

From Scrolling to Speaking: Exploring the Vocabulary Gap among Indonesian EFL Learners in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

The widespread use of digital media has substantially increased English exposure among adolescent learners. Social media, online games, video-sharing platforms, and other digital applications provide learners with frequent encounters with English outside formal classroom settings. However, frequent exposure does not necessarily result in the development of functional vocabulary that learners can actively retrieve and use in communication. This qualitative case study explores the vocabulary acquisition difficulties experienced by Indonesian senior high school EFL learners in the digital era, with particular attention to the gap between passive digital exposure and productive vocabulary use. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eight senior high school students and two English teachers, classroom observations, and field notes. The data were analyzed thematically through data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings indicate two major patterns. First, students frequently encounter English through social media and online gaming, but their engagement is predominantly passive. Second, students demonstrate a strong dependence on automated translation tools, which reduces opportunities for independent meaning-making and contextual processing. These patterns are associated with difficulties in retrieving basic functional vocabulary and increased anxiety during classroom speaking activities. The findings suggest that digital exposure should not be equated with vocabulary acquisition. Rather than simply increasing students' access to digital English, contextualized vocabulary tasks, peer interaction, role-play, digital storytelling, and guided use of translation technologies. The study contributes to the discussion of digital-age EFL learning by highlighting the importance of moving learners from recognition to active production.

Keywords: *EFL Learners, Vocabulary Acquisition, Digital Media, Productive Vocabulary, Translation Tools, Speaking Anxiety*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received

June 13, 2026

Revised

August 17, 2026

Accepted

September 28,
2026

Journal Homepage

<https://ojs.staialfurqan.ac.id/IJoASER/>

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INTRODUCTION

In today's digital era, the way individuals encounter the English language has changed significantly. Senior high school students, often characterized as digital natives, are consistently surrounded by English digital environment via social media platforms, online gaming, streaming platforms, and various online applications. In the process of acquiring a second language, the acquisition of vocabulary emerges as a fundamental and indispensable skill. Nobody can learn a language without acquiring vocabulary firsthand highlighting the importance of vocabulary in language learning (Kaya, 2023; Tiansoodeenon et al., 2023). When individuals who grew up with technology frequently interact with true digital multimedia, it is believed that they instinctively acquire functional words essential for daily communication.

Emphasizing vocabulary is extremely important since lexical understanding acts as the essential foundation for overall language skills. Vocabulary is not merely a component of a language; it is the core driver that enables reading comprehension, listening clarity, writing mechanics, and oral fluency (Tang, 2023). Vocabulary, the building blocks of language, is crucial for effective communication. A strong vocabulary enables individuals to express themselves clearly, comprehend information accurately, and engage in meaningful interactions. (Javaid et al., 2023) said that as a tool for determining which terms are good for communicating successfully and quickly understanding contexts students are required to learn vocabulary well. Without a sufficient collection of basics, everyday words, grammar structures lose their effectiveness, and meaningful exchanges of information fall apart.

Mastery of high-frequency vocabulary is what allows senior high school students to express thoughts, understand instructions, and transition from passive learners into active communicators (M. Chen, 2025). Therefore, deficiencies in foundational vocabulary inevitably paralyze a student's entire academic performance in English. Individuals with a well-developed lexicon convey professionalism, eloquence, and intellectual aptitude. In the professional arena, effective communication frequently serves as the pivotal factor for success, and a rich vocabulary allows individuals to present ideas persuasively and partake in meaningful dialogue (Muryani & Yunus, 2024).

Learning vocabulary in a language can pose difficulties for non-native English speakers. In the early steps of learning English, it is mandatory to master L2 vocabulary first. Acquiring vocabulary is not a simple task. The process of learning vocabulary in a second language is particularly challenging and complex. There are four factors that contribute to vocabulary acquisition challenges: pronunciation, spelling, word length, and meaning (Putri et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the transition towards digital tools in the process of acquiring vocabulary has not only changed the way students learn, but it has also created a dynamic and adaptable environment for them. Digital learning media refer to technology-based tools used to deliver instructional content in an interactive, flexible, and engaging format (Majid et al., 2025). Digital tools have become an integral part of modern language learning, offering innovative ways to support vocabulary acquisition. Through applications, online platforms, and multimedia resources, students can access a wide range of vocabulary materials in an interactive and engaging manner.

