

Students' Perception of Reading Alternative Universe to Develop English Vocabulary

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary is an important component that students must master in order to master other language skills, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Vocabulary learning can be effectively done through reading stories. A popular example is Alternative Universe (AU), a setting for a work of fan fiction found on Twitter or X. Utilizing a qualitative research design, this study investigated students' perception of reading short stories in AU for vocabulary development. The participants were 78 students consisting of 36 senior high school (SHS) students and 42 university students. Data was collected through questionnaires. The findings show that most respondents were familiar with and engaged in reading AU stories. The participants had a positive perception of reading AU stories because it helped them discover new words, recall previously learned vocabulary, and improve their reading skills. Therefore, it was concluded that AU stories can be an effective tool to increase vocabulary among EFL students.

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INTRODUCTION

Education has a vital role in the formation of individuals and society. As the main foundation in developing human potential, education not only provides knowledge but also forms character, skills, and attitudes that have a positive impact on everyday life. The definition of education according to Sudarto (2019) emphasizes the importance of rethinking and changing the teaching framework to accommodate students in an inclusive educational setting. This is because the growth process includes adjustments to each phase of a person's ability. Education is not just a transfer of information, but also a means to open horizons, increase understanding, and stimulate creativity. Education is described as an activity that takes place in diverse venues and is intended to develop knowledge, experience, valuing, growing, caring, and behaving (Chazan, 2022). With the application of knowledge, changes in behavior, maturity of thinking, and maturity of personality are expected, which will create a positive impact on the educational environment, both formal and informal. This transformation is expected to make a valuable contribution to the character-building and development of learners. In the education process, there is an effort called learning. One of them is language learning.

To succeed in language learning, be it the first, second, or foreign language, one must have a sufficient vocabulary because it is one of the essential aspects of acquiring a language and its development (Nugraheni et al., 2024). Learning a language without learning its vocabulary is impossible (Cesarini et al., 2021) because vocabulary knowledge facilitates and links listening speaking, reading, and writing altogether. However, Language learners have to master vocabulary first before they produce it through speaking or writing (Arochman et al., 2024). Therefore, a limited vocabulary range prohibits one from succeeding in learning a language, while rich vocabulary facilitates second or foreign language acquisition (Zwier & Boers, 2022).

Vocabulary also plays a crucial role in understanding a language. Thus, it is also essential in communication. Limited vocabulary in a second language impedes successful communication. Although a person can make grammatically accurate sentences, insufficient vocabulary range limits his communication with others. Conversely, although one does not know grammar but is rich in vocabulary, he still can express what he is going to say by using words. Words are the means for expressing thoughts. The more words we learn the easier we express ideas.

Despite their importance in language learning and communication, some students find it difficult to acquire a large vocabulary when studying a foreign language like English because they believe that gaining vocabulary requires boring and tiresome repetition. This must be one of the consequences of vocabulary teaching negligence in EFL contexts (Zhu, 2020). Students' problem with vocabulary is seen from their continuous struggle to select the right meaning for words and their misunderstanding of how words should be used in context (Surmanov & Azimova, 2020). Vocabulary problems are also seen in students' difficulty in finding words to express themselves in speaking and writing (Ghalebi et al., 2020).

Vocabulary can be taught explicitly or implicitly. Vocabulary-explicit teaching can be conducted, for instance by getting students to look up definitions in dictionaries, giving students the chance to see and use new words in real-world contexts, incorporating visual

supports like graphic organizers, etc. Visual aids help students to actively engage in using and thinking about word meanings and in word relationship creation (Milton & Alexiou, 2012). Vocabulary implicit teaching can be conducted through extensive reading and listening (Subroto et al., 2024). For students in elementary levels, explicit teaching seems to be more effective for vocabulary building. Yet, for students in intermediate and advanced levels, implicit teaching is more efficient. Besides its effectiveness, implicit teaching will also drive students to be independent learners. Teachers just provide them with various materials interesting to them (for example: short stories, songs, etc.), and they will be accustomed to acquiring the vocabulary delicately. This will surely benefit teachers because they do not have to force students to enrich their vocabulary. Pardede (2011) posited that reading short stories can develop students' language skills and enrich vocabulary effectively. Additionally, implicit vocabulary teaching does not burden students with a heavy load of vocabulary memorization. The contexts of the reading or listening materials facilitate their long-term memory retention.

