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EXPLORING EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF MEMES AS SUPPLEMENTARY MEDIA FOR ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING

Hanna Luthfia Tavania[1]*, Zuhad Ahmad[2]
[1,2] Universitas Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. Hamka, Jakarta, Indonesia

hannaluthfia45@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Vocabulary learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts is often associated with repetitive memorization and limited engagement. Although memes have been examined as tools for vocabulary acquisition and retention, less attention has been given to how students perceive their role in incidental and informal digital learning. This qualitative descriptive study explored EFL students' perceptions of memes as supplementary media for English vocabulary learning. Seven sixth-semester students from the English Education Study Program at FKIP UHAMKA were selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured Zoom interviews and analyzed through transcription, repeated reading, manual coding, category development, theme development, interpretation, and member checking. The findings revealed that memes provided incidental exposure to unfamiliar vocabulary, supported meaning recognition through visual and contextual cues, and increased enjoyment, curiosity, and engagement. Participants also associated humorous and relatable contexts with vocabulary retention. However, they noted that slang, wordplay, cultural references, ambiguous meanings, and inappropriate language could limit the educational value of memes. The study contributes to understanding how incidental vocabulary learning, multimodal input, and learner engagement interact in informal digital environments. Memes are therefore most appropriate as carefully selected supplementary materials alongside structured vocabulary instruction.

Keywords: Digital Memes, EFL Students, Incidental Vocabulary Learning, Multimodal Learning, Vocabulary Learning

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery plays a central role in English language learning because vocabulary knowledge is closely related to learners' language proficiency and instructional input (Zhang & Graham, 2020). Learners need adequate lexical knowledge to understand messages and express ideas across listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In EFL contexts, limited vocabulary knowledge can make communication difficult, even when students have learned grammar. Schmitt and Schmitt (2020) emphasize that vocabulary learning involves knowledge of form, meaning, and use rather than merely memorizing word lists. Therefore, vocabulary learning should be supported by learning resources that provide meaningful

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exposure, context, and opportunities for repeated encounters with words. This importance is also reflected in Wahyudin et al. (2021), who state that limited vocabulary knowledge may make it difficult for EFL learners to express ideas and understand messages in English.

Despite its importance, vocabulary learning is often perceived as monotonous when students rely mostly on memorization. Learners need strategies and media that are compatible with their learning habits and digital practices. Ghalebi et al. (2020) argue that understanding vocabulary learning strategies is important for designing learning conditions that encourage better learning outcomes. In the current digital environment, students encounter English not only through textbooks, but also through social media, videos, captions, comments, stickers, and memes. These forms of digital input create opportunities for incidental vocabulary learning outside formal classroom instruction, in which learners notice or acquire new words while focusing on meaning, communication, or entertainment rather than deliberate memorization.

In EFL learning, digital exposure becomes increasingly relevant because students may have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. Noori et al. (2022) found that social media can support motivation, communication, and engagement in EFL learning. This is also supported by Rezaul Karim et al. (2022), who found that social media platforms can play an important role in English language learning because they provide learners with access to digital communication and learning opportunities. Wati et al. (2024) also reported that social media offers benefits for English learning, such as access to authentic language use, interactive communication, and various digital learning resources. In relation to vocabulary learning, Zainal et al. (2020) found that social media could influence students' English vocabulary development and learning interest. A review by Alharthi et al. (2020) also shows that social media platforms can enhance vocabulary development by increasing learners' engagement, interaction, and exposure to new words. Similarly, Wilson and Anam (2024) found that social media use contributed positively to English vocabulary learning among EFL university students, especially because students could encounter new vocabulary through familiar digital platforms.