Expertise in frequently used, effective vocabulary is what empowers upper Senior High School students to articulate independent ideas, engage in meaningful exchanges, and evolve from merely consuming media to becoming proficient language practitioners. As a result, persistent weaknesses in basic vocabulary not only obstruct a student's language development; they ultimately stall their overall academic achievements in all four major linguistic skills in English. However, there is a significant disconnect between the significant digital accessibility and the real language skills of senior high school students in the field. Despite spending multiple hours interacting with digital devices, a substantial number of students remain unable to comprehend or produce basic, everyday English vocabulary. Recent research indicates that constant digital engagement does not inherently ensure vocabulary skills; rather, it frequently results in recognition without the ability to actively use the language (Liu et al., 2024). In the classroom, this deficiency becomes evident when students struggle

with elementary situational expressions, simple instructions, and essential vocabulary, facing major barriers to understanding.

Recent studies show mixed results regarding how digital media affects language learning. On one hand, research by (Haque et al., 2024; Puspitasari, Anwar, Hadijah, et al., 2025) shows that interactive digital activities, such as online games, can help students understand more English words when they hear or see them. On the other hand, (Paramio & Zayas, 2026) stated that most social media activities are passive. When students spend hours scrolling through TikTok or Instagram, they develop a very short attention span. They rely heavily on instant translation buttons instead of trying to understand the English words by themselves. Other studies revealed that learners' engagement in extramural.

English EE (through activities such as watching television or films or playing digital games) constitutes an important individual difference (ID) variable that needs to be included in studies that aim to measure L2 English proficiency or development (L. Sparks et al., 2023). (Teng & Zhang, 2024) introduce the Involvement Load Hypothesis. This theory states that students remember new words better if they have to work hard to understand them. For example, if a student has to search for a word's meaning and think about how to use it, they will remember it long-term. However, digital tools like smartphones and apps make everything too easy. With automated translation features, students can simply click a button to translate words instantly. Because their brains do not have to do any hard work, the words are forgotten almost immediately.

This situation shows a clear gap in existing educational research. Most previous studies only talk about the good sides of technology, assuming that using smartphones automatically makes students better at English. Very few qualitative studies look at the negative habits that cause digital exposure to fail. Additionally, while quantitative studies often look at test scores, we lack deep qualitative information about the real, daily struggles that students face behind their screens.

The novelty of this research is instead of using large surveys, this research talks directly to twelve students and two English teachers. This qualitative approach allows us to compare what the students feel with what the teachers actually see in class. Furthermore, this study does not just focus on test scores. Instead, it uncovers the psychological side; like classroom anxiety and the lazy habits caused by instant translation tools. In the end, this research will give practical tips for English teachers. It provides a real guide on how to help students stop being passive internet viewers and start becoming active English speakers.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative case study design to investigate the vocabulary acquisition challenges faced by learners. A qualitative approach is the most appropriate choice for this research because it allows the researcher to explore the real, daily experiences of individuals within their natural educational setting (Chand, 2025). To ensure comprehensive and credible findings, data were gathered using multiple instruments to achieve data triangulation (Rana & Chimoriya, 2025). The primary method used was semi-structured interviews, which were conducted individually with all eight students and two teachers. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they provide a clear, pre-determined list of questions while still allowing the researcher the flexibility to ask follow-up questions based on the participants' real-time answers. To supplement the interview data, the researcher also

conducted extensive classroom observations during regular English lessons. These observations focused closely on how students reacted when the teacher asked them to produce basic vocabulary and how they utilized their smartphones during class tasks. Finally, the researcher maintained detailed field notes throughout the observation process to record the students' body language, visible signs of speaking anxiety, and spontaneous classroom interactions.