The effectiveness of reading for vocabulary development is supported by the results of numerous studies. Cunningham (2005), for instance, found that reading text can provide significant opportunities for vocabulary development because reading texts generally contain many more low-frequency words than spoken language. Reading helps develop students' listening and speaking competence because reading material generally includes words that an individual needs for both written and oral language use. (Nelson et al., 2005).

The learning media used in learning vocabulary through reading can vary, one of which is social media or applications such as Duolingo or other websites that can support the student learning process. Ajisoko (2020) found that the integration of mobile-assisted language learning applications like Duolingo facilitates vocabulary development and contributes to overall English language proficiency. In addition, Rafiq et al. (2019) posited that social media affects students' reading habits. Another prospective social media for reading is Twitter, which has now changed its name to X. Over time, new terms began to appear on Twitter. The most popular one is the Alternative Universe (AU). According to Prameswari (2022), AU is a term used on Twitter as a fictional story created by fans with visualizations of their favorite artists or idols. Rahmawati (2022) reiterated that AUs are written and uploaded in the form of Twitter threads, and usually consist of synopses, character profiles, and screenshot images from fake chat applications. The characters written in AUs are imaginary. AU does not only exist on Twitter but also on other platforms such as Facebook, Wattpad, and many more. Nevertheless, it is now most popular on Twitter (X).

AU often uses visualizations of Korean idols, but it is not uncommon to use other foreign artists who change their names, characters, jobs, and social status according to the author's wishes with a storyline that is made as interesting as possible. The genre of AU is unlimited and varies greatly from romance, friendship, family, and many more. AU storylines are written using continuous threads so that the story is not mixed with other tweets from the author and can be read continuously. Interestingly, AU's writing style is not only narrative but also in the form of conversations between characters displayed using bubble chat screenshots from chat applications.

Many contents of AU use English, and they are very popular among teenagers, especially fans of K-pop idols, Thai artists, anime, and other famous characters. AU gets a lot of attention from the public because the readers have enough free time to read the interesting stories presented by the authors. Even when there is an Alternative Universe (AU) that is favored by many people, this can also be beneficial for the author. Usually, if their work is popular, the author will contact a publisher, or vice versa, to make the story into a printed book. Some of the famous AU that have been published in a book are: *Dikta dan Hukum*, *Malioboro at Midnight*, *Hello Cello*, *Himpunan*, *Atuy Galon*, and others.

The main reason why young people like AU is their interesting short stories, which are easy to access because they are presented on social media. Short stories have long been regarded as an effective tool to develop English learners' language skills, enrich vocabulary, and enhance motivation (Pardede 2011; Saripah & Syukri, 2017). Pardede's (2021) systematic review showed that short stories are effective materials or tools for vocabulary and grammar learning, in addition to language skills development, communicative competence advancement, cultural awareness increase, memory enhancement, and critical thinking skills development. Reading short stories on Twitter was also effective for vocabulary enrichment (Eusebio & Eusebio, 2020).

Based on the discussion above, it is clear that as an interactive and engaging platform, using Twitter as a supplementary resource for vocabulary learning can be beneficial. It provides a diverse range of contexts and word usage, which are essential for vocabulary acquisition. Yet, to the present writers' knowledge, research focusing on the use of AUs for language learning is very scarce. To fill in the gap, this study will examine the influence of reading AU on Twitter on students' vocabulary development. In this regard, this study will address the following questions: (1) What were the difficulties encountered by students in learning English vocabulary? (2) Did students frequently use AU to read English stories? (3) What were Students' views on reading Alternative Universe as a strategy for vocabulary learning?

METHOD

Research Design

This research method used a descriptive qualitative approach, which is useful for obtaining information, and understanding a phenomenon then described in detail and thoroughly. According to Creswell (2017), Qualitative Research generally focuses on understanding and interpreting data obtained through interviews, observations, questionnaires, and other techniques. Where the results will be interpreted descriptively in detail to provide understanding to the reader.

Participants

The subjects of this study were 36 high school students and 42 university students who read Alternative Universe both for entertainment and to improve and expand their English vocabulary. The participants lived in various places in Indonesia. They were contacted online to ask for their willingness to become participants through social media.

