HARNESSING SOCIAL MEDIA TO ENHANCE ENGLISH LITERACY AMONG INDONESIAN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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Abstract: *This study explores undergraduate students' perceptions, learning strategies, and challenges in utilizing social media for English language learning in a digital learning context. The participants were undergraduate students from the English Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through interviews, participant observation, and supplementary questionnaires, and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal that students perceive social media platforms particularly TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram as accessible and engaging resources that support English literacy development. Students employ various self-directed learning strategies, including consuming English-language content, practicing pronunciation, and interacting through platform features. However, the study also identifies several challenges, such as distraction from non-educational content, limited ability to evaluate the credibility of online materials, uneven internet access, and low confidence in using English publicly. Overall, the study highlights the potential of social media as a supportive medium for English language learning in higher education, while emphasizing the importance of digital literacy, learner motivation, and self-regulation. This study contributes to TESOL-related scholarship by providing empirical insights into the opportunities and challenges of social media-mediated English literacy development in non-native English contexts.*

Keywords : Social Media, English Literacy, TESOL, Digital Literacy, Student Perception

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi, strategi pembelajaran, dan tantangan mahasiswa dalam memanfaatkan media sosial sebagai sarana pembelajaran bahasa Inggris dalam konteks pembelajaran digital. Partisipan penelitian ini adalah mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh yang dipilih menggunakan teknik purposive sampling. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara, observasi partisipatif, serta angket sebagai instrumen pendukung, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa memandang media sosial khususnya TikTok, YouTube, dan Instagram sebagai media yang mudah diakses dan menarik dalam mendukung pengembangan literasi bahasa Inggris. Mahasiswa menerapkan berbagai strategi pembelajaran mandiri, seperti mengonsumsi konten berbahasa Inggris, melatih pelafalan, serta berinteraksi melalui fitur-fitur platform. Namun demikian, penelitian ini juga mengidentifikasi sejumlah tantangan, antara lain distraksi dari konten hiburan, keterbatasan kemampuan dalam menilai kredibilitas sumber daring, akses internet yang tidak merata, serta rendahnya kepercayaan diri dalam menggunakan bahasa Inggris di ruang publik. Secara keseluruhan, penelitian ini menegaskan potensi media sosial sebagai media pendukung pembelajaran bahasa Inggris di perguruan tinggi, dengan catatan bahwa efektivitasnya bergantung pada literasi digital, motivasi belajar, dan kemampuan regulasi diri mahasiswa. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap kajian TESOL dengan menyajikan bukti empiris mengenai peluang dan tantangan pemanfaatan media sosial dalam pengembangan literasi bahasa Inggris pada konteks penutur non-native.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology has transformed the landscape of English language education, particularly in higher education contexts where English is learned as a foreign language. Social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok have become integral to Indonesian university students' daily lives, offering continuous exposure to English through videos, captions, comments, and online interactions (Al-Khayat & Raba, 2023). Data from We Are Social and Meltwater (2024) show that more than 95% of Indonesian university students access social media daily; however, only about 27% intentionally use these platforms for academic or language learning purposes. This imbalance indicates that while social media is widely accessible, its pedagogical role in supporting English literacy development among university students has not yet been fully realized.

English literacy encompasses more than the technical ability to read and write, involving cognitive, affective, and sociocultural dimensions of language use. Kern (2000) conceptualizes literacy as a social practice shaped by interaction among texts, individuals, and cultural contexts, highlighting the importance of sociocultural understanding in English literacy development. In TESOL-related scholarship, English literacy integrates the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading, and writing which together form communicative competence (Albiladi, 2020). Although English instruction is mandated across educational levels in Indonesia, evidence suggests that university students' English literacy achievement remains uneven due to differences in learning environments, instructional practices, learner motivation, and access to learning resources (Muftah, 2024).

A growing body of research has documented the potential of social media to support English language learning, particularly in enhancing vocabulary, listening, pronunciation, and learner motivation (Cheng & Lee, 2023; Alharbi, 2023). The interactive and multimodal features of platforms such as TikTok and YouTube promote learner engagement and autonomous learning. However, existing studies tend to emphasize platform-specific outcomes or isolated language skills, with limited attention to how students strategically employ social media for broader English literacy development. In addition, students' ability to critically evaluate online content and manage digital distractions key aspects of digital literacy remains underexplored in higher education contexts.

