


The Role of Social Media in EFL Vocabulary Development in University

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A B S T R A C T

This study explored the role of social media in enhancing EFL students' vocabulary development at Tadulako University. It addressed the limited research on students' experiences using social media for vocabulary learning in the Indonesian university context. A qualitative descriptive design was employed involving three students from the English Education Study Program. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that platforms such as Instagram and TikTok supported vocabulary development by providing authentic language exposure through videos, captions, comments, and online interactions. Students also benefited from contextual learning, repeated exposure, multimedia content, and social interaction, which increased their motivation and engagement in learning English vocabulary. Nevertheless, they encountered several challenges, including fast speech, slang expressions, distractions, and limited subtitle availability. Overall, social media functioned as an effective informal digital learning environment that facilitated vocabulary acquisition beyond the classroom. These findings suggest that educators should integrate social media into vocabulary instruction to complement formal learning while guiding students in overcoming potential challenges and maximizing its educational benefits.

Keywords: *Social Media, Vocabulary Development, EFL Students, Instagram*

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is one of the most essential components of English language learning because it supports learners' ability to communicate effectively in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, students may experience difficulties in understanding information and expressing their ideas accurately. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, vocabulary development is particularly important because learners have limited opportunities to use English in their daily lives. Therefore, identifying effective ways to support vocabulary learning has become a significant concern for educators and researchers.

The rapid growth of digital technology has transformed the way students access information and learn languages. Among various digital tools, social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have become an integral part of students' daily activities. These platforms provide abundant English-language content through videos, captions, comments, and online interactions, exposing learners to authentic language use beyond the classroom. Social media also allows learners to engage in informal and self-directed learning, enabling them to encounter new vocabulary in meaningful and contextualized situations.

Previous studies have reported positive contributions of social media to vocabulary learning. Abbas et al. (2019) found that social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube support vocabulary acquisition by providing interactive learning opportunities. Similarly, Kabilan et al. (2016) revealed that social networking environments can enhance students' vocabulary knowledge and increase their motivation to learn English. Agustina et al. (2023) further demonstrated that visual and contextual features on Instagram facilitate vocabulary

acquisition by helping learners understand and remember new words. In addition, Yulianti (2025) reported that TikTok significantly improves students' vocabulary mastery due to its engaging and interactive content. These findings suggest that social media has considerable potential as a learning resource for vocabulary development.

Despite the growing body of research, several gaps remain. Most previous studies have employed quantitative or experimental approaches that focus primarily on measuring vocabulary improvement and learning outcomes. While these studies provide valuable evidence regarding the effectiveness of social media, they offer limited insights into how students actually experience vocabulary learning through social media in their daily lives. Furthermore, many studies discuss social media in general without specifically examining the roles of Instagram and TikTok, which are currently among the most widely used platforms by university students. Research exploring students' perceptions, learning strategies, benefits, and challenges in using these platforms for vocabulary development remains relatively limited, particularly in the Indonesian EFL context.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the role of Instagram and TikTok in enhancing vocabulary development among EFL students at Tadulako University. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, this study explores students' experiences in utilizing social media for vocabulary learning, the strategies they employ, the benefits they perceive, and the challenges they encounter. By focusing on students' real-life experiences, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how social media contributes to vocabulary development and to offer insights that may support the integration of digital platforms into English language learning practices.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach. This approach was considered appropriate because it allows researchers to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and practices in a natural setting and to obtain in-depth information regarding the use of social media for vocabulary learning.

The participants were three students from the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met the following criteria: (1) active students in the English Education Study Program, (2) frequent users of social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, (3) having experience learning English vocabulary through social media content, and (4) willing to participate voluntarily in the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide consisted of ten open-ended questions covering students' engagement with social media, vocabulary learning strategies, motivation and benefits, challenges, and perceptions of effectiveness. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the interview questions were reviewed and validated by an English education lecturer and the research supervisor through expert judgment. Revisions were made based on their feedback regarding clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face and audio-recorded with participants' consent. After data collection, all recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then carefully reviewed several times to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data.

Data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles & Huberman (1994), consisting of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the data reduction stage, the researcher conducted open coding by identifying meaningful statements related to vocabulary learning through social media. Similar codes were grouped into categories, which were then organized into broader themes. Through the coding process, five major themes emerged from the data: (1) social media as a source of vocabulary exposure, (2) vocabulary learning strategies through social media, (3) application of vocabulary in daily communication, (4) benefits and motivation of learning vocabulary through social media, and (5) challenges in learning vocabulary through social

media. These themes were subsequently presented descriptively and interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework and previous studies.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. First, the interview guide was reviewed by an English education lecturer and the research supervisor through expert validation to ensure its clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. Second, member checking was conducted after transcription by confirming the accuracy of the interview data with the participants. Third, detailed field notes were maintained throughout the interview process to document contextual information and support data interpretation. Finally, the emerging themes were repeatedly compared with the original interview transcripts to ensure consistency, credibility, and accuracy of the findings.