Internet memes are part of contemporary digital culture. Shifman (2014) describes internet memes as digital units that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by users, making them highly recognizable and participatory. Rogers and Giorgi (2024) further emphasize that meme circulation is shaped by platform features and digital practices. In language learning, memes are not only humorous images or texts; they can also function as multimodal materials that combine visual cues, short written language, facial expressions, humor, and cultural references. This combination allows meaning to be constructed through both verbal and visual elements. For EFL learners, multimodal materials may help them infer the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary because images, expressions, and situations provide contextual clues. Aedo and Millafilo (2022) found that multimodal texts in the form of memes supported vocabulary acquisition and retention among EFL learners. In addition, Kayali and Altuntaş (2021) reported that meme-based classroom activities could create a more enjoyable learning atmosphere and support vocabulary recall. A systematic review by Altukruni (2022) also suggests that internet memes are often associated with motivation,

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engagement, and a more enjoyable EFL/ESL learning atmosphere when they are implemented with clear pedagogical purposes.

The relevance of memes as vocabulary learning media can also be connected to broader studies on digital multimodal materials in EFL classrooms. Digital multimodal texts allow learners to engage with meaning through various modes, such as images, written language, sound, layout, and visual design. Ilmi et al. (2020) showed that EFL students were able to use multiple modes in creating digital multimodal texts, indicating that digital materials can support learners' engagement with language through more than written forms. In vocabulary learning, multimedia-based instruction has also been found to support students' vocabulary comprehension and retention. Kabooha and Elyas (2018) reported that students showed positive perceptions toward the use of multimedia materials for vocabulary learning. These studies suggest that vocabulary learning can be strengthened when learners are exposed to language through visual, contextual, and digital elements. Yu and Liu (2022) also found that multimodal input involving text, audio, translation, and pictures could support EFL learners' vocabulary meaning acquisition and retention. This indicates that visual and textual combinations can help learners connect word forms with meaning more effectively. Therefore, memes can be considered relevant supplementary media because they combine short texts, visuals, humor, and familiar digital communication practices.

Although previous studies have shown the potential of memes in vocabulary learning, many have emphasized measurable outcomes, including vocabulary acquisition, recall, retention, and pre-test or post-test performance (Aedo & Millafilo, 2022). Amanda et al. (2024) also examined students' viewpoints on memes for vocabulary development, although their discussion of perception remained closely connected to learning outcomes. Taken together, previous studies suggest that the educational potential of memes can be understood through three interconnected dimensions: incidental vocabulary exposure, multimodal meaning construction, and learner engagement. Incidental exposure enables students to encounter unfamiliar words during informal digital activities, multimodal cues support the interpretation of meaning, and humor or familiarity may encourage attention and curiosity. However, achievement-based studies do not fully explain how learners perceive the interaction among these dimensions, which benefits they consider meaningful, or what limitations they experience when encountering vocabulary through memes.

Based on this gap, the present study focuses on sixth-semester English Education students at FKIP UHAMKA and addresses the following research question: How do EFL students perceive memes as supplementary media for English vocabulary learning? The novelty of this study lies in its perception-oriented examination of how incidental vocabulary exposure, multimodal meaning construction, and learner engagement interact in students' informal digital experiences. Rather than measuring vocabulary achievement through test scores, this study explores how students interpret the usefulness, limitations, and pedagogical potential of memes for vocabulary learning. Therefore, the study contributes to EFL vocabulary research by explaining the conditions under which memes may support initial vocabulary exposure, meaning recognition, engagement, and retention alongside structured instruction.

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METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore students' perceptions of memes as supplementary media for English vocabulary learning in an EFL context. This design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to describe participants' opinions, experiences, and interpretations of meme-based vocabulary learning rather than to measure vocabulary achievement through tests. Creswell (2018) explains that qualitative research enables researchers to understand educational phenomena through detailed descriptions of participants' perspectives. In addition, qualitative descriptive research is suitable when researchers intend to provide a clear and direct description of participants' experiences related to a particular phenomenon (Doyle et al., 2020). Therefore, this approach enabled the researcher to examine how students perceived the usefulness, benefits, and limitations of memes in English vocabulary learning.

The study was conducted at the English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, University of Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. HAMKA, Jakarta. Sixth-semester students were selected because they had experienced various English learning activities and were considered capable of reflecting on their vocabulary learning experiences. They were also familiar with digital platforms where English-language memes commonly circulate, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Pinterest, and X.

