

DELVING INTO EFL LEARNERS' EXPERIENCE OF VOCABULARY MASTERY IN DIGITAL AGE: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY STUDY IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

For the past few decades, the research on vocabulary learning and digital mediated learning has attracted the attentions of various researchers. Digital media has been proven to give positive influence on the development of learners' vocabulary knowledges. However, the study in which investigate on how learners learn vocabulary mediated by various digital media is still in its infancy. Thus, this study is conducted in order to explore how EFL learners learn vocabulary mediated by various digital resources. In doing so, this study employs narrative inquiry and collect the data using semi-structure interview involving two females undergraduate EFL learners in which currently majoring in English Education Department in several Universities in Jember, Indonesia. As results, this study found that both participants employ various vocabulary learning strategies using various digital media. Additionally, this study also found that both participants are highly motivated to learn vocabulary from digital apps. Lastly, limitations and recommendations are also discussed in this study.

Keywords: EFL learners Experience; Vocabulary Mastery; Digital Age.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements in the digital age have significantly reshaped traditional methods of language learning, especially in vocabulary acquisition. The incorporation of digital resources like online platforms, social media, language learning apps, and artificial intelligence offers learners a range of interactive opportunities to enhance their vocabulary skills. In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), a robust and extensive vocabulary is essential for mastering the language. Studies have highlighted that a rich vocabulary contributes to improved reading, writing, and speaking abilities. As a result, many researchers and educators have turned to digital resources to create engaging and interactive vocabulary learning experiences. Although there has been considerable research on the impact of digital resources on vocabulary learning, there is a shortage of studies specifically examining EFL learners' experiences with these digital tools and platforms. This research seeks to address that gap.

EFL learners are individuals studying English in environments where it is not the primary language of the community or school. Vocabulary mastery refers to the learner's ability to understand, explore, and correctly pronounce, listen to, and write English words. Web-based language learning (WBLL) involves using a variety of digital resources, tools, and platforms to enhance language learning by providing access to a wide range of authentic materials.

This research is focused on examining undergraduate students' experiences with vocabulary learning using various digital tools and platforms, with particular attention to their learning enjoyment and the obstacles they encounter. The study seeks to answer the question: "How do EFL learners experience enjoyment and face challenges in mastering vocabulary through different digital platforms and resources?" The primary objective is to explore the enjoyment and difficulties that Indonesian EFL learners experience during vocabulary learning, especially through their interactions with digital tools. The results are expected to provide a deeper understanding of the challenges and positive experiences in vocabulary learning with digital resources. These insights will be valuable for teachers in developing more effective vocabulary instruction that leverages digital resources, and for students, the study aims to enhance their enthusiasm and effectiveness in learning vocabulary, thereby improving their ability to write, read, and speak English with greater ease.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) involves studying and using English in countries where it is not the primary language, such as Koreans learning English within Korea. Scholars describe EFL as teaching English in settings where it isn't the native language, often within the learner's home country or through short courses in English-speaking nations. EFL learners face distinct challenges, needing determination and effort to master the language, which requires both understanding and applying English in daily contexts. These learners typically engage with English in educational settings but switch to their native language outside of class.

Teaching and learning EFL are crucial for social integration and enhancing career prospects. The advent of technology and globalization has introduced innovative ways to learn English, making it more accessible and efficient. However, mastering a foreign language necessitates developing both receptive skills (such as listening and reading) and productive skills (such as speaking and writing).

In Indonesia, there have been significant efforts to improve EFL education, notably with the implementation of the 2013 curriculum. Despite these initiatives, challenges persist, including issues related to teaching methods, technology use, and educational resources. The misuse or overuse of digital media can impede language learning, underscoring the importance of effective management and guidance in leveraging these tools to improve English proficiency.

Mastering a second or foreign language requires learners to develop a substantial vocabulary. Research indicates that vocabulary size is closely linked to language proficiency, highlighting the importance of continually expanding both the breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. Effective vocabulary learning involves not only understanding words and their meanings but also being able to use them fluently and appropriately in various contexts. This requires both receptive mastery (understanding and recognizing words) and productive mastery (actively using words), which are crucial for developing proficiency in lexical organization.

