



## The Strategies Used by EFL Students to Learn New Vocabulary

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### Abstract

*For EFL students, vocabulary mastery is very important, but traditional memorization methods often result in passive knowledge. The vocabulary mastery mechanisms used by seventh-semester EFL students at Universitas PGRI Delta Sidoarjo after attending formal vocabulary classes were analyzed in this study. Ten students were selected through purposive sampling and interviewed in November 2025 using a qualitative descriptive design and semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved methodically coding, classifying, and clustering replies into more general themes according to recurrent patterns. Thematic analysis revealed three interconnected themes: (1) Authentic Multimodal Media with Emotional Connections (films, music, social media), (2) Active Practice through Production and Error-Based Learning (conversations, writing, self-practice), and (3) Immediate Meaning Search with Contextual Understanding (online dictionaries with contextual exploration). The results of the study show that advanced EFL students use authentic materials and emotional engagement for deeper encoding and retention, shifting from teacher-dependent learning to independent learning. Compared to mechanical memorization, these techniques are considered simpler, more enjoyable, and more applicable. This study provides insights for creating more successful, student-centered vocabulary training by highlighting the importance of contextual understanding, productive practice, and the transformation of error experiences in vocabulary acquisition.*

**Keywords:** Vocabulary Mastery; Vocabulary Learning Strategies; EFL Students.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Vocabulary mastery in EFL is important. The importance of vocabulary mastery in the English language learning process cannot be denied. Vocabulary mastery enables students to express their ideas effectively and understand communication from others, so that the communication process can take place smoothly and efficiently (Hakami, 2025). Vocabulary is an essential component of a language because it gives names and labels to objects, activities, and ideas. Effective meaning absorption in communication is impossible without vocabulary (Nation, 2001). Since human communication depends on the use of vocabulary, learning a language is impossible without mastering its vocabulary. In addition, mastering vocabulary is very important for becoming proficient in English, especially for those who are learning it as a second language. A lack of vocabulary makes it difficult for students to read, write, listen, and communicate their thoughts clearly in both academic and real-life contexts (Fikri & Aisyah, 2025).

To learn new vocabulary, a lot of EFL students still rely on memorizing techniques like using bilingual dictionaries. Passive vocabulary learning is frequently the outcome of this reliance. However, students' preferred strategies may change from simple memorization to more complex, context-based methods as they progress and gain greater autonomy (Al-Shumaimeri et al., 2025). There is still a lack of research on this shift from teacher-dependent to self-directed vocabulary learning, especially among senior students who have finished formal teaching but continue to expand their vocabulary on their own. This condition poses a significant problem: even though students are able to recognize a word in reading or exams, they have great difficulty remembering and using it actively and spontaneously in conversation or writing. As a result, the reading process becomes very slow and tiring, and can even cause frustration and despair in students when they encounter unfamiliar words in a text (Noorizah Mohd. Noor & Zaini Amir, 2009). This occurs because rote memorization alone is insufficient for building a deep understanding network between a word, its meaning, and its various contexts of use (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Nation, 2001).

Vocabulary learning strategies are fundamental tools that play a crucial role in helping EFL students acquire and expand their vocabulary systematically. Nation (2001) asserts that effective vocabulary learning must use a well-planned and strategic approach, while Schmitt (2008) adds that choosing the right strategy can significantly accelerate the process of vocabulary expansion. Without the implementation of structured strategies, EFL students often face difficulties in building a strong and sustainable vocabulary foundation. In the context of strategy selection, EFL students tend to choose lessons that are considered easier, more enjoyable, and more applicable in new situations (Oxford, 2003).

In the context of strategy selection, Oxford (2003) identifies that EFL students tend to choose learning strategies that are considered easier to implement, provide an

enjoyable learning experience, and can be widely applied in various communication situations. This preference indicates that ease and comfort are significant factors influencing the adoption of learning strategies.

