

Exploring EFL Learners' Emotional Engagement with Authentic English Captions in Digital Reading

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Abstract. In the digital era, social media has become a prominent source of authentic English input for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. While previous studies have emphasized benefits such as vocabulary enhancement, motivation, and digital literacy, little attention has been given to how learners emotionally engage with emotionally charged captions frequently encountered on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X. Despite their linguistic simplicity, these captions frequently elicit emotional responses and personal reflection, indicating a potential role in language learning that extends beyond traditional comprehension. The present study investigates EFL learners' emotional and cognitive engagement with such captions and examines how these factors relate to language learning behaviours. Employing a qualitative methodology, semi-structured interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants who regularly interact with English-language content on social media. Thematic analysis identified five principal themes: emotional resonance, cognitive reflection, language learning behaviour, platform influence, and frequency of exposure. Participants described translating captions, reflecting on personal experiences, and observing vocabulary growth as outcomes of engaging with emotionally charged texts. Participant reported that emotional connection appeared to support their comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, particularly when content aligned with their personal experiences. This study highlights the significance of affective factors in digital reading contexts and offers preliminary evidence that social media texts can function as meaningful resources in English language learning.

Keywords: EFL learners, Emotional Engagement, Social media captions, Authentic digital reading materials.

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Introduction

In today's digital age, reading practices have gone beyond traditional printed texts. For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), social media serves as a valuable resource for engaging with authentic materials that are rich in both emotional and contextual depth. According to Djumabaeva (2020), authentic reading refers to engagement with texts not explicitly designed for language learning but reflecting natural language use in authentic contexts. Moreover, it aligns with Harmer's (1991) definition, which states that authentic texts are materials designed for native speakers and not modified for language teaching purposes. This approach effectively improves EFL learners' reading skills, cultural awareness, and pragmatic competence. However, integrating social media captions as authentic reading materials and how learners respond to them emotionally is still an under-explored area in language education research.

The emotional and motivational aspects of learning a second language are becoming more and more prominent in research. Building on this, Pekrun's revised Control-Value Theory (2024) highlights that when feelings are focused on the learning task itself, positive activating emotions like enjoyment can improve task engagement. Similarly, early research by Dörnyei (1990) revealed that broad emotional dispositions toward the language, in addition to instrumental orientations, shape affectively based motivation in L2 learning. According to these theoretical viewpoints, students' emotions may have a significant impact on how they interpret and react to texts, particularly those they come across online.

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of motivation and behaviour in shaping English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' engagement with digital texts. Wang (2024) discovered that students who are more motivated to read English content on social media are more likely to engage meaningfully with authentic online texts. Additionally, Mitrulescu (2024) noted that social media significantly enhances learners' motivation and supports the acquisition of vocabulary and comprehension skills in informal contexts. Furthermore, media platforms evoke strong emotional responses that can affect learners' attitudes toward reading and comprehension (Boczkowski, 2021).

Despite the growing interest in language learning through social media, most studies still primarily focus on the technical or linguistic aspects of content, overlooking the emotional dimensions of learner engagement. For instance, Draxler et al. (2023) investigated the effects of keyword highlighting and time synchronization in captions on language comprehension. However, their study concentrated on technical comprehension rather than emotional engagement. Similarly, Assakhi and Fakhurriana (2023) demonstrated that social media enhances English language skills for EFL learners, but they did not address the learners' emotional or cognitive responses to the caption they consumed. Additionally, Erlangga and Anam (2024) highlighted the significance of social media exposure in promoting intercultural awareness, showing that digital platforms play a role in enhancing both linguistic and cultural literacy. However, their research did not address how learners emotionally process and respond to this type of content.