To enhance vocabulary learning, learners are encouraged to engage in productive practice rather than solely relying on receptive methods. Several approaches have been studied to aid vocabulary acquisition. Incidental learning exposes learners to the target language through real-life contexts, helping them grasp how words are used, even if vocabulary development isn't the primary goal. On the other hand, deliberate vocabulary learning involves structured activities like exercises, flashcards, and vocabulary lists, which promote deeper processing and long-term retention of new words. Regardless of the approach, successful vocabulary learning demands continuous effort, persistence, and regular practice.

Boredom during vocabulary learning is a frequent challenge for EFL learners, often leading to diminished memory retention and unsatisfactory learning outcomes. To combat this issue, recent studies have highlighted the importance of incorporating diverse digital resources to create more interactive and engaging vocabulary learning activities. Research consistently shows that digital vocabulary learning significantly boosts student engagement and motivation, which in turn can enhance both vocabulary retention and acquisition. These digital tools, which can be accessed at any time and place, allow learners to gradually expand their vocabulary at their own pace, adjusting the material's difficulty to match their proficiency level.

Learning new vocabulary is inherently difficult because it requires practice across various skills such as listening, writing, reading, and speaking. Motivation plays a critical role in improving vocabulary proficiency, and the use of appropriate instructional media can make the learning process more enjoyable and effective. Digital tools like YouTube Cake, ReLife, Duolingo, and Hilokal are particularly effective in engaging students, helping them achieve their learning objectives by presenting content in a fun and user-friendly way.

Instructional media is crucial in the learning process, as it delivers content that captures students' attention and interest, facilitating the achievement of learning goals. Media serves as a bridge between students and the lesson content, making learning more efficient and engaging. The benefits of digital media in education include its ability to store and replay content, adapt materials to learners' needs, and reach a wide audience simultaneously. In the current digital era, technology plays a pivotal role in education, reducing the need for physical interaction while still achieving or even surpassing traditional learning outcomes. Therefore, choosing the right media is essential for successful teaching and learning in today's world.

Over the past few decades, numerous studies have explored vocabulary learning within digital environments. For instance, a study by Reynolds (2014) with 92 EFL undergraduate students in Taiwan found that digital vocabulary learning significantly enhanced students' engagement and motivation. Similarly, research in Iran (Ebrahimzadeh & Alavi, 2016) involving 136 EFL high school students showed that digital tools motivated students and encouraged active participation in vocabulary learning activities. Another study from Turkey (Yüksel et al., 2022), which analyzed data from 57 EFL undergraduate students, revealed that digital vocabulary learning led to better vocabulary retention compared to traditional methods.

These studies collectively suggest that integrating digital resources into vocabulary learning can make the process more efficient and effective. However, despite these benefits, there remains a need to further investigate how EFL students interact with various digital tools to enhance their vocabulary learning.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), utilizing interviews to gather data. The goal is to thoroughly explore EFL learners' strategies and challenges in vocabulary learning, both within and beyond the classroom setting. Narrative inquiry is well-suited to this research as it allows for the collection of detailed personal accounts that provide insight into the socio-educational aspects of vocabulary learning (Saldana, 2011; Perez, 2022).

The participants in this study consist of two female undergraduate students from universities in Jember, Indonesia, both majoring in English education. They have been studying English for approximately five years and have experience using digital tools for vocabulary learning. To ensure their privacy, the participants are referred to by pseudonyms: Aisyah (22 years old) and Fatimah (19 years old). Both have demonstrated strong English proficiency, as evidenced by their high grades in English-related courses.

The study utilizes both observations and individual semi-structured interviews as its main methods for data collection. During the observation phase, researchers will closely monitor how participants engage with various digital platforms for vocabulary learning, focusing on identifying key patterns and details (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Following these observations, in-person interviews will be conducted to gain deeper insights into the participants' experiences with digital vocabulary learning. These interviews will consist of multiple sessions, all of which will be video recorded after obtaining the participants' consent. The interview questions will cover topics such as the digital tools and platforms used, the strategies employed for vocabulary learning, the participants' emotional states during the learning process, and the challenges or opportunities they faced.

