JURNAL ILMIAH BAHASA DAN SASTRA
Special Edition No. 1 of 2026
ISSN 23557083 | eISSN 25494155

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF PASSIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXPOSURE THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN AN INDONESIAN EFL CONTEXT

Angel Amori
Universitas Islam Negeri Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu
nglmree@gmail.com

Ferri Susanto
Universitas Islam Negeri Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu
ferrisusanto@mail.uinfasbengkulu.ac.id

Endang Haryanto
Universitas Islam Negeri Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu
endangharyanto@mail.uinfasbengkulu.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The growing use of social media has created new opportunities for English exposure outside formal classroom settings. Students can encounter English naturally through videos, captions, music, and other digital content without intentionally learning the language. This study explores the experiences of eighth-semester students in encountering passive English exposure through social media and identifies its benefits and challenges. A qualitative exploratory design was used involving eight students from the English Education Department at Universitas Islam Negeri Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model. The findings show that passive English exposure occurred naturally through YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram during entertainment and daily activities. The exposure included audiovisual, audio, and textual input such as videos, captions, subtitles, comments, music, and memes. Repeated exposure supported incidental learning of vocabulary, slang, expressions, pronunciation, and language patterns. Social media also functioned as an informal and flexible learning space through algorithmic recommendations and personal interests. However, students faced difficulties such as unfamiliar vocabulary, fast speech, slang, and non-standard English. To overcome these challenges, they used contextual clues, visual support, translation tools, and repeated viewing. Overall, passive exposure through social media provides meaningful informal English learning experiences beyond the classroom.

Keywords: *social media, incidental learning, informal digital learning, EFL students*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has significantly transformed the ways in which learners encounter and use the English language in their daily lives. English learning is no longer confined to formal classroom instruction, as learners are now able to access and interact with English through various digital platforms and online activities. Social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram have become dominant spaces where users are continuously exposed to audiovisual and textual content created by individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As a result, English has increasingly become part of learners' everyday experiences, even when they are not intentionally engaged in language learning activities (Kusuma, 2023).

One form of English exposure that has gained increasing attention in digital learning environments is passive English language exposure. Unlike active language learning, which involves deliberate efforts to practice speaking, writing, reading, or listening for academic purposes, passive exposure occurs when learners encounter English incidentally while engaging in other non-learning activities. For instance, students may watch English-language videos for entertainment, read English captions while scrolling through social media feeds, encounter English expressions in TikTok content, or listen to English music without consciously intending to study the language. Such exposure provides repeated contact with authentic language input, including vocabulary, pronunciation, expressions, and discourse patterns that are naturally embedded in digital communication (Putri, 2024).

Social media plays a crucial role in shaping this phenomenon because its content is highly personalized through algorithmic systems that adjust recommendations based on users' interests, search history, and interaction patterns. In the present study, students' exposure to English was frequently influenced by algorithmic recommendations, personal preferences, entertainment habits, and repeated engagement with similar types of content. The participants interacted with English through various forms, including videos, captions, subtitles, comments, music, memes, and short-form digital content. Observation data also indicated that all eight participants consistently experienced passive English exposure through platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram in their daily routines (Lestari, 2024).

This phenomenon can also be understood through the concept of Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), which refers to language learning that occurs outside formal educational settings through digital engagement. In this context, learners are not explicitly instructed to learn English, yet they are continuously exposed to it through their online activities. In the present study, students primarily used social media for entertainment, relaxation, and personal interests rather than for academic purposes. However, their repeated exposure to English content created opportunities for incidental language learning. Words and expressions such as "banger," "POV," "FYP," and "slay" became increasingly familiar to students through repeated encounters in different contexts. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that vocabulary acquisition can occur incidentally through repeated digital exposure (Nugroho, 2023).

Although passive exposure provides opportunities for natural language acquisition, it does not always guarantee effortless comprehension. The participants in this study encountered several linguistic challenges, including unfamiliar vocabulary, long and complex texts, fast speech, unfamiliar accents, slang, abbreviations, and non-standard grammatical structures commonly used in online communication. These challenges often required students to actively interpret meaning despite the passive nature of their exposure. To overcome these difficulties, students employed various strategies such as using contextual clues, analyzing visual information, reading comment sections, utilizing translation applications, searching for additional information, and rewatching videos. In some cases, students repeatedly viewed content that they found interesting until they were able to understand its meaning (Pratama, 2024).

