



HOW INSTAGRAM REELS SUPPORTS ENGLISH IDIOM LEARNING: AFFORDANCES AND CHALLENGES FROM EFL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

Keisya Ersi Ivani¹, Nyimas Triyana Safitri², Hidayati³
¹keisyaersi@gmail.com, ²triyana@unja.ac.id, ³hidayati@unja.ac.id

¹Universitas Jambi, Muaro Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia

²Universitas Jambi, Muaro Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia

³Universitas Jambi, Muaro Jambi, Jambi, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

English Idioms as an Issue of EFL Teaching is a challenging one for EFL learners since most of idioms' meaning is figurative and relative depending on its context. Following up on previous research which discusses Instagram Reels as the new way for English learners to acquire the vocabulary since it contains a very interesting short-form audio visual contents, this research explored how Instagram Reels facilitate EFL students' English idiom learning process through exploring the affordances and challenges. This study was a qualitative case study which recruited five EFL learners in the second semester from Universitas Jambi who were selected using purposive sampling technique. The data collection instruments are semi-structured interviews which were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results demonstrate that there are six affordances of Instagram Reels on English idiom learning: repeated exposure to idiomatic expressions, multimodal support for interpreting figurative meanings, opportunities for autonomous learning, flexible access to learning, contextualized language input, and opportunities to use idioms in authentic communication. In addition to the affordances, the students also reported challenges: interpretation problem on the meaning, inadequate explanations from content creator, the rapidly vanished subtitle, and lack of feedback. Therefore, the results imply that Instagram Reels is a useful supplemental tool for EFL idiom learning; however teacher-based instructions are needed to enhance the understanding on difficult idioms.

Keywords: Affordances, Challenges, EFL Students, English Idioms, Instagram Reels

A. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge of vocabulary is one of the essential components of English language learning because it supports learners' ability to comprehend spoken and written texts as well as communicate ideas effectively in both oral and written forms. However, vocabulary knowledge extends beyond understanding individual words and also includes mastery of formulaic language such as collocations, phrasal verbs, and idioms, which frequently occur in authentic communication and contribute to language fluency and naturalness (Webb & Chang, 2022; Baruti & Subekti, 2023). Among these formulaic expressions, idioms are considered one of the most challenging aspects of vocabulary learning for EFL students because their figurative meanings often cannot be inferred from the literal meanings of the individual words. Consequently, learners who possess adequate general vocabulary knowledge may still encounter difficulties in interpreting and appropriately using idiomatic expressions in everyday

communication (Baureh & Neman, 2025; McCarthy & O'Dell, 2023). It can be assumed that since idiom learning is a complicated issue, the traditional teaching methods of teaching vocabularies only can be far from enough for the development of the figurative language proficiency. It is usually observed in many English classrooms that most lessons are centered around the memorization of the lists of words, the definitions in the dictionary and those activities in textbooks which are mainly concentrated on the literal meaning. Even though these activities help the students' lexical development, the learners get fewer chances to experience idiomatic language in real situations. As a matter of fact, the meaning of an idiom originates from real contexts and cultures, so it requires the repeated exposure of authentic languages associated with meaningful contexts so as to show how idioms work in real conversations. Therefore, in order to facilitate the learning of idioms, learners need both lexical knowledge of them and chances of watching, inferring, and encountering them over and over in a naturally formed language environment.

Learning English idioms therefore requires instructional approaches that go beyond traditional vocabulary teaching, which often emphasizes memorizing isolated word lists and dictionary definitions. Although such approaches contribute to learners' lexical development, they provide limited opportunities to experience idiomatic expressions in authentic communicative contexts. Recent studies emphasize that idioms are more effectively acquired through repeated exposure to meaningful language input, contextualized interaction, and authentic communication rather than through isolated memorization (Nation, 2023; Webb & Chang, 2022). Because idiomatic meanings are closely related to contextual and cultural knowledge, learners need opportunities to repeatedly observe, interpret, and infer idioms as they naturally occur in real-life communication. Such repeated exposure enables learners to gradually strengthen both their comprehension and retention of figurative expressions (Baureh & Neman, 2025; Mukolo et al., 2025).

