


# Learners' Perceptions of Social Media-Based Vocabulary Learning: Insights from TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube Users in an EFL Context

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines learners' perceptions of utilizing social media platforms, including TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, as tools for acquiring English vocabulary. Recognizing that vocabulary is a key component of communicative competence, this research examines how informal, multimodal exposure through social media supports incidental vocabulary learning. A qualitative descriptive design was employed involving eight EFL students from a private university in Manado, Indonesia, who actively use social media for English learning. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically to identify patterns in learners' experiences, strategies, and challenges. Findings reveal that most learners prefer video-based content for its visual clarity, contextual richness, and entertainment value, which foster motivation and engagement. Learners employed a combination of strategies, including note-taking, translation, and pronunciation practice, to enhance word retention. Participants viewed social media as an effective and enjoyable platform for vocabulary acquisition; however, they also encountered difficulties with accent comprehension, word retention, and technical constraints. The study finds that social media is a good supplement to formal education because it helps students learn on their own and exposes them to real language. It recommends that teachers integrate social media-based activities into classroom tasks to support vocabulary enrichment. Future research could employ mixed-method or experimental designs to measure the actual impact of social media exposure on vocabulary development.

**Keywords:** *Social Media, Incidental Learning, Vocabulary, Acquisition, EFL Learners, Learner Perception*

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## INTRODUCTION

Social media has become an integral part of humans' daily lives nowadays. Social media has affected students' social lives and their use of language. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are widely used because of their rich mix of visual, audio, and text that exposes users to new vocabulary in context. English learners may find this way easy and exciting. This approach simplifies the process of learning new words or phrases for English learners. Moreover, this exposure can happen incidentally by scrolling through the content of entertainment or social interaction but ending up encountering new words and expressions along the way. As these platforms continue to evolve and dominate communication among learners, their potential role in supporting language learning, particularly vocabulary development, has become increasingly significant.

Vocabulary is vital in developing a new language. Alqahtani (2015) stated that a lack of vocabulary in a second language prevents learners from effective communication. Without enough vocabulary, learners may struggle to express their thoughts, understand others, or fully participate in conversations. Recently, social media platforms have provided learners with easy exposure to real-life language use. Instagram and TikTok offer informal opportunities to acquire new vocabulary. Through captions, comments, and video content, students often come across new words in context that can help them understand meaning

*Learners' Perceptions of Social Media-Based Vocabulary Learning: Insights from TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube Users in an EFL Context* naturally. These platforms present language in an engaging and authentic way. They make vocabulary learning more relevant and accessible to learners.

Although social media provides frequent exposure to English, little is known about how students view this experience in terms of its usefulness for learning new vocabulary. This lack of insight highlights the need to explore learners' perspectives toward using social media as a vocabulary learning tool. Therefore, this study aims to investigate students' perceptions of using Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube to learn English vocabulary and understand how these platforms contribute to their language development.

## Literature Review

### *Vocabulary Acquisition in Language Learning*

Vocabulary is a central part of excellent communication and language skills. Wilkins (1972) explained that knowing the use of words is vital, as a person can still communicate effectively without grammar if they have enough vocabulary and useful phrases (as cited in Rashid, Lan, & Hui, 2022). Vocabulary is considered the foundation of language because it allows learners to convey meaning, express ideas, and understand others. Without sufficient vocabulary, students may struggle to participate in conversation or comprehend spoken and written texts, even if they understand grammar rules. Nation (2001) emphasized that vocabulary knowledge strongly influences reading comprehension and oral fluency. In fact, vocabulary supports all four language skills, making it a key component of language proficiency. Therefore, helping learners build a strong vocabulary base is essential for their overall language development and communicative competence.

### *Modern Approaches to Vocabulary Learning*

Learning a new language is a complex act. It requires mastering various components such as grammar, pronunciation, and especially vocabulary. Traditionally, vocabulary has been taught through techniques such as word lists, flashcards, and repetition. While these methods can be useful, they often lack contextual richness and do not always promote long-term retention (Schmitt, 2008). In response, researchers and educators have increasingly emphasized more meaningful, communicative approaches that integrate vocabulary into real-life contexts and engaging activities (Nation, 2001). These include storytelling, games, multimedia, and digital tools to create richer learning experiences. According to Webb and Nation (2017), learners acquire vocabulary more effectively when they encounter words many times in different and meaningful contexts. The growing integration of technology in language education has further developed the possibilities for vocabulary learning, making it more interactive, personalized, and accessible (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

### *Social Media and Incidental Vocabulary Learning*

In line with these modern approaches, social media has emerged as a powerful platform for language exposure and learning, especially among English learners. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube provide learners opportunities to learn new vocabulary. A study by Malik and Asnur (2019) revealed that students found social media useful to develop their skills in language learning, with YouTube and Instagram identified as the most commonly used platforms. In addition to these, TikTok has also been shown to be effective in supporting vocabulary learning. Tirtayasa, Mahardika, and Andyani (2024) noted that TikTok's short, visually engaging videos and interactive features help learners to memorize vocabulary more easily while maintaining motivation and enjoyment in the learning process.

