

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter outlines the background of the study and provides a clear foundation for understanding the issues explored in this research.

A. Background of the Study

Digital media environments such as online platforms, streaming services, and social networks provide learners with authentic exposure to the English language in multimodal formats that integrate text, image, and sound. For example, Rahmanu and Molnár found that The application of multimodal approaches greatly enhances learners' English proficiency. Integrating multimodality has shown substantial effects on students' vocabulary acquisition, writing performance, and listening comprehension. Employing learning materials that merge visual, auditory, and interactive components offers learners richer opportunities to internalize and remember new vocabulary.¹ This ubiquity of English in digital spaces has expanded the opportunities for incidental language acquisition that occurs unintentionally through repeated exposure to meaningful input in natural contexts. Unlike conventional classroom instruction that often focuses on explicit grammar and

¹ I. W. E. D. Rahmanu and Gábor Molnár, "Multimodal Immersion in English Language Learning in Higher Education: A Systematic Review," *Heliyon* 10, no. 19 (2024)

vocabulary exercises, digital media facilitates learning through interaction and engagement.

Learners encounter English as it is used in real life communication, including informal expressions, cultural references, and visual symbolism embedded in online discourse. Such experiences can foster not only linguistic knowledge but also pragmatic and cultural understanding. In digital contexts, the abundance of multimodal input creates a form of digital immersion in which learners process language through authentic, visually rich materials that mirror real world communication.

Moreover, digital platforms are not merely tools but social ecosystems that shape learners' participation and identity in language communities. Learners interact with peers, consume user generated content, and engage in meaning making processes that blur the line between learning and entertainment. In this sense, the digital environment has transformed English learning into a dynamic, continuous, and participatory process. Learners are no longer passive recipients of knowledge but active consumers and creators of meaning in multimodal spaces. Such a shift underscores the importance of studying how digital media, particularly social platforms like Instagram, function as informal contexts for language exposure and comprehension.

Among the various multimodal forms available on social media, memes have become one of the most influential genres in online communication. One study defines memes as texts that combine images or videos and words, and are

used for humour and communication in digital environments.² Their viral nature allows them to spread rapidly across platforms, contributing to the creation of shared linguistic and cultural repertoires among users. From a pedagogical perspective, memes represent an authentic and multimodal form of input that aligns with contemporary approaches to language learning emphasizing meaning making and visual literacy. Aedo and Millafilo demonstrated that multimodal texts such as memes can significantly enhance learners' vocabulary acquisition and retention by presenting language within humorous and contextually rich visual frameworks.³ Their study highlights that learners' engagement with multimodal content encourages deeper cognitive processing, as learners attempt to understand implied meanings conveyed through contextual and situational cues presented in memes. In authentic communication, such meanings are often inferred intuitively rather than through explicit analytical awareness of linguistic and non linguistic interaction.

The multimodal nature of memes situates them as valuable resources for developing higher order comprehension skills. Understanding a meme requires not only linguistic decoding but also cultural and pragmatic awareness skills that are crucial in interpreting nuanced and implicit meanings.⁴ As learners engage with English memes on platforms such as Instagram, they are exposed to everyday expressions, colloquial phrases, and social commentaries

² Pablo Aedo and Claudia Millafilo, "Increasing Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention in EFL Young Learners through the Use of Multimodal Texts (Memes)," *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal* 24, no. 2 (2022): 254,

³ Ibid., 261.

⁴ Ibid., 261.

embedded in humorous contexts. This experience fosters a sense of authenticity and motivation that is often lacking in traditional learning materials. . When exposure takes the form of multimodal texts such as memes combining image and text comprehension demands shift from decoding discrete linguistic elements (vocabulary, grammar) toward inferential comprehension. Inferential comprehension refers to the cognitive process by which learners go beyond literal meaning to infer implied or embedded meaning: the intended humour, irony, cultural reference, intertextuality.⁵ This process involves learners' ability to go beyond literal interpretation and infer implied meanings using contextual information, which can be challenging for language learners who are still developing English proficiency.

Memes often appeal to younger learners because of humour, cultural relevance, concise formats, and immediate shareability thus motivating repeated exposure. In the modern digital age, young people communicate in new ways, especially through internet memes. These memes combine text and images to convey meaning, often using humor or satire. Essentially, memes are humorous expressions presented in formats such as pictures with captions, GIFs accompanied by text, or even plain text alone. Moreover, internet memes are digital creations that share recognizable features and circulate widely across online platforms among diverse internet communities.⁶ Additionally applying

⁵ Ardi Nugroho and Kevin Nathanael Liemantara, "EFL Students' Interpretation of Implicature and Gender Representation in Memes," *Journal of English Teaching, Literature, and Applied Linguistics* 8, no. 2 (2024): 27.