For analyzing the data, the study will apply thematic analysis, following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). This process will begin with the researchers becoming thoroughly familiar with the data by repeatedly listening to the recorded interviews, followed by transcribing the conversations. The next steps involve coding the data, organizing these codes into thematic categories, defining the themes, and finally interpreting and presenting the results.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From digital resources, this section examines the digital resources favored by the participants for vocabulary learning. Both Aisyah and Fatimah showed some similarities in their choices, though there were also differences. Aisyah mentioned that she frequently uses mobile apps like YouTube, Duolingo, and Hilokal on her smartphone to expand her vocabulary. Fatimah, on the other hand, also uses YouTube but relies on additional apps such as Cake and Relife. Fatimah emphasized that YouTube is her preferred resource because it's free and offers a vast array of language learning materials.

Another way with technical digital vocabulary learning strategy, this section examines the technical strategies used by the participants for digital vocabulary learning. Both Aisyah and Fatimah employed similar approaches to engage with their chosen digital resources. Aisyah utilized YouTube to watch English podcasts and channels, focusing on vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation. She complemented this by using Duolingo to memorize vocabulary through games and practiced speaking with friends on Hilokal. Fatimah also used YouTube for listening to music and watching educational content, writing down new vocabulary she encountered. Additionally, she used the Cake app for vocabulary games and quizzes, and practiced English conversation with others on Relife. Both participants demonstrated a combination of listening, writing, and interactive strategies to enhance their vocabulary learning.

Both Aisyah and Fatimah expressed high levels of motivation during their digital vocabulary learning activities, driven by the interactive and engaging nature of the digital tools they used. Aisyah found that listening to podcasts on YouTube was particularly motivating, appreciating the platform's interactive and enjoyable aspects. Fatimah similarly enjoyed using various applications, especially when conversing with English speakers, which she found both enjoyable and motivating. However, both participants encountered challenges. Aisyah faced issues such as limited access to premium features on Duolingo, which restricted her vocabulary learning opportunities, and difficulties with the Hilokal app due to a lack of filtering options for conversation partners, leading to inconsistent interactions. Additionally, her busy schedule and unsupportive environment in her dormitory made it hard for her to maintain a consistent learning routine. On the other hand, Fatimah struggled with English pronunciation. She addressed this by comparing subtitles with spoken words and practicing pronunciation, though she admitted that her results were not always perfect. Despite these challenges, both participants acknowledged the valuable learning opportunities provided by their digital resources.

This study examined how Indonesian EFL undergraduate students engage with digital tools for vocabulary learning. Both participants favored YouTube for its multimedia content, echoing Mohsen's (2016) research that highlights the benefits of multimedia in vocabulary acquisition. They used YouTube to listen to English podcasts and educational videos, taking notes to aid memorization, a method also supported by Muslim and Mahbub (2023). Additionally, both participants utilized digital games and language learning apps, consistent with findings by Shortt et al. (2023) that gamification enhances language skills. They combined various strategies, such as note-taking, memorization, and practical use of new vocabulary in conversation, reflecting methods identified by Bošnjak Terzić & Pavičić Takač (2020) and Pauwels (2018). Challenges differed: Aisyah faced issues with maintaining consistency and an unsuitable learning environment, while Fatimah struggled with pronunciation, a common issue among EFL learners due to differences in L1 and EFL phonology, as noted by Huensch (2019) and Mirzaei et al. (2015). Despite these obstacles, both participants were highly motivated, aligning with Li et al. (2021) and Shortt et al. (2023) who found that interactive digital tools boost motivation. The study suggests that incorporating a variety of digital resources can enhance motivation and improve vocabulary retention.

5. CONCLUSION

The goal of this narrative inquiry was to investigate how EFL undergraduate students engage with digital tools for vocabulary acquisition. The findings show that both participants used a range of digital resources, such as YouTube, game-based apps like Duolingo and Cake, and teleconference platforms like Hilokal and Relife, to support their vocabulary learning. They adopted various strategies to maximize their use of these tools. The study also uncovered challenges, particularly with maintaining consistent learning habits, but highlighted that both participants remained highly motivated when using these digital platforms. This suggests that integrating diverse digital resources into language teaching could enhance learning effectiveness. The study contributes valuable insights to the field of English Language teaching, especially regarding digital vocabulary learning. However, the study has some limitations: it involved only female participants and was conducted in a specific region of Indonesia. Future research should include male learners and examine different regions to broaden the understanding of digital vocabulary learning across various contexts.

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