Previous studies have increasingly highlighted the role of digital media as a supportive environment for language learning. However, much of the existing literature tends to focus on intentional learning activities, formal educational applications, or measurable learning outcomes. Less attention has been given to how learners themselves experience English

exposure that occurs naturally during everyday social media use. Therefore, this study focuses on students' lived experiences of passive English exposure, particularly how they encounter English, how they respond to unfamiliar input, and what benefits and challenges they perceive in their daily digital interactions.

This issue is particularly relevant in the Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where opportunities to encounter English outside the classroom may vary significantly among learners. In many cases, formal instruction remains the primary source of English exposure, while informal exposure depends heavily on individual digital habits. Understanding students' everyday experiences in digital environments can provide a more comprehensive perspective on how English learning occurs beyond formal education. Rather than assuming that social media automatically facilitates language learning, it is important to examine how learners actually experience and interpret English exposure in their daily lives (Nugraha, 2025).

Based on this background, this study aimed to explore the experiences of eighth-semester students of the English Education Department at Universitas Islam Negeri Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu in encountering passive English language exposure through social media. Specifically, the study addressed two research questions: (1) How do eighth-semester students experience passive English language exposure through social media? and (2) What benefits and challenges do students experience during passive English language exposure through social media?

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the growing body of literature on informal digital learning of English by illustrating how everyday social media use can create meaningful opportunities for incidental language exposure. In addition, the study may provide valuable insights for both students and English educators regarding the potential of digital environments as complementary spaces for English exposure and learning in the modern era.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to gain an in-depth understanding of students' everyday experiences of passive English language exposure through social media. The focus of the study was not to measure language achievement or learning outcomes in a quantitative manner, but rather to explore how students naturally encounter, interpret, and respond to English-language content within their daily digital environments. In this sense, the study emphasized lived experiences and meaning-making processes that occur when students interact with English incidentally while using social media platforms for non-academic purposes.

The research was conducted in the Department of English Education, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Tadris, Universitas Islam Negeri Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu during the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants consisted of eight eighth-semester students who were actively exposed to English through various social media platforms, particularly YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. The participants were identified as AAH/P1, MNP/P2, IO/P3, IPS/P4, RAP/P5, EDP/P6, BN/P7, and FMR/P8. These students were selected because they frequently encountered English content in their daily social media use, making them relevant informants for exploring passive exposure phenomena.

Data collection was carried out using three main techniques, namely participant observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Participant observation was conducted

to identify the forms of English exposure experienced by students during their social media activities, including audiovisual content such as videos, audio input such as music or spoken language, and textual elements such as captions, comments, and subtitles. In-depth interviews were used to obtain detailed information regarding students' personal experiences, perceptions, benefits, and challenges related to passive English exposure. Meanwhile, documentation was used to support the data in the form of interview recordings, transcripts, field notes, photographs, and screenshots of English-language content accessed by the participants during their social media use.

The data obtained from these techniques were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The analysis process consisted of three interconnected stages, namely data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the data reduction stage, the researcher selected and organized relevant information related to passive English exposure, incidental learning, digital learning environments, global English varieties, as well as perceived benefits and challenges experienced by the participants. The reduced data were then presented in the form of thematic descriptions, tables, and selected quotations from participants to provide a clear and structured representation of the findings. After that, conclusions were drawn and continuously verified by revisiting interview transcripts, observation notes, and documentation to ensure the accuracy and consistency of interpretations throughout the analysis process.

To enhance the validity and credibility of the findings, member checking was also conducted. In this process, participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the interpreted data, ensuring that their experiences were represented appropriately. In addition, the trustworthiness of the study was strengthened through triangulation of multiple data sources, including interviews, observations, and documentation. Interview recordings were transcribed and systematically compared with observational field notes to provide contextual depth and to cross-check the consistency between what participants reported and what was observed in their actual engagement with English content on social media. Through this rigorous methodological approach, the study ensured the credibility, dependability, and overall reliability of the findings.

RESULTS

Before presenting the detailed findings, it is important to emphasize that this study explored how passive English exposure through social media contributed to students' incidental language-learning experiences. The data were obtained from interviews and observations involving eight participants who actively used YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram in their daily lives. The findings are presented according to several interconnected themes that emerged from the data, namely passive English exposure, incidental language learning, social media as an informal digital learning environment, connection with global English content, exposure to different English varieties, perceived benefits and challenges, and students' strategies for dealing with difficulties.

Passive English Exposure through Social Media

The findings indicate that all eight participants experienced passive English exposure as a natural part of their everyday social media activities. English exposure primarily occurred through YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram while participants were seeking entertainment, following personal interests, or spending their free time. Importantly, the participants did not

generally access these platforms with the initial intention of learning English. Instead, English appeared naturally as part of the digital content recommended to them or encountered while scrolling through their feeds. This demonstrates that English exposure can become integrated into ordinary social media use without requiring learners to deliberately create a language-learning session.