Furthermore, vocabulary learning is considered a complex and multidimensional structure, not a one-dimensional structure. Chou (2024) emphasizes that students interact with language through several phases, such as encoding, storage, and retrieval of knowledge from long-term memory, each phase requiring a strategic approach tailored to the characteristics of specific students. In this context, individual perception characteristics are very important in determining the effectiveness of vocabulary acquisition procedures. Wu et al. (2013) found that self-confidence, attitudes toward learning, and perceptions of task difficulty in students of English as a foreign language have a significant impact on how they choose and apply vocabulary learning strategies throughout these stages. This finding is further supported by Tseng and Schmitt (2008), who demonstrated that students' initial appraisals of their vocabulary learning experiences and their attitudes toward vocabulary learning directly affect their self-regulatory capacity and strategic involvement in the learning process.

In recent decades, research on learning strategies in EFL has grown rapidly (Schmitt, 1997; Nation, 2001). However, most previous studies have preferred to use a quantitative approach, which focuses on measuring how often vocabulary learning strategies are used (Goundar, 2019). Although Chou (2024) successfully validated vocabulary learning strategies and identified the most effective strategies through quantitative frequency measurements of 556 students, this method cannot reveal the subjective and complex dimensions of the students' learning experiences. In particular, the study did not explore the context of autonomous learning in advanced students who had completed formal vocabulary classes.

Methodological limitations are becoming an increasingly significant issue in the context of English education, especially for EFL students in their seventh semester, who are consistently improving their communication skills outside of formal classes. There are many opportunities to examine how EFL students select and apply vocabulary learning strategies in the context of their independent study. Important factors include personal motivation in selecting strategies, situational context in applying strategies, and reflective evaluation of strategy success, which have not been fully explored. Therefore, qualitative studies using semi-structured interviews have the potential to provide more in-depth information about how EFL students learn new vocabulary during their semester. This includes understanding new vocabulary, practicing its use in everyday communication, the influence of context and learning media, and the process of learning through mistakes.

This study aims to fill the research gap by exploring the vocabulary learning strategies used by seventh-semester EFL students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas PGRI Delta Sidoarjo through semi-structured interviews. Seventh-semester students were chosen as participants because they have more advanced learning experiences and a higher level of independence in choosing and applying vocabulary learning strategies according to their needs. This condition allows for a more in-depth insight into the effectiveness of vocabulary learning strategies in the context of long-term learning.

Specifically, this study aims to explore the vocabulary learning strategies used independently by seventh-semester EFL students after they have completed formal vocabulary classes. Based on these objectives, this study was designed to answer the following research questions: (1) what vocabulary learning strategies are used by seventh-semester EFL students after completing formal vocabulary classes; and (2) besides memorizing word lists, what steps do you take to truly understand and remember new vocabulary in the long term.

## **Method**

This study uses a qualitative research approach with a descriptive design. The qualitative approach was chosen because it was considered most appropriate for achieving the research objectives, namely to explore an issue in depth in order to gain a rich and deep understanding from the participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The application of this research design is considered appropriate because the researcher aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of EFL students, particularly students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas PGRI Delta Sidoarjo. The main focus of this study is to explore the vocabulary learning strategies used by EFL students, particularly 7th semester students of the English Education Study Program who have completed the Vocabulary class.

### **Research Subjects**

This study involved students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas PGRI Delta Sidoarjo. Participants were selected from the population of 7th semester students who had taken the Vocabulary course with a minimum grade of B. A total of 10 students were selected as participants using purposive sampling techniques. This technique was applied to ensure that the selected participants had sufficient understanding and could provide relevant information related to the research focus on vocabulary usage. The eligibility criteria for participants included willingness to participate in interviews and give permission for recording, as well as having at least 3 years of formal English learning experience. The participants consisted of 10 participants aged between 20 and 22 years.

### Research Instrument

The main instrument in this study was semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was specifically designed to facilitate the interview process, which in this context is understood as a direct verbal interaction between the researcher and the informant to obtain information (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Roberts, 2020). This guide serves as a frame of reference for researchers to explore data in depth while remaining flexible. Specifically, this instrument contains a list of open-ended questions designed to obtain rich insights and in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives and ideas.

### Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 10 (ten) participants who were selected purposively. The interviews were conducted face-to-face, and were recorded after obtaining permission from the participants. Before the interviews were conducted, the researcher obtained ethical approval from the relevant institutions. All participants were given informed consent explaining the purpose of the study, the interview procedure, and the guarantee of confidentiality of their identities. To maintain privacy, the names of the participants in the research report were replaced with pseudonyms such as P1, P2, etc.

### Data Analysis

The data from the interviews were analyzed thematically using a structured and systematic procedure. The first step was to transcribe all interview results completely and clearly without omitting any information. Next, the interview transcripts were reread repeatedly to understand the context of the interview and the meaning of each answer given by the participants. Then, important statements found in the transcripts were grouped according to their level of importance. Next, the codes were collected and entered into different categories based on relevant patterns or topics. Finally, the main themes representing all the analyzed data are identified. These themes reflect the perspectives, experiences, and strategies used by students in learning and mastering new vocabulary.

The results of the data analysis were linked to theories regarding vocabulary learning strategies in the context of EFL students. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews provided a deeper insight into the various methods and techniques used by participants in learning and remembering new vocabulary. This aimed to show how the selection and application of appropriate strategies directly influenced the participants' ability to master new vocabulary.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study aims to explore vocabulary learning strategies used by seventh-semester students in the English Education Study Program at Universitas PGRI Delta Sidoarjo. The

students who participated in this study had completed the Formal Vocabulary Class but were still actively trying to enrich their vocabulary. Based on a thematic analysis of data obtained through semi-structured interviews in November 2025.

Three main themes were identified. The first theme, Authentic Multimodal Media with Emotional Connection, refers to the use of various authentic media that can build engagement and emotional bonds with students. The second theme, Active Practice and Error-Based Learning, describes the practice of active language use accompanied by a willingness to learn from mistakes. The third theme, Immediate Meaning Search with Contextual Understanding, relates to the effort to find the meaning of vocabulary directly by utilizing the context of its use in situations.

All participants fully agreed with these three themes, indicating that this learning strategy is universal for them. Interestingly, these themes do not operate independently but are interrelated and form a complete and integrated learning ecosystem.

The participants in this study strongly supported the first theme, namely the use of authentic multimodal media with emotional connections. Ten participants consistently stated that they used authentic media, such as films, songs, and social media, as their main sources for their daily vocabulary learning strategies. In addition, eight participants stated that the emotional connection that arises from interacting with these media greatly supports the process of memorizing new vocabulary, making the words easier to remember in the long term. This shows that participants do not only use media for entertainment; they also consciously use media as a enjoyable and effective vocabulary learning strategy.

### **Authentic Multimodal Media with Emotional Connection**

Film is the most popular learning media, used by 7 out of 10 participants. Participant P1 explained his strategy: "I usually watch movies with English subtitles every day to learn new vocabulary." The daily consistency of this activity shows that watching movies is not just a spontaneous activity, but a deliberate and structured learning strategy. This statement is reinforced by P4, who states, "For me, I usually continue to learn new vocabulary through watching movies. So even though I no longer have vocabulary classes, I still watch English movies and listen to new words that appear." This finding underlines a crucial point: vocabulary learning through films continues independently even after formal vocabulary classes are over.

