry they chose. The students were reminded of how the visual images they posted help attract attention, but that being able to communicate clearly through writing was how the students really "sell" their message.

Instagram task three. For the third task, the students developed survey questions based on their creative industries and conducted field observations and interviews. The students chose an interviewee that can represent the creative industry they selected. The interviewees could be other artists, professors in the relevant field, people that work in that particular creative industry, or participants in art events. The students documented their interview task by submitting at least one image or video with a short narrative that describes the interviewee's artwork or journey in the industry.

Instagram task four. In their final Instagram task, the students posted an image of their own artwork (e.g., performance, work in progress, studio, equipment, or film settings). The students were required to submit at least one image or video with a short narrative that introduced their work and how it represented them as an artist.

Project presentations

The students used the information they collected from all their Instagram assignments and composed a digital storytelling presentation. In this presentation, they were required to (1) introduce the creative industry they chose; (2) talk about why they are interested in this field; (3) demonstrate where they can find access to this creative industry around the city of Chicago; (4) introduce what other artists' works they found and connected with on Instagram; (5) introduce the person they interviewed; and (6) introduce their own artwork. The students can use Instagram as their visual aid to help create this digital story about their own creative industry career and thus document their journey to becoming an artist.

Based on the theory of the L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014) and the Model of Student Engagement (Dörnyei, 2018b), the following section further discusses how Instagram could be a powerful tool as an outlet for personal narratives that tell the personal stories of ELLs and also to promote in-depth discussion and meaningful tasks that are relevant to the students' creative artwork and careers. This multimodal digital storytelling project provided opportunities for students to demonstrate their ideal L2 self by picturing themselves in their future creative industry careers, show their ought-to L2 self by obtaining the traits and skills to meet the expectation, and experience their L2 learning.

Discussion

Multimodal Digital Storytelling in Model of Student Engagement

Using Instagram for ELLs to tell digital stories of their professional creative industry careers could bring meaning to their learning and bridge in-class activities to the real world. The present multimodal digital storytelling project aims to enhance future self-guides to motivate action and encourage ELLs to engage their learning in diverse and multilayer contexts that are proposed in the L2 motivational self system and the Model of Student Engagement. In order to achieve active student engagement, students were required to engage with (1) school contexts, (2) foreign language environments, (3) course materials and syllabi, (4) learning tasks, (5) peer relationships, and (6) teacher-student relationships.

Regarding school context engagement, ELLs used Instagram to explore and understand the academic culture and norms of the target language and their professional creative industry fields.

In Task 1, the students researched the ethos of other artists, the ways they presented themselves as artists, and how they represented and introduced their artwork on Instagram. The students further applied hashtag indexing functions to connect and build networks with other artists online. Such engagement appeared to foster the motivation of the ELLs and enhanced their confidence towards their academic literacy and professional careers.

As to the foreign language context, many of the ELLs learned their target language in an isolated environment in which they often interacted and spent time with friends who shared the same first language due to the lack of opportunities for them to branch out to people from other cultural backgrounds when they first arrived in the U.S. This project met the needs of these ELLs and allowed them to practice their target language in an authentic language environment beyond their limited social and academic interactions. In tasks two and three, by using this multimodal writing assignment, the ELLs were able to explore new environments and engage in conversations, using terms and vocabulary in their professional fields, in order to interact with and interview other artists. These students were guided to connect their professional interests with the real world and interact with target language speakers. During this learning process, the ELLs could potentially develop their target language identity and establish their identity as an artist inside and outside of the classroom.

In addition to school and language contexts, course materials and content are crucial factors that foster learner engagement. This digital storytelling project promoted learner autonomy, which refers to “the ability to take charge of one’s learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3). These ELLs developed their goals in the beginning of the project and took charge of creating materials and postings on Instagram. The ELLs worked in groups to analyze and discuss each other’s postings each week, developing a sense of community and collaboration.

This digital storytelling project was developed through task-based language teaching methods and encouraged ELLs to build their problem-solving skills through the main four Instagram tasks. For instance, the ELLs on this project explored neighborhoods in Chicago or attended events related to their professional creative industries. Figures 2-6 demonstrate ways these ELLs could relate their own interests to this project and engage themselves with the environment around them. Additionally, these figures show ways in which the ELLs were able to use Instagram to document their stories and experiences.



Figure 2. Example of music theatre Instagram project.

The example in figure 2, above, shows that the student was able to picture her ideal L2 self performing in the famous Chicago theatre in the future.