Instruments

The main instruments used in this research were questionnaires designed to collect qualitative data on students' perceptions of AU reading and its impact on vocabulary learning. The questionnaire consisted of 12 items, comprising five multiple-choice questions and seven open-ended questions. The multiple-choice questions aimed to gauge general data on students' familiarity with AU reading, reading frequency, and their perceived impact on vocabulary learning. Meanwhile, the open-ended questions were aimed at gathering deeper insights into students' personal experiences, challenges, and the specific vocabulary they acquired through AU reading. To establish validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by two experts in English language learning and qualitative research to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's objectives. A pilot test involving 10 students was conducted to refine the wording and effectiveness of the questions. Furthermore, to measure the reliability of the questionnaire, a Cronbach's Alpha test was conducted, yielding a reliability coefficient of 0.82, indicating good internal consistency. The questionnaire was distributed online via social media platforms such as X (Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook, ensuring a broader reach and diversity among respondents.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved 78 students consisting of 36 senior high school (SHS) students (aged 16-18 years old) and 42 university students (aged 18-25 years old). All of them lived in Jakarta, Indonesia. Further demographic information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic data

Sex	Number (%)	
	SHS Students (16-18 years old)	University Students (18-25 years old).
Male	4 (5.13%)	2 (2.57%)
Female	32 (41.02%)	40 (51,28%)
Total	36 (46.15%)	42 (53.85%)

As shown in Table 1, the number of male participants in the study was significantly lower than that of female participants. This discrepancy may be attributed to several factors, including male students' lack of interest in reading short stories posted in AU and their little interest in participating in the study.

Students' difficulties in learning English vocabulary

Table 2. Students Difficulties in Vocabulary Learning

Question	SHS Students		University Students	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Have difficulties in learning English vocabulary?	77.8	22.2	76.2	23.8

Table 2 shows that more than three-fourths of both SHS and university students stated they had difficulties in vocabulary learning, and the rest thought they encountered no problem. Thus, it can be concluded that most of them found learning vocabulary as difficult.

Table 3. Reasons for the Difficulty in Vocabulary Learning

Reasons	Responses	
	SHS Students	University Students
Difficulties in memorizing vocabulary	19.4%	31.0%
Finding correct vocabulary to apply grammar rules	44.4%	28.6%
Less motivation in vocabulary learning	11.2%	14.3%
No difficulty in learning vocabulary	25.0%	26.1%
Total	100%	100%

The findings on students' difficulties in vocabulary learning reveal both similarities and differences between Senior High School (SHS) students and university students. Research on vocabulary learning difficulties (e.g., Siregar & Ismahani, 2024) suggests that learners commonly struggle with pronunciation, spelling, memorization, grammatical application, and motivation, which aligns with the results of this study. However, some notable patterns emerge. More university students (31%) reported difficulties in memorizing vocabulary compared to SHS students (19.4%), suggesting that as students progress academically, they encounter more complex vocabulary that requires deeper processing rather than simple rote memorization. On the other hand, the lack of vocabulary to apply grammatical rules was the most common issue among SHS students (44.4%) but slightly less prevalent among university students (28.6%). This confirms the results of previous studies (e.g., Ellis, 1997), which suggest that younger learners often struggle with applying vocabulary within grammatical structures. Meanwhile, both groups reported relatively low instances of lack of motivation (11.2% of SHS students and 14.3% of university students), indicating that while motivation can be a challenge, it is not the primary difficulty for most students. Interestingly, a similar proportion of SHS and university students (25% and 26.1% respondents, respectively) stated that they had no difficulty in learning vocabulary, suggesting that a subset of students may have effective strategies in place.

These findings align with Siregar and Ismahani's (2024) study, which revealed that students often experience difficulties in pronunciation, writing, and recalling new words. These findings also align with Nation's (2001) vocabulary learning theory, which highlights those difficulties in vocabulary acquisition stem from memory retention, contextual usage (grammar), and motivation. Additionally, Schmitt's (2008) vocabulary learning strategies model suggests that memorization difficulties arise from insufficient exposure and ineffective recall strategies, which may explain the students' struggles. From a socio-cognitive perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), the difference between SHS and university students could also be attributed to varying levels of scaffolding and learning autonomy. Younger students (SHS) may still rely on explicit grammar instruction, whereas university students, who face denser academic vocabulary, struggle more with retention.