Although the use of social media as an informal learning environment is increasing, little is known about how EFL learners emotionally engage with emotionally charged captions frequently encountered on these platforms. In this

study, “emotionally charged captions” refer to short texts, typically 5–30 words, that are often found in Instagram, TikTok, or X posts, expressing strong emotions such as love, heartbreak, loneliness, self-reflection, motivation, or personal struggles. These captions can take the form of quotes, confessional statements, or reflective one-sentence texts. When viewing a piece of content, the same content often appears repeatedly due to social media algorithms, increasing users’ exposure to emotionally charged content. Cognitive neuroscience research also shows that emotional stimuli interact with working memory load and activate salience and emotion processing networks, suggesting that emotionally charged text may engage readers differently than neutral text (Luo et al., 2024). Despite these theoretical and empirical developments, few studies have explored how English as a foreign language (EFL) learners respond emotionally and cognitively to emotionally charged captions, and how these responses relate to their informal digital reading practices. Therefore, this study aims to explore the emotional and cognitive reactions of EFL learners to emotionally charged captions encountered on social media, and to understand how these texts function as authentic reading materials that can shape learners’ digital engagement and meaning formation processes.

Method

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive design to explore how EFL learners emotionally engage with emotionally charged English texts found on social media platforms. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain in-depth insight into learners’ emotional and cognitive reactions to real-world digital texts in an informal learning context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Sandelowski, 2000). As explained by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), in qualitative research, researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meanings they attribute to their experiences. Therefore, this viewpoint aligns with the current study’s aim of understanding how learners interpret exposure to emotion-driven language in their daily digital world. Qualitative descriptions are well-suited for gathering participants’ authentic responses and offer vivid accounts of their experiences.

Population and Sample

As an alternative to reaching broad inferences about EFL learners’ emotional engagement with emotionally charged English captions on social media, the current study was carried out as a small-scale exploratory pilot case study. Two information-rich participants were purposefully chosen in accordance with this goal since they satisfied requirements that were directly related to the phenomenon which was being studied. Both participants were 22 and 24 years old, undergraduate EFL students with assessed English ability between B1 and B2. They spent two to four hours a day interacting with English-language content on social media, especially Instagram and TikTok. Furthermore, both stated that they were frequently exposed to brief emotional texts like quotes, reflective posts, and revealing captions. They also reported experiencing emotional reactions or moments of introspection when reading these captions. While the other participant (male) preferred to follow inspirational and contemplative caption-based content, one participant (female) expressed great engagement with self-growth and

relationship-related captions. Their inclusion was deliberate since they were in a good position to provide in-depth, contextualized explanations of how EFL learners interpret emotionally and cognitively emotionally charged digital texts. Depending on availability, interviews were done over the phone or in face. The purpose of this pilot exploratory study was to record early, illustrative incidents that can guide larger-scale research in the future rather than to draw conclusions about more general patterns.

Instruments

The primary instrument used for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. This approach gave the researcher the opportunity to explore new subjects that were pertinent to each participant while still maintaining a consistent structure (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The purpose of the interview questions was to get in-depth answers on the students' reading habits and comprehension techniques, their emotional responses to English captions, the motivating factors behind interacting with digital content, and their preferences for particular social media sites. According to Patton (2015), semi-structured interviews are beneficial for understanding how individuals interpret their experiences and provide the depth needed in qualitative inquiry. The questions were carefully created in accordance with the research objectives and then checked for clarity and relevance. Interview guides were provided in Indonesian and English for the convenience and understanding of participants. Each interview was audio recorded with permission, lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, and was then transcribed. Responses from participants who spoke more than one language were translated into English for reporting purposes, and these translations were carefully checked to ensure that the original meaning was preserved.

Data Analysis

The interview data in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis, a flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method was chosen to systematically identify, analyze, and report recurring themes in qualitative data, thus enabling a more detailed and deeper understanding of participants' emotional engagement with English texts on social media. To begin, the taped interviews were transcribed accurately. After transcription, the researcher carefully read the transcripts and manually coded key statements about emotional responses, language learning behaviours, and social media use. After that, similar codes were grouped into broader themes that reflected meaningful patterns. Finally, the researcher interpreted and linked how EFL students emotionally engaged with English texts on social media and how these interactions aided their learning. Instead of using qualitative software, coding decisions were documented through a verification process. The researcher verified important interpretations with participants as part of member checking to increase credibility. While maintaining semantic accuracy, every translated sentence included in the findings was taken from the original Indonesian statements.