The observation data further showed that passive English exposure occurred through three major forms of language input: audiovisual, audio, and textual input. Audiovisual exposure included English-language videos such as movie clips, lifestyle content, entertainment videos, and short-form videos. Audio exposure included spoken English, music, podcasts, and other forms of recorded speech. Meanwhile, textual exposure included captions, subtitles, comments, posts, and written expressions. The presence of these three forms indicates that participants were exposed to English through a multimodal digital environment rather than through a single linguistic channel.

The multimodal nature of social media was particularly important because participants could use one form of information to support their understanding of another. For example, when spoken English was difficult to understand, participants could rely on captions, subtitles, images, comments, or the situation presented in the video. Similarly, unfamiliar written expressions could sometimes be understood through accompanying images or the overall context. Thus, English exposure on social media was not isolated from other forms of information; instead, language was embedded within a combination of visual, auditory, and textual cues.

The interview findings showed that participants' comprehension varied according to the familiarity and complexity of the English input. Familiar words and short expressions could generally be understood without translation. However, unfamiliar vocabulary, longer texts, rapid speech, and unfamiliar accents required additional effort. Participants commonly attempted to infer meaning from the surrounding context before deciding whether to use translation, search for additional information, rewatch the content, or skip it.

RAP/P5, for example, explained that she generally understood English content because she had become familiar with English-language material through repeated exposure. When she encountered unfamiliar vocabulary, she first attempted to understand its meaning from the context or comments. When an interesting video contained speech that was too fast, she sometimes watched it repeatedly until she understood the message. EDP/P6 similarly reported using translation applications and comment sections to understand unfamiliar vocabulary and difficult spoken content. BN/P7 and FMR/P8 also described differences between short and long English texts, with longer texts requiring more processing time.These findings indicate that the passive nature of exposure primarily refers to the students' original intention rather than to the complete absence of cognitive activity. The students may not have intentionally opened social media to study English, but they still processed language when they encountered it. When content was familiar, comprehension could occur almost automatically. When content was unfamiliar or difficult, however, participants became more engaged by interpreting context, checking comments, translating words, or replaying videos.

Therefore, passive exposure can be viewed as a starting point for a continuum between incidental and more active language engagement. A student may initially encounter an English video unintentionally, but if the topic is interesting, the student may continue watching, replay the video, search for unfamiliar vocabulary, or examine the comments. The

process consequently moves from simple exposure toward more deliberate comprehension. The findings are also consistent with the principle of comprehensible input. English input encountered through social media can become easier to understand when it is supported by contextual information, images, subtitles, captions, comments, and learners' previous knowledge. Participants did not depend exclusively on spoken or written English because the surrounding digital context frequently assisted them in constructing meaning. This multimodal support may be particularly valuable when learners encounter English that is slightly beyond what they can immediately understand.

Overall, the first theme demonstrates that social media provided participants with frequent and naturally occurring English input. The exposure was flexible, multimodal, and closely connected with their personal interests. At the same time, the degree to which the exposure became meaningful depended on students' familiarity with English, the complexity of the content, and their willingness to engage with difficult input.

Incidental Language Learning through Repeated Exposure

The second major finding concerns incidental language learning. Participants reported that they often encountered and learned English unintentionally while using social media for entertainment. Their primary purpose for accessing YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram was generally not academic. Nevertheless, repeated encounters with English-language content allowed them to become increasingly familiar with vocabulary, expressions, pronunciation, and patterns of language use. Repeated exposure emerged as an important mechanism in this process. Participants encountered certain words and expressions multiple times across different videos, posts, captions, and comments. Over time, repeated encounters made these expressions increasingly recognizable. Instead of memorizing vocabulary through a conventional list, students encountered words in contexts that were connected to entertainment, personal interests, or current digital culture.

The data specifically identified expressions such as "banger," "POV," "FYP," and "slay" as examples of language encountered repeatedly in social media. Participants gradually developed an understanding of these expressions through contextual interpretation and observation of how other users employed them. Some participants also saved content or recorded words that they considered useful or interesting.

RAP/P5, for instance, reported learning the expression "banger" after encountering it repeatedly in social media content. EDP/P6 similarly encountered expressions such as "POV" through quotations, movie clips, and other digital content. These examples illustrate how vocabulary development can occur even when students do not consciously study vocabulary.

