

Enhancing English Vocabulary Mastery through Social Media Exposure: A Quasi-Experimental Study of Generation Z Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of social media exposure in enhancing English vocabulary mastery among Generation Z learners. The rapid growth of digital technology has positioned social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube as prominent sources of informal language input, particularly for digitally native students. Grounded in the theory of Comprehensible Input, this research examines whether structured exposure to English-language content on social media can significantly improve students' vocabulary mastery. This study employed a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental design with a one-group pre-test and post-test model. The participants consisted of 20 Generation Z students from the English Education Department at a regional university in Indonesia. Data were collected through a vocabulary test administered before and after a seven-day social media exposure program, as well as a questionnaire measuring students' engagement with English-language content on social media. The data were analysed using paired sample t-test and simple linear regression with the assistance of SPSS. The findings revealed a statistically significant improvement in students' vocabulary mastery after the treatment. The mean score increased from 50.75 in the pre-test to 82.25 in the post-test, with a significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the regression analysis indicated that social media engagement had a significant positive effect on vocabulary mastery, explaining 37.8% of the variance in post-test scores ($R^2 = 0.378$, $p = 0.004$). These results suggest that higher levels of engagement with English-language content on social media are associated with better vocabulary outcomes. social media exposure can serve as an effective supplementary tool for enhancing English vocabulary mastery among Generation Z learners. When used purposefully, social media provides authentic, multimodal, and contextual language input that aligns with learners' digital habits and supports vocabulary acquisition beyond the traditional classroom setting.

Keywords: Vocabulary Mastery; Social Media; Gen Z

INTRODUCTION

In the digital era, the rapid advancement of information and communication technology has significantly transformed the way people access information, communicate, and learn. One of the most influential outcomes of this transformation is the widespread use of social media. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok are no longer used solely for entertainment or social interaction; they have evolved into dynamic digital spaces that provide opportunities for informal learning, including language acquisition. For students who belong to Generation Z, social media has become an inseparable part of daily life, shaping not only their communication patterns but also their learning behaviors.

Generation Z refers to individuals born approximately between 1997 and 2012. This generation is often described as digital natives, as they have grown up with constant access to the internet, smartphones, and social networking platforms. Unlike previous generations, Generation Z learners tend to prefer fast-paced, visual, and interactive learning environments. They are accustomed to consuming short-form videos, visual content, and real-time information, which strongly influences how they process knowledge. As a result, traditional language learning approaches that rely heavily on textbooks and classroom instruction may not fully align with their learning preferences and habits.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), vocabulary mastery plays a crucial role in developing overall language proficiency. Vocabulary is the foundation of all language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, learners may struggle to comprehend texts, express ideas, or engage in meaningful communication. Scholars such as Nation emphasize that vocabulary knowledge is central to language use and that successful communication depends largely on learners' ability to understand and use words appropriately in various contexts. Therefore, identifying effective strategies to enhance vocabulary mastery remains a major concern in EFL education.

Traditionally, vocabulary instruction has been conducted through explicit teaching methods, such as memorization of word lists, dictionary use, and classroom exercises. While these approaches can be effective to some extent, they often fail to provide learners with meaningful and contextualized exposure to language. Moreover, such methods may reduce learners' motivation, particularly among Generation Z students who are more engaged by digital and interactive content. Consequently, there is a growing need to explore alternative learning resources that are more relevant to students' real-life experiences and digital habits.

Social media offers unique potential as a supplementary tool for vocabulary learning. Through continuous exposure to authentic English content, learners can encounter new words in meaningful contexts. Videos, captions, comments, and

subtitles found on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok provide rich linguistic input that combines visual, auditory, and textual elements. This multimodal input supports vocabulary acquisition by helping learners infer meaning, recognize usage patterns, and remember new words more effectively. Additionally, social media content often reflects real-life language use, including idiomatic expressions, colloquial vocabulary, and current trends, which are rarely addressed in traditional classroom materials.

From a theoretical perspective, the role of social media in language learning can be explained through Krashen's Comprehensible Input Theory. According to this theory, language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to input that is slightly above their current proficiency level but still understandable through context. Social media content frequently meets this criterion, as it presents language supported by visuals, repetition, and familiar situations. When learners repeatedly encounter English vocabulary in such comprehensible and engaging contexts, vocabulary acquisition can occur naturally and incidentally, without conscious memorization.