The researcher continued to be reflexive throughout the analysis. The researcher recognized the potential for interpretive bias since the researcher was an EFL teacher with experience with students' digital habits. Reflexive records were maintained during theme development and coding to minimize this, and transparency was maintained by documenting analytical decisions.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

The study identified five main themes: Emotional Resonance, Cognitive Reflection, Language Learning Behaviour, Platform Influence, and Frequency of Exposure. These themes illustrate how emotionally charged captions on social media affect EFL learners both emotionally and cognitively, they also amplify their language learning experience.

Emotional Resonance

According to the participants, the text evoked strong emotions like empathy, nostalgia, and melancholy. Participants were more eager to interact with the text because of the emotional resonance with their own experiences, which also made it memorable and meaningful.

Excerpt 1. Personal Relevance

"That post really resonated with my situation right now." (P1)

"That kind of content makes me sad because it relates to my life, especially since I just broke up." (P2)

Excerpt 2. Emotional Validation

"I realized I'm not alone." (P1)

Cognitive Reflection

Basically, emotionally impactful captions also encourage learners to reflect on their own experiences, values, and emotions. Some participants mentioned that they use captions as inspiration to create personal stories or writings.

Excerpt 3. Reflection Triggers

"It makes me think more and directs me to life topics like love or zodiac signs." (P1)

"It makes me think a lot more and relate it to what I'm experiencing." (P2)

Excerpt 4. Creative Inspiration

"Some of my writings were inspired by the quotes I see on social media." (P1)

Language Learning Behaviour

Emotionally engaging texts encourage participants to actively engage with unfamiliar English vocabulary. When they come across sentences that they do not understand, they often use tools like Google Translate to look up meanings. This process helps them acquire vocabulary incidentally through frequent exposure.

Excerpt 5. Translation Strategies

"If there is a translation feature, I will click on it- if not, I will copy and paste it into Google Translate" (P1)

"If the caption is long and I don't understand it, I usually translate it." (P2)

Negative Case:

"I But if it's short and there are some parts I still understand, I just understand it based on what I know." (P2)

Excerpt 6. Vocabulary Learning

"Even though they're not heavy words, they still expand my vocabulary." (P1)

"I learn more because I get new English vocabulary. I find it very beneficial for me." (P2)

Platform Influence

Participants pointed out that platforms like Instagram have algorithms that surface more emotionally relevant content based on their previous engagement with the content they are interested in. The effect of these algorithms increases the frequency of reading and the perceived emotional intensity of the information

owing to frequent exposure, making such content feel more personally relevant over time.

Excerpt 7. Algorithmic Exposure

"I mostly use Instagram, especially since the quote content on IG is more tailored to me, especially since I often open quote content like that". (P1)

"I see it a lot because of the algorithm, the more we watch, the more it appears, so many caption contents show up. And here, I usually use Instagram because it is enjoyable for me". (P2)

Frequency of Exposure

The use of social media is an integral part of daily life. With this, participants reported that they engage with emotionally charged captions daily, with an average of 2-3 hours of social media use in a day. The captions often appeared while they played social media, suggesting that algorithm-driven exposure played a significant role.

Excerpt 8. Daily Encounter

"I spend around 2-3 hours on social media... quotes appear more often than random videos." (P1)

"Very often... a lot of captioned posts keep appearing." (P2)

Discussion

The findings of this exploratory study indicate that emotionally charged social media captions may serve as both sources of emotional stimulation and possibly useful resources for EFL learner' language acquisition. According to the first theme, the two participants' learner engagement seems to be improved by emotional resonance. They said they felt more connected and were more inclined to read and engage with the content when they came across texts that reflected their own feelings or experiences. They were also more likely to be focused, motivated, and willing to engage with the material actively. Emotional stimulation on digital platforms can affect readers' attitudes and engagement levels (Boczkowski, 2021). This emotional engagement not only creates a more meaningful learning experience but also encourages deeper interaction with the text. Thus, motivation to read English content on social media can increase significantly when learners experience emotional and cognitive engagement (Wang, 2024). This means that when emotions are involved in learning, learners are more likely to understand and remember the material more easily.