Figure 3. Example of art design Instagram project.

Figure 3 shows that the student found this event to be very intriguing, which motivated her to learn more about her field and enjoy the learning process.



Figure 4. Example of cinema art and science Instagram project.

Figures 4 (above) and 5 (below) showcase ways students were able to develop their ought-to L2 selves and understand what characteristics and skills that they will need to obtain in order to succeed in both their language learning and creative industry careers.



Figure 5. Example of standup comedy Instagram project.

Figures 5 (above) and 6 (below) indicate that the students were able to compare and contrast the differences between their home culture and norms with the target language culture. This learning experience allows students to understand how different creative industry culture varies in different contexts.



Figure 6. Example of music industry Instagram project.

The last two engagement contexts (peer relationships and teacher-student relations) were present throughout the entire digital storytelling project. The ELLs practiced their communicative skills and intercultural communicative competence by engaging with their peers in the social context online during classroom discussions and in real world settings. They needed to build up these skills in order to appropriately interact in the social context, and in the process learn about social acceptance and norms of the target language environments. Another benefit of this project was that the students attempted to connect with professionals, so that “peers” does not just mean their classmates but established artists in their selected fields. The instructor played a role as a facilitator in this project by monitoring the ELLs’ learning progress and providing scaffolding in terms of technological workshop trainings, building connections between tasks, and problem-solving.

Implications and Limitations

The majority of participants in this project had been using Instagram for more than a year before this project started and were therefore familiar with this tool. Since these students had been using Instagram in their everyday lives for social purposes, they were able to navigate it easily in the Instagram training workshop. Since many of them had already acquired these social media literacy skills, they were able to transfer them for academic purposes. Therefore, this model suggests instructors can embrace the skills students already possess and incorporate them into classroom activities so that the ELLs are motivated and engaged in oral expression and writing in their target language.

However, instructors should be aware that some students may not be familiar with popular social media platforms, particularly with students from other cultures. Instructors should offer additional support so that their students will not feel left behind. It will be helpful to conduct a pre-task survey to understand their ELLs' experiences using the tool in their target language environment. Based on this information, instructors can better understand to what extent they should provide scaffolding throughout their task assignments.

The students' posts were graded based on the rubric introduced in the beginning of the project. Three categories were evaluated: context relevance, content richness (depth of analysis of the posts), and clarity and grammar. Based on these criteria, the students were made more aware of the synergy between the content they created in the target language and the images they shared with the audience.

Since many ELLs have used this tool in their private social lives, technological skills are not the main issue for them to complete the tasks; language and sociopragmatics are the primary barriers and challenges for them. In this project, the students showed their hesitation toward posting comments and descriptions on Instagram and their insecurity of how other users will judge their English grammar. Anggraeni (2017) suggests that ELLs refrain from posting in their target language and prefer using their native languages to express ideas and thoughts online. For many ELLs, their audience on social media are their friends and connections from their home countries who speak their native language. Thus, it may feel unnatural for them to publish posts on Instagram that their audience would neither appreciate nor understand. This is why we suggest that instructors should require students to create a new account for classwork that is separate from their personal account.

Despite these limitations, this project attempted to help ELLs break out of their comfort zone and into the target language culture online. This allows students to be more comfortable with sharing information on Instagram related to their professional interests and in the target language.

Future Research Directions

Empirical research into integrating social media as digital storytelling tools into ESL curricula is limited. Future studies are needed to investigate:

- the characteristics and trends of ELLs' using platforms like Instagram inside and outside of classrooms;

- how these characteristics affect ELLs' engagement when posting images and text on social media as a digital storytelling tool;
- how posting images and text on a platform like Instagram can foster ELLs engagement in writing;
- and what practices and strategies instructors could use to help ELLs participate on social media platforms like Instagram.

The authors of this project hope that the model presented here can contribute to the research and best practices regarding social media platforms like Instagram used as digital storytelling tools, allowing ELLs to contribute their voices to the digital world around them.

Conclusion

This article contributes to the existing literature by demonstrating a multimodal digital storytelling model that integrates social media, particularly Instagram, into ESL curricula in order to foster college-level ELLs' engagement in speaking and writing, and also engage them in an online participatory culture related to their future professions. Students were encouraged to incorporate their interests and future professions into their language development by branching out to contexts outside of their everyday classrooms. The model presented in this article helps international students claim their voice not only in classroom settings but also in making connections with wider audiences in their professional fields and could potentially narrow the gap between ELLs in-school and out-of-school literacy practices.

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