In all the forms of social media platforms, Instagram appears to be one of the most frequently employed applications amongst the undergraduate learners, with its highly-rated function named as Instagram Reels. In Instagram Reels, learners can craft and distribute short form videos in which a variety of modes like spoken, captioned language, written script, photographs, hand gestures, human face expressions, soundtrack, as well as genuine context of use are mixed together. Due to its multimodal property, in Instagram Reels, learners can acquire abundant background information to help them to decode figural linguistic expressions including idioms; In traditional text books, they can find that idiom used as isolated sentences, while on the Instagram Reels, they can see how idiom used in real linguistic usage in an everyday society. Thus, it is hoped that Instagram Reels has potential as an additional tool of enhancing idiom acquisition by experiencing an authentic context of usage.

Learning potential of the affordances in Instagram Reels could be elucidated by referring to the construct of affordances introduced by Gibson (1979). Gibson's notion of affordances was initially conceived of as possibilities for action resulting from the interplay between an individual and his environment and existing neither in one nor the other exclusively. Relating affordances to language learning, van Lier (2004) defines affordances as possibilities for learning that emerge and become relevant as learners perceive, interpret and act upon them. In the context of Instagram Reels, functions such as short-format videos, subtitles, illustrations, gestures, replay feature, comment sections and algorithm-recommended content are possible



affordances for second language learners to decipher unfamiliar English idioms. Mayer's (2009) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning holds that learners engage in meaningful learning when they actively integrate verbal and visual inputs, and Paivio's (1986) Dual Coding Theory that verbal and visual information is mutually supplementary which leads to enhancement of memory and understanding of a material. From these theoretical backgrounds, it seems reasonable to investigate the use of Instagram Reels in teaching and learning English idioms.

In addition to offering multimodal avenues of learning, Instagram Reels empowers learners by facilitating learner control of their learning. Students have the autonomy to rewatch clips, freeze on expressions they don't recognise, switch on subtitles, bookmark helpful clips, go back to videos they have already seen, and follow the content providers that are constantly creating new English idioms videos. Such facilities permit students to interject English idioms learning in their everyday lives according to their specific interests, level of comfort with their pace of learning, and personal liking. Nevertheless, at the same time learning English idioms using the app is problematic since some of the clips provide incomplete answers, the subtitles might blink rapidly, the content of many videos tend to be entertainment focused, and students may find it difficult to get feedback when a misconception is happening. All in all, these affordances and constraints of Instagram Reels seem to create their own conditions for learning English idioms by students.

In other words, studies had already provided considerable evidence about the potential of Instagram for English language teaching and learning (ETL) (Al Mujaddid et al., 2025; Thesalonika and Adaninggar, 2023). Thesalonika and Adaninggar (2023) found that for Indonesian EFL learners, Instagram could provide an interesting and enjoyable environment in which students could effectively learn English vocabulary. Similarly, Hasbi and Cahyaningsih (2024) found that Instagram attracted the interest of learners through their use of entertaining audiovisual vocabulary presentations which facilitate learner comprehension and remembering. More recently, Al Mujaddid, Mahdum, and Syarfi (2025) noted that their Indonesian participants regarded Instagram Reels as an authentic and authentic tool that helps improve the process of learning English vocabulary because of their accessibility and exposure to a large amount of authentic linguistic materials. Together these findings suggest that Instagram is likely to contribute to vocabulary acquisition in digital learning spaces and prompt more learner-driven English activities outside classroom boundaries (Al Mujaddid et al., 2025).