Seven sixth-semester students were selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was used because the study required participants whose experiences were relevant to the research focus. Campbell et al. (2020) explain that purposive sampling enables researchers to select participants who can provide rich and relevant information about the phenomenon being investigated. The participant criteria were as follows: they were active sixth-semester students of the English Education Study Program, had experience learning English as a foreign language, were familiar with social media platforms, had encountered English-language memes in their daily digital activities, and were willing to participate voluntarily. These criteria ensured that the participants could provide relevant information about their perceptions of memes in vocabulary learning.

The number of participants was considered sufficient based on the richness of the interview data and the recurrence of patterns across participants' responses. In qualitative research, sample adequacy is not determined only by the number of participants but also by the relevance and depth of the information obtained. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) explain that saturation occurs when additional data no longer generate substantially new information or themes. During the analysis, recurring patterns related to incidental vocabulary exposure, visual and contextual support, enjoyment and engagement, vocabulary retention, authentic and informal vocabulary, and the need for careful selection of memes appeared repeatedly across the interviews. Although some participants expressed different emphases or opinions, the seventh interview did not produce a substantially new theme. Therefore, the data were considered to have reached sufficient saturation for the scope of this qualitative descriptive study.

Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom from April 7 to April 9, 2026. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they

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allowed the researcher to use prepared questions while giving participants opportunities to elaborate on their experiences in their own words. Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the interview procedure, the recording process, and the intended use of the data. With their permission, the interviews were recorded to support accurate transcription and analysis. Each interview lasted approximately 5-10 minutes and was conducted individually to allow participants to express their opinions freely.

The interview guide consisted of five open-ended questions adapted from Amanda et al. (2024) and aligned with the objective of exploring students' perceptions of memes for vocabulary learning. The questions examined students' general opinions about using memes for vocabulary learning, whether memes helped them encounter new words, whether they enjoyed learning vocabulary through memes, whether they were interested in using similar activities in the classroom, and whether memes made vocabulary easier to remember**.** For example, the researcher asked participants whether memes helped them encounter or learn new English words and whether memes made vocabulary easier to remember. Follow-up questions were asked when clarification or further explanation was required.

The data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis supported by thematic procedures. Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize that thematic analysis requires systematic and reflective engagement with the data when identifying, developing, and interpreting themes. First, the Zoom interview recordings were transcribed into written form. Second, the researcher read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the participants' responses and identify statements relevant to the research question. Third, meaningful statements were identified and assigned initial descriptive codes, such as unplanned vocabulary exposure, visual clues, humor, vocabulary retention, slang, cultural references, and content suitability. Fourth, similar codes were grouped into broader categories. Fifth, the categories were reviewed and developed into six final themes: incidental vocabulary learning, visual and contextual support, enjoyment and engagement, vocabulary retention, authentic and informal vocabulary, and the need for careful selection of memes. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the research question and relevant literature, while selected participant quotations were used to support the interpretation.

The coding process was conducted manually without qualitative data analysis software. The researcher identified meaningful statements in the interview transcripts, assigned initial descriptive codes, grouped similar codes into broader categories, and developed the categories into final themes. To maintain analytical consistency, the researcher repeatedly compared the codes and themes with the original transcripts. Representative quotations and differing participant responses were retained to ensure that the interpretation remained grounded in the interview data rather than being based solely on the researcher's assumptions.

Several procedures were applied to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings and reduce researcher bias. The transcripts were read repeatedly during different stages of analysis, and the interpretations were continually checked against the participants' original statements. Consistent definitions were maintained for each theme, while responses that differed from the dominant pattern were also included in the analysis. Member checking was

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conducted after transcription by asking each participant to review and confirm that the interview transcript accurately represented their responses and intended meanings. This process enhanced the credibility of the data, reduced the risk of transcription or interpretation errors, and helped ensure that the findings reflected the participants' actual opinions and experiences.

Ethical considerations were applied throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and all participants provided informed consent before the interviews. They were informed about the research purpose, interview procedure, recording process, confidentiality of their responses, and use of the data for research purposes. To protect their identities, participants' real names were not included in the report. Instead, the codes P1 to P7 were used. The interview data were presented carefully to avoid disclosing information that could reveal the participants' identities.