The findings suggest that repetition alone was not the only factor involved. Meaningful context also played an important role. A word encountered repeatedly in unrelated contexts might remain difficult to understand, whereas a word encountered repeatedly in similar situations could gradually become associated with a particular meaning or function. Participants could therefore develop familiarity by observing how the same expression was used by different creators or users. This pattern is closely related to incidental language learning. Incidental learning occurs when learning is not the primary purpose of an activity but develops as a consequence of engaging with meaningful content. In this study, entertainment was generally the primary purpose, while English learning occurred as a secondary outcome of continued exposure. The findings also reflect the concept of Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE). Social media provided students with opportunities to encounter English without classroom schedules, textbooks, or teacher-directed exercises.

Personal interests, entertainment, algorithmic recommendations, and repeated encounters worked together to create an informal learning environment.

An important implication of this finding is that learning and non-learning cannot always be separated clearly in digital environments. Students may consider themselves to be "just scrolling" or watching entertainment, while simultaneously developing familiarity with English vocabulary and expressions. The learning process is therefore embedded within ordinary digital behavior. However, incidental learning should not be interpreted as automatic learning. The findings show that students' attention, interest, prior knowledge, and comprehension strategies influenced whether exposure became meaningful. Difficult or uninteresting content was more likely to be skipped, while interesting content encouraged students to continue watching or rewatching. Therefore, repeated exposure creates opportunities for learning, but individual engagement determines how far those opportunities are processed.

Social Media as an Informal Digital English-Learning Environment

The third finding demonstrates that social media functioned as an informal digital environment for English exposure. Participants encountered English in spaces that were not specifically designed for language instruction. Their exposure occurred while watching entertainment videos, following creators, exploring personal interests, reading posts, and interacting with digital content. The observation findings demonstrated that English exposure occurred across different physical locations, including boarding houses, cafés, parks, and other personal environments. This indicates that passive English exposure was not dependent on a particular educational location. Instead, it was integrated into participants' everyday digital routines. This finding highlights one of the major differences between formal and informal language learning. In a formal classroom, the teacher generally determines the material, time, sequence, and learning objectives. In social media environments, however, students have considerably more control over what they watch, when they watch it, and whether they continue engaging with it.

Another important characteristic was the role of algorithmic recommendations. Participants frequently encountered English-language content because platforms continued recommending content related to their interests and previous interactions. A participant could initially encounter one English-language video and subsequently receive similar content because of viewing, liking, saving, or reposting behavior. AAH/P1, for example, reported that interaction features such as likes, reposts, and saves contributed to the continued appearance of similar English-language content. IPS/P4 also described situations in which one piece of content encouraged her to explore additional English-language information or articles because the topic became interesting to her. These experiences demonstrate that algorithmic personalization may increase the continuity of English exposure. Once users repeatedly interact with English content, they may receive more similar content, creating a cycle of exposure and engagement. This cycle can increase the frequency with which learners encounter particular vocabulary, expressions, accents, or communicative styles.

At the same time, the algorithmic environment does not guarantee that all exposure will be educationally valuable. Recommendation systems primarily respond to user behavior and interests rather than formal language-learning objectives. Consequently, students may encounter both useful and problematic language forms, including slang, abbreviations, incomplete sentences, and non-standard grammar. The findings therefore suggest that social media is best understood as a complementary English-learning environment rather than a

replacement for formal education. Students already use these platforms regularly, meaning that English exposure can potentially be integrated into familiar and meaningful activities. Teachers can also encourage students to reflect on English content they encounter naturally and use it as supplementary material for classroom learning. However, exposure alone should not automatically be interpreted as successful language acquisition. The participants' experiences differed according to their familiarity with English, the difficulty of the content, their interest in the topic, and the strategies they employed when comprehension problems occurred.

Connection with Global English Content and Communities

The participants' experiences also indicate that social media connected them with English-language content produced by creators and users from different countries and linguistic backgrounds. Through social media, participants could encounter English in international entertainment, lifestyle content, sports, music, quotations, memes, and other forms of digital communication. This connection is important because it exposed students to English beyond the forms commonly presented in formal instructional materials. Rather than encountering only textbook dialogues or standardized examples, students encountered English as it is actually used in contemporary digital communication. The exposure to global content also increased the possibility of encountering cultural references. Students could learn not only the linguistic meaning of an expression but also how that expression was used within a particular cultural or digital context. In this way, English exposure was connected with cultural understanding.