However, several gaps remain. Firstly, the majority of prior research has examined vocabulary learning generally, rather than English idioms that necessitate learning in context with attention to cultural factors and the ability to infer figurative meaning on the basis of something other than mere lexical meaning. Secondly, while much existing work has addressed the affordances of using Instagram as a tool for learning, there has been a comparatively small amount of attention paid to the constraints of learning from this contextually-rich social network. In addition, in large part previous studies have adopted quantitative methods that assess only students' views of the learning process, but provide relatively little information about how learners experience the learning process while actually utilizing the resources offered by Instagram Reels for idioms. Therefore, there is a lack of qualitative data about how the affordances of Instagram Reels are combined with these constraints experienced by learners when it comes to learning English idioms.



Therefore, this descriptive qualitative study aims to explore the use of Instagram Reels for learning English idioms in relation to the affordances and challenges EFL students encountered. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions: (1) What affordances do EFL students experience when learning English idioms through Instagram Reels? and (2) What challenges do EFL students encounter when learning English idioms through Instagram Reels? Using semi-structured interviews, the study seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of how learners perceive, utilize, and respond to the learning opportunities offered by Instagram Reels while also identifying the constraints that influence their learning experiences. By adopting the perspective of learning affordances, this study contributes to the growing literature on digital language learning by explaining not only whether Instagram Reels supports idiom learning but also how and under what conditions its features facilitate or constrain learners' engagement with figurative language. The findings are expected to provide practical implications for English teachers, learners, and digital content creators seeking to integrate social media into English idiom instruction more effectively.

B. METHOD

Descriptive qualitative research approach Descriptive qualitative research design was used in this study to identify the experience of learning English idioms through Instagram Reels of EFL students. A descriptive qualitative approach is appropriate for investigating participants' perspectives and experiences of a particular phenomenon in natural settings without seeking to establish causal relationships or develop new theories (Sandelowski, 2000). Rather than evaluating the effectiveness of Instagram Reels quantitatively, this study aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of how students experienced both the affordances and the challenges of learning English idioms through their everyday interactions with the platform. This approach enabled the researcher to capture rich descriptions of learners' experiences and interpretations regarding the use of Instagram Reels as a supplementary learning resource.

The participants were five second-semester students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Jambi. They were selected through purposive sampling because they possessed experiences relevant to the objectives of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To be included in the study, participants were required to meet three criteria: (1) they actively used Instagram Reels, (2) they had experience learning English idioms through Instagram Reels, and (3) they were willing to participate voluntarily in the interview. These criteria ensured that the participants could provide information-rich accounts of the phenomenon under investigation. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms (S1–S5) throughout the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews because this method provides sufficient flexibility for participants to describe their experiences while allowing the researcher to explore emerging issues through follow-up questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and informed by the literature on idiom learning, learning affordances, learner autonomy, and social media-assisted language learning. The interview questions encouraged participants to explain how Instagram Reels supported their learning of English idioms and to describe the difficulties they encountered while using the platform. Individual interviews were conducted after participants had provided informed consent and took place in a comfortable environment to encourage open

communication. Participants were allowed to respond in either Indonesian or English so that they could express their ideas naturally and confidently. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission. The recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim, and responses originally expressed in Indonesian were translated into English where necessary for reporting purposes.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, member checking was conducted after the transcription process. On 18 June 2026, the interview transcripts and preliminary interpretations were returned to the participants for verification. All participants confirmed that the transcripts accurately reflected their responses and that the interpretations represented their intended meanings. In addition, an audit trail documenting participant selection, interview procedures, transcription, coding, and theme development was maintained throughout the study to enhance the dependability and confirmability of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The data analysis employed thematic analysis approach based on Braun and Clarke (2006). The data analysis involved the initial step of reading and re-reading the interview scripts in order to be acquainted with the data. Units of meaning were selected and initial codes were generated to address the research questions. Similar codes were then grouped to form the categories and later transformed into the themes that illustrated EFL learners' experience in learning English idioms using Instagram Reels. The researcher revisited and re-organized the themes to ensure that they were coherent within themselves and also separated from each other. The researcher then explained and interpreted the themes in light of the research questions, learning affordances (van Lier, 2004), and relevant research on the use of social media to facilitate language learning. This analytical process enabled the researcher to understand what patterns account for the affordances and challenges of EFL learners' use of Instagram Reels in learning English idioms.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Repeated Exposure to Idiomatic Expressions

