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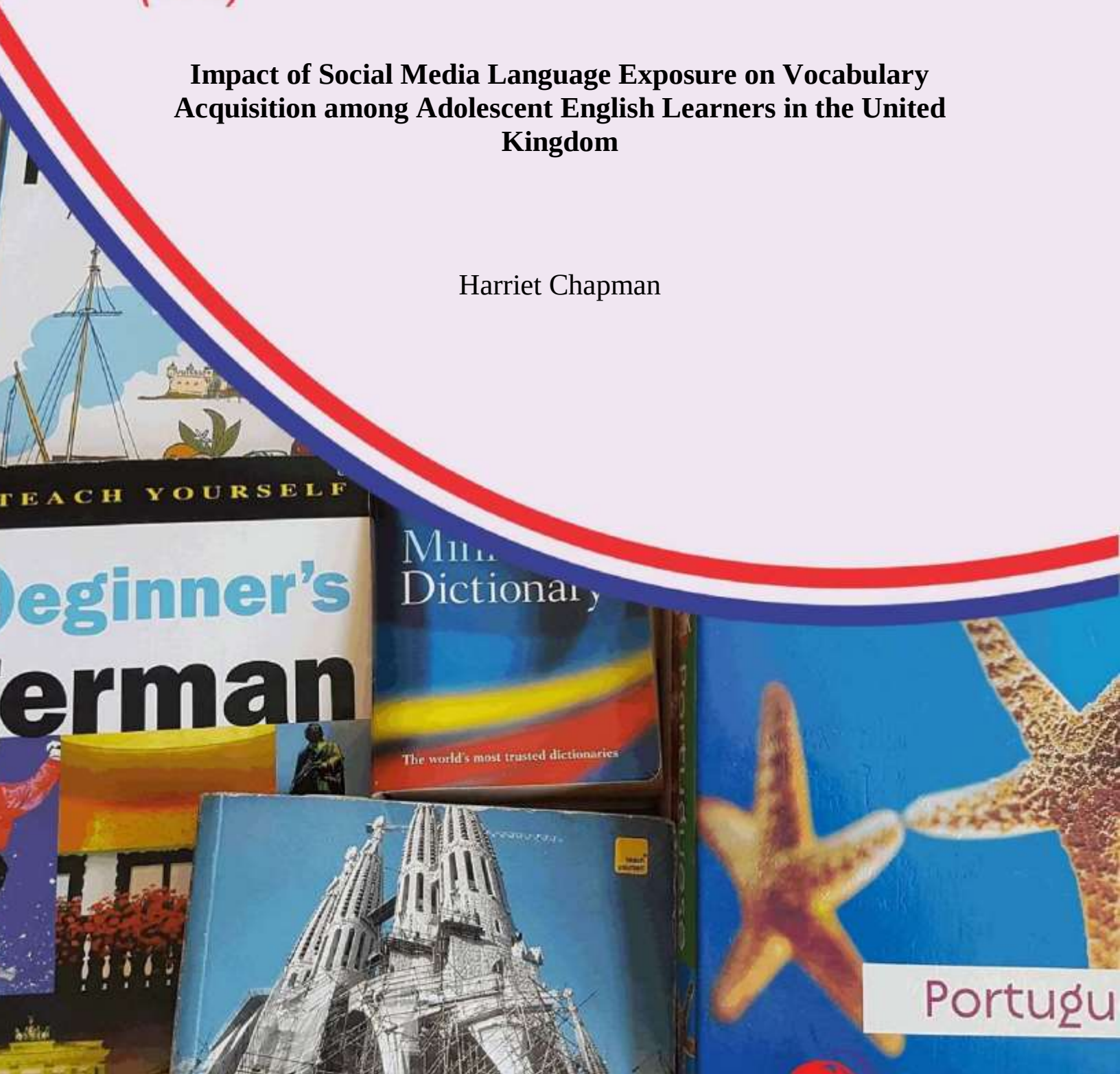