Unlike traditional classroom instruction, which often relies on explicit teaching, social media enables incidental vocabulary learning—where learners acquire new words unintentionally while engaging with content for entertainment. This type of learning is more meaningful and memorable, especially when the content is relevant and emotionally engaging (Peters, 2018). Krashen's (2004) input hypothesis suggests that learners are most effective in incidental learning when they encounter comprehensible input in a low-stress environment. Social media, with its informal and interest-driven nature, offers precisely that, making it a valuable supplement to formal language instruction.

Despite the potential benefits of social media for vocabulary development, many language learners are not fully aware of how to use these platforms effectively for educational purposes. While incidental learning on platforms like Instagram and TikTok offers an engaging way to acquire new vocabulary, not all learners experience the same outcomes. The amount of vocabulary actually learned may vary depending on factors like content choice, exposure frequency, and individual learning strategies. Moreover, limited research has been conducted on how learners themselves perceive their experiences using social media to support vocabulary growth, especially in informal settings.

This gap highlights the need to explore learners' perspectives on vocabulary learning through social media, focusing on the types of content they watch, how they engage with it, and which strategies they find most effective. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate learners' perceptions and experiences of using social media, particularly Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, for incidental English vocabulary acquisition. Also, this study aims to identify the kinds of content and learning strategies learners consider advantageous in building their vocabulary through social media platforms. Grounded in established theories of second language acquisition, this study adopts a conceptual framework that links social media exposure, learning strategies, vocabulary learning outcomes, and learner perception. Drawing from Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis, social media serves as a source of comprehensible and low-anxiety input, allowing learners to acquire vocabulary incidentally while engaging with authentic content. The process of acquiring and retaining new words is further explained through Schmitt's (2008) Vocabulary Learning Strategies framework, which emphasizes both discovery and consolidation strategies – such as note-taking, translation, and repetition – observable in learners' behaviors on digital platforms. Dörnyei's (2001) Motivational Theory bolsters the affective dimension of learning, as learners' enjoyment, curiosity, and emotional engagement shape their persistence and vocabulary retention. Finally, the inclusion of learner perception aligns with Zimmerman's (2002) theory of self-regulated learning, highlighting how awareness, reflection, and autonomy shape individuals' use of social media for educational purposes. This integrated framework illustrates that vocabulary learning through social media is not a linear process but a dynamic interaction among exposure, strategy use, motivation, and perception that collectively enhances vocabulary acquisition in informal learning environments.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a descriptive qualitative approach (Sandelowski, 2000), to explore learners' perceptions of vocabulary learning using social media platforms. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The participants of this study were eight university students aged between 18 and 20 years old, all of whom were enrolled in general English classes and possessed a pre-intermediate English proficiency level (B1 based on CEFR descriptors). All participants regularly used social media, spending approximately three to four hours per day on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted individually in a quiet room on campus to ensure comfort and privacy. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and was conducted in a mix of English and Indonesian, depending on participants' comfort. Sample interview prompts included "What types of social media content help you learn new vocabulary?", "What strategies do you use when encountering unfamiliar words?", "How effective do you think social media is for improving your vocabulary?", and "What challenges do you face when learning vocabulary through social media?"

Prior to data collection, participants provided informed consent, and their identities were anonymized to protect confidentiality. Institutional permission was also obtained to conduct the research. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically. To enhance trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review their transcripts, and peer debriefing was employed to validate

*Learners' Perceptions of Social Media-Based Vocabulary Learning: Insights from TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube Users in an EFL Context* emerging themes. For the data analysis, the thematic analysis was used in this study. The researcher, firstly, transcribed the interviews, translated them into English, coded the responses, and grouped similar ideas into categories. Once they were grouped, the researchers then identified emerging themes related to vocabulary learning strategies, perceptions of social media, and challenges faced by learners.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents the themes along with the supporting quotations from the participants. Then, a discussion will be given to connect the findings to existing research on vocabulary learning and social media.