Repeated Exposure was emerged as a recurring theme as the interview participants in this study all expressed experiencing English idiomatic expressions a number of times whilst engaging with Instagram Reels. As opposed to proactively looking for idioms participants said that they regularly found content on their social media feed in English, through funny video's movie excerpts and other English material which regularly showed English idioms. Repeated exposure to these idioms which participants found unfamiliar meant that they grew to recognize and memorize English Idioms and a feeling of repetitiveness means that Repeated Exposure to these Idioms were believed to have played a role in supporting participants with their English Idioms learning.

Student 1 explained that repeated exposure occurred because Instagram continuously recommended similar English-learning content based on viewing history:

"I notice certain vocabulary because of the repetitive content that I usually watch and maybe because of the algorithm. So, vocabulary that was previously unfamiliar becomes familiar when it repeatedly appears in related content."

Similarly, Student 3 described how repeated encounters enabled them to remember both the idioms and the contexts in which they were used:

“Sometimes I can even remember the lessons or conversations that appear in the Reels, or imitate them.”

This means that students have picked up idiomatic expressions from the endless encounters of real English-contained material when surfing Instagram Reels as part of their everyday lives. These students, who did not use any specific method of learning, but who could identify their increasing understanding of idiomatic expressions by their repeated viewing of some expressions from different videos. Many students link this to the suggestion engine of Instagram which repeatedly served up English-contained content relevant to what they have watched and so, they acquired these expressions in a way that naturally takes place as they are trying to get entertain or to get information from Instagram Reels without it being a context for explicit learning.

Overall, the findings suggest that frequent encounter with the similar English idioms was the most favorable component of Instagram Reels that they identified as important in their experience in learning English idioms in an authentic learning environment as it helped the learners identify the idioms more frequently, remember their meaning, and feel more and more accustomed to using them in authentic contexts of communication. It appears that with the frequent exposure to the similar English idioms in Instagram Reels, the learners have opportunities to repeatedly have an encounter with idioms in their digital learning environments.

Multimodal Support for Idiom Comprehension

The second theme identified from the interview data was multimodal support for idiom comprehension. Participants consistently reported that Instagram Reels helped them understand English idioms through the combination of spoken language, subtitles, visual illustrations, facial expressions, gestures, movie clips, and authentic situations. Rather than interpreting idioms by translating individual words, participants explained that they relied on these multimodal elements to infer figurative meanings from the context in which the expressions were used. The integration of multiple forms of information enabled them to understand idiomatic expressions more naturally and confidently.

Student 1 described how movie scenes presented in Instagram Reels helped distinguish literal expressions from idiomatic ones:

“When I was scrolling through Instagram, I found a content creator explaining the differences between basic English and English idioms by using parts of a movie. For example, in basic English you say ‘never,’ but in the idiom it becomes ‘when pigs fly.’”

Similarly, Student 4 emphasized the importance of visual information in supporting comprehension:



“Visual illustrations are very helpful to me because I prefer to learn visually, so they really help me understand.”

The findings reflect the importance of both nonverbal information and context that accompanied spoken explanations when participants learn to understand the figurative meanings that cannot be interpreted through literal translation (as facial expressions, gestures, subtitles, and the circumstances). Multiple learners stated that real conversations and movie scenes helped their understanding, because they could see idioms being used in a natural context, thus allowing them to learn to associate idioms with certain circumstances instead of learning them as single language units.

Overall the findings suggest that the multimodal characteristics of Instagram Reels as an important source of support for understanding English idioms. By processing verbal and visual information in a combined way, the learners can figure out the meanings more concretely and lessen the use of dictionary and translation for every single word. It can be concluded that the multimodal features are of help to the students' learning of idiomatic expressions when they come across it in digital context.

