

The Relationship Between Vocabulary Exposure and Vocabulary Recognition Among EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary mastery is essential for English language proficiency; however, limited classroom exposure continues to hinder EFL learners' lexical development. Given the growing role of digital media in language learning, this study investigates the relationship between extramural vocabulary exposure and vocabulary recognition among English Education students. Using a quantitative correlational design, data were collected from 20 students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar (2025/2026) through a questionnaire on vocabulary exposure via digital media and a multiple-choice vocabulary recognition test. Spearman Rank Correlation analysis revealed a strong, positive, and statistically significant relationship between vocabulary exposure and vocabulary recognition ($r = 0.709$, $p < .001$). The findings highlight the value of informal digital learning environments in fostering vocabulary acquisition beyond classroom instruction. This study contributes empirical evidence supporting the integration of autonomous, media-based vocabulary learning into EFL pedagogy, offering practical insights for educators seeking to strengthen students' lexical competence.

Key words: Correlational Study; EFL Students; Vocabulary Exposure; Vocabulary Recognition

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is considered the most essential component in language learning because, without sufficient vocabulary, students cannot understand others or express their own ideas. Previous researchers agree that vocabulary mastery is the core of language proficiency that supports listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Nation, 2001; Alqahtani, 2015; Schmitt, 2000). However, many EFL students in Indonesia still face difficulties in recognizing and memorizing new words due to limited use of English in their daily environment (Cahyono & Widiati, 2011).

Theoretically, language acquisition depends heavily on the input or exposure that learners receive. According to the Input Hypothesis, students need to be exposed to "comprehensible input" to acquire the language naturally (Krashen, 1985). In the modern digital era, vocabulary exposure is no longer limited to the classroom; students can now access English through various media such as movies, songs, social media,

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and video games. This phenomenon is often referred to as "Extramural English" or English usage outside the classroom (**Sundqvist, 2009; Peters, 2018**).

Furthermore, relying solely on formal instruction in the classroom is often insufficient for achieving high vocabulary proficiency. Classroom time is typically limited to a few hours per week, which restricts the amount of meaningful engagement students have with the target language (**Renandya, 2012**). Consequently, autonomous engagement outside the classroom becomes crucial. When students expose themselves to English through digital platforms, they encounter high-frequency words repeatedly, which helps transfer vocabulary from short-term to long-term memory (**Ellis, 2002; Schmitt, 2000**).

For EFL students who live in a non-English speaking country, this incidental exposure serves as the primary substitute for a natural immersion environment, directly affecting their ability to recognize words in various contexts. According to **Harmer (2007)** and **Brown (2004)**, vocabulary mastery is a fundamental component of language competence that needs to be assessed accurately, as emphasized by **Milton (2009)**.

Several studies have indicated that informal exposure significantly impacts students' vocabulary recognition. Students who frequently engage with English media tend to have better receptive vocabulary skills compared to those who rely solely on textbooks. Exposure allows learners to encounter words in context, which aids in retention and recognition (**Webb, 2010; Peters 2018; Arndt & Woore, 2018**). Therefore, this study aims to specifically investigate the relationship between vocabulary exposure and vocabulary recognition among EFL students

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework of Vocabulary Exposure Vocabulary exposure is defined as the frequency with which learners encounter words in the target language. In the Journal Homepage; <https://journal.ballacaraddeeducation.id/index.php/sej-mlss>

context of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), exposure is the primary fuel for learning. **Krashen (1985)** emphasized in his Input Hypothesis that humans acquire language in only one way: by understanding messages, or by receiving "comprehensible input."

In the modern EFL context, exposure often occurs outside the classroom, a phenomenon known as "Extramural English" (Sundqvist, 2009). This type of exposure is typically voluntary and involves activities such as watching English movies, listening to music, playing video games, and engaging in social media. Researchers distinguish between intentional learning (studying words explicitly) and **incidental learning**. Incidental vocabulary learning refers to the picking up of new words as a by-product of other activities, such as reading or listening for pleasure (Hulstijn, 2001). For university students, this incidental exposure through digital media is often more significant than formal classroom instruction due to the sheer volume of time spent on digital platforms.

The Concept of Vocabulary Recognition Vocabulary knowledge is multidimensional. Nation (2001) categorizes vocabulary mastery into two main types: **receptive** (recognition) and **productive** (use). Vocabulary recognition specifically refers to the ability to perceive a word's form (visual or auditory) and retrieve its meaning from memory.

Recognition is cognitively less demanding than production. A student might recognize the word "sophisticated" when reading a text but may struggle to use it in a conversation. However, recognition is the foundation of fluency. Without a large recognition vocabulary, learners cannot comprehend reading materials or spoken dialogue. Therefore, testing vocabulary recognition provides a realistic measure of how much language input a student has successfully processed and stored in their long-term memory.

The Relationship Between Exposure and Recognition The link between exposure and recognition is supported by the *Frequency Effect* theory (Ellis, 2002), which posits that the more frequently a learner encounters a word, the more likely they are to recognize it. High-frequency exposure strengthens the neural connections in the brain, making word retrieval faster and more accurate.

