



Exploring Factors Influencing Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition among EFL Students

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Abstract

This study explores the factors influencing incidental vocabulary acquisition among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research focuses on the personal narratives and learning processes of three EFL students enrolled in a talent scouting program. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for an in-depth exploration of individual strategies and challenges in vocabulary acquisition. Key factors identified include media and entertainment, social interactions, and classroom experiences, particularly in reading and listening contexts. Participants expressed a strong preference for incidental learning over explicit instruction, finding it more natural and contextually meaningful. However, challenges in retaining newly acquired vocabulary highlighted the need for reinforcement strategies, such as note-taking and repeated exposure, to ensure long-term retention. The study concludes that while incidental learning is beneficial, it should be complemented by deliberate strategies to maximize vocabulary retention and application in real-world situations. By integrating various learning contexts, EFL students can achieve enriched vocabulary and greater fluency in English, ultimately enhancing their confidence in using the language.

Keywords: *Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition; EFL Students; Vocabulary Retention*

Introduction

Vocabulary is one of the keystones of a language that substantially influences one's capacity to speak, listen, read, and write in that language (Wangdi, 2022). Given the needs of the modern day, especially in light of globalization, mastery of other languages has become essential (Sotlikova, 2023). English is one of the many foreign languages that students are required to learn, and it is one that is widely spoken throughout the world.

However, the process of learning a foreign language requires careful thought, and one crucial component that should be given priority is vocabulary development.

Developing one's vocabulary is an essential part of learning a language, especially when studying English as a foreign language (EFL), since a learner's capacity to understand and communicate successfully is largely dependent on their lexical knowledge. In the past, teachers have approached vocabulary development as an organized process that involves explicit instruction and the purposeful introduction of new terms through lesson plans. But in the discipline of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), accidental vocabulary acquisition—the process of picking up new terms without intending to—has drawn attention recently. Language learners naturally and continuously acquire new languages through incidental learning, which happens when they participate in real-world language activities including reading, watching media, and interacting with people (Nation, 2013).

An essential part of learning a foreign language is expanding one's vocabulary. This is because learning a foreign language requires a strong vocabulary, without which language abilities cannot be acquired. Since there is no environment to encourage them and not everyone can speak and understand the language, Indonesian children learning English as a foreign language in school have a restricted vocabulary and English is a new challenge in their country (Ibhar et al., 2018). For instance, Aravind & Rajasekaran (2019) notes that the words we need to know to converse successfully are called our vocabulary. They are speaking and listening words (receptive vocabulary and expressive vocabulary). To be able to communicate and react spontaneously, students need to have a large vocabulary and a solid grasp of the meaning(s) of the words they use.

Technological advancements and the proliferation of digital media have significantly expanded opportunities for incidental vocabulary acquisition. Platforms like YouTube, TikTok, streaming services, podcasts, and social media have exposed EFL learners to diverse language inputs in informal, engaging contexts. Schmitt (2008) emphasizes that integrating different types of media creates a more interactive and dynamic environment for vocabulary learning. These digital tools allow learners to encounter new vocabulary in meaningful contexts, enhancing both retention and comprehension.

In classroom settings, particularly through reading and listening activities, learners are often exposed to new words that they acquire incidentally as they focus on the meaning of the text rather than memorizing vocabulary. Moreover, social interactions, whether in person or online, provide additional opportunities for students to encounter and use new vocabulary in authentic communication. Incidental vocabulary acquisition is increasingly recognized as a crucial element in the language learning process, offering learners a means to acquire new words naturally and contextually. This section reviews the relevant literature, focusing on the key factors that contribute to incidental vocabulary learning in EFL

contexts, including classroom experiences, media and entertainment, social interactions, and the strategies learners use to retain vocabulary.

1. Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition and Second Language Learning

Incidental vocabulary acquisition occurs when learners acquire new words while their attention is focused on meaning rather than form, as they engage in tasks such as reading or listening (Nation, 2013). This is contrasted with explicit vocabulary learning, which involves intentional study of word meanings and usage. According to Laufer & Hulstijn (2001), incidental learning is effective because it engages learners in deeper processing of language input, allowing them to deduce meanings from context and reinforce understanding through repeated exposure. Studies have shown that incidental vocabulary acquisition can occur in both formal educational settings and informal contexts, such as through media consumption and social interactions (Webb & Nation, 2017).