⁶ Danar Suryawijaya and Arif Suryo Priyatmojo, "How Internet Memes Develop Vocabulary Proficiency among EFL University Students," *ELT Forum: Journal of English Language Teaching* (2025): 383.

multimodal based learning significantly enhanced students' reading ability. Learners were able to comprehend texts more easily when visual elements, such as pictures and colors, were integrated with written language. The combination of verbal and visual modes helped students interpret meaning more effectively and made the reading process more engaging. Moreover, multimodal instruction encouraged students to be more active, creative, and motivated in constructing meaning from various semiotic resources.⁷

These memes often convey humor while also expressing universal emotions such as anger, sadness, and various social or cultural messages. There are generally two common types of internet memes: image memes and short video memes. Among these, image memes are the most popular due to their easy accessibility and wide circulation. This popularity has drawn the attention of researchers and analysts interested in examining the implicatures embedded within image memes and the contextual factors that shape their meanings.⁸ For instance, a meme parodying a famous movie scene might require knowledge of both the original film and contemporary slang, demanding a blend of cultural literacy and linguistic inference that traditional reading tasks do not. Research indicates that both verbal and visual modes work together to convey meanings; they engage the reader or viewer, show varying levels of involvement, and reflect different power relations. For example, whether ideas are presented as

⁷Ridwin Purba et al., "The Multimodal-Based Learning Improves Students' Reading Ability in Perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics," *Journal of Education Technology* 7, no. 1 (2025): 66-67.

⁸Nova Rina, Yusrita Yanti, and Hayqal Idham, "Implicature in the Internet Memes: Semio-Pragmatics Analysis," *Journal of Cultura and Lingua* 1, no. 1 (January 2020): 28,

true or false, real or imagined, possible or impossible. Furthermore, Understanding such texts requires learners to recognize implied meanings conveyed through both verbal and visual elements, without necessarily being able to explicitly explain how these elements interact within the text.⁹ Multimodal texts those combining words and images do more than convey information; they also build social relationships between the creator and the reader. Both verbal (words) and visual (images) elements can show how close or formal the relationship is, who holds power in the interaction, and how certain or possible something is.

Therefore, students who read or create such texts need to understand how words and images work together to express attitude such as certainty, truth, or possibility and address such as giving commands, asking questions, or making offers. They should also be aware that within one text, verbal and visual modes may support each other, contradict one another, or even create ironic effects. Despite these potentials, many studies examine exposure (via social media) and many studies examine multimodal literacy or inferential comprehension in reading, few studies have specifically examined the relationship between learners' exposure to English memes and their ability to infer implied meanings conveyed in multimodal texts. For example, the EFL students' study on memes and implicature revealed difficulty in inferential interpretation. Often, the intended meaning of a speaker's utterance differs from the literal interpretation

⁹ Terry Royce, "Multimodal Communicative Competence in Second Language Contexts," in *The Routledge Handbook of Second Language Acquisition and Multimodality*, ed. Chantelle Warner and Michael Legutke (London: Routledge, 2018), 357.

of the words used, as speakers may aim to express ideas that extend beyond the explicit content of what they say.¹⁰ Existing studies have mostly emphasized how memes can support vocabulary learning, enhance student motivation, or promote cultural awareness. However, only a few have examined how learners' exposure to memes on social media contributes to their ability to interpret implied meanings in multimodal texts. For instance, a study by Pablo Aedo and Claudia Millafilo investigated the use of multimodal texts, specifically memes, to improve vocabulary acquisition and retention among young EFL learners in Chile.¹¹ Similarly, research conducted by Ardi Nugroho and Kevin Nathanael Liemantara explored EFL students' interpretation of implicature and gender representation in English memes.¹² The findings revealed that while students could identify textual and visual elements, many failed to infer the underlying or intended meanings embedded in the memes. This indicates that the multimodal format itself does not automatically ensure learners' ability to comprehend implied or contextual meanings, highlighting the need for deeper investigation into how exposure influences inferential comprehension.

Taken together, these studies reveal four First, most previous research has focused on general or literal comprehension, vocabulary development, and learner motivation, leaving inferential comprehension the ability to interpret

¹⁰ Ardi Nugroho and Kevin Nathanael Liemantara, "EFL Students' Interpretation of Implicature and Gender Representation in Memes," *Journal of English Teaching, Literature, and Applied Linguistics* 8, no. 2 (2024), 142.