The findings suggest that personal interest played an important role in maintaining this global exposure. Students were more likely to engage with English content when it was related to topics they already enjoyed. Consequently, the language input became meaningful because it was attached to an existing interest rather than presented as an isolated vocabulary or grammar exercise. The connection with global content also encouraged some students to explore information beyond the original social media post. For example, an interesting topic could motivate students to search for additional English-language articles, news, or information. This indicates that social media could sometimes become the starting point for broader engagement with English. Therefore, social media expands the linguistic environment available to EFL students. Instead of relying exclusively on local or classroom-based English input, students can encounter international English through everyday digital participation.

Exposure to Global English Varieties

Another important finding concerns participants' exposure to different English varieties. The participants encountered different accents, slang, abbreviations, and non-standard grammatical forms through social media. Such exposure demonstrated that English encountered in digital environments is diverse and cannot be reduced to a single standardized variety. The participants experienced different levels of difficulty when encountering unfamiliar accents. Some accents required additional processing time, particularly when pronunciation differed considerably from the English varieties with which students were familiar. Strong regional accents and certain non-native accents could therefore create temporary comprehension difficulties.

Slang and abbreviations presented another challenge. Because many digital expressions are highly contextual, participants sometimes needed to examine comments, search online, or use translation tools before understanding their meanings. The participants'

strategies show that digital language requires not only knowledge of standard vocabulary but also familiarity with contemporary communicative practices. Non-standard grammar was similarly challenging. Participants sometimes encountered grammatical structures that differed from the forms they had learned formally. Although these forms could be understood from context, they could also create confusion, particularly when combined with unfamiliar vocabulary or accents.

At the same time, exposure to these varieties can provide valuable awareness of the diversity of English. Students can become familiar with the fact that English is used by speakers with different linguistic backgrounds and that pronunciation, vocabulary, and expressions may vary across communities. The multimodal nature of social media helped reduce some of these difficulties. Participants could use captions, subtitles, images, emojis, comments, and video context to compensate when spoken English was difficult to understand. This suggests that digital multimodality functions as an informal form of comprehension support. Consequently, exposure to global English varieties represents both a benefit and a challenge. It increases learners' awareness of authentic variation while simultaneously requiring them to develop flexible comprehension strategies.

Perceived Benefits of Passive English Exposure

The findings reveal several perceived benefits of passive English exposure through social media. The most prominent benefits included vocabulary development, increased familiarity with English expressions, improved listening and pronunciation, greater comprehension, cultural knowledge, and a more relaxed learning experience.

The first benefit was vocabulary development. Participants repeatedly encountered words and expressions that were unfamiliar to them at first. Through contextual interpretation and repeated exposure, some of these words became increasingly familiar. Digital slang was particularly prominent because it was repeatedly encountered across different forms of content. The second benefit concerned listening comprehension. Frequent exposure to spoken English allowed participants to become more accustomed to natural speech, different pronunciation patterns, and varying speaking rates. This was particularly relevant because social media exposed students to language that was not always carefully articulated for language learners. The third benefit was pronunciation awareness. By repeatedly hearing English spoken by different creators, participants could become more familiar with how words and expressions were pronounced in natural communication. The fourth benefit was increased cultural knowledge. International content exposed students to cultural references, lifestyles, humor, entertainment, and communication practices that were not necessarily available through classroom materials.

Finally, social media was perceived as a relatively relaxed environment for encountering English. Students could decide whether to continue watching, rewatch a video, read comments, translate an expression, or skip content. This level of control distinguished social media exposure from classroom activities, where students may be required to complete a task regardless of their interest in the material. Taken together, these benefits indicate that passive exposure can provide multiple forms of language-related experience simultaneously. Students are not only encountering individual words but also listening to pronunciation, observing expressions in context, interpreting cultural references, and becoming familiar with different communication styles.

Challenges and Strategies for Overcoming Them

Although participants reported several benefits, passive English exposure also presented challenges. The main difficulties involved unfamiliar vocabulary, long texts, fast speech, unfamiliar accents, slang, abbreviations, and non-standard English. These difficulties demonstrate that natural exposure does not always mean immediately comprehensible exposure.

One of the most common strategies was contextual interpretation. Participants first attempted to determine meaning by considering surrounding words, the topic, images, or the situation presented in the video. This allowed them to understand some unfamiliar language without immediately using translation. A second strategy was checking comment sections. Comments sometimes provided additional explanations or examples of how a particular expression was being used. This was especially useful when students encountered internet slang or abbreviations.