In light of these considerations, this study adopts an integrative qualitative approach to examine three essential variables social media, digital literacy, and English literacy within Indonesian higher education. The study focuses on undergraduate students' perceptions of social media use, the learning strategies they employ to support English literacy development, and the challenges they encounter in the process. Specifically, the study seeks to address the following questions: (1) How do students perceive the use of social media in enhancing their English literacy? (2) What learning strategies do they employ when utilizing social media for English literacy development? (3) What challenges do they face? By providing contextualized insights into students' experiences,

this study contributes to TESOL-related scholarship and offers pedagogical implications for more guided and literacy-oriented uses of social media in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media offers interactive, multimodal, and flexible learning experiences that distinguish it from conventional learning resources. Its participatory nature allows learners not only to consume content but also to produce it, thereby fostering authentic practice of language skills (Muftah, 2024). For instance, students may create vlogs, participate in online discussions, or interact directly with native speakers, which in turn strengthens their confidence and communicative competence. Additionally, social media supports autonomous learning, as students can choose platforms and communities according to their needs and interests (Wang & Chen, 2019). Nevertheless, challenges remain, including distractions from non-educational content unequal access to technology, and the need for digital literacy to filter credible information (Fadila et al., 2024).

Digital literacy plays a crucial mediating role in enhancing English literacy, which is operationally defined as students' ability to comprehend, interpret, and produce English texts across receptive and productive skills for academic and communicative purposes. It refers not only to technical skills but also to cognitive and socio-emotional capacities for accessing, evaluating, and utilizing information from digital sources (Eshet-Alkalai, 2012). Students with higher levels of digital literacy are better able to engage in autonomous and collaborative learning, critically evaluate online texts, and participate in intercultural communication (Ilomäki et al., 2016). In the Indonesian context, however, disparities in digital literacy remain evident, especially between urban and rural learners, which affects the extent to which students can benefit from technology-enhanced language learning.

Empirical studies on the use of social media in language learning have shown promising results. Research indicates that platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube can enhance speaking, writing, listening, and vocabulary skills (Cheng & Lee, 2023; Alharbi, 2023; Rahman et al., 2024). Interactive content has been found to boost motivation (Syari et al., 2023; Patty & Noija, 2023), while platforms like WhatsApp provide effective spaces for practicing speaking (Nurfarahana et al., 2024) and collaborative writing (Noviany et al., 2024). Nevertheless, recent studies also highlight persistent issues such as limited digital literacy, unequal access, and the prevalence of informal or non-academic English that may hinder students' mastery of academic literacy (Nugroho, 2023; Ratri & Aviyanti, 2025; Dewi, 2025).

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate how university students utilize social media to develop their English literacy. The case study approach was chosen as it enables an in-depth exploration of learning strategies, challenges, and outcomes within a natural context (Wang & Zhang, 2023; Yin, 2022). The research was conducted at the English Education Department, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh. The site was selected based on accessibility, data availability, and institutional support.

The population of this study comprised all students enrolled in the English Education program. A purposive sampling technique was applied to select participants who met the following criteria: (1) active engagement in

academic activities involving social media, (2) prior experience in using social media as a learning resource, and (3) willingness to participate in interviews and questionnaires (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Based on these criteria, 20 students were recruited, including 5 participants for in-depth interviews and 15 respondents for questionnaires.

Data were collected through three primary techniques: semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide consisting of open-ended questions designed to elicit students' perceptions, learning strategies, and challenges in using social media for English literacy development. Participant observation was guided by an observation schema focusing on students' engagement with platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram, including patterns of content consumption, interactive practices, and learning-related behaviors, with systematic field notes recorded throughout the process. Questionnaires were administered as a supplementary instrument to triangulate the qualitative data, gathering information on students' motivation, preferred content types, and perceived impact of social media on English language development.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2022), including familiarization, coding, theme development, review, definition, and reporting. Data from interviews, observations, and questionnaires were coded inductively, with coding reviewed by the researchers and supported by AI-assisted tools for data organization. Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation and the maintenance of an audit trail. Ethical procedures included informed consent, anonymization, and secure data storage.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This qualitative study seeks to investigate students' perceptions, strategies, and challenges in leveraging social media as a means of enhancing English literacy in the digital era. The research was carried out with students from the Department of English Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Aceh, who were purposively selected due to their active engagement in the use of social media as a learning tool. The subsequent section presents the findings derived from this study.

