

EFL Students' Perception of Social Media as a Gateway to Global Culture

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Abstract

In the era of digital communication, social media has become a significant space for language learners to engage with global culture. This descriptive study explores how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students perceive the role of social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok in raising their awareness of global culture. Grounded in the frameworks of Intercultural Communicative Competence and social constructivism, the study focuses on students' experiences outside the classroom, where informal exposure to diverse lifestyles, values, and communication styles contributes to their language learning process. Data were collected through a 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire administered to 60 university students in an English Education program in Indonesia. The results, analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation), reveal that students perceive social media as a useful and motivating tool for understanding global cultural practices, enhancing their interest in learning English, and becoming more open-minded toward cultural diversity. The findings suggest that integrating global content from social media into EFL instruction may support both linguistic development and intercultural competence in meaningful and practical ways.

Keywords:

EFL;
Social Media;
Global Culture;
Intercultural
Competence;
Student Perception

1. Introduction

In today's globally connected world, social media has emerged as a powerful space for informal learning, especially for students learning English as a Foreign Language (Kessler, 2018; Vazquez-Calvo et al., 2022). Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok provide constant exposure to authentic language use and real-life cultural practices from around the world (Pérez-Sabater et al., 2024; Xiuwen & Razali, 2021; Yang, 2020). Rather than depending solely on classroom instruction and textbooks, students now engage with global communities, observe cultural norms, and absorb diverse perspectives through everyday digital interactions. This shift reflects a growing trend in which language learning is no longer confined to formal settings but extends into personal and social digital environments.

This development is aligned with global education goals that emphasize intercultural competence, global citizenship, and media literacy. For example, UNESCO's Global Citizenship Education (GCED) framework highlights the need for learners to "experience global interconnectedness" and develop "respect for cultural diversity through digital media." Similarly, Indonesia's *Merdeka Belajar* (Freedom to Learn) policy promotes flexible, relevant, and student-centered learning that encourages learners to explore content beyond traditional materials and become critical, globally aware citizens.

The use of social media in EFL learning can be examined through the lens of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC), a framework developed by Byram (1997), which views language learning not only as a linguistic process but also as a cultural one. According to Byram, successful language learners should develop five components: attitudes of openness and curiosity, knowledge of other cultures, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Social media, with its continuous flow of real-life intercultural content, offers a practical context where these competencies can be developed organically.

Social Constructivism also underpins this perspective, particularly Vygotsky's idea that learning is socially mediated and contextually situated. Through engagement with global media, learners are exposed to diverse cultural narratives, idioms, practices, and perspectives, enabling them to construct meaning in relation to their own cultural background and language goals. These digital environments function as "third spaces" where language learners negotiate identities, challenge stereotypes, and build cross-cultural understanding.

Previous research has explored how social media contributes to language development, such as improving vocabulary (Zainal & Rahmat, 2020), enhancing speaking fluency (Xiuwen & Razali, 2021), and supporting learner autonomy (Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2013). Other studies have shown that social media can be a space for intercultural engagement, such as promoting intercultural communicative competence (Özdemir, 2017) and encouraging cultural understanding through digital interaction (Yang, 2020). However, most of these studies tend to focus either on language skills or on technology integration, without explicitly addressing students' perceptions of how social media fosters global cultural understanding as part of their EFL journey, particularly in the Indonesian context.

This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how EFL students in Indonesia perceive the role of social media in shaping their global cultural awareness. Understanding students' perspectives can help educators align informal learning experiences with formal curriculum goals related to cultural literacy and global competence. The novelty of this study lies in connecting the theoretical concepts of intercultural competence and social constructivism with practical student experiences on digital platforms.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive quantitative design to explore EFL students' perceptions of how social media contributes to their awareness of global culture. The use of a survey allowed the researcher to gather numerical data that reflect participants' responses to a series of statements about their experiences and attitudes.

The participants were 30 university students enrolled in an English Education Study Program at a public university in Indonesia. They were selected using convenience sampling, as they were readily accessible and had experience using social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. All participants were in their second or third year and had intermediate proficiency in English.

The main instrument used in this study was a 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire developed by the researcher. The items were grouped into three categories:

- (1) Exposure to global culture through social media,
- (2) Language learning and global culture, and

(3) Attitudes and cultural awareness.

Each item was rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was validated through expert review by two EFL lecturers and was revised based on their feedback to improve clarity and relevance. The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Data collection took place over a one-week period.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically mean and standard deviation, to determine the overall trends in students' responses. These statistics were used to describe the central tendency and variability of students' perceptions regarding how social media contributes to their understanding of global culture in the context of learning English. Descriptive statistics, such as means, standard deviations, and ranges, were calculated as indicated in table 1.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Students' Perception	30	48	75	62.60	8.080
Valid N (listwise)	30				

With a mean perception score of 62.60 (SD = 8.08), students generally demonstrated a moderately high awareness of global culture through their engagement with social media. The lowest score was 48 and the highest score was 75, indicating variation among students' perceptions. This range suggests that while most students perceived social media as supportive of their global cultural understanding, some students showed relatively lower awareness, possibly due to differences in their engagement levels or preferences for digital platforms.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Students demonstrated moderately high perception of social media's role in fostering global cultural awareness (M = 62.60, SD = 8.08), with scores ranging from 48 to 75. This variation indicates differing levels of cultural engagement across participants, suggesting that cultural learning through social media is not uniform among EFL students.