RESULTS

The findings were derived from semi-structured interviews with seven sixth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at FKIP UHAMKA. The analysis generated six interconnected themes: incidental vocabulary learning, visual and contextual support, enjoyment and engagement, vocabulary retention, authentic and informal vocabulary, and the need for careful selection of memes. Overall, the participants viewed memes positively as supplementary vocabulary-learning media. Nevertheless, their responses also showed that the perceived benefits of memes varied according to students' learning intentions, the clarity of the visual context, and the suitability of the meme content.

Memes as a Source of Incidental Vocabulary Learning

A common pattern across the interviews was that students encountered English vocabulary through memes without deliberately intending to study it. Memes generally appeared as part of their routine use of social media platforms, including Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Pinterest, and X. Therefore, vocabulary exposure occurred while students were primarily seeking entertainment or engaging with digital content rather than completing a formal learning activity.

P1 explained:

> *"I do not intentionally use memes to learn. However, when I come across memes that contain vocabulary I have never heard before, it becomes additional knowledge for me. Moreover, the images or expressions in the memes help me understand the meaning of the words." (P1)*

P1's account represented the dominant perception that memes provided additional vocabulary exposure rather than structured instruction. However, P6 expressed a slightly different perspective by considering memes as a possible personal learning method because they frequently introduced unfamiliar words. This variation indicates that meme-based vocabulary learning was predominantly incidental, although some students had begun to use digital content more consciously as a learning resource.

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Visual and Contextual Support for Meaning Recognition

Participants commonly emphasized that the combination of written text, images, facial expressions, and situations helped them interpret unfamiliar vocabulary. Rather than relying immediately on direct translation, they used the visual context of a meme to predict or confirm its meaning.

P2 stated:

> *"When I do not understand a word or the meaning of a meme, the visuals help me understand it. This makes learning easier through social media that we frequently use." (P2)*

The responses suggest that students did not process the written and visual components separately. Instead, they connected the vocabulary with the situation, expression, or humorous event presented in the meme. Visual support was therefore perceived as particularly useful for initial meaning recognition. However, its usefulness depended on whether the relationship between the image and the written expression was sufficiently clear.

Enjoyment, Curiosity, and Engagement

Most participants described vocabulary learning through memes as more enjoyable and less stressful than conventional memorization. Humor, familiarity, and the integration of memes into students' daily digital activities made vocabulary encounters feel less formal.

P5 explained:

> *"I really enjoy learning vocabulary through memes because the process is fun and amusing, while also helping me understand word meanings. Compared to conventional learning, learning through memes feels more enjoyable, especially in terms of enriching vocabulary." (P5)*

Enjoyment was not limited to entertainment. Some participants indicated that unfamiliar words in memes stimulated their curiosity and encouraged them to search for meanings through translation tools, comment sections, or contextual interpretation. Therefore, memes were perceived as encouraging both emotional engagement and independent vocabulary exploration. However, participants did not suggest that enjoyment alone was sufficient for systematic vocabulary mastery.

Vocabulary Retention through Humor and Memorable Contexts

Most participants believed that vocabulary encountered through memes could be easier to remember when the words were connected with humor, visual information, or relatable situations. P5 described this connection as follows:

> *"Memes greatly help in remembering vocabulary, especially if the meme is funny. Vocabulary becomes easier to remember because it is associated with a specific situation or moment in the meme." (P5)*

P6 similarly associated vocabulary retention with the combination of images, sentences, and contextual information. Nevertheless, the participants did not fully agree

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about the extent of this benefit. P2 distinguished between understanding and long-term retention, explaining that learners might remember the image more strongly than the vocabulary itself.

This contrasting response indicates that memes may support immediate recognition and create memorable associations, but they do not automatically ensure durable vocabulary retention. Additional encounters, practice, or deliberate review may still be required for students to remember and use the vocabulary accurately.

Authentic and Informal Vocabulary in Memes

The interviews also showed that memes exposed students to forms of English commonly used in online communication, including slang, jokes, wordplay, and informal expressions. Such language was perceived as different from vocabulary typically encountered in textbooks.