Previous studies have consistently shown a positive correlation between media exposure and vocabulary skills. For instance, Webb (2010) and Peters (2018) found that watching English television with captions significantly improved vocabulary recognition scores among EFL learners. Similarly, Arndt and Woore (2018) highlighted that YouTube serves as a rich source of input that enhances receptive skills. These studies suggest that students who immerse themselves in English media create a "virtual immersion" environment, which compensates for the lack of English use in their daily society. Based on this theoretical background, it is hypothesized that higher vocabulary exposure will directly correlate with higher vocabulary recognition capabilities.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative research method with a correlational design. According to Creswell (2012), a correlational design is used to measure the degree of association or relationship between two or more variables. This design was chosen because the researcher aimed to investigate the relationship between Vocabulary Exposure (Variable X) and Vocabulary Recognition (Variable Y) without manipulating the variables. The population of this study consisted of English education majors at Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar in the academic year 2025/2026. The sample for this study comprised 20 students. The sampling technique

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used was Convenience Sampling, where the participants were selected based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study. Although the sample size was small, it was deemed sufficient for this preliminary study to observe the correlation patterns between the variables. The data collection process for this study was conducted in January 2026 at Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar. The procedure followed a structured approach consisting of two main phases to ensure valid and reliable data gathering: The first stage of data collection involved distributing a questionnaire to measure the students' *Vocabulary Exposure* (Variable X). This questionnaire was designed to assess how frequently students interact with English in their daily lives. The instrument contained items regarding various digital activities, specifically accessing social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok, Twitter), listening to English songs, watching movies, reading English texts, and playing video games. Students were instructed to answer honestly based on their actual habits. This phase was crucial to map the intensity of students' independent engagement with the target language.

Test (Vocabulary Recognition)

Immediately following the questionnaire, the researchers administered the *Vocabulary Recognition Test* (Variable Y). This test aimed to objectively measure the students' ability to identify and understand English words. The instrument consisted of multiple-choice questions, where students were required to select the correct Indonesian meaning for specific English words (e.g., determining the meaning of "essential", "recognize", or "context"). This test served as the primary indicator of the students' receptive vocabulary mastery.

Throughout the process, the researchers ensured that all participants understood the instructions clearly. The data from both the questionnaire and the test were then compiled and tabulated for statistical analysis using SPSS.

4. RESULTS

Normality Test

Table 1. Tests of Normality

Tests of Normality						
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
X_Total	.104	20	.200*	.962	20	.577
Y_Total	.214	20	.017	.835	20	.003

*. This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Based on the Shapiro-Wilk normality test, the X_Total variable has a Sig. value of 0.577 ($p > 0.05$), indicating that the data is normally distributed. Meanwhile, the Y_Total variable has a Sig. value of 0.003 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the data is not normally distributed. Since one of the variables is not normally distributed, the relationship test used is the Spearman correlation.

Hypothesis Test (Correlation Analysis)

To determine the strength and significance of the relationship between Vocabulary Exposure and Vocabulary Recognition, the Spearman Rank Correlation test was performed. The results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Nonparametric Correlations

➔ Nonparametric Correlations

Correlations				
Spearman's rho	X_Total	Correlation Coefficient	X_Total	Y_Total
		Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000	.709**
		N	20	20
	Y_Total	Correlation Coefficient	.709**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	20	20

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Based on the results of the Spearman Rank Correlation test presented in Table 2, the correlation coefficient (r) obtained is 0.709. Additionally, the significance value (Sig. 2-

tailed) is 0.000, which is smaller than the alpha level of 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). These statistical results indicate that there is a strong, positive, and significant relationship between Vocabulary Exposure (X_{Total}) and Vocabulary Recognition (Y_{Total}). This positive correlation implies that the frequency of vocabulary exposure aligns with vocabulary mastery; specifically, the more frequently students are exposed to English vocabulary in their daily lives, the better their ability to recognize and understand English words.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that vocabulary exposure plays a critical role in students' vocabulary recognition. The strong positive correlation ($r = 0.709$) indicates that students who actively engage with English media outside the classroom (such as watching movies, listening to music, or using social media) perform significantly better in recognizing English words.

This result supports Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985), which argues that language acquisition relies heavily on the amount of comprehensible input learners receive. When students expose themselves to English media, they are creating an "immersion-like" environment that is often missing in EFL contexts. Furthermore, this study aligns with the findings of Webb (2010) and Peters (2018), who concluded that incidental learning through audio-visual media significantly contributes to vocabulary knowledge. In short, the more input students receive from their daily digital activities, the more familiar they become with word forms, leading to higher recognition scores.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data analysis and discussion, this study concludes that there is a strong, positive, and significant relationship between Vocabulary Exposure and Vocabulary Recognition among English Education students at Universitas Muhammadiyah Makassar. The correlation coefficient of 0.709 confirms that students

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with higher frequency of exposure to English in their daily lives tend to have superior vocabulary recognition skills.

These findings imply that relying solely on classroom instruction is insufficient for vocabulary mastery. Therefore, it is suggested that students should actively maximize their engagement with "extramural" English activities, such as watching English content, listening to podcasts or songs, and reading English captions on social media, to autonomously enhance their vocabulary recognition.

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