Table 4. Students View about Vocabulary Development through Story Reading

Question	SHS Students		University Students	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Did reading stories help you learn English vocabulary?	77.8%	22.2%	74.2%	23.8%

Table 4 shows that 77.8% of the SHS students and 74.2% of university students stated they used story reading to increase and learn vocabulary. So, it can be concluded that a majority of the participants learned vocabulary through reading stories.

Frequency of using AU to Read English Stories

Table 5. Familiarity with the Alternative Universe (AU)

Question	SHS Students		University Students	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Are you familiar with AU English reading on the X (Twitter) app?	72.2%	27.8%	78.6%	21.4%

Table 5 describes that 72.2% of SHS students and 78.6% of university students were familiar with and read Alternative Universe (AU) content on X (Twitter). This suggests that AU stories have a significant presence among students as a form of reading material.

In comparison to previous studies on digital reading habits and fanfiction engagement, these results align with research suggesting that young readers increasingly engage with non-traditional digital texts (Lee, 2020; Wang & Vásquez, 2021). Studies have shown that fanfiction and AU narratives can serve as an alternative form of literacy development, fostering vocabulary acquisition and comprehension skills (Dizon, 2023). The high familiarity rate observed in this study supports the argument that social media-based reading materials contribute to students' language exposure and engagement.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings align with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning. AU stories, often created and shared within online communities, provide a collaborative and interactive learning environment where students are exposed to English vocabulary and structures in context. Moreover, Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis suggests that exposure to comprehensible input is essential for language acquisition. Since AU stories often use contemporary, conversational English, they may serve as an accessible source of language input for students.

These findings also raise questions for further exploration: Do students actively engage with AU content for language learning purposes, or is it primarily a form of entertainment? How does AU exposure compare to traditional reading materials in its impact on vocabulary acquisition? Future research could examine these aspects to better understand the educational potential of AU stories.

Table 6. AU Reading Frequency

Question	SHS Students		University Students	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Do you read AU often?	55.6%	44.4%	59,5%	40.5%

Table 6 shows that more than half of the respondents replied that they often read Alternative Universe (AU), in which the university students were a bit higher in percentage than SHS students.

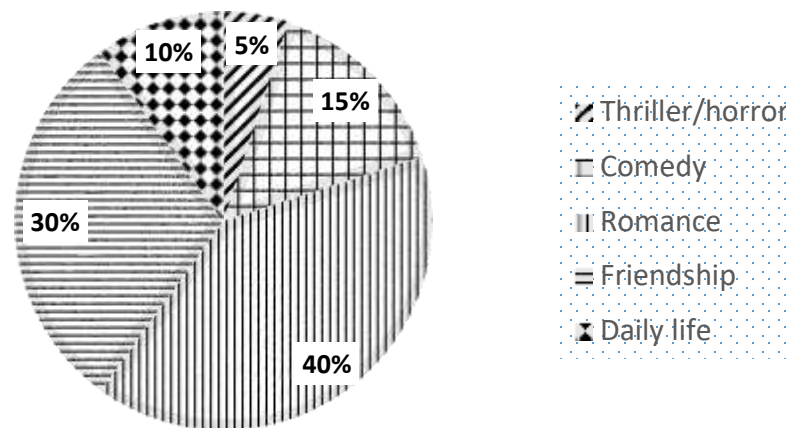


Figure 1. Genres that students are interested in AU

Figure 1 shows the participants' preferences of genres in AU. It is shown that romance was the most favored genre, followed by friendship, and comedy. Daily life, and thriller respectively. Friendship and romance became the top two genres in the Alternative Universe was probably due to their strong emotional connection and relatability. These genres focus on personal relationships, character growth, and deep emotional bonds, making them highly engaging for audiences. Unlike thriller or horror, which may rely on suspense and action, friendship and romance stories prioritize dialogue and interactions, making them more immersive and easier to connect with. Additionally, their light-hearted and feel-good nature may contribute to their popularity, as they provide comfort and entertainment.