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Impact of Social Media Language Exposure on Vocabulary Acquisition among Adolescent English Learners in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Purpose: To aim of the study was to analyze impact of social media language exposure on vocabulary acquisition among adolescent English learners in the United Kingdom.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: Studies on the impact of social media language exposure on vocabulary acquisition among adolescent English learners in the United Kingdom indicate that frequent interaction with digital platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and WhatsApp significantly increases informal vocabulary recognition and speed of word recall. Learners exposed to online content tend to acquire contemporary slang, abbreviations, and conversational expressions faster than those relying only on classroom input. However, the exposure often strengthens receptive vocabulary more than productive academic vocabulary, meaning students understand many words but struggle to use formal equivalents in writing.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Input hypothesis, usage-based language learning theory may be used to anchor future studies on the impact of social media language exposure on vocabulary acquisition among adolescent English learners in the United Kingdom. Educators can guide learners in distinguishing between informal slang and standard academic vocabulary to improve language accuracy. Educational authorities should recognize social media as a supplementary language exposure environment and include digital language learning in curriculum frameworks.

Keywords: *Social Media Language Exposure, Vocabulary Acquisition, Adolescent English Learners*

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition level refers to the extent to which learners understand, recognize, and correctly use words in meaningful communication. It includes both receptive vocabulary (words learners understand) and productive vocabulary (words learners actively use in speech or writing). In the United States, large-scale school literacy assessments show adolescents exposed to digital reading environments learn new words faster because of contextual repetition and multimodal input. A longitudinal classroom study found students who engaged with online English content increased vocabulary test scores by about 18–25% over one academic year compared to traditional text-only learners (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2022). This improvement was linked to frequent incidental exposure and meaningful usage.

In Japan, vocabulary acquisition among English learners has been strongly associated with exposure frequency and interaction. Research in secondary schools reported learners interacting with online English media demonstrated significantly higher receptive vocabulary knowledge (approximately 20% higher) than those relying on textbooks alone (Peters & Webb, 2023). Learners exposed to authentic communication retained vocabulary longer because they encountered words in context. However, academic vocabulary growth remained slower than conversational vocabulary. This indicates exposure increases vocabulary breadth faster than depth.

In developing economies, vocabulary acquisition levels are influenced by access to technology and exposure to authentic English environments. A study among adolescent English learners found learners using social media English communication improved vocabulary recognition scores by 15–22% after one semester compared to classroom-only learners (Gonulal, 2020). The improvement occurred mainly in frequently used communicative words rather than formal academic vocabulary. Students benefited from contextual cues such as emojis, visuals, and conversation flow. However, inconsistent internet access reduced continuous exposure for some learners.

Another study in emerging education contexts reported that collaborative online communication significantly increased word recall accuracy. Learners participating in messaging discussions retained vocabulary more effectively due to repetition and peer clarification. The effect was strongest in interactive tasks compared to passive reading. Nevertheless, learners struggled to transfer informal vocabulary to academic writing. This suggests vocabulary acquisition occurred but remained context-dependent.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, vocabulary acquisition level is often shaped by multilingual backgrounds and limited exposure to native-like input. Research shows learners exposed to English media and online communication improved vocabulary comprehension scores by about 14–20% over a school term compared to traditional instruction alone (Al-Jarf, 2021). Exposure helped learners understand everyday language faster because of contextual reinforcement. Students reported remembering words linked to social interaction more easily than isolated memorization. However, academic vocabulary mastery remained comparatively low.

Another study in multilingual learning environments found learners retained vocabulary longer when communication involved peer discussion rather than teacher-only instruction. Interactive environments increased confidence and encouraged active word usage. Nevertheless, formal

writing accuracy lagged behind spoken comprehension. This shows exposure improved vocabulary breadth more than precision. Therefore, social interaction improves vocabulary acquisition but requires instructional support for academic mastery.

Social media language exposure refers to the contact learners have with vocabulary while interacting with digital platforms such as posts, chats, videos, and comments. This exposure allows learners to encounter words repeatedly in meaningful contexts, supporting incidental vocabulary learning (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2022). Four major forms include text-based interaction, multimedia exposure, peer communication, and algorithm-driven content repetition. Text-based interaction such as reading captions and comments strengthens receptive vocabulary because learners repeatedly notice word forms (Gonulal, 2020). Multimedia exposure through short videos combines audio and visual cues, improving vocabulary recognition and memory retention.