Autonomous Learning

The third theme identified from the interview data was autonomous learning. Participants consistently described taking personal initiative to continue learning English idioms beyond simply watching Instagram Reels. Rather than depending solely on the information provided in the videos, they actively searched for additional explanations, revisited learning materials, saved useful content, and followed educational accounts that regularly shared English expressions. These learning behaviors indicate that participants assumed an active role in managing their own learning according to their individual needs and interests.

Student 1 explained that repeated encounters with unfamiliar idioms encouraged them to seek further information independently:

“Because it keeps coming up over and over, I realize it’s a new vocabulary word, and eventually I look it up on Google.”

Likewise, Student 4 described how they organized learning materials for future review:

“I save the video first so I can watch it again later. Yes, I also create a collection and save it there.”

The participants' responses demonstrate that Instagram Reels functioned as a starting point rather than the sole source of learning. Indeed, for not recognizing certain expressions the participants searched into dictionaries, search engines and other on-line materials; some students also kept in their devices and stored some Reels they found to use for future reference, and re-watched videos in order to learn more by the platform without further interaction. Some students have also followed accounts specialised to learn English in order to enhance the number of English learning and idiom-acquiring videos.

Overall, the findings suggest that the learners took part in a self-directed way of learning while studying the English idioms on Instagram Reels. This can be interpreted from the findings that the learners personally chose their learning materials; the learners themselves made judgments on their own understanding level; and the learners utilized personal ways to retain and rehearse the learning they gained from this app.

Flexible Learning

The fourth theme identified from the interview data was flexible learning. Participants consistently described Instagram Reels as a platform that enabled them to learn English idioms conveniently according to their own schedules, preferences, and learning pace. Unlike classroom learning, which is restricted by fixed instructional time and structured activities, Instagram Reels allowed participants to access learning materials whenever they wanted and wherever they were. This flexibility enabled them to incorporate English idiom learning into their daily routines without feeling that they were engaged in formal study.

Student 4 explained that Instagram Reels provided immediate and practical access to learning resources:

“It’s more of an enjoyable experience because it’s easier to understand, more entertaining, and more practical. Whenever we want to look something up, it appears immediately, and whatever we want to learn is instantly available. Overall, it’s fun, exciting, and simple.”

Similarly, Student 5 highlighted the relaxed nature of learning through Instagram Reels:

“Because it feels more casual, cool, more flexible, and more relaxing than sitting in a classroom and studying.”

Such responses show that the respondents enjoyed the flexibility of Instagram Reels in terms of deciding when, where and how they would learn English idioms; that they were able to learn in their spare times or when they stumbled upon something educational on the platform instead of adhering to a study schedule and that they felt the hands-on or relaxed nature of learning on Instagram Reels less pressurized compared to learning idioms in the class.

Overall, the findings suggest that the flexibility of Instagram Reels encouraged participants to engage more frequently with English idioms in their everyday lives. Being exposed to the original English videos free from time and place restriction, students could have English learning more naturally as a part of their social media routines. They were able to retrieve and re-study these learning materials if there is the need to remember the idiom if not learned earlier.

Contextualized Learning

The fifth theme identified from the interview data was contextualized learning. Participants consistently explained that Instagram Reels enabled them to learn English idioms through authentic communicative contexts rather than isolated vocabulary presentations. Instead of memorizing idiomatic expressions from word lists or textbook examples, they encountered idioms embedded in movie scenes, storytelling videos, point-of-view (POV) content, and everyday conversations. These authentic contexts allowed participants to relate idiomatic expressions to specific situations, making their meanings easier to understand and remember.

Student 1 explained that idiomatic expressions frequently appeared in relatable content shared by Instagram creators:

"I often find idioms and phrases in POV content, especially when content creators share feelings and experiences that viewers can relate to."

Similarly, Student 2 described how contextual information supported their understanding of unfamiliar expressions:

"Sometimes I can understand expressions based on the author's gestures and body language."