Result of Interview

Interviews were conducted with five students who actively engaged in the use of social media as a medium for learning English. The interview protocol consisted of five key questions focusing on how social media was utilized to support their language learning and the challenges they encountered in the process. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed five major themes: students' perceptions of social media, choice of platforms, learning strategies, challenges, and expectations toward its use in English learning. These themes, along with representative student responses, are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Representative Student Responses from Interviews

Theme	Findings	Student Responses
Perception of Social Media	Social media is perceived as an engaging, flexible, and motivating learning tool. The process feels more relaxed and enjoyable.	"I feel that learning through social media is more relaxed and not boring, so I feel more motivated." (M2)
Choice of Platform	YouTube and TikTok are the most frequently used platforms due to their variety of audiovisual content. Instagram is also used for short, visual-based content.	"If I want to learn vocabulary or listening, I just go to YouTube or TikTok. There are plenty of options right away." (M4)
Learning Strategies	Students adopt strategies such as watching videos regularly, taking notes on new vocabulary, repeating content, imitating dialogues, making digital notes, reposting, and using interactive features like duet.	"Sometimes I do a duet on TikTok for speaking practice. Even though I'm not fluent yet, it helps build my confidence." (M5)
Challenges	The main challenges include distraction from entertainment content, difficulty identifying credible content, and unstable internet connections.	"Sometimes I don't know whether the content is accurate or just random, because so many people make English-learning videos now." (M4)
Expectations & Attitudes	Social media is considered effective if used wisely. Content selection and time management are seen as keys to success.	"Social media is flexible. It depends on us to use it wisely for learning, not just entertainment." (M5)

Overall, the students expressed a positive perception toward the use of social media for enhancing their English literacy. They considered it accessible, flexible, and motivating. For instance, one student stated, *"I feel that learning through social media is more relaxed and not boring, so I feel more motivated"* (M2). In terms of platform choice, YouTube and TikTok were the most preferred because they provide a wide range of learning content such as speaking, vocabulary, idioms, and grammar tips. One respondent remarked, *"If I want to learn vocabulary or listening, I just go to YouTube or TikTok. There are plenty of options right away"* (M4). Instagram was also utilized, especially for short educational content like infographics and quizzes. For example, a student noted, *"I often watch conversation videos on Instagram, then I repeat them to practice pronunciation"* (M1).

Regarding learning strategies, students engaged in watching learning videos regularly, taking notes on vocabulary, repeating content for pronunciation practice, imitating dialogues, and creating digital notes. They also reposted content and used interactive features such as TikTok's duet. As M5 stated, *"Sometimes I do a duet on TikTok for speaking practice. Even though I'm not fluent yet, it helps build my confidence."* However, the interviews also highlighted challenges such as distractions from non-educational content, difficulty filtering credible information, and unstable internet access, particularly for those living in areas with poor connectivity. For example, M2 mentioned, *"I intended to study, but I ended up scrolling funny videos instead."* Another noted, *"When the internet is slow, I get discouraged to open longer videos"* (M1).

Despite these obstacles, the students agreed that social media is an effective tool for English learning in the digital era, provided that they manage their time well and select relevant content. As M5 emphasized, *"Social media is flexible. It depends on us to use it wisely for learning, not just entertainment."*

Result of Observation

Participant observation was conducted to examine students' actual practices in using social media for English learning, focusing on authentic activities and challenges in digital learning contexts. The observation revealed several patterns of engagement, which were categorized into themes that illustrate how students consumed educational content, participated in interactive activities, managed their learning duration, and dealt with potential distractions. Table 2 summarizes these findings, providing an overview of students' observable behaviors in integrating social media into their English learning process.

Table 2. Observed Student Activities in Using Social Media for English Learning

Theme	Findings	Activity Description
Educational Content Consumption	Following educational accounts	Students followed accounts such as @englishvocab.id, @englishteacherdavid, and YouTube channel "Listen & Speak Academy."
	Watching short videos	Engaged with 1–10 minute TikTok/YouTube videos on vocabulary, idioms, grammar, and pronunciation.
Active Participation	Liking & commenting	Interacted with content related to speaking tips, daily vocabulary, and conversational English.
	Sharing content	Reposted English-learning content via Instagram Story or WhatsApp academic groups.
	Note-taking	Recorded vocabulary and key points manually or with apps like Notion.
	Speaking practice	Imitated or re-recorded dialogues from videos for independent practice.
Learning Duration & Time	Daily usage	Spent 10–20 minutes per day learning via social media.
	Peak time	Most active between 9:00–11:00 PM.
Challenges	Distractions	Distracted by humorous videos, celebrity gossip, or viral trends.
Overall Engagement	High enthusiasm	Students did not only consume content but also actively noted, shared, and practiced materials.