Peer communication through messaging and discussion groups promotes productive vocabulary because learners actively use new words in conversation (Viberg & Grönlund, 2019). Algorithm-driven repetition exposes learners to frequently used words across different posts, improving familiarity and recall. Informal exposure increases vocabulary breadth, while guided interpretation improves depth of understanding (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2022). However, without instructional support, learners may acquire slang more easily than academic vocabulary (Gonulal, 2020). Therefore, different types of social media exposure influence vocabulary acquisition through recognition, usage, repetition, and contextual learning mechanisms.

Problem Statement

The rapid expansion of digital communication platforms has transformed how adolescents interact with language in the United Kingdom. Social media applications such as messaging platforms, video-sharing sites, and discussion forums now expose learners to large amounts of English vocabulary outside the classroom. While this exposure offers opportunities for incidental learning, teachers increasingly report inconsistencies between learners' informal online language use and expected academic language standards. Many adolescent learners demonstrate strong recognition of conversational expressions yet struggle with precise vocabulary use in formal school tasks. Research shows that digital exposure can both enhance vocabulary breadth and introduce non-standard forms that may affect academic performance (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2022). Consequently, educators remain uncertain whether social media supports or undermines structured vocabulary development.

Although previous studies confirm that online interaction contributes to vocabulary growth, limited evidence explains how such exposure affects learners within the United Kingdom's structured educational environment. Differences in context, purpose, and linguistic register mean vocabulary learned informally may not transfer effectively to academic communication (Gonulal, 2020). Furthermore, adolescents vary in how they engage with social media, making its learning impact uneven across learners. Existing classroom instruction also rarely integrates online language experiences into formal teaching strategies. As a result, teachers lack clear guidance on managing social media language exposure to support vocabulary acquisition. Therefore, this study seeks to examine the impact of social media language exposure on vocabulary acquisition among adolescent English learners in the United Kingdom.

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Theoretical Review

Input Hypothesis (Comprehensible Input Theory)

Originated by Stephen Krashen, the Input Hypothesis states that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to understandable language slightly above their current level. Social media provides continuous exposure to authentic English through posts, captions, comments, and videos, allowing adolescents to encounter new vocabulary in meaningful contexts. This repeated contextual exposure helps learners infer meaning without direct instruction and gradually expand their vocabulary knowledge. Recent research confirms that frequent digital language exposure contributes to vocabulary growth through incidental learning (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2022). Therefore, social media serves as a natural input environment supporting vocabulary acquisition among adolescent English learners.

Usage-Based Language Learning Theory

Proposed by Michael Tomasello, this theory suggests that language learning develops from repeated usage patterns and meaningful interaction rather than memorization of rules. Learners acquire vocabulary when they encounter words frequently across communicative situations and associate them with functions and intentions. Social media platforms create high-frequency interaction environments where adolescents repeatedly see and use words in conversations and digital discourse. Research shows

Empirical Review

Viberg and Grönlund (2019) investigated how mobile and social media interaction affects vocabulary learning among secondary-school English learners. The purpose was to determine whether online communication contributes to vocabulary growth. The researchers used a survey combined with vocabulary tests among adolescent learners. Participants reported their frequency of social networking interaction in English. Learners were then assessed using standardized vocabulary recognition measures. Results showed frequent social media users had higher receptive vocabulary scores. Exposure to authentic communication increased contextual understanding of words. Students encountered repeated vocabulary in conversations. This repetition improved retention over time. Learners also demonstrated better recognition of informal expressions. However, academic vocabulary gains were smaller than conversational vocabulary gains. The study showed informal exposure supports incidental learning. Researchers concluded digital communication strengthens vocabulary acquisition. They recommended integrating online communication tasks in classrooms. Teachers were advised to guide students toward academic vocabulary awareness.

Gonulal (2020) examined Instagram use and vocabulary development in English learners. The purpose was to assess whether image-based social media exposure enhances vocabulary retention. A mixed-methods approach using questionnaires and lexical tests was applied. Students viewed English captions and comments regularly. Vocabulary retention was measured through pre- and post-tests. Learners exposed to Instagram content performed better than control groups. Visual context helped learners infer word meanings. Repeated viewing reinforced memory. Learners reported enjoying informal reading activities. Motivation increased engagement with English

words. Students also remembered slang expressions more easily. However, structured instruction improved accuracy of usage. The study concluded social media supports incidental acquisition. Teachers were encouraged to incorporate caption analysis tasks. Classroom discussion of online language was recommended.