Several previous studies have highlighted the positive impact of social media on vocabulary development. Research has shown that learners who frequently engage with English-language content on social media tend to demonstrate better vocabulary recognition and retention. Platforms such as YouTube have been found to enhance vocabulary learning through audiovisual input and subtitles, while Instagram and TikTok support incidental learning through short, repetitive, and visually rich content. These findings suggest that social media can function as an effective informal learning environment, particularly for Generation Z learners who are already highly engaged with digital platforms.

Despite its potential benefits, social media is often viewed negatively in educational contexts. Many educators perceive it as a source of distraction that may reduce students' academic focus. As a result, social media has not been systematically integrated into most formal EFL curricula. Furthermore, although many students are exposed to English on social media, not all of them experience measurable improvement in vocabulary mastery. This may be due to differences in engagement levels, content selection, or learning awareness. Therefore, empirical research is needed to examine whether structured exposure to English-language content on social media can significantly enhance vocabulary mastery.

Another limitation of existing research is that many studies focus on a single platform or rely primarily on correlational designs. There is still limited experimental evidence that measures vocabulary improvement before and after social media exposure, particularly among Generation Z learners in higher education contexts. Addressing this gap is important to provide stronger empirical support for the educational value of social media in language learning. Based on these considerations, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of social media exposure in enhancing English vocabulary mastery among Generation Z learners.

By employing a quasi-experimental design with a one-group pre-test and post-test model, this research seeks to examine whether structured engagement with English-language content on social media leads to significant improvement in vocabulary mastery. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to EFL pedagogy by providing empirical evidence on the role of social media as a supplementary learning tool that aligns with the digital characteristics and learning preferences of Generation Z students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews theories and previous studies related to social media, English vocabulary mastery, Generation Z learners, and the relationship between social media exposure and vocabulary acquisition. The discussion provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how social media can function as an effective medium for enhancing vocabulary mastery among Generation Z learners. Social media refers to digital platforms that allow users to create, share, and interact with content and with other users in virtual communities. Kaplan and Haenlein describe social media as internet-based applications that enable the creation and exchange of user-generated content. In recent years, social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok have become increasingly popular among students and have gained attention in educational contexts, particularly in language learning.

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, social media provides access to authentic language use beyond the classroom. Through videos, captions, comments, and subtitles, learners are exposed to real-life English expressions, pronunciation, and contextual usage. Unlike traditional learning materials, social media content reflects current language trends and everyday communication, which helps learners develop more practical vocabulary knowledge. The interactive nature of social media also allows learners to participate actively by commenting, sharing, or responding to content, thereby reinforcing vocabulary learning through use and repetition.

Vocabulary mastery is a fundamental component of language proficiency. Vocabulary refers to the knowledge of word meanings, forms, and usage, while mastery indicates the ability to understand and use vocabulary accurately and appropriately in communication. Nation classifies vocabulary knowledge into receptive knowledge, which involves recognizing and understanding words when reading or listening, and productive knowledge, which involves using words correctly in speaking or writing. Effective vocabulary mastery requires repeated exposure to words in meaningful contexts. Simply memorizing word lists is often insufficient, as learners may struggle to apply vocabulary in real communication. Therefore, learning environments that provide contextualized and meaningful input are essential for vocabulary development. In this regard, social media offers an environment where learners can encounter vocabulary naturally through continuous exposure to authentic language content.

Generation Z consists of individuals born between approximately 1997 and 2012. This generation is commonly referred to as digital natives because they have grown up with constant access to digital technology, the internet, and social media. Generation Z learners tend to prefer learning experiences that are visual, interactive, and technology driven. They are accustomed to consuming information through short videos, images, and multimedia content, which influences their attention span and learning strategies. In language learning, Generation Z students are frequently exposed to English through entertainment, social interaction, and online content. However, their exposure is often informal and unstructured. While this creates opportunities for incidental learning, it also raises questions about whether such exposure leads to measurable improvement in vocabulary mastery. Understanding the characteristics of Generation Z learners is therefore crucial in designing learning strategies that align with their digital habits and maximize the educational potential of social media.

The role of social media in vocabulary acquisition can be explained through Krashen's Comprehensible Input Theory. According to Krashen, language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to input that is slightly above their current level of competence but still understandable through context. This input allows learners to acquire new vocabulary naturally without explicit instruction. Social media content often provides comprehensible input through the combination of visual cues, subtitles, repetition, and familiar contexts. For example, short videos on TikTok or YouTube present spoken language supported by images and captions, enabling learners to infer the meaning of unfamiliar words. Repeated exposure to similar content further strengthens vocabulary retention. Thus, social media aligns well with the principles of comprehensible input and supports incidental vocabulary learning.