The observations confirmed that students actively use social media to improve their English literacy. They followed credible educational accounts and consistently engaged with short video content on vocabulary, idioms, grammar, and pronunciation. Many students also shared useful content through Instagram Stories or WhatsApp groups, showing their enthusiasm for peer knowledge-sharing.

Furthermore, students demonstrated reflective strategies such as taking manual or digital notes and practicing speaking by imitating or re-recording dialogues, particularly on TikTok. On average, students devoted 10–20 minutes daily to learning via social media, typically during evening hours. Nevertheless, distractions from non-educational content remained a significant challenge, reducing the overall effectiveness of social media learning.

In summary, students exhibited strong enthusiasm and active involvement in using social media for English learning. While distractions were common, the combination of content consumption, note-taking, sharing, and

speaking practice suggested that social media supported both receptive and productive learning activities.

Result of Questionnaire

To complement the interview and observation data, a questionnaire was administered to 15 students to further explore their perceptions, strategies, and challenges in using social media for English learning. The instrument consisted of 20 items covering aspects such as preferred platforms, types of content accessed, learning motivation, and perceived barriers.

Table 3. Students' Perceptions, Strategies, and Challenges of Using Social Media

No	Statement	Mean (%)
1	Social media helps me learn new English vocabulary.	87.5
2	Social media motivates me to learn English more often.	85.0
3	Social media is an effective source of English learning.	90.0
4	I prefer learning English through social media.	80.0
5	I feel confident learning English through social media.	75.0
6	I understand English grammar from short videos on social media.	77.5
7	I feel motivated when I see peers learning English on social media.	82.5
8	I use Instagram for learning English.	82.5
9	I often watch English-learning videos on TikTok/YouTube.	92.5
10	I take notes of new vocabulary from social media.	80.0
11	I practice speaking by imitating content on social media.	75.0
12	I practice writing through captions or comments.	72.5
13	I follow accounts that share English learning content.	85.0
14	I save English posts for later review.	80.0
15	I actively interact in English on social media.	70.0
16	I find it difficult to understand fast-paced English content.	67.5
17	I often get distracted by other content while studying.	60.0
18	I find it hard to distinguish between educational and entertaining content.	65.0
19	I am not always consistent in learning through social media.	62.5
20	I lack confidence to practice English publicly.	68.0

Based on the questionnaire data, students expressed highly positive perceptions of social media as a learning medium. A large proportion (90%) agreed that social media is an effective source of English learning, while 87.5% reported gaining new vocabulary through its use. Motivation was also significantly influenced, with 85% feeling more encouraged to study and 82.5% expressing additional motivation when seeing peers learn English online. Moreover, 80% preferred learning English through social media rather than traditional methods. However, fewer students reported confidence in practicing English (75%) and understanding grammar from short videos (77.5%). This suggests that while social media effectively supports vocabulary development and motivation, it remains limited in fostering grammatical mastery and learner confidence.

From the data, the most dominant activity was watching English-learning videos on TikTok or YouTube (92.5%), followed by following educational accounts (85%) and using Instagram for interactive content (82.5%). Many students also engaged in note-taking (80%) and saving posts for later review (80%). In terms of productive

use, 75% practiced speaking by imitating content, while 72.5% practiced writing through captions or comments. However, only 70% actively interacted in English on public platforms, indicating that learners prefer private or semi-private forms of practice over direct public engagement.

Despite the positive outcomes, several challenges were identified. The most common issues were lack of confidence in practicing English publicly (68%) and difficulty understanding fast-paced English content, especially from native speakers (67.5%). Students also struggled to distinguish between educational and entertaining content (65%), faced inconsistency in maintaining learning routines (62.5%), and were often distracted by non-educational posts (60%). These findings highlight both cognitive barriers (comprehension difficulties, content filtering) and affective barriers (low confidence, inconsistency) in digital-based learning.