Al-Jarf (2021) analyzed social media interaction and lexical acquisition among teenage learners. The purpose was to evaluate structured online discussion impact on vocabulary learning. An experimental design compared guided discussion and traditional learning groups. Learners participated in moderated English social media conversations. Vocabulary tests measured learning outcomes. The experimental group acquired more new words. Students used newly learned vocabulary in posts. Peer interaction reinforced meaning comprehension. Learners retained vocabulary longer than the control group. Contextual communication supported deeper processing. Participants expressed higher engagement levels. Motivation increased active language use. The study concluded interaction promotes vocabulary retention. The author recommended supervised online discussions in schools. Teachers should moderate digital conversations to support learning.

Hashim, Yunus, and Embi (2021) studied WhatsApp communication and vocabulary learning among adolescents. The purpose was to determine whether group chat interaction improves vocabulary acquisition. A quasi-experimental design compared chat participants and non-participants. Learners communicated in English discussion groups. Vocabulary tests measured progress across weeks. Students in chat groups improved significantly more. Repetition of words strengthened recall ability. Informal discussion improved confidence in using vocabulary. Learners asked peers about meanings. Collaboration promoted shared learning. Students retained frequently used words longer. However, teacher monitoring improved accuracy. The researchers concluded collaborative communication aids vocabulary development. They recommended structured messaging activities in language courses. Teachers should provide corrective guidance during discussions.

Fathi and Rahimi (2022) explored TikTok-based learning activities and vocabulary acquisition. The purpose was to examine whether short video content enhances lexical learning. Learners completed pre- and post-vocabulary tests. Students watched English educational videos regularly. Visual and audio cues helped meaning interpretation. Vocabulary recognition improved significantly. Learners remembered words linked to images. Short videos increased motivation and attention. Students reported enjoyment during learning. Retention remained high after delayed testing. Multimedia context supported memory formation. The authors concluded video exposure improves vocabulary acquisition. Teachers were advised to use short educational clips. Structured follow-up exercises were recommended. Students should discuss new words after viewing content.

Sundqvist and Sylvén (2022) examined extracurricular digital English exposure and vocabulary growth. The purpose was to analyze long-term impact of online interaction. A longitudinal study tracked adolescent learners over time. Learners reported hours spent interacting online in English. Vocabulary size was tested periodically. Greater exposure predicted larger vocabulary gains. Learners interacting in games and forums learned faster. Informal communication reinforced classroom learning. Students demonstrated improved comprehension ability. Exposure improved listening and reading vocabulary. However, formal writing vocabulary improved slower. The

study confirmed informal input complements education. Researchers recommended acknowledging digital learning sources. Teachers should connect online experiences to classroom lessons. Schools should integrate digital language exposure into curriculum planning.

Peters and Webb (2023) investigated online interaction and lexical learning using simulated social media discussions. The purpose was to compare interactive and non-interactive exposure effects. Experimental groups participated in discussion tasks. Control groups read texts without interaction. Vocabulary tests measured acquisition and retention. Interactive groups learned more target words. They retained vocabulary longer after delays. Social interaction encouraged deeper processing. Learners negotiated meaning with peers. This improved understanding and usage accuracy. Non-interactive learners forgot words faster. The study concluded communication enhances vocabulary retention. Teachers were advised to design interactive digital tasks. Classroom use of discussion platforms was recommended. Structured interaction improves vocabulary acquisition outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low-cost advantage as compared to field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

FINDINGS

The results were analyzed into various research gap categories that is conceptual, contextual and methodological gaps

Conceptual Research Gap

The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate that social media exposure enhances vocabulary acquisition mainly through repetition, interaction, and contextual understanding (Viberg & Grönlund, 2019; Gonulal, 2020; Peters & Webb, 2023). However, most research measures vocabulary improvement using recognition tests or word counts without clearly distinguishing between types of vocabulary knowledge such as receptive, productive, and academic vocabulary. While informal communication improves conversational vocabulary, limited attention is given to how learners transfer this knowledge into formal academic language use (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2022). Furthermore, studies rarely examine cognitive mechanisms such as depth of processing, language awareness, or meaning negotiation as mediators between exposure and vocabulary acquisition. As a result, the theoretical pathway explaining how social media exposure translates into durable academic vocabulary competence remains insufficiently explained. Therefore, a conceptual gap exists in understanding the quality and type of vocabulary development rather than only the quantity of words learned.