Such responses suggest that speakers rely on the context in which the idiom is found, rather than the individual words, to comprehend an expression. Real life situations, personal experiences, and authentic speech were utilized to understand unfamiliar idioms intuitively. Some speakers noted that exposure to how speakers utilize idioms during real-life situations led them to connect an expression with a situation, and they not only came to know the idiom, but the context in which it was to be employed.

Overall, the findings suggest that Instagram Reels provides opportunities for contextualized learning by presenting idiomatic expressions within meaningful communicative situations. Rather than encountering idioms as isolated lexical items, participants learned them as part of authentic discourse that reflected everyday language use. Providing this type of context allows participants to see the links between linguistic forms and communication, therefore making learning English idioms more relevant to the communicative nature of English.

Opportunities for Authentic Language Use

The sixth theme identified from the interview data was opportunities for authentic language use. Participants reported that Instagram Reels not only helped them understand English idioms but also encouraged them to use newly learned expressions in their own communication. Several participants explained that they applied idiomatic expressions in conversations with friends, social media captions, online interactions, and classroom discussions. These experiences indicate that learning extended beyond recognizing the meanings of idioms to using them appropriately in authentic communicative situations.

Student 1 described using an idiomatic expression encountered on Instagram in another digital platform:

“Yes, I’ve used the idiom ‘once in a blue moon’ that I found on Instagram, and I used that idiom on a different platform.”

Similarly, Student 4 explained that they incorporated idioms into both written and spoken communication:

“When writing captions and also in conversations on campus.”

The participants seem to be successful in applying their Instagram Reel-related input in their real-life encounters, going beyond learning to comprehend what unfamiliar idiomatic expressions might mean, they applied them to different social and academic settings. It was pointed out by some that the authentic language shown on Instagram enabled them to feel more confident in using similar phrases on their own. For this reason, they felt they had been able to transform Instagram Reels as their source for input to practice English idiomatic expressions.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Instagram Reels provides learners with opportunities to bridge the gap between learning and language use. Authentic samples provided learners opportunities to identify contexts where idioms are suitable and prompted them to utilize these idioms outside the platform. It can be argued that the Instagram Reels usage not only helped learners comprehend English idioms but also enhance the learner willingness to integrate English idioms in daily use.

Challenges in Learning English Idioms

While participants broadly agreed that Instagram Reels was an useful tool for learning English idioms, there were other obstacles that hindered their learning process as well, because many idioms can’t be understood literally, but metaphorically. For example, “sometimes the content creators don’t give too many explanations” or “it is not enough clues to understand.” Moreover, the design aspects, such as the subtitles that disappear so quickly and the lack of interaction could also cause trouble in grasping the idiomatic meaning.

Student 5 described the difficulty of interpreting figurative meanings despite understanding the individual words:

“Sometimes I know the words, but I don’t understand the idiom. For example, ‘piece of cake’ means something is very easy, not cutting a cake.”

Similarly, Student 2 explained that the speed of subtitles sometimes affected comprehension:

“Sometimes the subtitles go by too fast, so I can’t fully understand them.”

These findings suggest that to comprehend idioms, participants cannot rely solely on the recognition of the words in an idiom. Many participants shared that the provided explanations for some idioms in the Instagram Reels were incomplete and hence not enough for learners to infer the correct meanings. Furthermore, several participants pointed out that the short time limit for the Reels video sometimes hampered them from expatiating the complicated idioms



in great depth. Thus learners have sometimes to resort to dictionaries, search engines and other internet-based learning tools to find and clarify, which then gave them confidence.

Overall, the findings suggest that, despite offering numerous opportunities for learning, Instagram Reels does not always provide sufficient support for understanding complex figurative language. The Instagram Reels platform successfully offers learners exposure to genuine idioms, however, its potential effectiveness relies on the explicitness of the language explanations, depth of context and learners' proactive search for more materials if needed. Based on this evidence, the Instagram Reels platform can function as a supplementary language-learning resource for students, and the fusion of spontaneous informal learning on the Instagram Reels platform with various resources is needed to acquire full mastery of English idioms.