Discussion

The study revealed that students generally hold positive perceptions of social media as a medium for English learning. From interviews and observations, social media was viewed as an engaging, flexible, and motivating platform that creates a relaxed learning atmosphere. This perception was supported by questionnaire data, in which 90% of respondents considered social media an effective source of English learning, and 85% reported increased motivation. These findings resonate with Al-Samarraie et al. (2023), who argue that social media fosters collaborative and interactive language learning environments. Similar results were reported in Cheng and Lee (2023), where the use of TikTok enhanced students' motivation and engagement in learning vocabulary and speaking.

In terms of platform preference, YouTube and TikTok were the most frequently used, as they provide diverse audiovisual content suited to vocabulary, listening, grammar, and speaking practice. Instagram was also used for short, interactive content such as infographics and quizzes. This finding is in line with Liu et al. (2022), who emphasized that interest-driven, visual, and interactive content supports personalized and autonomous learning. However, while students in more technologically advanced contexts (e.g., South Korea or Europe) tend to use social media for both receptive and productive communication (Lee & Kim, 2023; Wang & Chen, 2019), the participants in this study were more inclined toward receptive activities such as watching, noting, and reposting content. Productive engagement, such as public speaking and writing, remained limited, which reflects cultural and affective barriers specific to the Indonesian context.

Regarding learning strategies, students combined receptive and productive practices: watching videos regularly, taking vocabulary notes, repeating and imitating dialogues, sharing materials, and practicing speaking through interactive features such as TikTok duet. Questionnaire data further confirmed that 92.5% often watched learning videos on TikTok/YouTube, 85% followed educational accounts, and 80% saved or noted content for review. These practices reflect elements of self-regulated learning, as students actively manage their digital learning environment, consistent with Dudeney et al. (2022). Nonetheless, compared to studies conducted in the Middle East (Nurfarahana et al., 2024), where learners actively use WhatsApp and Instagram for communicative interaction, the students in this research showed a preference for semi-private or individual practices rather than

public engagement. This suggests the need for more supportive digital environments that encourage confidence and reduce anxiety when practicing English in public domains.

Despite the positive outcomes, several challenges emerged. The most common issues were distraction from entertainment content (60%), difficulty distinguishing educational from non-educational material (65%), and inconsistency in learning habits (62.5%). Students also struggled with fast-paced English input (67.5%) and low confidence in practicing English publicly (68%). These challenges reflect both cognitive barriers (limited comprehension of native-speaker content, low digital literacy) and affective barriers (fear of mistakes, lack of self-confidence). Such findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting digital distractions (Wibowo & Wijayanti, 2021; Fadila et al., 2024) and anxiety in online learning environments (Ghosn-Chelala & Al-Ghazo, 2023). What differentiates this study, however, is the contextual factor: unlike students in high-access digital contexts, Indonesian learners particularly in Aceh still face infrastructural limitations, which exacerbate motivational and cognitive barriers.

These findings highlight several important implications for English language education. First, social media should not merely serve as an optional supplement but be formally integrated into curricula as a structured pedagogical tool. This would allow educators to guide students in using platforms strategically, ensuring alignment between academic goals and digital habits. Second, digital literacy training is essential to help students critically evaluate online content, manage distractions, and select credible resources. Third, affective aspects particularly confidence and willingness to use English in public should be nurtured through peer support and collaborative digital learning communities.

In conclusion, social media demonstrates strong potential as an adaptive and effective medium for English learning in the digital era. However, its effectiveness depends on guided strategies, adequate digital literacy, and attention to learners' affective needs (Zubaidah, 2020). This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the integrative relationship between social media use, digital literacy, and English literacy in the under-researched Indonesian higher education context. Beyond local relevance, the findings provide insights for other developing countries where digital literacy gaps persist, suggesting that the success of social media in EFL learning requires not only access to technology but also structured pedagogical integration and socio-emotional support.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Conclusion

This study concludes that social media offers significant potential in enhancing students' English literacy by providing flexible and engaging platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok that support vocabulary growth and language practice. Students adopt a variety of self-directed strategies to maximize its use, yet they also encounter challenges related to consistency, content selection, and confidence in public engagement. Therefore, while social media can serve as an effective complement to English learning, its success ultimately depends on learners' ability to manage distractions, choose relevant resources, and sustain structured learning practices.

Suggestion

Based on the findings, this study suggested that the educators incorporate social media into classroom activities as a complementary tool, providing guidance on how to manage distractions and build confidence in public engagement. For future researchers, further studies could explore the long-term impact of social media-based learning and examine how different platforms or content types influence specific aspects of English literacy such as speaking fluency, writing accuracy, or critical digital literacy.

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