Contextual Research Gap

Most prior studies focus on general adolescent learners or mixed educational settings rather than structured classroom learning contexts where social media is intentionally integrated into language instruction (Al-Jarf, 2021; Hashim, 2021). Many investigations treat social media exposure as extracurricular activity rather than part of formal curriculum design, leaving uncertainty about how teachers can systematically incorporate it into lesson planning. Additionally, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp are studied separately, creating fragmented understanding of their combined educational impact. The interaction between guided classroom tasks and natural online exposure is rarely examined. Consequently, there is limited evidence on how social media language exposure functions within organized educational programs designed for measurable learning outcomes. This creates a contextual gap in evaluating structured pedagogical use of social media for vocabulary acquisition.

Geographical Research Gap

Most empirical evidence originates from non-UK contexts and international ESL environments, with little direct focus on adolescent learners in the United Kingdom educational system (Gonulal, 2020; Fathi & Rahimi, 2022). Differences in curriculum structure, digital literacy practices, and linguistic background may influence how learners interpret and benefit from social media language exposure. The multicultural and multilingual composition of UK classrooms may also affect vocabulary acquisition patterns differently from more homogeneous settings. Furthermore, regional educational policies regarding digital technology use in schools vary significantly across countries. As a result, findings from other regions cannot be fully generalized to the UK adolescent learning context. This creates a geographical gap requiring localized research to validate the influence of social media exposure on vocabulary development within UK secondary education environments.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

The evidence suggests that social media language exposure plays a significant role in shaping vocabulary acquisition among adolescent English learners in the United Kingdom. Frequent interaction with posts, comments, and multimedia content exposes learners to authentic language use, varied expressions, and emerging vocabulary that may not always appear in traditional textbooks. This repeated contextual exposure supports incidental learning, allowing learners to understand meaning through usage rather than memorization. However, the influence is mixed, as learners may acquire both standard vocabulary and informal slang depending on how they engage with digital content. Therefore, social media acts as both a learning resource and a linguistic challenge.

Overall, vocabulary development improves when learners are guided to critically interpret online language and connect informal expressions with formal academic usage. Structured educational support helps transform casual exposure into meaningful language learning. Teachers and parents play an important role in helping adolescents differentiate appropriate language contexts. When combined with classroom instruction, social media becomes a powerful supplementary language learning environment. Thus, purposeful integration of digital communication into education can enhance vocabulary growth while maintaining academic language standards.

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Recommendations

Theory

The study highlights that social media functions as an informal language learning environment where vocabulary acquisition occurs through repeated exposure, contextual usage, and peer interaction rather than structured instruction. It contributes to language acquisition theory by demonstrating that incidental learning in digital spaces complements formal classroom learning. The findings support usage-based and input-interaction perspectives by showing that frequent exposure to authentic language promotes retention and meaning construction. The research also suggests expanding vocabulary acquisition models to include digital communicative environments as legitimate learning contexts. Consequently, theoretical frameworks should integrate formal and informal language input sources when explaining adolescent vocabulary development.

Practice

Teachers should intentionally incorporate social media texts such as posts, captions, and comments into classroom vocabulary instruction to connect school learning with students' daily communication habits. Educators can guide learners in distinguishing between informal slang and standard academic vocabulary to improve language accuracy. Schools should design tasks where students analyze, categorize, and reflect on vocabulary encountered online to enhance critical language awareness. Parents and educators should encourage purposeful engagement with educational or language-rich platforms rather than passive scrolling. Language programs should also provide digital literacy training to help learners interpret meaning, tone, and context in online communication.

Policy

Educational authorities should recognize social media as a supplementary language exposure environment and include digital language learning in curriculum frameworks. Policies should support integration of online communication analysis into English language teaching syllabi. Schools should establish safe-use guidelines that allow structured academic use of social platforms without compromising learner safety. Teacher professional development policies should include training on digital language pedagogy and online discourse analysis. National literacy initiatives should incorporate digital vocabulary development strategies to align education with contemporary communication practices.

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