The participants reported that emotionally charged captions appeared to stimulate cognitive reflection in addition to affective engagement. In this case, the participants not only experienced an emotional charge but also reflected deeply on their lives and even their identities. The use of social media not only motivates learners but also enhances understanding through engagement with content that encourages personal interpretation (Mitrulescu, 2024). With this, emotional texts play a dual role in stimulating both affective and cognitive processes-which is crucial in meaningful language learning. The results also show that emotionally charged texts seemed to motivate students to check unfamiliar vocabulary, use translation tools, and make independent efforts to comprehend meaning which promoted language learning behaviours. Although previous studies, such as Assakhi and Fakhurriana (2023), have acknowledged the benefits of social media in improving English language proficiency, they have not addressed the emotional motivations behind learners' behaviour. This present study extends the discussion by showing that emotional impact may encourage learners to translate texts,

explore word meanings, and expand vocabulary. Relevant texts emotionally encourage incidental learning through interest and empathy. These behaviours suggest that authentic language learning may stem from a learner's personal curiosity and emotional investment.

Additionally, the impact of social media platforms is readily apparent. Platforms such as Instagram use an algorithm that repeatedly displays similar emotionally charged content to maintain high levels of engagement. This personalized exposure creates a feedback loop where users will engage and continue to engage because of the similar content. With this, the use of social media supports multimodal learning and digital literacy (Mitrulescu, 2024). It also encourages creativity and a growth mindset in students (Jiang & Zhao, 2024). Therefore, social media not only provides emotionally engaging content but also shapes learners' habits and preferences in language consumption through personalized and repeated exposure. The present findings provide early, small-scale indications that algorithm-driven exposure may contribute to sustained engagement with English texts, though further research is needed to confirm these patterns.

Furthermore, daily interactions lead to repeated contact with emotionally rich English expressions. This study reveals that participants encountered similar content multiple times a day, often without actively seeking it out. Whereas the consistent and repeated use of digital media can foster linguistic and intercultural awareness that resonates emotionally, shaping students' emotional sensitivity, comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition (Erlangga & Anam, 2024). However, language learning involves more than just mastery of grammar and vocabulary; it also includes understanding language as a medium for constructing cultural and emotional meaning (Kramsch, 1993). The participants' repeated interactions with emotionally charged content illustrate how social media exposure can support a deeper and more authentic engagement with language. Through such content, participants not only expanded their vocabulary but also began to understand the way feelings such as love, sadness, and motivation are expressed in the cultural context of native English speakers. Exposure to emotional expression can be an alternative approach to language teaching that seeks to develop students' cultural and affective senses.

This study demonstrates that in the digital age, emotionally charged social media captions may function as meaningful reading materials for EFL learners. Although the results suggest that these texts may encourage participation and introspection, these conclusions are still speculative because of the exploratory character of the study and the small sample size. The interaction between emotional content, digital platform design, and learner behaviour provides valuable insights into how informal online environments can support EFL development. This study emphasizes the need for more research to fully comprehend how emotional digital content can be successfully incorporated into language instruction and what role it might play in influencing the learner experience in light of these limitations.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate how EFL learners engage with and respond to emotionally charged texts on social media, as well as how such content serves as authentic reading material in the digital age. According to the research,

emotionally charged texts fostered deep relationships between individuals, promoted reflection, and encouraged learners to engage in active language activities, such as vocabulary development and translation. Moreover, social media algorithms and frequent exposure have a significant role in maintaining emotional engagement and fostering language acquisition. The findings of this study highlight the potential of social media as an informal yet effective learning environment. Emotionally charged English content not only aids language comprehension but also can foster emotional awareness, which aligns with a broader view of language as a means of creating meaning in social contexts

Limitations

Despite offering valuable insights, this study has several limitations. The small number of participants and their specific cultural background restrict the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on self-reported experiences may also introduce bias, as participants' perceptions may not fully reflect their actual learning behaviours. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design prevents the study from capturing changes over time or determining long-term effects of emotional engagement with digital texts. Future research should include larger and more diverse participants, use mixed or longitudinal methods, and examine different platforms or types of emotional content to better understand how digital environments shape language learning.

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