Discussion

Instagram Reels as an Affordance-Rich Environment for English Idiom Learning

Perhaps the most important contribution of the study was that it identified Instagram Reels as an affordance-rich learning environment for learning English idioms via the engagement of reiteration, multimodality and contextualized input of the target language. Participants did not seem to be able to identify one specific tool on the platform to have facilitated the learning of the idioms; instead, they suggested that reiteration of the idioms on Instagram Reels, together with multimodal representations and real communicative purposes, has led to the facilitation of their understanding of the idiomatic meaning. That is to say, it is not just about being exposed to the English language per se but about being aware of and able to engage with the afforded learning opportunities provided by Instagram Reels.

The explanation of this discovery might be interpreted based on the notion of affordances of learning which is discussed by van Lier (2004). It is suggested that affordances are affordances for learning are made of the interaction between the learner and their environment. In this research, there were affordances of the Instagram Reels: such as frequent encounters of idiomatic expressions, idiomatic visual illustrations, subtitling, gestures and actual communicative contexts, etc. The affordances, however, will only be meaningful to the learners in condition of their attention to the affordances and using them as a means to understand the target idioms which they have not yet known prior to learning them. Thus, the function of Instagram Reels in this study, does not just depend on its own technological capacity.

It also reinforces Nation's (2013) contention that repeated exposure to lexical items enhances learning through familiarity and reinforcement. The data showed that seeing the same idiomatic expressions many times through algorithmic recommendations slowly helped in becoming accustomed to the idioms. In contrast to learning by deliberately trying to memorize idioms, repeated exposure led to their incidental learning as while watching the videos, they mainly concentrated on the message, they still were learning new idioms passively. This extends Nation's idea further to figurative language, where meanings are based on interpretation in context.

In addition to, verbal language was of secondary importance to these participants, while the role of visual stimuli in determining the meaning of idioms was found to be substantial; that is



to say, the meanings of idioms were best understood through the assistance of such visual components as subtitles, facial expressions, gestures, and movie scenes. This result is consistent with Mayer's (2009) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, stating that effective learning results from the learner's connecting between verbal and visual stimuli. It also corroborates Paivio's (1986) Dual Coding Theory, according to which the verbal and visual encoding modes support each other for improving both comprehension and recall. Thus, this study demonstrates the benefits of using multimodal input for idiom learning, due to the frequent difficulty of comprehending figurative meanings via translation only.

Compared with previous studies, the present research offers a more comprehensive explanation of how Instagram supports language learning. Earlier studies by Thesalonika and Adaninggar (2023), Hasbi and Cahyaningsih (2024), and Al Mujaddid et al. (2025) primarily concluded that Instagram promotes vocabulary learning by increasing learners' engagement and motivation. This study further examines this finding by showing that Instagram Reels fosters the learning of idiomatic expressions by means of a range of interrelating affordances, instead of solely the engagement afforded by it. Hence, this study add to the extant literature by elucidating the how the learning of figurative expressions occur on social media in EFL setting.

Extending Idiom Learning Beyond the Classroom through Learner Autonomy

We also found evidence of Instagram Reels acting as facilitators of learner autonomy and learner autonomy in language learning in a non-classroom setting. Our participants mentioned using Instagram Reels to independently find extra explanations, save teaching videos, watch old videos again, and subscribe to accounts teaching English. The findings show that learners engaged with digital content actively, rather than being passive audience, by controlling what, when and how to learn.

The results are aligned with Benson's (2011) definition of learner autonomy: the learner's control of his/her own learning processes through planning, monitoring and evaluation. Instead of relying entirely on teachers, students in this study took control of their learning by choosing what language learning materials to use and what strategies to employ in learning a new language. The instagram reel was considered as a context where students had more power over their language learning.