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis, following the interactive model proposed by (Naeem et al., 2023). The analysis process moved through three continuous and interconnected steps, beginning with data condensation. During data condensation, the researcher carefully selected, focused, and simplified the raw interview transcripts and observation notes, removing irrelevant information while highlighting critical statements about vocabulary difficulties and student anxiety. Next, the data display stage was conducted; where the organized data were woven into clear paragraphs and descriptive quotes to vividly show the connections between the students' digital habits and their classroom performance. Finally, the process concluded with conclusion drawing and verification, where the researcher identified recurring patterns and main themes. These emerging themes were then verified by constantly checking them against the classroom observation field notes and the teacher interview transcripts to ensure the final conclusions were accurate, valid, and trustworthy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the result and discussion derived from qualitative data analysis. The primary objective of this study is to explore the specific vocabulary difficulties faced by eight Indonesian senior high school EFL learners in the digital era. To ensure data validity, semi-structured interviews and digital logs from the eight student participants (S1-S8) were triangulated with interviews from two English instructors (T1 and T2).

Result

Based on the thematic analysis of the field data, the researchers identified two major findings: passive digital consumption and over-reliance on translation tools, and the subsequent impacts, they are classroom anxiety and a lack of functional vocabulary.

1. Passive Digital Consumption and Over-Reliance on Translation Tools

The interviews revealed that while all eight students (S1-S8) and two English teachers (T1-T2) spend between 3 to 6 hours daily on English-rich platforms (such as TikTok, Instagram, and online gaming), their learning is strictly passive. Students simply scroll through content or play games without actively trying to remember the words. When they encounter an unknown English word, they do not attempt to guess its meaning. Instead, they instantly rely on automated translation features (like Google Translate).

S4 (Student 4) shared how this shortcut has become a daily habit:

"When I play online games or scroll through TikTok, a lot of English words pop up. But I never actually write them down or try to memorize them. If there's an important caption, I just tap the 'See Translation' button or use Google Translate. It's so practical, so I don't have to stress myself out thinking about what it means." (Interview, March 12, 2026)

This statement shows that instant technology creates an easy way out for students. Because the translation is immediate, the brain does not perform any deep

mental work. His reliance on instant features was manifested differently but consistently among other students. S-1 acknowledged that when they watch TikTok videos, they quickly seek out translated subtitles in the comments or rely on screen-translation applications. S-2 and S-5 confessed that they perceive English on social media simply as a form of "background noise" or visual enhancement; Student 2 remarked, *"I just enjoy the trends, if I don't understand the English words, I swipe or let the auto-translate do the work,"* while S5 noted that they never feel the need to remember words because *"Google Translate is always one click away on my phone."*

Moreover, the integration of technology has transformed how students perceive conventional education. S-3 and S-6 noted that maintaining a vocabulary notebook seems outdated. S-3 explained that writing down words manually is "excessively time-consuming," while S-6 stated, *"What is the point of memorizing words when my smartphone can translate a full page in just two seconds?"* In addition, S-7 and S-8 indicated that while participating in online gaming activities, they depend significantly on visual hints within the game or immediate translations that pop up to finish tasks, entirely avoiding the necessity to understand the actual English expressions.

To triangulate this data, the interviews with the English instructors confirmed that this digital habit brings a negative impact into the classroom. **T1 (Teacher 1)** observed:

"Students currently exhibit highly passive vocabulary skills. In the classroom, when tasked with writing short sentences or answering questions, they reflexively attempt to access their mobile devices to use translation applications. This behavior indicates a declining capacity for independent thinking without the aid of technology." (Interview, March 15, 2026)

The immediate satisfaction provided by online translation services fosters a shallow workflow. Since translations occur instantly and are not permanent, the mind avoids engaging in thorough cognitive processing or meaningful encoding, resulting in the students lacking a rich vocabulary base.