P6 provided an example:

> *"I have also found some memes in English. One example I remember is a meme that uses wordplay, such as 'William,' 'pear (Pierre),' and 'William Shakespeare.'" (P6)*

This example shows that meme-based exposure may involve more than recognizing the literal meaning of a word. Students may also need to notice similarities in pronunciation, spelling, and word association to understand the humor. Thus, informal and creative language was perceived as both a benefit and a challenge. It introduced students to authentic digital language use, but successful interpretation often depended on linguistic, contextual, and cultural knowledge.

Learning Challenges and the Need for Careful Selection

Despite their generally positive perceptions, participants consistently viewed memes as supplementary rather than primary learning materials. Their concerns included ambiguous meanings, culturally specific references, slang, inappropriate content, and expressions that might not be suitable for formal communication.

Participant P7 emphasized this point:

> *"Not all memes are suitable for educational contexts, so appropriate memes must be chosen for learning purposes." (P7)*

P3 similarly stated that memes would be less effective if they were used as the main instructional material, although they could attract students' attention and provide variation in vocabulary learning. These responses indicate that participants' support for meme-based learning was conditional. Memes were considered beneficial when their content was understandable, relevant, and appropriate for the learning objectives. Teacher guidance and careful content selection were therefore viewed as necessary when memes were introduced into classroom instruction.

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Table 1. Analytical summary of students' perceptions of memes for vocabulary learning

Theme	Main Finding	Variation or Qualification
Incidental vocabulary learning	Students usually encounter vocabulary from memes during daily social media use.	P6 considered memes a possible personal learning method, whereas most participants viewed the exposure as unplanned.
Visual and contextual support	Images, expressions, and situations help students infer meanings of unfamiliar words.	Visual information was useful when the relationship between the image and the vocabulary was clear.
Enjoyment and engagement	Memes make vocabulary learning feel fun, natural, and less stressful.	Enjoyment increased interest, but participants did not view it as sufficient for systematic vocabulary learning.
Vocabulary retention	Humor, visual context, and relatable situations created memorable associations with vocabulary.	P2 noted that learners might remember the image more strongly than the vocabulary itself.
Authentic and informal vocabulary	Memes expose students to informal English, slang, wordplay, and expressions used in digital communication.	Informal and culturally dependent language could be difficult to interpret or inappropriate in formal contexts.
Careful selection	Memes are useful as supplements, but not all meme content is suitable for vocabulary learning.	Their usefulness depended on content appropriateness, clarity, learning objectives, and teacher guidance.

Taken together, the findings reveal that students' positive perceptions were conditional rather than absolute. Memes were valued because they connected vocabulary exposure with visual context, humor, and familiar digital practices. However, students differentiated between encountering vocabulary, understanding its meaning, remembering it, and using it appropriately. This distinction suggests that memes are most suitable for supporting initial exposure, contextual interpretation, and engagement, while structured instruction remains necessary for deliberate practice and accurate vocabulary use.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that students generally perceived memes positively as supplementary media for English vocabulary learning. However, this positive perception was conditional rather than absolute. Students valued memes because they provided accessible, visually supported, humorous, and contextually meaningful encounters with English vocabulary within their everyday digital activities. At the same time, they recognized that memes could not replace structured vocabulary instruction because their language was often informal, culturally specific, and potentially ambiguous. These findings suggest that the

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educational value of memes lies primarily in their ability to connect students' informal digital experiences with formal language-learning objectives.

The first major finding concerns the role of memes in incidental vocabulary learning. Most participants did not deliberately access memes for educational purposes. Instead, they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary while scrolling through social media for communication or entertainment. From the perspective of incidental learning, attention is initially directed toward understanding a message or enjoying content rather than memorizing particular lexical items. Nevertheless, learners may notice unfamiliar words, infer their meanings, and gradually develop vocabulary knowledge through repeated encounters. This interpretation is consistent with Webb et al. (2023), who explain that incidental vocabulary learning can occur through meaning-focused activities such as reading, listening, and viewing. It also supports Schmitt and Schmitt (2020) argument that vocabulary learning develops through encounters with word form, meaning, and use.