2. The Role of Classroom Experiences

Classroom-based incidental vocabulary acquisition is often facilitated through reading and listening activities. Extensive reading programs, for example, provide students with opportunities to encounter a wide range of vocabulary in varied contexts (Grabe, 2009). Nation (2013) emphasizes that reading is one of the most effective ways to acquire vocabulary incidentally, as it allows learners to infer meanings of new words from context, particularly when reading texts that are slightly above their current proficiency level. Listening activities, such as lectures, podcasts, or classroom discussions, also expose learners to new vocabulary, which they may acquire without the explicit aim of memorization.

3. Media and Entertainment as Sources of Incidental Learning

The increasing accessibility of digital media has revolutionized the way EFL learners acquire vocabulary. Platforms such as YouTube, podcasts, movies, and social media expose learners to real-world language use, often in more engaging and contemporary contexts than traditional classroom materials. Pavia et al. (2019) found that learners exposed to multimedia content tend to acquire new vocabulary more effectively due to the combination of auditory and visual stimuli. Moreover, studies like Montero Perez et al. (2018) have demonstrated that the use of captions and subtitles can significantly enhance vocabulary retention, as learners are simultaneously exposed to written and spoken language.

Rodgers & Webb (2020) found that repeated exposure to vocabulary in television programs helped learners internalize new words. Similarly, Lenhart et al. (2018) highlight the effectiveness of visual storytelling, noting that learners acquire

vocabulary more effectively when exposed to language through multimedia than through text alone. This underscores the potential for incorporating various forms of media into language instruction to promote incidental learning.

4. Social Interactions and Incidental Learning

Social interactions, both inside and outside the classroom, provide another context in which incidental vocabulary acquisition can occur. Interactionist theories of language acquisition, such as Long's (1996) Interaction Hypothesis, suggest that meaningful communication with others helps learners acquire new vocabulary as they negotiate meaning and receive feedback in real time. In both formal settings (such as classroom group work) and informal contexts (such as online chats or conversations with peers), learners encounter new words and phrases incidentally through the process of communication. As Krashen (1985) argued in his Input Hypothesis, exposure to language that is slightly beyond the learner's current level of proficiency ($i+1$) is essential for language acquisition, making social interaction a vital source of vocabulary learning.

5. Strategies for Retaining Incidental Vocabulary

Although incidental vocabulary acquisition can occur naturally, retaining the new vocabulary over time requires specific strategies. Learners often use a combination of discovery and consolidation strategies to enhance vocabulary retention. Schmitt (1997) classified vocabulary learning strategies into two broad categories: discovery strategies (used to understand the meaning of new words) and consolidation strategies (used to commit these words to memory). Techniques such as repetition, note-taking, and contextual learning are commonly employed by learners to reinforce their incidental encounters with new vocabulary (Gu & Johnson, 1996).

Reinforcement through repeated exposure to the same words across different contexts is essential for long-term retention. Hulstijn (2001) emphasized the importance of repetition and context in converting short-term vocabulary gains into long-term knowledge. Learners who encounter new vocabulary in multiple contexts—such as reading, listening, and social interactions—are more likely to remember and use these words effectively.

Moreover, recent studies have explored the relationship between IVA and language confidence and communication ability. Pavia et al. (2019) found that learners who expanded their vocabulary through incidental exposure to media reported higher levels of confidence in their language use. This increase in confidence is attributed to a broader, more flexible vocabulary base that allows learners to participate in conversations with greater ease and fluency.

Three previous studies were utilized for this research. First research by Teng (2022) investigated how watching a documentary TV program with captions impacts incidental vocabulary learning among 82 Chinese-speaking EFL learners. The participants were split into two groups: one group watched the video with

captions, while the other watched it without captions. The results showed that the group viewing the video with captions experienced significantly greater vocabulary gains. Additionally, learner-related factors, including language aptitude and L2 proficiency, influenced the vocabulary learning outcomes. However, L2 proficiency did not significantly predict the ability to recall or recognize word meanings. The findings suggest that using captioned videos can be an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing incidental vocabulary learning.

The second research by Rodgers & Webb (2020) explored how watching full-length television programs impact incidental vocabulary acquisition among 187 Japanese university students. Participants watched ten 42-minute episodes of an American drama, and their vocabulary knowledge of 60-word families was measured through pre-and post-tests. The study found significant gains in vocabulary knowledge from television viewing, with a strong correlation between word frequency and learning. The findings suggest that repeated exposure to words in a meaningful context, such as through television programs, can effectively enhance vocabulary acquisition.

The third research by Mousavi & Gholami (2014) examined the impact of flash stories on vocabulary acquisition among elementary learners. The study involved two experimental groups—one watching flash stories with subtitles and the other without—and a control group that read subtitles as text. Data were collected using a vocabulary knowledge scale and pre-and post-tests. The results showed that watching flash stories, whether with or without subtitles, led to greater incidental vocabulary acquisition compared to reading subtitles alone. This suggests that visual storytelling is more effective for vocabulary learning than just reading text.