Respondents

The respondents of this study were three students from the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on specific criteria relevant to the study objectives. The criteria included active use of social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok, and experience in learning English vocabulary through social media content. These participants were selected because they were considered capable of providing rich and relevant information regarding their vocabulary learning experiences.

Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions. The interview questions were designed to explore students' experiences in using social media for vocabulary learning, including their learning strategies, perceived benefits, motivation, and challenges. To support the data collection process, the researcher also used a voice recorder and field notes. The voice recorder ensured the accuracy of participants' responses, while field notes documented relevant observations during the interviews.

Procedures

Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews with the selected participants. Prior to the interviews, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and obtained participants' voluntary consent. Each interview was recorded with participants' permission to ensure data completeness and accuracy. During the interviews, participants were encouraged to share their experiences and provide examples related to vocabulary learning through social media. After the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed into written form for further analysis.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles & Huberman (1994), which consists of four stages: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. During the data collection stage, data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with three participants and audio-recorded for further analysis. The interview recordings were then transcribed verbatim and reviewed several times to ensure accuracy and familiarity with the data.

In the data reduction stage, the researcher conducted open coding by identifying meaningful statements related to students' experiences of learning vocabulary through social media. Similar codes were grouped into categories such as vocabulary exposure, learning strategies, vocabulary use, perceived benefits, and learning challenges. These categories were then organized into broader themes that reflected the participants' experiences.

In the data display stage, the categorized data were organized into thematic summaries to facilitate interpretation and comparison across participants. This process enabled the researcher to identify patterns and relationships among participants' responses regarding their vocabulary learning experiences through Instagram and TikTok.

Finally, in the conclusion drawing and verification stage, the researcher interpreted the emerging themes and continuously compared them with the original interview transcripts to ensure that the findings accurately reflected participants' perspectives. The findings were verified through repeated review of the data to ensure consistency, credibility, and accuracy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Social Media as a Source of Vocabulary Exposure

The findings revealed that participants frequently encountered new English vocabulary through their daily engagement with digital content. They reported discovering unfamiliar words while watching videos, reading captions, browsing educational content, and interacting with English-language materials. As Participant 1 stated, "Because I follow several international accounts and English-language content, I often encounter new vocabulary indirectly. Social media helps me learn vocabulary in a more relaxed way because I learn while enjoying the content" (P1). Similarly, Participant 2 reported learning new vocabulary by changing the language settings of social media applications to English and watching educational English-learning videos, while Participant 3 explained that everyday language used in online content helped him understand new words in authentic contexts.

These responses indicate that vocabulary learning occurred naturally through participants' daily interactions with digital content. The findings demonstrate that vocabulary exposure was largely incidental, as participants acquired new words while engaging with content for entertainment, information, and social interaction rather than through deliberate memorization. Furthermore, repeated exposure to English-language content increased participants' familiarity with new words and expressions commonly used in everyday communication.

These findings suggest that social media provides authentic and contextualized language exposure that facilitates vocabulary acquisition through meaningful interaction with digital content. Through continuous engagement with English-language content, students are exposed to vocabulary in natural communicative settings rather than isolated word lists. This finding is consistent with Abbas et al. (2019), who found that social media supports vocabulary learning by exposing learners to words in authentic situations. Similarly, Alharthi et al. (2020) argued that continuous exposure to English-language content promotes vocabulary acquisition by allowing learners to encounter words repeatedly in meaningful contexts. Therefore, social media may serve as a valuable supplementary source of vocabulary exposure that complements formal classroom instruction.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies through Social Media

The findings revealed that participants applied various strategies to understand and retain vocabulary obtained from social media. Most participants searched unfamiliar words using online dictionaries or Google Translate, repeated new words several times, took notes, and saved videos or screenshots for further review. Participants explained that understanding the context of words before searching for meanings helped them remember vocabulary more effectively.

In addition, participants attempted to apply newly learned vocabulary in communication activities such as chatting, writing captions, and speaking practice. The participants believed that using vocabulary in real communication helped improve confidence and familiarity with new words. Therefore, these findings demonstrate that students actively engaged in contextual learning and vocabulary practice rather than relying only on memorization.

Benefits and Challenges of Vocabulary Development through Social Media

The study found that social media increased students' motivation and interest in learning English vocabulary. Participants perceived social media as an enjoyable and flexible learning environment because vocabulary learning did not feel overly formal or monotonous. Furthermore, participants mentioned that videos, subtitles, images, and audio features helped them understand pronunciation and contextual meanings more effectively.