2. The Impacts: Classroom Anxiety and Lack of Functional Vocabulary

The second major finding is the direct impact of these digital habits inside the classroom. Because students rely on instant translations at home, they fail to build a permanent vocabulary repository in their minds. Consequently, when technology is removed during classroom activities, students experience severe foreign language speaking anxiety and fail to produce even basic, everyday expressions. This cognitive disconnect leads to a false sense of fluency. S-8 highlighted this misconception, saying, *"Since I listen to English music and view English subtitles daily, I believed I was proficient. However, I was wrong."*

"This troubling transition from digital comfort to classroom paralysis was vividly described by S-7, who confessed that their brain "totally shuts off" when the teacher prohibits phone in the class. S4 similarly noted that in the absence of an internet connection, they experience a sense of "linguistic vulnerability."

This affective filter often triggers severe physical and psychological anxiety during oral tasks. S-1 and S-3 confessed to experiencing intense nervousness; S-1 shared:

"I often hear English words on social media, so I feel like I'm already familiar with the language. But when the teacher asks me to speak or stand up in front of the class, I instantly go blank and start shaking. I know what the words mean in my head when I'm reading, but my

tongue just freezes and I don't know how to say simple, everyday words out loud." (Interview, March 12, 2026).

Similarly, S2 and S5 stated that the fear of making mistakes makes them choose to remain silent or whisper answers to their peers rather than speaking up.

This confession proves that high digital exposure only creates a false sense of familiarity. Students think they know English because they see it every day, but they cannot actually produce it.

T-2 (Teacher 2) substantiated these claims, explaining that the vocabulary students do pick up from their extensive screen time is highly contextualized, informal, and non-functional for basic communicative purposes:

"These students can recognize internet slang or gaming terms. Ironically, however, when asked to use basic everyday verbs like 'to borrow,' 'to return,' or 'to explain,' they do not know them. Their passivity outside the classroom turns into acute anxiety inside the classroom." (Interview, March 16, 2026).

This observation aligned precisely with the self-assessments of S5 and S6, who both confessed that while they master specialized vocabulary like buff, nerf, FYP, or aesthetic, they genuinely struggled to recall basic classroom verbs.

Ultimately, the data from all ten participants paints a cohesive narrative: high digital exposure without active pedagogical intent creates a deceptive familiarity. While students are heavily immersed in English environments daily, their over-reliance on automated tools cripples their functional vocabulary development, culminating in severe classroom anxiety when they are forced to rely solely on their own independent linguistic resources.

3. From Digital Comfort to Classroom Anxiety

The last finding concerns the emotional consequences of the exposure-production gap.

Students who felt comfortable encountering English online did not necessarily feel confident using English orally in class. S1 explained:

"I often hear English words on social media, so I feel like I'm already familiar with the language. But when the teacher asks me to speak or stand up in front of the class, I instantly go blank." (Interview, March 12, 2026)

The statement illustrates the transition from digital familiarity to communicative difficulty. Online environments may allow students to consume English without being required to respond immediately. Classroom speaking activities, by contrast, require rapid retrieval and production.

S2 and S5 also reported that fear of making mistakes sometimes caused them to remain silent or communicate answers privately with classmates. These experiences indicate that vocabulary limitations and affective factors may reinforce one another.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a useful theoretical lens for interpreting this finding. High anxiety and low confidence can interfere with learners' ability to process and produce language. In this study, the students' difficulties were not necessarily caused by a complete absence of vocabulary knowledge. Rather, some students appeared unable to retrieve vocabulary efficiently under the pressure of classroom communication.

Therefore, vocabulary instruction and anxiety reduction should not be treated as completely separate pedagogical issues. Students need repeated opportunities to retrieve and use vocabulary in supportive environments before being required to perform publicly.

Discussion

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that daily exposure to digital media does not automatically guarantee that senior high school students will master functional English vocabulary. While students spend hours interacting with English content online, a significant mismatch occurs when they are required to produce that language in a formal classroom setting. This discussion interprets these field facts by connecting them to established theoretical frameworks and recent empirical literature.