While previous studies have examined the effects of various media, such as captioned videos and television programs, on incidental vocabulary acquisition, there is a notable gap in research focusing specifically on the diverse factors influencing vocabulary acquisition among EFL students in varied contexts. Many studies have primarily targeted traditional media and specific learner demographics, which limits our understanding of how different classroom experiences, media and entertainment sources, and social interactions contribute to vocabulary learning. Furthermore, existing literature often overlooks the integration of modern digital platforms, such as social media, which are increasingly relevant to today's learners.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the various factors influencing incidental vocabulary acquisition among EFL students in a private university in Indonesia, particularly focusing on classroom experiences (especially in reading and listening), the role of media and entertainment, and the impact of social interactions.

The research also seeks to identify and evaluate the learning strategies students use to retain vocabulary learned incidentally, understand the challenges they face, and explore the solutions they employ.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the factors influencing incidental vocabulary acquisition among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students at a private university in Indonesia. A case study approach is appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth, contextual examination of complex phenomena within real-life settings (Yin, 2018). Specifically, this design provides rich, detailed insights into how students acquire vocabulary incidentally through a range of experiences, including classroom activities, media consumption, and social interactions.

The qualitative nature of this study aligns with the objective of understanding students' lived experiences, perspectives, and strategies for acquiring vocabulary without explicit instruction. This approach facilitates a nuanced exploration of the various factors at play, including the influence of formal educational practices, the role of multimedia, and the impact of social engagements.

The participant sample for this study consisted of three EFL students enrolled in the English Education program in a private university in Indonesia, specifically within the talent scouting program. These participants were selected using a purposeful sampling approach, ensuring that each individual had substantial experience with incidental vocabulary acquisition in the context of their English language learning. The purposeful selection of these students was driven by the aim to obtain rich, detailed insights into the factors influencing their vocabulary acquisition, as their involvement in the talent scouting program provides a unique learning environment where incidental language learning might naturally occur. It is important to note that you do not need to use too many formulas or tables unless it is absolutely crucial to be displayed.

The principal data collection strategy used by the researchers to gather information for this study was semi-structured interviews. The researchers created interview guidelines, which provided a structure for the interviews and helped to direct the process. The semi-structured format allows for flexibility in questioning, enabling participants to share their unique experiences while ensuring that the core themes of the study are addressed (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The face-to-face interviews allowed for direct communication and a thorough examining the research issue with the chosen participants. The purpose of the interview questions was to specifically explore the factors that affect students' incidental vocabulary acquisition. These factors include media and entertainment, social interactions, classroom experiences (particularly in reading and listening), learning strategies, challenges, and solutions, as well as how these factors affect the student's learning experiences.

The researchers used cell phones to record the interviews to guarantee the accuracy of the data analysis procedure. This method was chosen rather than depending only on the researchers' interpretations or impressions to increase the data's validity by using the participants' own voices. The researchers listened to the recorded interviews to provide a true picture of the viewpoints and experiences of the participants. The researchers can capture the interviewees' spontaneous flow of ideas, feelings, and experiences by recording the sessions. Because the audio-based method enables the researchers to rewatch and thoroughly examine the interviews, it offers a more genuine portrayal of the participants' comments. Researchers need to listen to the recorded interviews with diligence and attention to detail to guarantee the validity and consistency of the analysis. The statements and feelings of the participants must be accurately transcribed.

The data collected from interviews are analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-step process outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). This method involves familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, identifying patterns, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finally, producing the report. The analysis focuses on identifying recurring themes related to the sources of vocabulary acquisition, challenges, strategies employed by students, and the role of various factors in supporting or hindering incidental vocabulary acquisition.

Thematic analysis is chosen for its flexibility and suitability for exploring qualitative data, allowing for a detailed and interpretive approach to understanding how students incidentally acquire vocabulary.

Results

The analysis of the interview data revealed several key findings related to the factors influencing incidental vocabulary acquisition among EFL students. These findings are organized around themes such as sources of incidental vocabulary learning, the effectiveness of incidental learning compared to explicit instruction, challenges encountered, and strategies for overcoming these challenges.

1. Sources of Incidental Vocabulary Learning

Participants identified various sources through which they incidentally acquired new vocabulary. These included multimedia platforms such as films, podcasts, and social media (e.g., TikTok, YouTube).