Previous studies have consistently reported positive effects of social media on English vocabulary acquisition. Research on YouTube has shown that audiovisual content with subtitles improves vocabulary recognition and retention among EFL learners. Studies focusing on Instagram have found that visual-based posts and captions help learners remember new words more effectively through visual association. Similarly, research on TikTok indicates that short, repetitive, and engaging videos facilitate incidental vocabulary learning, particularly among Generation Z learners. Despite these findings, most previous studies have focused on single platforms or used correlational research designs. There is still a lack of experimental studies that measure vocabulary improvement before and after structured social media exposure, especially in higher education contexts. Therefore, further research is needed to provide empirical evidence on the effectiveness of social media as a supplementary tool for vocabulary learning among Generation Z learners.

METHOD

Design and Sample

This study employed a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental method to examine the effect of social media exposure on English vocabulary mastery among Generation Z learners. The research design applied was a one-group pre-test and post-test design. This design was chosen because it allows the measurement of vocabulary improvement before and after treatment without random assignment of participants. The treatment consisted of structured exposure to English-language content on social media platforms. A pre-test was administered to measure students' initial vocabulary mastery, followed by a post-test after the treatment period to identify any changes in vocabulary performance. The difference between the pre-test and post-test scores was used as the main indicator of the treatment effect. The sample consisted of 20 undergraduate students from the English Education Department at a regional university in Indonesia. All participants were classified as Generation Z, with ages ranging from 18 to 21 years. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on specific criteria, including active use of social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, regular exposure to English-language content, and willingness to participate throughout the research process. These characteristics made the participants suitable for investigating the influence of social media exposure on vocabulary mastery.

Instrument and Procedure

Two instruments were used in this study: a vocabulary test and a social media usage questionnaire. The vocabulary test consisted of 20 multiple-choice items designed to measure students' English vocabulary mastery. The items covered word meaning, contextual usage, synonyms, and comprehension of vocabulary commonly encountered in social media content. Each correct answer was scored as one point, and the total score was converted into a percentage. The same test was used for both the pre-test and post-test to maintain consistency. The questionnaire was designed to measure students' engagement with English-language content on social media. It consisted of 10 items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire focused on frequency of social media use, types of English content accessed, and learning-related engagement. Validity and reliability testing were conducted before data analysis to ensure the quality of the instrument. Data collection was carried out in four stages. First, participants completed the pre-test to assess their initial vocabulary mastery. The test was administered online through Google Forms. Second, the treatment was implemented over seven days. During this period, participants were instructed to engage daily with English-language content on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok by watching videos, reading captions, and following English-focused or educational accounts. Third, the post-test was administered using the same vocabulary test to measure vocabulary improvement. Finally, participants completed the social media usage questionnaire to report their level of engagement during the treatment period.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize pre-test and post-test scores as well as students' social media engagement levels. A paired sample t-test was conducted to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between students' vocabulary mastery before and after the treatment. In addition, simple linear regression analysis was applied to examine the relationship between social media exposure and English vocabulary mastery. A significance level of 0.05 was used for all statistical analyses.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of social media exposure in enhancing English vocabulary mastery among Generation Z learners. Data were collected from 20 undergraduate students through a vocabulary pre-test, a vocabulary post-test, and a social media engagement questionnaire. The findings are presented based on descriptive statistics, assumption testing, and inferential analysis.

Descriptive Statistics of Vocabulary Scores

The descriptive analysis showed a clear improvement in students' English vocabulary mastery after the treatment. Prior to the treatment, students demonstrated relatively low vocabulary mastery. The mean pre-test score was 50.75, with scores ranging from 25 to 75. This result indicates that before structured social media exposure, many students experienced difficulties in recognizing and understanding English vocabulary in context. After seven days of structured exposure to English-language content on social media platforms, students' vocabulary performance improved substantially. The mean post-test score increased to 82.25, with scores ranging from 60 to 100. This improvement suggests that students developed a stronger understanding of word meanings, usage, and contextual application. In addition, the post-test scores showed a lower standard deviation than the pre-test scores, indicating more consistent vocabulary performance among students after the treatment.

Normality Test Results

Before conducting inferential analysis, a normality test was performed to ensure that the data met the assumptions for parametric testing. The Shapiro–Wilk test was applied to both pre-test and post-test scores. The results showed that the significance values for both tests were greater than 0.05, indicating that the data were normally distributed. Therefore, parametric statistical analysis was appropriate.