The present study extends these earlier findings by identifying memes as a specific form of informal digital input through which incidental vocabulary exposure may occur. Previous technology-assisted vocabulary studies have generally focused on learning applications, instructional platforms, or deliberately designed digital activities (Hao, 2021). In contrast, the participants in this study encountered vocabulary through content that was not originally approached as instructional material. Therefore, the contribution of the present study lies in showing that students may perceive ordinary social media content as a source of additional lexical knowledge, even when vocabulary learning is not their primary intention. However, incidental exposure should not be equated with complete vocabulary mastery. Encountering or recognizing a word does not necessarily mean that learners can remember, produce, or use it accurately.

A second important finding relates to the multimodal characteristics of memes. Participants commonly relied on images, facial expressions, written text, and situational context to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words. This suggests that vocabulary interpretation did not depend solely on linguistic information. Rather, students constructed meaning by integrating verbal and visual cues. This finding confirms Aedo and Millafilo's (2022) conclusion that memes as multimodal texts may support vocabulary acquisition and retention. It is also consistent with Ilmi et al. (2020), who emphasize that digital multimodal texts enable learners to engage with meaning through more than written language, and with Ramezanali et al. (2021), who found that combinations of different representational modes can support vocabulary learning.

Nevertheless, the findings also qualify the assumed benefits of multimodal input. Visual information was useful only when the relationship between the image and the written expression was sufficiently clear. When a meme depended on unfamiliar cultural references, slang, or complex wordplay, the visual component did not always guarantee correct understanding. This result adds an important distinction to previous studies: multimodality may facilitate meaning recognition, but its effectiveness depends on the learner's linguistic and cultural background. Therefore, images should not automatically be regarded as self-explanatory learning support. Learners may still require contextual explanation or instructional guidance to interpret vocabulary accurately.

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Enjoyment and engagement also played an important role in shaping students' perceptions. Participants described memes as less formal and less stressful than conventional vocabulary memorization because they were humorous, familiar, and closely connected to students' online activities. This finding confirms Altukruni's (2022) review, which associates meme-based learning with motivation, interest, and an enjoyable classroom atmosphere. It is also consistent with Antón-Sancho et al. (2022), who found that humorous resources can be positively perceived as educational materials. Humor may attract attention and reduce the monotony commonly associated with vocabulary memorization.

However, the present findings suggest that enjoyment has pedagogical value when it leads to further engagement with vocabulary. Some participants reported that unfamiliar words in memes stimulated curiosity and encouraged them to search for meanings through translation tools, comments, or contextual clues. This indicates that memes may function as attention-generating resources that initiate independent vocabulary exploration. The contribution of the study is therefore not simply that students found memes entertaining, but that enjoyment could encourage noticing, curiosity, and learner-initiated meaning seeking. Even so, enjoyment alone cannot ensure systematic vocabulary development. Without follow-up practice, students may understand a word temporarily without being able to retain or use it.

The findings on vocabulary retention further demonstrate this limitation. Most participants believed that humor, visual context, and relatable situations made vocabulary more memorable. This supports Kayali and Altuntaş (2021), who found that meme-based activities could assist vocabulary revision and recall. Memes may create stronger associations because words are connected with distinctive images, emotional reactions, or humorous situations. Such associations can make an initial encounter more memorable than the presentation of an isolated word.

At the same time, one participant distinguished vocabulary comprehension from vocabulary retention by noting that learners might remember the meme image more strongly than the lexical item. This contrasting perception is significant because it challenges an overly positive assumption that memorable visuals automatically produce durable vocabulary knowledge. The finding indicates that visual salience may support immediate understanding while drawing attention away from the vocabulary itself. Consequently, meme-based exposure should be followed by repeated encounters, explanation, retrieval, and active use if the objective is long-term retention. This finding reinforces the position that memes are more appropriate as supplementary materials than as independent vocabulary-learning resources.

Another contribution of the study concerns students' exposure to authentic and informal English. Memes introduced participants to slang, jokes, wordplay, and expressions commonly used in online communication but less frequently presented in formal textbooks. This type of exposure can broaden students' awareness of how English is used creatively in digital spaces. It may also help students recognize relationships among pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and cultural references. Rogers and Giorgi (2024) explain that memes are

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shaped by platform practices and shared digital knowledge, meaning that their interpretation often depends on context and cultural familiarity.