- 1) Participant 1** frequently encountered new words while watching films and listening to podcasts, often using English subtitles to aid comprehension. She explained:

"When listening to podcasts, films, or songs in English, I usually use English subtitles or look at song lyrics to find new vocabulary. For example, I recently came across the word 'meticulous' from a podcast subtitle."

- 2) Participant 2** highlighted the role of social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube, where exposure to informal, everyday language contributed significantly to their vocabulary growth:

"I like watching films, so usually if the film is in English, I still use English subtitles so that if I get new vocabulary, I can see clearly how it is written from the subtitles."

- 3) Participant 3** emphasized the importance of reading news articles and listening to podcasts on TikTok, noting that these sources provided rich contexts for encountering and understanding new vocabulary:

"I often discover new words while reading the news in English. Recently, I read a news article about the Olympic Games in Paris and found some new words related to sports and competition, like 'podium finish' and 'record-breaking performance'."

2. Effectiveness of Incidental Learning vs. Explicit Instruction

All participants expressed a preference for incidental vocabulary learning over explicit instruction, citing its natural and engaging nature.

- 1) Participant 1** found incidental learning more effective for long-term retention:

"I think both [incidental and explicit learning] are effective, but for memorization, I don't really get it in my memory unless it's spontaneous."

- 2) Participant 2** similarly preferred incidental learning, noting,

"I prefer incidental ones that are sudden, not designed ones, because it's a bit difficult to memorize, so usually, the ones that I have heard recently and have recognized are easier for me to catch."

- 3) Participant 3** highlighted the engaging nature of incidental learning:

"Maybe because we are deeper in the meaning if it is incidental, and also if it is incidental, in my opinion, it is also not boring, so I think the more effective one is incidental."

3. Challenges in Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

Participants also faced challenges in acquiring and retaining new vocabulary, with a common issue being the tendency to forget new words after initial exposure.

- 1) Participant 1** shared their struggle: *"Forgetting, we often forget the words, but they have been recorded, so we open the notes again to remember."*

- 2) Participant 2** echoed this sentiment, stating, *"So far, the challenge is that if I get new vocabulary, I don't know the information with the vocabulary and maybe there is no access like asking other people, so I will save the*

vocabulary to learn next time."

- 3) **Participant 3** mentioned the difficulty in understanding certain new words despite repeated encounters: *"There have been words that I've heard over and over again, but I still have a hard time really understanding them."*

4. Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

To address these challenges, participants employed various strategies to reinforce and retain new vocabulary.

- 1) **Participant 1** relied on notes to keep track of new words: *"I might write it down in a note on my mobile phone if I'm confused and look at the note to remember."* **Participant 2** focused on using newly learned words in conversation: *"Besides just remembering it, it must also be used more in direct words so that we can practice our own speaking and also our own pronunciations."*
- 2) **Participant 3** adopted a context-based approach: *"I often remember new words that I learnt by accident through songs. When I come across a new word in the lyrics of a song, I usually play the song repeatedly."*

5. Impact of Incidental Vocabulary Learning

Incidental vocabulary acquisition had a positive impact on participants' confidence and practical language use.

- 1) **Participant 1** noted an increase in confidence: *"The effect is quite good for the incidental ones... it can increase confidence."*
- 2) **Participant 2** mentioned that using less familiar, incidental vocabulary made them sound more advanced: *"Maybe by using words that we have just heard that other people may not understand... it increases confidence."*
- 3) **Participant 3** observed that incidental learning improved their language skills: *"When I discover a new word and understand its meaning, I immediately try to use it in conversation with my friends."*

Discussion

The results of this study provide valuable insights into the factors influencing incidental vocabulary acquisition among EFL students. The findings align with existing literature while also offering unique perspectives that can enhance our understanding of how students acquire new vocabulary outside of explicit instruction.

1. Sources of Incidental Vocabulary Learning

The participants in this study identified a wide range of sources through which they incidentally acquired new vocabulary, including multimedia platforms such as films, podcasts, and social media. These findings are consistent with previous research, which highlights the significance of exposure to authentic language in various media as a powerful tool for vocabulary acquisition (Pavia et al., 2019). The use of English subtitles, as reported by the participants, supports findings by Montero Perez et al. (2018), who demonstrated that subtitles can enhance vocabulary learning by providing learners with visual and auditory input simultaneously.

Selecting appropriate media significantly enhances student engagement and aids in achieving learning objectives (Faridawati et al., 2024). However, this study also underscores the growing role of social media platforms, such as TikTok and YouTube, in vocabulary learning. Unlike traditional media, these platforms offer short, engaging content that can capture learners' attention and introduce them to contemporary, colloquial language. This suggests that modern EFL learners may benefit significantly from integrating social media into their language learning strategies, particularly for acquiring informal, everyday vocabulary.