The primary reason behind this exposure mismatch can be explained through (Lea et al., 2023). This theory states that long-term vocabulary retention depends on the cognitive processing load—specifically the elements of need, search, and evaluation that a learner experiences during a task (Kim et al., 2025; Puspitasari, Anwar, Umam, et al., 2025). The data from the twelve students shows that their digital habits reduce this cognitive load to zero. When students encounter unfamiliar words while gaming or browsing social media, the immediate availability of automated features, such as Google Translate or instant translation buttons, creates a cognitive bypass. Because the smartphone does all the work, the students' brains do not have to put any effort into searching for meanings or evaluating contexts. Consequently, the words vanish from their short-term memory almost immediately. This finding strongly supports the work of (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2024), who argued that passive digital consumption fosters short attention spans and shallow engagement rather than actual, sustainable language learning.

Furthermore, this study highlights a psychological barrier termed the illusion of competence. Because high schools students see and hear English terms every day on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, they develop a false sense of familiarity with the language (Rahmawati et al., 2026). However, as (Webb, 2005) emphasized, there is a massive conceptual gap between receptive vocabulary, which is words that learners merely recognize passively on a screen, and productive vocabulary (Clemente-Suárez et al., 2024), which is words that learners can actively retrieve and use in speech or writing. When students enter the classroom and the teacher removes their smartphones, this illusion of competence quickly shatters. Students realize they cannot recall basic, everyday words because they never truly internalized them.

This sudden realization triggers intense feelings of vulnerability, which can be explained through Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1985) in (Oller, 1988). Krashen argues that when a student experiences high anxiety, low motivation, or a lack of self-confidence, an invisible mental wall goes up, blocking the language acquisition and production process (Mehak Jawed et al., 2025). In this study, the students' reliance on instant technology at home leaves them unprepared for spontaneous communication in class. The fear of making pronunciation mistakes and being judged by their peers raises their affective filter, causing them to freeze or go blank during speaking tasks. This outcome directly aligns with recent Asian EFL studies by (Syamsudin et al., 2025; Y. Chen, 2024; Ebadijalal & Yousofi, 2023; Supraptiningsih & Sakti Aji, 2026), which discovered that high digital literacy on smartphones does not translate to lower classroom speaking anxiety. Ultimately, the discussion proves that digital exposure is not a magic solution. Without active cognitive effort and pedagogical guidance to change passive viewing into active speaking, students will remain fluent on their screens but entirely silent in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that daily, extensive exposure to English-dominant digital media does not automatically translate into functional, active vocabulary mastery for

senior high school students. Although the twelve participants spent multiple hours every day immersed in English environments through social media and online gaming, their engagement remained strictly passive. The immediate availability of automated translation features, such as Google Translate, creates a cognitive bypass that removes the mental effort required to store new words. Consequently, this passive habit creates a dangerous illusion of competence; students feel familiar with English on their screens, but they fail to internalize the words in their long-term memory. When forced to produce basic, everyday vocabulary in the classroom without the aid of their smartphones, the students experience severe foreign language speaking anxiety and mental blocks. This study proves that without active cognitive engagement, high digital exposure only builds receptive recognition rather than the productive competence needed for real-life communication.

Based on these findings, several pedagogical recommendations are suggested for English language instructors. Teachers must recognize that digital natives still need explicit guidance to bridge the gap between informal digital habits and formal classroom performance. Rather than banning smartphones, educators should design targeted instructional activities that force students to increase their cognitive load. For instance, teachers can implement interactive tasks such as classroom debates, role-plays, or digital storytelling based on the multimedia content students already watch at home. Furthermore, teachers need to create a supportive, low-anxiety classroom environment to lower the students' affective filter, allowing them to practice speaking without the fear of immediate peer judgment. By transforming passive online consumption into active oral production, educators can help students transition from silent internet viewers into confident, competent English speakers.

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