A third strategy was using translation tools and online searches. When context was insufficient, participants searched for meanings or used translation applications to confirm their interpretations.A fourth strategy was repeated viewing. When students found the content interesting, they were willing to watch it several times until they understood the message. RAP/P5, for example, rewatched difficult but interesting content when the speaker talked too quickly. Other participants similarly reported that repeated viewing helped them process difficult English. The use of these strategies is significant because it demonstrates that students were not simply passive recipients of language input. Their exposure began passively, but comprehension difficulties could trigger active engagement. Thus, passive exposure and active learning should not be treated as completely separate categories.The students' willingness to continue with difficult content also appeared to depend on interest. Interesting content encouraged persistence, while difficult and uninteresting content was more likely to be skipped. This suggests that personal relevance can influence whether exposure develops into deeper language processing.

DISCUSSION

Before discussing the findings in detail, it is important to emphasize that this section interprets the empirical results presented in the previous section. The discussion connects the observed patterns of passive English exposure, incidental learning, and digital interaction with relevant theoretical frameworks and prior studies. The aim is to provide a deeper explanation of how and why social media functions as an informal environment for English language exposure and learning among the participants. In addition, this section highlights how digital behavior, algorithmic systems, and learner autonomy collectively shape the process of language exposure in contemporary contexts. This interpretation is essential to understand that language learning in the digital era is no longer confined to formal instructional settings, but increasingly embedded in everyday online practices.

Passive Exposure as a Continuous Learning Opportunity

The overall findings demonstrate that social media has transformed English exposure from an activity that is primarily scheduled and institutionally controlled into an experience that can occur continuously throughout everyday life. Participants encountered English while engaging in activities that were not formally classified as learning. This demonstrates the increasingly blurred boundary between formal learning and everyday digital participation.

The important point is that the participants did not need to consciously decide to study English before encountering English input. Their existing social media habits were sufficient to place them in contact with English-language materials. However, the findings also demonstrate that exposure alone does not guarantee learning. The language became more meaningful when students paid attention, connected it with context, repeated the content, or searched for additional information. Thus, passive exposure should be conceptualized as an opportunity rather than an automatic learning mechanism. It creates the conditions under which learning can occur, while individual attention, prior knowledge, interest, and comprehension strategies influence the extent to which that opportunity is realized.

Relationship between Passive Exposure and Incidental Learning

The relationship between passive exposure and incidental learning is one of the most important findings of this study. Participants often began with entertainment-oriented intentions but ended up acquiring familiarity with English vocabulary, expressions, pronunciation, and language patterns. Repeated exposure appears to be particularly important because social media allows similar linguistic forms to appear repeatedly. When a student repeatedly encounters the same expression in different contexts, the expression can gradually become familiar. This process differs from deliberate vocabulary memorization because the learning occurs within meaningful communicative contexts.

The examples of “banger,” “POV,” “FYP,” and “slay” illustrate this mechanism. Students did not initially approach these words as vocabulary items to memorize. Instead, they encountered them as part of digital communication and gradually developed an understanding of their meanings. This finding supports the view that incidental learning can complement formal instruction. Classroom learning may introduce vocabulary systematically, while social media can provide repeated exposure that reinforces familiarity and contextual knowledge.

The Role of Multimodality in Comprehension

Another important contribution of the findings is the role of multimodality. Social media does not present English as isolated text or speech. Instead, learners encounter language together with images, videos, captions, subtitles, comments, emojis, music, and other contextual resources. These resources can function as informal scaffolding. When students cannot fully understand spoken English, they may use subtitles or visual context. When they encounter an unfamiliar word, they may infer its meaning from the accompanying image or discussion in the comments.

Therefore, multimodal digital content may help make English input more comprehensible. This is particularly important for EFL learners who may have limited opportunities to interact with English outside the classroom. However, multimodality should not be assumed to eliminate all comprehension difficulties. Strong accents, rapid speech, unfamiliar slang, and non-standard grammar may remain challenging even when visual support is available. Consequently, students still need strategies for dealing with difficult input.

Algorithmic Recommendations and Repeated Exposure

The findings also highlight the role of algorithmic recommendation systems in shaping language exposure. Participants reported that their interactions with English content, including likes, reposts, and saves, contributed to the continued appearance of similar content. This creates an interesting relationship between learner behavior and platform algorithms. Students’ initial exposure may be accidental, but continued interaction can

influence subsequent recommendations. The resulting cycle may increase the frequency of English exposure.

From a language-learning perspective, this repeated exposure can be beneficial because it provides additional opportunities to encounter vocabulary and expressions. However, it also means that students have limited control over the linguistic quality of what they encounter. For this reason, digital literacy remains important. Students need to recognize that social media English may contain formal, informal, slang, abbreviated, or non-standard forms. Exposure to such variation can be valuable, but learners should understand the context and appropriateness of different forms.