From a vocabulary learning perspective, these genres can be beneficial as they expose learners to everyday conversational English, including common phrases related to emotions, relationships, and social interactions. Since the dialogues in these genres are often natural and context-based, they help learners understand word usage in real-life situations. Moreover, the frequent repetition of phrases and expressions aids in vocabulary retention. However, one limitation is that these genres may not introduce learners to academic or technical vocabulary, which is essential for formal writing and professional settings. Additionally, some expressions used in friendship and romance genres may include slang or culturally specific phrases, which might not always be applicable in broader communication contexts. Despite these limitations, the accessibility and engagement of

these genres make them an effective tool for improving vocabulary acquisition naturally and enjoyably.

Students View of Reading AU as a Strategy for Vocabulary Learning

Table 7. Students View Reading Alternative Universe as a Strategy for Vocabulary Learning

Question	SHS Students		University Students	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Do you feel that reading AU is an effective vocabulary learning?	77.8%	22.2%	76.2%	23.8%

Table 7 shows that 77.8% of SHS students and 76.2% viewed that reading AU can be an effective strategy for learning vocabulary.

Table 8. Advantages of Reading Alternative Universe (AU)

Advantages	Responses	
	SHS Students	University Students
1. Add a lot of English vocabulary and idioms	46.2%	31.0%
2. Got so much insight	7.7%	7.1%
3. Learn so many unfamiliar words and slang	42.3%	28.6%
4. Enhance fantasy and ideas with stories	3.8%	4.8%
5. Entertain, reduce stress, and be a mood booster	15.4%	11.9%
6. Motivation to write a story	3.8%	4.8%
7. Learn several POVs when facing problems	7.7%	2.4%
8. Increasing interest in reading	11.5%	9.5%
Total	100%	100%

Table 8 reveals that reading AU can provide many benefits. Most respondents thought that reading AU can increase vocabulary, and add foreign words and knowledge about slang. In addition, their answer to the next question, 'How did you feel reading the Alternative Universe? Is it fun?' Some of the respondents also answered that reading the Alternative Universe (AU) was fun. Many respondents answered that they were entertained by the various stories and plots in various AU.

Table 9 depicts that the participants viewed AU to have several shortcomings too. The biggest disadvantage was when stories were not completed by the authors followed by, writing stories that broke grammar rules, the presence of sensitive content, and stories were not clear. Salam and Nurnisa (2021) identified four main difficulties students found in vocabulary development: pronouncing unique English sounds, spelling, memorizing long syllable words, and understanding the meaning of unfamiliar words. On the other hand, the

findings above reveal that to learn vocabulary, most respondents encountered problems due to the difficulties in remembering new vocabulary and their lack of motivation. The results of this study indicate that reading AU can be a good alternative to learning new vocabulary. The respondents viewed that reading stories in AU helped them remember and expand new vocabulary. This confirms Anisa and Aufa's (2024) findings revealing that short story use made students interested in learning new vocabulary and improved their vocabulary effectively.

Table 9. Disadvantages of Alternative Universe (AU)

Benefits	Responses	
	SHS Students	University Students
1. Lacking sequence or detail, depictions of attitudes or activities make some stories unrealistic.	19.2%	9.5%
2. A lot of inappropriate words and pictures (sensitive content)	15.4%	7.1%
3. Stories are difficult to understand	19.2%	11.9%
4. The authors did not upload the next chapters quickly	15.4%	14.3%
5. Incomplete stories may make the readers have high expectations	42.3%	31.0%
6. Some sentences are ungrammatical or use inappropriate word choice	11.5%	9.5%
7. The timestamp as well not accurate	7.7%	7.1%
It can cause children/students to have too much screen time	7.7%	9.5%
Total	100%	100%

The findings of this study also reveal that AU also helps students to discover and memorize new vocabulary, because the words are repeated in the story they were reading. This supports Saydakhmetova's (2020), finding that short stories help students acquire new words, understand their meanings, and get ideas on how to use them properly.

CONCLUSION

This study examines and explores the effect of reading Alternative Universe (AU) in vocabulary learning for students. AU contains fictional stories with various genres created by many authors. The stories are presented in the form of a thread with hundreds of tweets with interesting and sequential storylines. Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that most of the respondents know and read AU. The participants felt that AU helped them in improving vocabulary mastery as it facilitated them to find new vocabulary, learn their meanings, memorize them, and know how to use them. So, AU can be an alternative to help students improve their vocabulary.

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