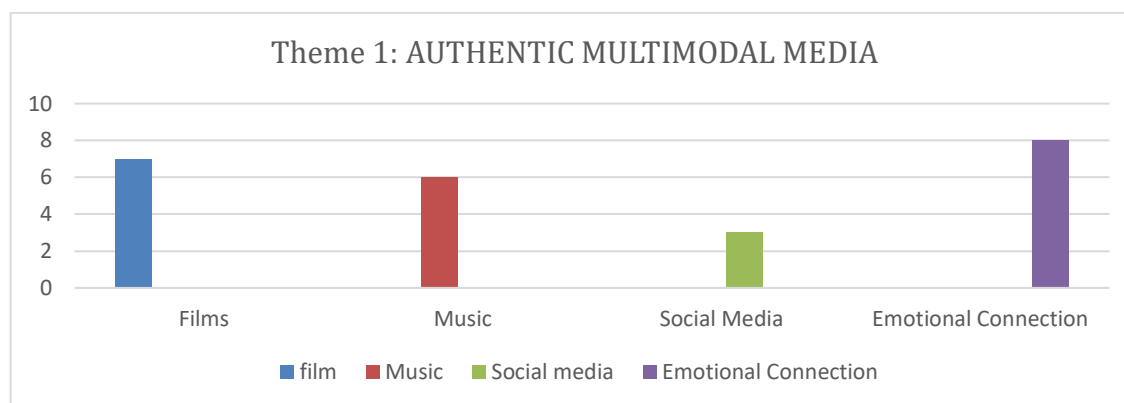
Music or songs in English were used by 6 out of 10 participants as a source for learning vocabulary. Using English songs to support their vocabulary learning. P7 explained the rationale behind this choice: "I learn new vocabulary mainly through songs in English because the lyrics and rhythm help me remember words more naturally." The rhythmic

and melodic aspects of music were perceived as enabling stronger memory associations compared to conventional learning methods.

Only three participants reported using social media used social media such as TikTok and Instagram as a strategy for learning vocabulary. P10 stated, "I use social media such as TikTok and Instagram to expand my vocabulary." The use of social media for this purpose is a relatively new phenomenon, reflecting students' adaptation to today's digital dynamics. Platforms like TikTok present short content that aligns with the attention patterns of the digital generation, while Instagram offers a combination of visual and text elements that are rich in information. In addition, social media introduces current and everyday language, including slang, idioms, and expressions that are often not covered in conventional dictionaries or textbooks. Although only three participants explicitly mentioned it, this level of adoption is quite remarkable given the novelty of this approach in formal language learning.

Eight participants reported that emotional connections while watching movies played a crucial role in vocabulary learning. As P3 said, "Vocabulary is easiest to remember when I watch exciting movies. That's because the emotions and storyline give the words meaning, so they're not just a string of letters in a dictionary." This statement shows that the emotions evoked by films create strong memory tags, making vocabulary easier to remember. P4 added a similar perspective, emphasizing specific situations in films: "I usually remember vocabulary most easily when I hear it in exciting films or memorable scenes. For example, when the characters speak with emotion or in funny situations." And P10 reveals another dimension of emotional connection: "New vocabulary feels easier to use when I associate it with personal experiences or when I hear it in songs and movies that I like." When vocabulary is associated with "personal experiences," it becomes personally meaningful, which increases motivation to learn and ease of recall.

The most significant aspect of Theme 1 is the synergy between authentic media and emotional connection. Authentic media provides a rich emotional context, while emotional engagement increases attention and encoding of the vocabulary encountered within it. Movies, for example, provide not only linguistic input but also narrative context and emotional depth that makes vocabulary more memorable. Music provides repetition as well as emotional resonance that strengthens memory. Meanwhile, social media offers up-to-date language use along with personal relevance through content chosen by students themselves. The interaction between authentic media and emotional connection creates a learning experience that is simultaneously enjoyable, meaningful, and effective, as observed by Oxford (2003) that students prefer strategies that are "easy, enjoyable, and applicable in new situations."



