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VOCABULARY MASTERY AMONG FOURTH-SEMESTER ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDENTS AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

Vocabulary mastery is a fundamental component in language acquisition, particularly for English Education students who are preparing to become future language educators. This study explores how fourth-semester English Education students develop their vocabulary mastery and identifies the factors that influence it. Using a qualitative exploratory approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three student participants (NM, N, and NG). The findings reveal that students primarily develop vocabulary through contextual learning methods, particularly by consuming English-language digital media such as TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and films. The key factors influencing vocabulary development include intrinsic motivation, consistency of practice, the academic environment, and access to digital technology and language learning applications such as Duolingo and Google Translate. However, challenges such as forgetting newly acquired words and limited use of English outside the classroom were also identified. This study contributes insights into the vocabulary learning strategies of Indonesian EFL students in a higher education context and suggests the need for more supportive English-speaking environments in daily academic life.

Keywords: *Vocabulary mastery; English education students; contextual learning; digital media; EFL*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery is widely recognized as one of the most critical components of language proficiency. Without an adequate vocabulary, learners cannot effectively communicate, comprehend texts, or engage in meaningful interactions in a second or foreign language. As Nation (2001) asserts, vocabulary knowledge is central to language use, and its development is a lifelong process that requires consistent exposure and practice.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning in Indonesia, vocabulary development poses significant challenges. Students are rarely exposed to authentic English communication outside the classroom, making it difficult to naturally acquire and retain new words. This challenge is particularly relevant for English Education students, who not only need to develop their own language proficiency but also need to build strong vocabulary knowledge to support their future roles as English teachers.

Fourth-semester students represent an important stage in this developmental process. Having completed approximately two years of their undergraduate program, these students are expected to have moved beyond foundational language skills and begun developing more advanced linguistic competencies. Understanding how they approach vocabulary learning

and what factors influence their progress is therefore of considerable academic and pedagogical interest.

Recent studies have increasingly highlighted the role of digital platforms in supporting vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners. Usman et al. (2024) found that teaching vocabulary through TikTok had a significant positive impact on students' vocabulary proficiency compared to conventional methods. Similarly, Rosa and Suhartatik (2025) reported that TikTok serves as an effective alternative medium for contextual vocabulary learning, offering accessibility, engagement, and authentic examples of language use. In addition, Pikhart, Klimova, and Al-Obaydi (2024) found that digital tools such as Duolingo, ChatGPT, and Google Translate play a multifaceted role in vocabulary acquisition and overall language skill development among EFL college students.

Beyond technology, motivational and contextual factors also remain central to vocabulary development. Wijayanti, Suryani, and Prasetyo (2024) identified several motivational factors influencing Indonesian EFL learners' engagement in vocabulary learning, including the desire for academic success and effective communication. Likewise, Assagung, Lestari, and Munir (2025) emphasized those vocabulary learning strategies are closely related to learners' overall language competence, including reading ability, suggesting that the strategies students adopt have long-term implications for their academic performance.

Despite this growing body of research, relatively few studies have examined how Indonesian EFL students in English Education programs specifically navigate their vocabulary development in the digital age, particularly through an in-depth, exploratory lens that captures their personal experiences. This exploratory study aims to fill this gap by investigating the vocabulary learning strategies and influencing factors among fourth-semester English Education students. The study is guided by two research objectives: (1) to describe how English Education students develop their vocabulary mastery, and (2) to identify the factors influencing vocabulary mastery among English Education students.

By focusing on students' lived experiences and personal strategies, this study seeks to provide meaningful insights that can inform instructional practices and curriculum development in English Education programs in Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design, which is appropriate for investigating phenomena that are not yet fully understood and require in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to capture rich, descriptive data about how students develop vocabulary mastery and what factors shape their learning process.

The participants of this study consisted of three fourth-semester students from an English Education program at a university in Indonesia. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, with the criterion that they were actively enrolled in the fourth semester of the English Education program. The participants are identified using initials to protect their privacy: NM, N, and NG.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted individually with each participant. The interview guide consisted of seven main questions divided into two thematic categories corresponding to the research objectives. The first category explored

how students develop their vocabulary mastery, while the second category focused on the factors influencing their vocabulary development. Participants were encouraged to elaborate on their responses, and follow-up probing questions were used to elicit deeper insights.

The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing and naming themes, and producing the final report. Themes were identified inductively based on the patterns emerging from the data, ensuring that the findings were grounded in the participants' actual responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Vocabulary Learning Strategies

The findings reveal that all three participants primarily rely on contextual and incidental learning strategies to develop their vocabulary, particularly through the consumption of English-language digital media. This aligns with Nation's (2001) framework of incidental vocabulary learning, in which learners acquire new words through meaningful engagement with language rather than through deliberate memorization.