Personal Interest as a Mediating Factor

The findings indicate that personal interest played an important role in determining the extent of students' engagement with English content. Participants were more willing to continue watching difficult content when the topic was interesting. In contrast, difficult content that did not attract their interest was more likely to be skipped.

This suggests that interest can mediate the relationship between exposure and learning. The same linguistic difficulty may produce different responses depending on whether the content is meaningful to the learner. Personal interest can therefore support persistence. When students care about the topic, they may be willing to tolerate unfamiliar vocabulary, fast speech, or difficult accents. They may also rewatch content or search for additional information. This finding has an important implication for English education. Rather than providing identical digital content to all learners, teachers may encourage students to identify English-language content connected to their own interests. Such an approach may increase engagement while simultaneously expanding English exposure.

Implications for English Language Education

The findings suggest that social media can serve as a complementary resource for English education. Because students already use these platforms in their daily lives, educators can connect formal classroom instruction with the language students naturally encounter online. For example, students can be encouraged to record unfamiliar vocabulary from social media, identify differences between formal and informal expressions, analyze pronunciation, or discuss the meaning of slang according to context. Such activities can transform naturally occurring exposure into more conscious language-learning opportunities.

However, educators should avoid presenting social media as a replacement for formal instruction. Social media content is highly variable and may contain inaccurate information, inappropriate language, or non-standard grammatical forms. Students therefore need guidance in distinguishing between language that is suitable for academic or formal communication and language that is appropriate only in informal digital contexts.The findings ultimately support a balanced perspective: social media provides valuable opportunities for authentic exposure, while formal education provides structure, explanation, correction, and guidance. Combining both environments may offer students a broader and more flexible English-learning experience.

Overall Interpretation

Overall, the findings show that passive English exposure through social media is a multidimensional phenomenon. It involves more than simply seeing or hearing English. Students encounter language through audiovisual, audio, and textual input; interpret meaning through context and multimodal resources; repeatedly encounter vocabulary and

expressions; interact with global English content; and develop strategies for dealing with unfamiliar forms.

The process can begin unintentionally but may gradually involve active cognitive engagement. A student may open TikTok for entertainment, encounter an English-language video, notice an unfamiliar expression, infer its meaning from the context, read the comments, replay the video, and eventually remember the expression. In this sequence, an initially passive encounter develops into incidental learning through repeated and meaningful engagement. The findings therefore support the view that social media can function as an informal and flexible environment for English exposure. Its greatest value is not that it replaces classroom learning, but that it expands the amount, variety, and authenticity of English that students can encounter in their everyday lives.

At the same time, the study emphasizes the importance of learner awareness. Passive exposure becomes more educationally meaningful when students recognize the language they encounter, pay attention to unfamiliar expressions, and use appropriate strategies to understand them. Consequently, the potential of social media lies in the interaction between continuous exposure, personal interest, multimodal support, repeated encounters, and learner engagement.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences of eighth-semester English Education students at Universitas Islam Negeri Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu regarding passive English language exposure through social media, as well as the benefits and challenges they experienced. Based on the findings, all eight participants encountered English naturally through YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram while engaging in entertainment, personal interests, and everyday social media activities. The exposure occurred through audiovisual, audio, and textual input, including videos, music, captions, subtitles, comments, memes, and other forms of digital content.

The findings indicate that passive exposure created opportunities for incidental English learning. Through repeated encounters with English-language content, participants became more familiar with vocabulary, internet slang, expressions, pronunciation, and patterns of language use. Social media also provided an informal and flexible environment in which English exposure occurred beyond the classroom. Algorithmic recommendations and students' personal interests contributed to the continuity of this exposure by repeatedly presenting related English-language content.

At the same time, passive English exposure was not completely effortless. Participants experienced difficulties with unfamiliar vocabulary, long texts, fast speech, unfamiliar accents, slang, abbreviations, and non-standard English. To deal with these difficulties, they used contextual clues, visual information, comment sections, translation tools, online searches, and repeated viewing. These strategies demonstrate that although the initial exposure was often unintentional, students could become actively engaged in interpreting English when the content was meaningful or interesting to them.

The study also shows that passive exposure provided several perceived benefits, including increased vocabulary knowledge, greater familiarity with English expressions, improved listening and pronunciation, better comprehension, and increased cultural knowledge. The participants also experienced social media as a more relaxed environment

for encountering English because they could interact with content according to their own interests and pace.