### Active Practice and Error-Based Learning

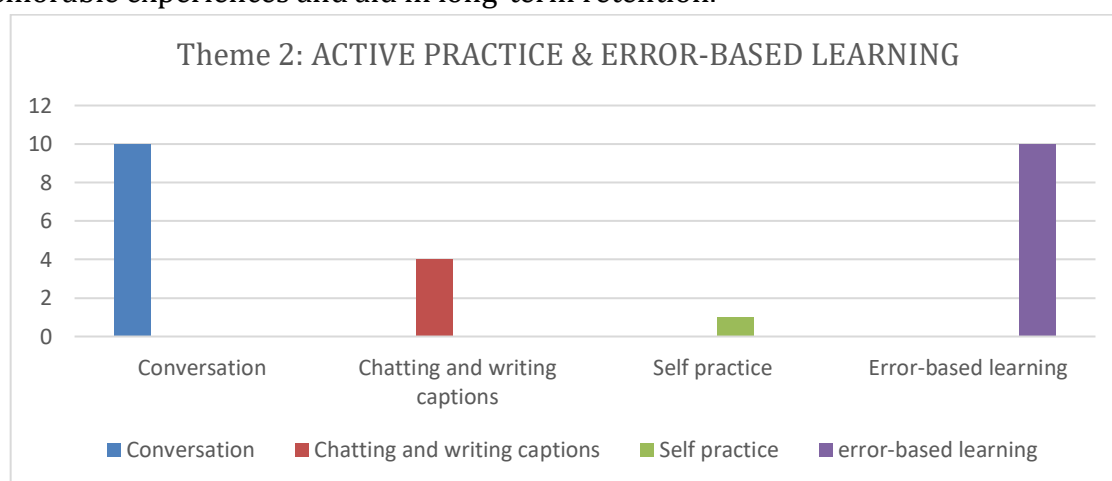
Based on the ten participants involved in this research, conversation is the most commonly used practice strategy. “I usually practice by having conversations with friends,” said P1. This simple statement hides the complexity of conversation practice. P4 described this strategies: “So that I don't forget it quickly, I often use that word when chatting with friends or when writing in captions or personal notes.” Engaging in writing enables participants to construct sentences more deliberately and consider their vocabulary choices with greater precision. P4 does not just wait passively for opportunities, but also actively creates them, such as “when chatting with friends.” The four participants also demonstrated active vocabulary use by chatting or writing captions, often referred to as conscious techniques to reinforce newly learned vocabulary.

P9 also reported “using it in everyday life, such as in conversation or chatting.” as a medium of practice, indicating that the practice is not limited to face-to-face conversations but extends to digital communication. This is particularly relevant in an era where most everyday communication occurs through text chat. Self-practice also emerged as a distinctive strategies, involving individual, self-directed rehearsal. P5 shared a creative strategy: “Usually, besides memorizing, I talk to friends, chat. Or I do talk in front of the mirror. To practice my new vocabulary.” Practicing in front of a mirror reflects an awareness of the importance of repetition and self-monitoring in the vocabulary learning.

One of the most important results of this second theme is the realization that active practice naturally leads to mistakes, and that mistakes that are processed correctly can lead to deeper learning. This result also revealed that all participants reported experiencing errors when learning new vocabulary. P2 offered a specific example: “I totally have! I used the wrong word ‘embarrassed,’ when it should have been ‘ashamed.’ I was embarrassed at first, but I eventually figured it out and it's stuck with me to this day.” This case illustrates how errors activate metacognitive awareness and deeper levels of processing, which in turn enhance retention.

The irony in P2's case is that he made a mistake with the word "embarrassed" itself and experienced embarrassment because of that mistake. This creates a particularly strong memory trace because the form, meaning, and feeling are all aligned. P2 shows a complex process that begins with making mistakes, experiencing embarrassment, learning about correct usage, and finally achieving long-term understanding and retention "remembering to this day". In contrast, emotional responses encourage deeper processing, which in turn improves retention due to mistakes.

The connection between when they practice new vocabulary and their conversations has built a positive relationship with mistakes. Instead of seeing mistakes as failures to be avoided, they view them as effective learning opportunities. Although it may feel uncomfortable at first, emotional reactions such as embarrassment are believed to create memorable experiences and aid in long-term retention.