### **Theme 1. Social Media Platforms and Content Preferences**

Based on the interview with the participants, they reported they have been using TikTok as their primary platform for learning vocabulary, with several also mentioning Instagram and YouTube. Videos were identified as the most helpful content format, as learners felt that “videos are clearer and easier to understand” (P1). However, one participant preferred learning from the caption because “I enjoy reading” (P6).

This finding shows that learners today prefer to learn vocabulary not only through word lists or traditional reading but also through video, sounds, and images. It supports the claim of Hendrawaty et al. (2024) that multiple modes of input can enhance vocabulary learning. Similar findings were supported by Zam & Al (2019), who found that YouTube and Instagram were widely used for English learning.

### **Theme 2. Strategies for Learning and Remembering Vocabulary**

Learners employed various strategies to navigate new vocabulary. For example, some took notes: “I write down new words or find how to use them in sentences” (P1), while others used translation: “I translate the words into Indonesian in my phone notes” (P2). Several participants mentioned practicing pronunciation or actively searching for meanings in comments or dictionaries.

These strategies show that learners are not passive but engage in actively processing the language, which aligns with Schmitt's (2008) emphasis on vocabulary learning strategies. The use of translation, while sometimes considered traditional, demonstrates learners' need to connect new words with existing knowledge (Laufer, 1997).

### **Theme 3. Perceived Effectiveness and Advantages**

Participants generally perceived social media as an effective and engaging medium for learning vocabulary. As one student noted, “learning English on social media is more interesting than in school” (P4), while another added, “social media is flexible because we spend a lot of time there” (P1). Some learners also highlighted how it builds confidence: “It helps shy learners because they don't have to be afraid of making mistakes” (P3).

This resonates with Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis, where incidental and comprehensible input from authentic contexts promotes acquisition. Furthermore, the study of Siraji (2025) found that the exposure to TikTok videos helped students to develop their vocabulary. The video features, such as clear speech, subtitles, and an interesting topic, as well as the appealing visuals, make the language easier to remember and understand.

### **Theme 4. Challenges in Social Media-Based Vocabulary Learning**

Despite the positive aspects, learners also mentioned challenges. Some struggled with pronunciation and accent; they said, “I find it hard to understand the accents” (P4, P5). Others faced forgetting words quickly (“I forget easily because I don't write new words down” – P8”) or technical problems like poor internet and short videos (P6).

These findings reflect the limitation of incidental learning. As Hulstijn (2003) argues, vocabulary acquisition from incidental input may lack depth unless reinforced with intentional practice. One participant commented that “some words cannot be found on social media” (P2), which underlines the need for formal instruction to complement informal learning.

### **Theme 5. Emotional Responses**



Most participants described learning vocabulary through social media as fun, exciting, and motivating. For instance, P7 shared, "I feel challenged but also enjoy it when I learn new words from videos." But some said they were annoyed when they couldn't understand accents or when content was too short.

These emotional responses align with Dörnyei's (2001) view that positive motivation strongly influences language learning success. Social media, based on the result, appears to provide an affective boost to the learners, even though some negative experiences still emerge.

Overall, the findings suggest that social media provides learners with engaging and flexible opportunities to acquire vocabulary, primarily through video-based content on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Learners adopt both traditional (note-taking, translation) and modern (following influencers, interactive searching) strategies, which foster vocabulary development. However, challenges such as comprehension, memory retention, and technical difficulties indicate that social media should complement rather than replace formal instruction.

## CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study offer important implications for language teaching, theory, and technology integration. Pedagogically, learners' strong preference for video-based content indicates that teachers can design blended learning activities incorporating TikTok or Instagram videos to introduce new vocabulary, model authentic language use, and encourage participation beyond the classroom, while institutions may recognize informal learning through social media as a complementary component of vocabulary instruction, especially for digital-native learners. Theoretically, the results extend models such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Schmitt's Vocabulary Learning Strategies by showing how digital environments provide abundant comprehensible input and stimulate natural strategy use, though challenges such as accent comprehension and limited retention highlight the need for intentional reinforcement to support incidental learning. Technologically, the study underscores the value of curated social media tools – including educational accounts, English-learning hashtags, and algorithm-driven recommendations – which can be leveraged to enhance learners' exposure to targeted vocabulary. Collectively, these implications emphasize the importance of integrating formal instruction, theoretical insight, and digital tools to promote effective vocabulary development.

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