¹¹ Pablo Aedo and Claudia Millafilo, "Increasing Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention in EFL Young Learners through the Use of Multimodal Texts (Memes)," *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal* 24, no. 2 (2022): 251-269.

¹² Ardi Nugroho and Kevin Nathanael Liemantara, "EFL Students' Interpretation of Implicature and Gender Representation in Memes," *Journal of English Teaching, Literature, and Applied Linguistics* 8, no. 2 (2024): 142-151.

implied meanings, humor, and cultural nuances in multimodal texts largely unexplored. Second, existing research has been predominantly situated in formal educational settings where memes were introduced as teaching materials, while informal digital environments such as Instagram where learners naturally encounter English memes have received little empirical attention. Third, many studies have mainly investigated students' perceptions, creativity, or motivation rather than examining measurable relationships between exposure to memes and students' comprehension abilities. Lastly, methodological limitations are evident, as several studies employed qualitative or descriptive approaches without statistical analysis to determine the strength of relationships between variables. This absence of empirical evidence creates a need for research that bridges the intersection of exposure, multimodality, and comprehension in authentic, socially mediated contexts. Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by investigating student' exposure to english memes on instagram and their inferential comprehension of implied meaning in multimodal text. By focusing on informal digital practices, this research aims to illuminate how everyday engagement with English memes can contribute to the development of comprehension skills, providing new insights into the role of digital exposure in language learning within contemporary, media rich environments. inferential comprehension in this study is conceptualized as learners' ability to infer implied meaning from English memes through the use of contextual, visual, and textual cues, rather than through explicit multimodal meta analysis.

B. Problem Identification and Limitation of the Study

This study focuses on the increasing exposure of students to English memes on Instagram and its possible relation to their inferential comprehension. Previous reviewed studies have suggested that exposure to multimodal digital content can positively impact students' language abilities. However, it remains unclear whether frequent exposure to English memes specifically contributes to students' ability to understand implied meanings, considering memes require complex interpretation.

The main problem is the unclear relationship between students' exposure to English memes and their inferential comprehension ability. Based on this, the research question is formulated to examine whether students with high exposure to English memes also achieve high scores in inferential comprehension.

The study is limited to two variables: exposure to English memes (predictor) and student's inferential comprehension (criterion). The sample are grade 12 students of MAN Kota Blitar who actively use Instagram, focusing only on English memes and inferential comprehension. This research applies a quantitative correlational design using a questionnaire and a reading test, without aiming to determine causality.

C. Research Questions

To further explore the relationship between students' exposure and their comprehension ability, this study raises the following research question: Do students with high exposure to English memes on Instagram have high inferential comprehension of implied meanings in English memes?

D. Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine whether students with high exposure to English memes on Instagram have high inferential comprehension of implied meanings in English memes.

E. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study refers to the benefits and contributions generated from the research, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to the development of knowledge in the field of English language learning, particularly related to digital literacy, multimodal learning, and inferential comprehension. Practically, this study is expected to provide benefits for students, teachers, educational institutions, and future researchers. The significance of this study is explained as follows:

1. Theoretical Significance

This study is expected to contribute to the development of theories related to digital literacy and multimodal learning in English language teaching. In particular, the study enriches the discussion on how informal exposure to English memes on Instagram can influence students' inferential

comprehension in understanding implied meanings within multimodal texts. Furthermore, this study provides additional empirical evidence regarding the role of social media as a digital learning environment that supports language acquisition and comprehension processes.

2. Practical Significance

This study is expected to provide practical benefits for students, teachers, educational institutions, and future researchers. The practical significance of this study is presented as follows.

a. For Students

This study is expected to help students recognize that exposure to English content on social media, especially English memes on Instagram, can support the development of inferential comprehension skills, vocabulary understanding, and interpretation of contextual meanings in English.

b. For Teachers

The findings of this study are expected to provide insights for English teachers in integrating digital and multimodal materials into classroom learning activities. Teachers may use social media content, such as English memes, as interactive and contextualized learning media to improve students' comprehension and engagement in English learning.

c. For Educational Institutions

This study is expected to serve as a reference for educational institutions in supporting digital literacy practices and encouraging the use of technology-based learning resources in English language teaching.

d. For Future Researchers

This study is expected to provide references and supporting information for future researchers who are interested in conducting further studies related to social media exposure, multimodal texts, digital literacy, and English language comprehension skills.

F. Scope of The Study

This study focuses on examining the relationship between students' exposure to English memes on Instagram and their inferential comprehension of implied meanings in English memes as multimodal texts. The participants of this study consisted of the entire population of Grade 12 students at MAN Kota Blitar (N = 163) who actively use Instagram as part of their daily social media activities.