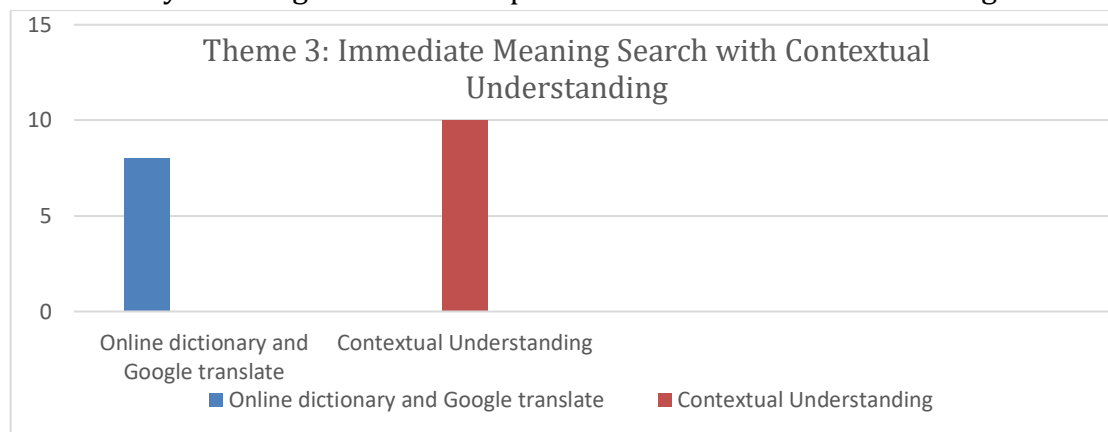


### Immediate Meaning Search with Contextual Understanding

The results of these three themes combine two approaches that may initially appear contradictory: instant meaning-seeking through digital tools and deep contextual understanding. However, participants showed that the two work together, with digital tools providing quick access to basic meaning and contextual understanding, which provides the depth necessary for real-life use.

Eight participants reported using online dictionaries or Google Translate as their main tools for determining word meanings. However, participants did not use Google Translate as simple processing tools. P2 described more advanced usage, saying, "When I encounter new vocabulary, I immediately look up the meaning in an online dictionary such as the Cambridge Dictionary, then look at how to pronounce it and see example sentences." This approach extends beyond simply obtaining a definition, incorporating pronunciation checks and examinations of example sentences to understand contextual usage.

ten participants agreed that contextual understanding is more important than comprehension of individual words. P3 stated emphatically: “It is clearly more important to understand how a word is used in context. It is useless to know the meaning of a sentence if you do not know when to use that word.” P8 provides a more nuanced perspective: “Both are important, but understanding how words are used in sentences is arguably more important for fast and effective communication.” While acknowledging that meaning and context are important, P8 prioritizes contextual understanding for fast and effective communication. ten participants noticed example sentences when learning new vocabulary. This aligns with the emphasis on contextual understanding.



Three main integrated themes emerged from the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with ten participants. These are (1) Authentic Multimodal Media with Emotional Connections, (2) Active Practice through Production and Error-Based Learning, and (3) Immediate Meaning Search with Contextual Understanding. These results were examined in light of the current literature. A unanimous consensus among the ten participants across all three themes indicates that these strategies are important methods for advanced EFL students to learn vocabulary independently. More importantly, the combination of these themes suggests a more complex learning environment that goes beyond formal classroom-based vocabulary instruction.

### **Authentic Multimodal Media with Emotional Connections : Films, Music, and Social Media**

The results show that all participants used authentic media, with seven out of ten participants specifically watching films with English subtitles, which indicates a significant change in the way vocabulary is learned. This is in line with research revealing that multimedia glossaries combining text, sound, video, and images in authentic texts make learning easier for EFL students while supporting vocabulary acquisition. Recent research reinforces these results by showing that student-created videos can provide the greatest improvement in vocabulary scores, as multimodal contexts increase cognitive and emotional engagement. Participants also emphasized that films provide a rich context that ordinary textbooks cannot offer.

There is a strong tendency to choose movies. P1: “I usually watch movies with English subtitles every day.” This demonstrates what Nation (2001) refers to as indirect vocabulary learning through meaningful experiences. However, the approach taken by

our participants is more directed than merely indirect, combining entertainment with an active focus on the new vocabulary being learned.