However, authenticity also creates pedagogical challenges. Expressions found in memes may be inappropriate in formal communication, difficult to translate literally, or understandable only within particular online communities. Thus, vocabulary learning through memes involves not only identifying meaning but also developing awareness of register and appropriateness. This study therefore extends previous discussions of authentic digital input by showing that students themselves recognize the need to distinguish between knowing the meaning of an expression and knowing when it can appropriately be used.

From a pedagogical perspective, memes can be integrated into EFL vocabulary instruction as carefully selected supplementary materials. Teachers may use them to introduce target vocabulary, activate prior knowledge, encourage meaning inference, or review previously learned words. A guided activity could involve asking students to identify unfamiliar expressions, interpret meanings through textual and visual clues, classify the expressions as formal or informal, and use them in appropriate contexts. Students may also create memes using target vocabulary, provided that the activity includes clear linguistic objectives and feedback.

This implication is consistent with Rahimi and Allahyari (2019), who found that multimedia-assisted vocabulary strategy instruction can support vocabulary learning and strategy use. It is also supported by Xodabande et al. (2022) and Boroughani et al. (2023), whose studies show that digital vocabulary activities are more effective when they involve structured learning goals, learner monitoring, and repeated practice. Therefore, the pedagogical value of memes does not arise from humor or digital format alone. It depends on how teachers select, contextualize, and connect meme content with deliberate vocabulary processing.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the relationship among incidental vocabulary learning, multimodal input, and learner engagement. The findings show that these three dimensions operate together rather than separately. Incidental exposure allows students to encounter unfamiliar vocabulary, multimodal cues support initial interpretation, and humor or familiarity encourages attention and curiosity. However, these processes do not automatically lead to durable vocabulary knowledge. The study therefore proposes that memes are best understood as entry points into vocabulary learning: they may initiate noticing, meaning construction, and engagement, while structured instruction remains necessary for retention, accurate use, and awareness of register.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved seven sixth-semester students from one English Education Study Program, and the findings are therefore context-specific rather than generalizable to all EFL learners. Second, the study examined students' perceptions and self-reported experiences rather than measurable vocabulary achievement. Consequently, the findings cannot establish whether meme exposure directly improves vocabulary test performance. Third, the interview-based data did not include classroom observation or analysis of the specific memes encountered by participants. Future research could involve learners from different educational levels, combine interviews with vocabulary assessments and classroom observations, or compare

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different meme types. Mixed-methods studies may also examine whether particular visual, humorous, or linguistic characteristics influence vocabulary comprehension, retention, and appropriate use.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that EFL students generally perceive memes as useful supplementary media for English vocabulary learning. Memes provide incidental exposure to unfamiliar words, visual and contextual support for meaning recognition, and an enjoyable form of engagement within students' everyday digital activities. However, their usefulness is conditional because memes do not automatically ensure long-term vocabulary retention and may contain slang, cultural references, wordplay, ambiguous meanings, and language that is inappropriate for formal contexts. Therefore, memes should complement rather than replace structured vocabulary instruction.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of how incidental vocabulary learning, multimodal input, and learner engagement interact in informal digital environments. The findings suggest that memes can function as entry points into vocabulary learning by attracting students' attention, supporting initial meaning construction, and stimulating curiosity about unfamiliar words. Nevertheless, repeated exposure, deliberate practice, and instructional guidance remain necessary to support vocabulary retention and appropriate language use.

Pedagogically, carefully selected memes may be incorporated into EFL vocabulary instruction as contextual examples, discussion prompts, warm-up activities, or review materials. Their use should be guided by clear learning objectives and careful consideration of linguistic difficulty, cultural relevance, content appropriateness, and language register. Future studies should involve participants from broader educational contexts and combine interviews with vocabulary assessments, classroom observations, or mixed-methods designs. Further research may also compare different types of memes to identify the visual, linguistic, and humorous features that are most effective in supporting vocabulary comprehension, retention, and appropriate use.

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