2. Effectiveness of Incidental Learning vs. Explicit Instruction

The preference for incidental vocabulary learning over explicit instruction among participants reflects a broader trend in language learning, where learners favor natural, context-based learning experiences. This preference aligns with Nation (2001) framework, which emphasizes the importance of incidental learning as a more meaningful and engaging approach compared to traditional rote memorization methods.

Participants' comments about the engaging and spontaneous nature of incidental learning resonate with Schmitt (2008) assertion that incidental vocabulary learning often leads to deeper processing and better retention. The enjoyment and interest derived from encountering new words in context, as highlighted by participants, further suggest that incidental learning may contribute to sustained motivation in language learning, a factor crucial for long-term success.

3. Challenges in Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

Despite its advantages, incidental vocabulary learning is not without challenges. The most commonly reported issue was the difficulty in retaining new words over time. This aligns with Webb & Nation (2017) findings that while incidental learning is effective for acquiring vocabulary, it often leads to shallow processing, which can result in quick forgetting.

The challenge of limited recall also emphasizes the need for strategies that reinforce newly acquired vocabulary. Participants' reliance on notes and repeated exposure to new words through various contexts suggests that additional support is necessary to convert incidental encounters into long-term vocabulary

knowledge. This observation reinforces the notion that while incidental learning is beneficial, it must be supplemented with deliberate practice and review to maximize retention (Hulstijn, 2001).

4. Strategies for Overcoming Challenges

Participants in this study employed a variety of strategies to address the challenges associated with incidental vocabulary learning, including note-taking, repetition, and contextual learning. These strategies align with Schmitt (1997) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, which highlights the importance of both discovery and consolidation strategies in effective vocabulary acquisition.

The use of contextual learning, as described by Participant 3, is particularly noteworthy. By associating new words with specific contexts, such as song lyrics or conversations, learners can create stronger mental connections, which enhance memory and retrieval (Ellis, 2008). This finding suggests that encouraging EFL students to actively engage with new vocabulary in meaningful contexts could improve retention and application in real-world situations.

5. Impact of Incidental Vocabulary Learning

The study findings indicate that incidental vocabulary acquisition positively influences learners' confidence in using English. This is consistent with previous research, which has shown that increased vocabulary knowledge contributes to greater fluency and ease in communication (Nation, 2001). Participants' reports of feeling more confident when using newly acquired vocabulary in conversations suggest that incidental learning not only expands their lexicon but also empowers them to participate more actively in English-speaking environments.

Furthermore, the practical application of incidental vocabulary in daily conversations, as noted by the participants, supports the idea that vocabulary knowledge is not only about knowing words but also about being able to use them effectively in context (Schmitt, 2008). This practical use of language in social interactions and media consumption demonstrates the real-world benefits of incidental learning, which can enhance both linguistic competence and communicative confidence.

6. Implications for EFL Teaching and Learning

The insights gained from this study have several implications for EFL teaching and learning. First, educators should consider incorporating more authentic media resources into the curriculum to provide students with opportunities for incidental vocabulary learning. Second, there should be an emphasis on teaching students'

effective strategies for reinforcing and retaining new vocabulary, such as note-taking, repetition, and contextual learning. Lastly, recognizing the motivational benefits of incidental learning, teachers could foster environments where students are encouraged to explore and engage with English in various real-world contexts.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing incidental vocabulary acquisition among EFL students, revealing that such learning is a multifaceted process shaped by various sources, preferences, challenges, and strategies. The findings highlight the significant role of multimedia platforms, particularly social media, in exposing learners to authentic language in engaging contexts, which is crucial for vocabulary acquisition.

Participants showed a strong preference for incidental learning over explicit instruction, finding it more natural and contextually meaningful. However, the challenges of retaining newly acquired vocabulary underscore the need for reinforcement strategies, such as note-taking and repeated exposure, to ensure long-term retention. The use of contextual learning emerged as an effective approach for enhancing memory and retrieval, allowing students to create stronger connections with new vocabulary.

Furthermore, the positive impact of incidental vocabulary learning on learners' confidence in using English indicates its value in promoting active participation in English-speaking environments. The study concludes that while incidental learning is highly beneficial, it should be supported by deliberate strategies to maximize vocabulary retention and application in real-world situations. By integrating media, social interaction, and intentional learning strategies, EFL students can achieve a more enriched vocabulary and greater fluency in English.

Overall, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on vocabulary acquisition in EFL contexts, offering practical insights that can inform language teaching practices and curriculum design to foster more effective and enjoyable learning experiences.

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