The study specifically investigates students' exposure to English memes through four dimensions: frequency, duration, engagement, and type of content. Frequency refers to how often students are exposed to English memes on Instagram, duration refers to the amount of time students spend interacting with English meme content, engagement refers to students' interactions with memes such as viewing, liking, commenting, sharing, discussing, and creating meme-

related content, and type of content refers to the categories of English memes encountered by students, including social humor, educational content, wordplay, and figurative expressions.

The comprehension aspect of this study is limited to inferential comprehension, which refers to students' ability to derive meaning beyond explicitly stated information in English memes as multimodal texts. Specifically, the study focuses on five inferential comprehension skills: inferring character traits, making comparisons, identifying the main idea, interpreting figurative or implied meanings, and recognizing cause-and-effect relationships. These skills require students to combine visual and textual cues, activate prior knowledge, and make logical inferences in order to understand the intended meaning of multimodal content.

In terms of research design, this study employs a quantitative correlational approach aimed at identifying the degree of relationship between students' exposure to English memes and their inferential comprehension ability. The study does not seek to establish a causal relationship between the variables. Data were collected using a questionnaire to measure students' exposure to English memes and an inferential comprehension test based on English meme texts.

Furthermore, this study is limited to English-language memes distributed through Instagram and does not include memes in other languages or content from other social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), or YouTube. In addition, the study focuses exclusively on inferential

comprehension and does not examine other levels of reading comprehension such as literal, evaluative, or critical comprehension.

G. Definition of Key Terms and Variables

1. Memes as Multimodal Texts

Memes are dynamic multimodal artifacts that integrate linguistic, visual, and cultural elements to convey meaning. As multimodal texts, they combine verbal and nonverbal semiotic modes such as written captions, imagery, color, and spatial arrangement to create layered messages that demand interpretive engagement from viewers. Understanding memes thus requires not only linguistic knowledge but also visual literacy and cultural awareness. Aedo and Millafilo explain that today's learners live in a visually rich world, where they permanently encounter and create meaning through images, and this environment has made visual literacy an essential learning skill, as learners must process words and pictures together to find meaning.¹³ Memes therefore require students to move between text and images, between literal and figurative worlds, a process that enhances inferential comprehension skills in language learning contexts.

2. Inferential Comprehension

In this study Inferential comprehension is operationally defined as students' ability to infer implied meanings from English meme-based

¹³ Pablo Aedo dan Claudia Millafilo, *Increasing Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention in EFL Young Learners through the Use of Multimodal Texts (Memes)*, *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal* 24, no. 2 (2022): 254.

items. The test specifically measures several inferential sub-skills derived from the theoretical framework, including inferring the main idea, identifying cause-and-effect relationships, inferring character traits, making implicit comparisons, and interpreting figurative or implied meanings.¹⁴ The instrument consists of 20 multiple-choice items presented in the form of short video-based memes combining visual and textual elements. Each item requires students to interpret the implied message, humor, or situation by integrating contextual clues from both visual and verbal information. The items are systematically distributed across the inferential categories, namely character traits (5 items), cause and effect (4 items), main idea (4 items), figurative or implied meaning (4 items), and comparison (3 items). Each question is designed to measure a specific inferential indicator by asking students to draw conclusions about behavior, identify implicit relationships, interpret contrasts, or understand non-literal meanings.

Therefore, inferential comprehension in this study is not limited to general understanding but is specifically focused on students' ability to interpret implied meaning across multiple inferential dimensions as represented in the test items.

¹⁴ Dale Pennell, *Inferential Reading Comprehension: Considerations Packet* (Williamsburg, VA: Training and Technical Assistance Center, College of William and Mary, 2002), 2.

H. Organization of Writing

This section explains the overall structure of the thesis, outlining the main contents discussed in each chapter.

1. Chapter I : Introduction

This chapter presents the background of the study, research questions, objectives of the study, significance of the study, scope and limitations, and the definition of key terms.

2. Chapter II : Review of Related Literature

This chapter discusses the review of related literature, covering the theoretical framework and previous studies relevant to the research topic. It also serves as the foundation for developing the conceptual framework and research hypothesis.

3. Chapter III : Research Methodology

This chapter describes the research methodology, including the research design, population and sample, research instruments, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques used in the study.

4. Chapter IV : Research Findings

This chapter presents the findings obtained from the data analysis based on the research questions of the study.

5. Chapter V : Discussion

This chapter discusses and interprets the research findings by relating them to the existing theories and previous studies relevant to the topic of the research.

6. Chapter VI : Conclusion and Suggestion

This chapter contains the conclusions of the study and provides suggestions for future research as well as practical implications related to the findings of the study.