The use of music by 6 of participants resonates with research on the rhythmic and melodic facilitation of memory. P7 explanation that “The lyrics and rhythm help me remember the words more naturally.” Reflecting the dual coding theory, in which language and sound produce multiple traces in memory. Recent research on storytelling on the internet and vocabulary enhancement indirectly shows that storytelling and musical elements improve comprehension and memory in a better context.

in the context of modern education. Digital storytelling platforms that combine musical and narrative elements significantly improve EFL students' vocabulary and comprehension (Tatlı et al., 2022). They found that a richer contextual framework is produced by combining storytelling with multimedia elements such as rhythm, melody, and visual elements. This encourages deeper understanding and longer vocabulary retention. These results collectively underscore the pedagogical value of incorporating musical and rhythmic elements into language teaching because they leverage fundamental cognitive processes to create a more effective and engaging learning experience (Tatlı et al., 2022).

The use of social media platforms for vocabulary learning by the three participants reflects an emerging trend in modern language learning practices. As expressed by P10, “I use social media such as TikTok and Instagram to expand my new vocabulary,” demonstrating how students actively utilize digital platforms they already use for entertainment purposes to facilitate language development (Wilson & Anam, 2024). Research on online vocabulary learning has established that social networking platforms and virtual chat rooms increase students' motivation and self-perception as competent speakers, which ultimately leads to successful vocabulary learning through active engagement (Muftah, 2022).

With this digital engagement, entertainment and educational goals can be easily integrated. This transforms the use of social media into a valuable learning opportunity. Social media platforms differ from traditional textbooks in that they provide a direct view of modern language usage, such as everyday language, slang, and informal expressions that reflect how people communicate in the real life. This exposure to living language allows students to acquire skills well in a variety of contexts. Vocabulary learning and social interaction facilitated by these platforms demonstrate a shift towards more independent and context-rich language acquisition. Social media is helpful for vocabulary learning and social interaction, and these platforms allow students to choose content that suits their interests and communication needs. According to Ausubel's meaningful learning theory, when new vocabulary is linked to existing knowledge and experience, it becomes more personally meaningful. This leads to greater motivation and makes it easier to remember the vocabulary.

### **Active Practice through Production and Error-Based Learning : Mistakes and Vocabulary Acquisition**

The results of this second theme show that ten participants actively used vocabulary in conversation and word creation; this phenomenon is in line with Swain's Output

Hypothesis (1985). Writing or speaking in the target language is the main mechanism through which learning occurs, not merely a by-product. “So that I don't forget quickly, I often use that word when chatting with friends or when writing captions or personal notes,” according to the P4 strategic approach. This statement shows how students' transform passive knowledge into active competence by deliberately integrating newly acquired vocabulary into actual everyday communication practices. Research on vocabulary learning strategies shows that collaborative learning environments provide important support that boosts students' confidence and ability to use new vocabulary independently (Ayana, Mereba, & Alemu, 2024).

Furthermore, this social learning context makes the acquisition process more engaging and intrinsically motivating. Group-based activities serve a dual function: not only do they reinforce previously encountered vocabulary, but they also create opportunities for incidental learning of unfamiliar words in a supportive and low-anxiety environment (Nation, 2001).

The most interesting result from Second Theme was the powerful learning experience associated with vocabulary errors by ten participants, especially those related to social embarrassment. “At that time, I used the word embarrassed incorrectly; the correct context should have been feeling embarrassed,” said P2. I felt embarrassed at first, but eventually I learned the difference and remembered it. in which mistakes made by people who are highly confident or have emotional value are more likely to be corrected and stored in memory for a long time. It appears that the emotional dimension of mistakes, particularly shame, increases the persistence of corrective learning experiences (Butterfield & Metcalfe, 2001).