Despite these benefits, several challenges were identified during the learning process. Participants experienced difficulties understanding fast pronunciation, slang expressions, and videos without subtitles. In addition, social media sometimes became distracting because of excessive non-educational content. However, all participants agreed that social media remained an effective medium for vocabulary development because it provided authentic examples of English usage in daily communication.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that social media contributes positively to EFL students' vocabulary development through authentic exposure, contextual learning, social interaction, and multimedia-based experiences. Students developed vocabulary naturally while interacting with English content on social media, indicating that language learning can occur beyond formal classroom settings. These findings support the concept of Digital Informal Learning of English (DILE) proposed by Sundqvist & Sylvén (2016), which explains that digital activities and online interaction facilitate language learning in informal environments. The findings are also consistent with Abbas et al. (2019), Kabilan et al. (2016), Alharthi et al. (2020), and Agustina et al. (2023), who reported that social media platforms provide authentic language exposure and meaningful opportunities for vocabulary acquisition.

Furthermore, the findings reflect the principles of Constructivist Learning Theory, which emphasizes that learners actively construct knowledge through meaningful experiences. Participants searched for meanings, interpreted contextual usage, recorded unfamiliar words, and applied vocabulary in communication activities. Learning vocabulary through authentic contexts helped students understand word meanings and usage more effectively than isolated memorization. Similar findings were reported by Fraidan & Fakhli (2024), Nourdad & Banagozar (2022), Dedi (2025), and Na'imah (2025), who found that learners employ various cognitive and metacognitive strategies to facilitate vocabulary retention and understanding through digital learning environments.

In addition, the findings align with Sociocultural Theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978), which explains that language learning develops through social interaction and communication. Participants practiced vocabulary through chats, captions, speaking exercises, and interaction with others. The use of vocabulary in meaningful communication activities increased students' confidence and familiarity with new words. This finding is consistent with Agustina et al. (2023), Wilson et al. (2025), Tsaqifah et al. (2023), and Syamsuri & Akhir (2025), who reported that social media encourages learners to use vocabulary in authentic communicative situations, thereby strengthening language acquisition and language use in daily contexts.

Similarly, the findings support Multimedia Learning Theory proposed by Mayer (2009), which states that combining visual and auditory information enhances comprehension and memory retention. Participants explained that videos, subtitles, visuals, and audio features made vocabulary easier to understand because they could observe pronunciation, contextual meaning, and word usage simultaneously. Repeated exposure to vocabulary through videos and reels also contributed to vocabulary retention because students continuously encountered vocabulary in meaningful contexts. These findings are supported by Yulianti (2025), Na'imah (2025), Revaldi (2024), Rakhmanita et al. (2025), and Dedi (2025), who found that multimedia-rich social media environments increase learners' engagement, motivation, and vocabulary learning outcomes.

However, this study also identified several challenges, including fast pronunciation, slang expressions, lack of subtitles, and distractions from unrelated content. These findings indicate that although social media offers valuable opportunities for vocabulary development, students still require appropriate learning strategies and self-regulation to maximize its educational benefits. Similar challenges were reported by Agustiani et al. (2025), Rahmatika et al. (2025), Gumilar et al. (2025), Halimi (2025), Mardikantoro et al. (2023) who identified distractions, language complexity, and varying levels of digital literacy as common issues in technology-assisted language learning. Therefore, social media should not only be viewed as a platform for entertainment and communication but also as a supportive digital learning environment that can facilitate EFL students' vocabulary development through authentic and interactive learning experiences.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved only three participants from the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University. Although the qualitative descriptive approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, the small sample size limits the transferability of the findings to broader EFL contexts. Second, the participants were selected from a single university in Indonesia, which may not represent students from different educational, cultural, and geographical backgrounds. Third, the study relied solely on semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data. Although expert judgment and member checking were employed to enhance the credibility of the instrument and findings, the data were based on participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions. Therefore, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings beyond the context of this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies are encouraged to involve larger and more diverse samples from different educational institutions and regions to obtain a broader understanding of social media-assisted vocabulary learning. Researchers may also employ mixed-methods or quantitative approaches to investigate the relationship between social media use and vocabulary acquisition more objectively. Furthermore, future research could compare the effectiveness of different social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X, in facilitating vocabulary development. The inclusion of additional data sources, such as classroom observations, vocabulary assessments, learning journals, or digital learning analytics, may also strengthen the validity and comprehensiveness of future findings.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concluded that social media plays a significant role in supporting EFL students' vocabulary development through authentic exposure, contextual learning, social interaction, and multimedia-based learning experiences. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok enabled students to encounter, understand, and practice English vocabulary in meaningful communication contexts beyond formal classroom settings. The findings revealed that students expanded their vocabulary by searching for word meanings, interpreting contextual usage, repeating unfamiliar words, saving educational content, and applying new vocabulary in communication. Social media also increased students' motivation and engagement because learning was perceived as enjoyable, flexible, and interactive. Although students encountered challenges, including fast pronunciation, slang expressions, and distractions from unrelated content, these limitations did not reduce the overall effectiveness of social media as a vocabulary learning resource. The findings suggest that social media can complement formal English instruction by providing continuous vocabulary exposure and authentic language practice in informal digital environments. This study also contributes to understanding digital vocabulary learning and highlights the potential of social media as a valuable supplementary resource for EFL university students.

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