NM described a multi-platform approach to vocabulary learning, explaining that she relies on films, songs, social media, and English reading material available on TikTok and Facebook. When she encounters unfamiliar words, she looks them up in a dictionary or translation application and then tries to use them in sentences to make them easier to remember. In her own words:

> **NM stated:** *"I usually learn new vocabulary through English films, songs, social media, and English reading materials - for example, on TikTok there are often short English texts, and on Facebook there are actually a lot of English learning videos. When I find a word I don't know, I look up its meaning in a dictionary or translation app, and then I try to use it in a sentence so it's easier to remember."*

This strategy reflects what Schmitt (2008) refers to as "contextual guessing followed by verification," a highly effective method for consolidating word meaning.

Similarly, N reported a more spontaneous and naturalistic approach to vocabulary learning, describing her method as "natural" and primarily mediated through TikTok. She stated:

> **N stated:** "It's usually spontaneous, mostly through social media, especially TikTok. The natural way is more effective because when we try to study in a prepared way, we usually get bored quickly, and if we study through our phone, we can easily get distracted."

This finding is consistent with Rosa and Suhartatik (2025), who found that TikTok offers an engaging and authentic context for vocabulary learning that learners perceive positively precisely because it does not feel like formal study. It also supports Budiartha and Akmar (2024), who noted that TikTok's short, autonomous format allows learners to control their own learning time and content, which increases motivation.

NG adopted a somewhat more structured approach compared to the other two participants, combining incidental exposure with deliberate note-taking. She explained:

> **NG stated:** "I usually learn new vocabulary by reading articles, watching English-language videos, and writing down words I don't know yet so I can study them again later."

This combination of incidental and intentional learning strategies observed in NG's approach has been identified as particularly effective for long-term vocabulary retention (Webb, 2008), and is consistent with Laoli et al. (2025), who found that English Education students in Indonesia commonly combine exposure-based learning with note-taking and other recording strategies to strengthen vocabulary retention.

Across all three participants, digital media emerged as the dominant medium for vocabulary development. Platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and streaming services for films were consistently mentioned. This finding underscores the growing role of social media and digital content in informal language learning, a trend that has been widely documented in recent EFL research (Usman et al., 2024; Rosa & Suhartatik, 2025). The accessibility and entertaining nature of these platforms appear to make them particularly attractive to students as informal learning environments.

Factors Influencing Vocabulary Mastery

Several key factors were identified as influencing the participants' vocabulary mastery: motivation, consistency if practice, the academic environment, and access to digital technology.

Motivation emerged as a central factor across all three participants, though the nature of their motivation varied sightly. NM expressed both academic and communicative goals, along with a longer-term personal aspiration:

> **NM stated:** "My biggest motivation is the desire to understand and use English better, both for academic needs and daily communication. Later, when I'm really good at it, I want to be able to debate in English. I'm being ambitious."

N was motivated by a mor functional goal related to fluency:

> **N stated:** "I want to master vocabulary, so that I can be fluent in constructing grammar, so that speaking won't be too difficult."

NG articulated a more broadly oriented motivation, including future career preparation:

> **NG stated:** "I am motivated to improve my communication skills, to understand course materials, and to prepare myself for my future career."

These varied motivational orientations reflect both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which Gardner and Lambert (1974) identified as critical drivers of second language acquisition. This is also consistent with Wijayanti, Suryani, and Prasetyo (2024), who found that Indonesian EFL learners' engagement in vocabulary learning is shaped by a combination of academic, communicative, and career-oriented motivations.

Consistency of practice and retention were noted as significant challenges. Both NM and NG identified the tendency to forged newly learned vocabulary when it is not used frequently. NM explained:

> **NM stated:** "The difficulty I face most often is that I easily forget vocabulary I've just learned if I don't use it often. Also, some words have different meanings depending on the context, which can sometimes be confusing."

NG shared a similar concern regarding long-term retention and near-synonyms:

NG stated: "The difficulty I face most often is remembering new vocabulary over a long period of time, and understanding the use of words that have similar meanings."

N, on the other hand, identified a lack of consistent motivation and discipline as her primary challenge, simply stating:

N stated: "For me, it's a lack of intention/willingness (niat)."

These findings highlight the importance of regular and varied exposure to new vocabulary, consistent with Nation's (2001) argument that multiple encounters with a word across different contexts are necessary for deep vocabulary knowledge. Assagung, Lestari, and Munir (2025) similarly found that inconsistent application of vocabulary learning strategies is a key barrier to long-term vocabulary mastery among Indonesian EFL students.