Overall, the findings suggest that social media can function as a meaningful complementary environment for informal English exposure and incidental learning. However, passive exposure should not be regarded as a replacement for formal English instruction. Its value lies in expanding students' opportunities to encounter authentic and diverse English outside the classroom. For students, greater awareness of the English encountered in everyday social media use may help transform incidental exposure into more conscious learning. For English educators, students' existing digital practices can be considered as potential complementary resources for connecting classroom learning with authentic language use. Nevertheless, because this study focused on the reported experiences and perceptions of eight students, further research involving a larger and more diverse group of learners and other research approaches is needed to examine the broader relationship between passive social media exposure and English language development.

REFERENCES

Al Arif, T. Z. Z., Sulistiyo, U., & Handayani, R. (2021). Using social media for English language learning by EFL university students: A mixed-methods study. *Celt: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching and Literature, 21*(1). https://doi.org/10.24167/celt.v21i1.2312

Al-Zoubi, S. M. (2018). The impact of exposure to English language on language acquisition. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research, 5*(4), 151–162.

Baureh, G. A. D., & Neman, M. I. E. (2025). Learners' perceptions of social media-based vocabulary learning: Insights from TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube users in an EFL context. *Journal of English Language and Education*. https://jele.or.id/index.php/jele/article/view/1742

Ellis, R. (2020). *The study of second language acquisition* (3rd ed.). Oxford University Press.

Gass, S. M., Behney, J., & Plonsky, L. (2020). *Second language acquisition: An introductory course* (5th ed.). Routledge.

Kohnke, L., & Moorhouse, B. L. (2021). Adopting the technological pedagogical content knowledge framework for English language teaching in the digital age. *RELC Journal, 52*(3), 617–622.

Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.

Lee, C., & Dressman, M. (2018). When IDLE hands are not all the same: The complexity of informal digital learning of English. *System, 73*, 13–24.

Mubarak, A. A. Al. (2016). Learning English as a second language through social media: Saudi Arabian tertiary context. *International Journal of Linguistics, 8*(6), 112–125. https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v8i6.10449

Muftah, M. (2023). Impact of social media on learning English language during the COVID-19 pandemic. *PSU Research Review*. https://doi.org/10.1108/PRR-10-2021-0060

Nama, D. Y. (2024). The use of social media to learn English for university students. *ELite Journal: International Journal of Education, Language and Literature, 4*(1), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.26740/elitejournal.v4n1.p1-14

Ningrum, P. K., & Apoko, T. W. (2025). The impact of social media on English language learning: A mixed-methods study. *International Journal of Research in Education*. https://doi.org/10.26877/j656ns21

Noori, A. Q., Orfan, S. N., Akramy, S. A., & Hashemi, A. (2022). The use of social media in EFL learning and teaching in higher education of Afghanistan. *Cogent Social Sciences, 8*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2027613

Pikhart, M., & Botezat, O. (2021). The impact of the use of social media on second language acquisition. *Procedia Computer Science, 192*, 1621–1628. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2021.08.166

Pratiwi, R. A., Kusuma, I. P. I., & Ana, I. K. T. A. (2024). Exploring the reason of university students to use social media for English learning. *Journal of Psychology and Instruction, 8*(3). https://doi.org/10.23887/jpai.v8i3.82518

Rezaul Karim, M., Ali Mondal, S., Hussain, A., Alam, M., & Nazarieh, M. (2022). Social media and learning of English language: A study on the undergraduate students of Assam, India. *Education Research International, 2022*. https://doi.org/10.1155/2022/8238895

Schmitt, N., & Schmitt, D. (2020). *Vocabulary in language teaching* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

Sockett, G. (2014). *The online informal learning of English*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137414885

Trinder, R. (2017). Informal and deliberate learning with new technologies. *ELT Journal, 71*(4), 401–412. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccw117

Yani, M., Palanee, M., Subramaniam, B., Wathoni, N. I., & Aiza, I. (2024). Uncovering social media preference of non-EFL/ESL students in English learning at higher education. *Indonesian Journal of English Education, 11*(1). https://doi.org/10.15408/ijee.v11i1.37865

Zainal, Z., & Rahmat, N. H. (2020). Social media and its influence on vocabulary and language learning: A case study. *European Journal of Education Studies, 7*(11). https://doi.org/10.46827/ejes.v7i11.3331

Seli, F. Y. (2024). Indonesian university students' perceptions on the use of social media for English language learning. *Jurnal Ilmiah Profesi Pendidikan, 9*(1), 285–292. https://doi.org/10.29303/jipp.v9i1.2055

Xodabande, I. (2017). The effectiveness of social media network Telegram in teaching English language pronunciation to Iranian EFL learners. *Cogent Education, 4*(1). https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2017.1347081