Most previous research has concentrated on language-related benefits, improved vocabulary (Zainal & Rahmat, 2020) and better speaking abilities (Xiuwen & Razali, 2021). What emerges here is different: students specifically identified cultural learning as something valuable they gain from platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. While other studies looked at learner independence (Klimanova & Dembovskaya, 2013) or measured intercultural skills through observed behaviors (Yang, 2020), our findings reflect how students themselves perceive their exposure to cultural elements, things like social values, proper etiquette, and different communication styles they encounter online.

The noticeable spread in scores (SD = 8.08) challenges an assumption found in earlier literature: that simply being on social media naturally broadens cultural understanding. Our data shows that even among Indonesian EFL students with comparable platform access, awareness levels differ substantially, pointing to the idea that how students engage matters more than just having access.

There's another distinction worth noting. Earlier studies typically examined specific platforms in isolation or used structured interventions. This research looks at what actually happens when students freely navigate multiple platforms on their own, offering a more realistic view of how cultural awareness develops through ordinary, everyday social media use among Indonesian English learners.

3.2 Discussion

This study aimed to understand how EFL students view social media's contribution to their awareness of global cultures. The perception scores, which averaged 62.60, tell us something interesting: while students generally see value in platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok for cultural learning, the notable spread in individual scores points to a more

complex reality. Not all students are gaining the same cultural insights from their social media use, and this variation matters.

Students scoring higher on cultural awareness appeared to approach social media with a learning mindset. They actively sought out diverse content, paid attention to how English is used in different cultural contexts, and noticed social customs and values embedded in what they watched. Lower scoring students, meanwhile, tended to use the same platforms mainly for entertainment or staying connected with friends. They had access to the same cultural content, but weren't necessarily processing it as learning material.

This observation matters because it shifts our understanding of social media's educational role. We often hear that digital platforms expose young people to global perspectives, and that's certainly true. But exposure alone doesn't guarantee learning. Students need certain skills, such as knowing how to find quality content, recognizing cultural patterns, reflecting on differences, to turn casual scrolling into meaningful intercultural development. This is particularly important in Indonesian EFL settings, where many students have limited opportunities for face-to-face intercultural exchange.

The constructivist idea that learning happens through interaction with authentic materials helps explain why social media *can* be valuable here. Students encounter real people using English in natural situations, expressing genuine cultural values and practices. But our findings add an important caveat: this potential only gets realized when students engage thoughtfully. The platform itself doesn't teach; it's the learner's active interpretation that creates understanding.

Previous research has generally shown positive links between social media use and intercultural awareness. Our study doesn't contradict this, but it does add nuance by showing that the relationship is conditional. It depends on learner intentionality and, likely, on whether students have been taught how to learn from digital content. This is different from assuming social media automatically broadens perspectives just by virtue of being global and accessible.

For educators, this suggests a concrete direction. Rather than simply encouraging students to use social media or hoping they'll pick up cultural awareness independently, teachers need to provide structured support. This might mean helping students identify valuable content sources, creating assignments that prompt reflection on cultural observations, or discussing in class what students notice in their online interactions. The goal would be helping students develop habits of critical engagement with digital content treating it as a learning resource rather than just entertainment.

Ultimately, what this study reveals is a gap between potential and practice. Social media holds genuine promise for cultural learning in contexts where direct intercultural contact is scarce. But bridging the gap requires intentional pedagogical action, not just technological access. The challenge ahead is figuring out how to equip students with the mindset and skills to transform their everyday digital experiences into opportunities for deeper intercultural understanding.

4. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that social media makes a meaningful contribution to developing EFL learners' understanding of global cultures, as evidenced by their relatively high perception scores ($M = 62.60$, $SD = 8.08$). Through informal encounters with authentic language contexts, cultural values, and social norms on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, students simultaneously build both intercultural competence and language proficiency.

These results add to existing scholarship by revealing that students view cultural learning as an important benefit of social media engagement, not just linguistic improvement. From a pedagogical perspective, this highlights the need to incorporate global cultural materials into course design through digital platforms. Educators can support students by helping them choose valuable online content,

promoting thoughtful consideration of cultural variations, and connecting their informal digital experiences with formal learning goals.

By using larger participant groups and combining qualitative and quantitative methods, future research could examine specific aspects of cultural understanding, such as the development of empathy, tolerance, or identity formation processes, in order to obtain a deeper understanding of how digital interaction fosters global competence.

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