The academic environment was identified as a supporting factor by all three participants. NM noted that coursework requirements contribute meaningfully to her vocabulary exposure:

NM stated: "Yes, the courses are quite supportive because lecturers often use English-language materials and give assignments that of course must be done in English, so that helps add a little vocabulary. However, in daily life, the use of English is still limited, so there aren't too many opportunities to practice new vocabulary."

N highlighted a specific classroom practice that she found particularly helpful:

N stated: "It's quite supportive - sometimes it happens spontaneously, and sometimes when the lecturer explains using full English and then translates it into Indonesian, we can understand without having to search too deeply for the meaning."

NG echoed similar views regarding course materials, while also pointing to the same limitation outside class:

NG stated: "Yes, the courses are quite supportive because a lot of the materials and assignments use English. However, the use of English in the daily environment is still limited."

This pattern is consistent with Kirkpatrick, Kirkpatrick, and Derakhshan (2024), who found that classroom exposure to the target language significantly shapes learners' vocabulary development, while also noting that limited use of the target language outside the classroom remains a persistent constraint in EFL contexts.

Digital technology and language learning applications played a notable role in supporting vocabulary development. All three participants reported using Google Translate and online dictionaries as primary tools for looking up unfamiliar words. NM described her use of technology as follows:

NM stated: "Yes, I use several applications and technologies such as Google Translate, online dictionaries, AI of course, and social media to look up the meanings of words and learn new vocabulary. I also sometimes use English learning applications to add and review the vocabulary I've already learned."

N reported using Duolingo, though she acknowledged a tension between gamified engagement and genuine learning intent:

N stated: "Of course I use technology and applications - Duolingo, I mean. Even though sometimes it's just to keep my daily streak going, for me that app still gives me new vocabulary."

NG also reported using a combination of applications:

NG stated: "Yes, I use applications such as Duolingo, Google Translate, and online dictionaries to help me learn the meaning, pronunciation, and usage of new vocabulary."

N's acknowledgment that her Duolingo use is sometimes primarily motivated by maintaining her daily streak rather than intentional learning reflects a broader tension in gamified language learning applications between engagement-driven motivation and deeper learning. This is consistent with Shortt et al. (2023), who found that gamification features such as streaks, levels, and rankings can sustain learner engagement even when they do not always translate into deep, intentional vocabulary study. Similarly, Pikhart, Klimova, and Al-Obaydi (2024) found that EFL college students perceive digital tools such as Duolingo and Google Translate positively, even when their use is informal or habitual, because these tools still provide meaningful incidental exposure to vocabulary.

The following table summarizes the key strategies and influencing factors identified across the three participants:

Table 1. Summary of Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Influencing Factors

Aspect	NM	N	NG
Learning Method	Contextual; films, songs, social media; dictionary lookup	Spontaneous/natural; TikTok-based incidental learning	Articles, videos, note-taking; contextual learning
Media Used	TikTok, Facebook, films, songs	TikTok, Facebook	YouTube, films, articles, social media
Motivation	Academic & communication goals; aspiration to debate in English	Improve grammar fluency and oral communication	Communication, academic understanding, future career
Main Challenge	Forgetting words; context-dependent meanings	Lack of consistent motivation	Long-term retention; distinguishing similar words
Academic Support	English materials & assignments; limited daily use	Lecturers teaching in full English then translating	English materials & tasks; limited daily environment
Technology Used	Google Translate, AI, online dictionary	Duolingo (streaks), TikTok	Duolingo, Google Translate, online dictionary

The findings of this study are broadly consistent with existing literature on vocabulary development in EFL contexts, while also highlighting the increasingly significant role of digital and social media platforms as informal learning environments. The convergence of all three participants around digital media as a primary vocabulary source suggests a shift in how young Indonesian EFL learners engage with the English language outside formal educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study investigated the vocabulary learning strategies and influencing factors among three fourth-semester English Education students. The findings indicate that all participants primarily develop their vocabulary through contextual and incidental learning, with digital media platforms — particularly TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, and

English films — serving as the main sources of exposure to new vocabulary. These findings suggest that informal digital environments play an increasingly central role in vocabulary development among EFL learners in Indonesia.

In terms of influencing factors, intrinsic motivation, the academic environment, and access to digital technology and language learning applications were identified as key supports for vocabulary development. At the same time, challenges such as difficulty retaining newly learned words, limited opportunities to use English in daily social contexts, and inconsistent learning discipline were noted as significant barriers.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that English Education programs create more opportunities for students to use English in authentic communicative contexts both within and beyond the classroom. Additionally, the intentional integration of digital tools and platforms into classroom instruction may help bridge informal and formal vocabulary learning experiences. Future research with larger sample sizes and mixed-methods approaches is encouraged to build on the exploratory insights provided by this study.

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