Paired Sample t-Test Results

A paired sample t-test was conducted to determine whether the improvement in vocabulary mastery was statistically significant. The results revealed a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores. The mean difference was 31.5 points, with a significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). This finding indicates that the increase in students' vocabulary mastery after social media exposure was statistically significant. As a result, the null hypothesis was rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted.

Social Media Engagement and Vocabulary Mastery

Descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data showed that students demonstrated a high level of engagement with English-language content on social media. The mean engagement score was 41.70, which falls into the "very high" category. This suggests that participants actively interacted with English content during the treatment period. A simple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between social media engagement and vocabulary mastery. The results indicated a significant relationship between the two variables, with a significance value of 0.004 ($p < 0.05$). The coefficient of determination (R^2) was 0.378, meaning that 37.8% of the variance in students' vocabulary mastery was explained by their level of social media engagement. This finding demonstrates that higher engagement with English-language social media content contributed positively to vocabulary improvement. The findings confirm that structured social media exposure significantly enhanced students' English vocabulary mastery and that engagement level played an important role in learning outcomes.

The findings of this study indicate that social media exposure has a significant positive effect on English vocabulary mastery among Generation Z learners. The substantial increase in post-test scores compared to pre-test scores suggests that structured engagement with English-language content on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube can effectively support vocabulary learning. This improvement can be explained through Krashen's Comprehensible Input Theory, which proposes that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to input that is slightly beyond their current proficiency level but remains understandable. Social media content often provides this type of input through visual support, subtitles, repetition, and familiar contexts. These features help learners infer word meanings naturally and support incidental vocabulary acquisition without direct instruction.

The popularity of platforms such as TikTok and Instagram among participants also contributed to the effectiveness of the treatment. These platforms emphasize short, visually engaging, and repetitive content, which aligns well with the learning preferences of Generation Z learners. Repeated exposure to similar vocabulary across different videos strengthens word recognition and retention. This finding supports previous studies highlighting the effectiveness of audiovisual and

multimodal input in vocabulary development. The regression analysis further revealed that social media engagement significantly influenced vocabulary mastery. The finding that 37.8% of vocabulary improvement was explained by engagement level suggests that learning outcomes depend not only on exposure but also on how actively students interact with content. Learners who paid closer attention to videos, read captions, and engaged cognitively with English content achieved better vocabulary outcomes. This aligns with social constructivist perspectives, which emphasize active participation and interaction as essential elements of effective learning.

These results are consistent with previous research showing that social media facilitates vocabulary acquisition by providing authentic language exposure and increasing learner motivation. Enjoyable and relevant content encourages sustained engagement, which enhances learning persistence. Social media also connects classroom learning with real-life language use, allowing students to encounter vocabulary in meaningful contexts. However, the findings also indicate that social media engagement accounts for only part of the variance in vocabulary mastery. Other factors, such as prior language proficiency, individual learning strategies, motivation, and formal instruction, may also influence vocabulary development. Therefore, social media should not replace traditional instruction but should be used as a complementary learning tool. This study highlights that social media, when used purposefully and supported by active engagement, can serve as an effective supplementary medium for vocabulary acquisition. Its alignment with Generation Z's digital habits and learning preferences makes it a valuable resource in contemporary EFL contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that structured exposure to English-language content on social media significantly enhances English vocabulary mastery among Generation Z learners. The findings from the pre-test and post-test results demonstrate a substantial and statistically significant improvement in students' vocabulary performance after the treatment. This indicates that social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok can function as effective supplementary learning tools by providing authentic, contextual, and engaging language input that supports vocabulary acquisition beyond the traditional classroom environment. The results reveal that students' level of engagement with English-language content on social media plays a crucial role in determining learning outcomes. Higher engagement levels were associated with better vocabulary mastery, suggesting that active interaction with content such as paying attention to visuals, subtitles, and repeated exposure facilitates deeper vocabulary learning. This finding supports the theoretical perspective of comprehensible input, which emphasizes the importance of meaningful and understandable language exposure in the language acquisition process. Social media has strong potential to be integrated into EFL learning as a complementary resource, particularly for Generation Z learners who are highly familiar with digital technology. While social media should not replace formal

instruction, its purposeful and guided use can enrich vocabulary learning experiences, increase learner motivation, and bridge the gap between formal education and real-world language use. Future research is recommended to involve larger samples, longer treatment durations, and comparative group designs to further validate and extend these findings.

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