P5's innovation in vocabulary consolidation demonstrates an interesting awareness in this second finding. “Usually, in addition to memorizing, I talk with friends, talk, or even talk in front of the mirror to practice my new vocabulary,” said P5, who did this exercise independently without receiving direct feedback from the instructor (Zimmerman, 1990). During this process, students actively observe, evaluate, and adjust their own learning strategies. This behavior shows that good language students do not just receive instruction. Instead, they actively build a learning environment tailored to their own needs and desires. The mirror practice technique demonstrates the learner's ability to construct a simulated communicative context, which helps them practice and improve their new vocabulary.

### **Immediate Meaning Search with Contextual Understanding**

Even though universal digital tools such as online translators are used, some participants stated that they try to make contextual inferences before determining meaning. P7, a two-step process, involves “I usually guess the meaning from the context of the lyrics, then confirm the meaning.” Guessing from the context encourages active processing; generative activities such as guessing enhance learning compared to passive reception and can result in better retention when the guess is later confirmed or corrected (Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour, 2021).

The results of the data show that understanding context is more important than simply memorizing words. These results are in line with the modern understanding of

vocabulary knowledge as a multi-dimensional construct. Nation (2001) states that understanding a word involves understanding its form, meaning, and usage. Everyone who participates realizes that knowing the meaning of each word is not enough to use language correctly. For example, P10 states that “understanding how words are used in sentences is more important than simply understanding the meaning of each word, because the meaning of a word often depends on its context in a sentence,” indicating that context is very important in determining the meaning of a word, especially in English, where many words have meanings that change depending on the situation. And P3, “It is clearly more important to understand how a word is used in the context of a sentence. It is useless to know the meaning if you don't know when to use the word.” Vocabulary comprehension must include not only the meaning but also the relevant usage.

Therefore, the results of the data show that learning strategies can be used strategically to learn new vocabulary. Online translation tools, which provide quick access to basic meanings and pronunciations, help students familiarize themselves with new vocabulary (Simonnet et al., 2025). Increased fluency can be achieved through contextual learning, the use of media, and practical applications. Ideal vocabulary learning includes form recognition, meaning comprehension, context exploration, and productive use. By using digital tools as an important part of their broader learning strategies, participants have gained strategic intuition about this process.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study successfully identified the vocabulary mastering mechanisms used by seventh-semester students in the EFL program at PGRI Delta University Sidoarjo after attending formal vocabulary classes. Three interrelated themes emerged: real multimodal media with emotional connections, active practice through error-based learning, and immediate meaning search with contextual understanding. Together, these practices form a learning system that students find easier, more enjoyable, and more applicable than the rote memorization methods taught in traditional classes, indicating a clear transition from teacher-dependent learning to independent learning.

The results show that students consciously engage with authentic content, such as films, music, and social media, not only as resources, but as meaningful emotional experiences that enhance long-term information encoding and retention. By encouraging contextual meaning rather than rote memorization, this emotional-cognitive integration overcomes the problem of long-standing passive vocabulary. Instead of making students feel discouraged, mistakes help them remember, challenging traditional methods of avoiding errors. The use of digital tools such as translation apps and online dictionaries allows for deeper contextual investigation. This demonstrates a balanced integration of digital literacy and language learning, with students learning vocabulary as an independent and iterative process.

Based on this study, to introduce students to language in relevant situations, EFL teachers should use authentic digital media in addition to textbooks, such as film, songs, or social media posts. It appears that promoting error-based learning in the classroom can also improve long-term memory. However, this study acknowledges several significant limitations, including a small sample size (only 10 participants from one university), time constraints that prevented longer observations, and a qualitative

methodology that made it impossible to objectively measure the effectiveness of the strategy.

These limitations point to several areas for further research. A mixed design combining qualitative interviews with pre- and post-tests would be better suited to evaluating vocabulary acquisition and bridging the gap between self-reported practice and actual mastery. Longitudinal studies and research with larger, more diverse groups of participants from different skill levels and cultural contexts would help improve the generalization and depth of findings on EFL vocabulary learning.

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