The flexibility of the activity further supported autonomous learning as learning anytime and anywhere supported learners to incorporate English idioms to learn into their lives. These kinds of flexibility of time and place are typical feature of informal digital learning as they blurred the boundaries between learning English and daily life. For example, Instagram Reels make the boundaries between formal and informal language learning unclear as learning could take place outside of an institutional setting.

These findings support previous studies reporting that Instagram encourages independent vocabulary learning (Al Mujaddid et al., 2025). However, the present study extends earlier work by showing that autonomy is not limited to accessing learning materials independently. Instead, learners actively regulated their learning processes by seeking clarification, revisiting content, and selecting resources that best supported their understanding of English idioms. This



suggests that Instagram Reels contributes not only to vocabulary development but also to the cultivation of lifelong learning habits among EFL learners.

From Understanding Idioms to Using Them in Authentic Communication

Furthermore, another important contribution of this study is the evidence for Instagram Reels fostering not only idiomatic knowledge (the understanding of idiomatic expressions), but also the application of idioms. The students mentioned using the idioms in communication in conversation, social media captions, classroom context, or in any kind of digital space, which shows their move from comprehension to productive use of idiomatic expressions. Such transition demonstrates Nation's (2013) notion of the two levels of vocabulary knowledge, reception and production. In receiving lexical items, the learner is expected to understand or recognize the items, while in producing lexical items, he is to use them in their appropriate context in communication. This means that exposure through and contextualized exemplars on the platform helped them to recognize the most appropriate situations to use the idioms, hence progressing from comprehension to the use of them.

Moreover, Wray's (2002) statement also fits the results, that formulaic language such as idioms only make sense for learners when they are realized that idioms are part of actual discourse, not only the individual lexical item. When learners encounter idioms which are naturally occurring in real conversation, story-telling, and daily communication, they develop a deeper comprehension of meaning and function of idioms in terms of actual use, thereby feeling more empowered to use idioms in their own output. Compared to previous research focusing mainly on lexical learning, the present study further revealed that Instagram Reels has positive effects on the acquisition of new idioms and also promote learners to produce idioms in authentic context.

Learning Affordances Are Accompanied by Learning Challenges

While Instagram Reels offers many affordances to the learning of English idioms, this study also uncovered several affordances that impede the effective use of the app as a standalone language learning tool. Participants reported challenges with figurative meaning, lack of explanation from content creators, ephemeral subtitles, and lack of immediate feedback. These difficulties demonstrate that exposure alone to real-language is not sufficient for effective language acquisition.

In terms of learning affordances, van Lier (2004) notes that opportunities for learning only become real opportunities when a learner perceives them and acts upon them successfully. In the present study, many of the opportunities presented by Instagram Reels were underutilized because participants did not have adequate explanation or opportunities to check their interpretations of the presented authentic language input. As a result, many learners turned to dictionaries, search engines, or other online resources in an attempt to ascertain the idiomatic meaning of these previously unknown expressions.

The issue with figurative language is also consistent with prior research, as idioms are recognized to be among the most challenging aspects of vocabulary in L2 learning due to the fact that the literal meanings of individual words cannot usually be deduced to yield an

idiomatic sense (Cooper, 1999; Liontas, 2002). Short videos, though they may introduce learners to many authentic examples of English idiomatic expressions, also offer limited time for explanation of their meanings in terms of denotation and connotation. Furthermore, learners may leave a short video clip unsure if their idiomatic interpretations are correct due to the lack of immediate feedback.

Therefore, in the context of English language learning, Instagram Reels is better seen as an auxiliary tool rather than a substitute for classroom instruction. In addition to its potential as an authentic source for authentic language input, its affordances should be harnessed by teachers to scaffold students in interpreting abstract meaning and confirming the interpretations and usage of idiomatic language.

D. CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to investigate the affordances and challenges EFL students encounter while learning English idioms with the aid of Instagram Reels. The results of the study showed that there were various affordances of Instagram Reels that facilitate idiom learning, including repetition of idioms, multimodal affordances for understanding idiomatic meaning, autonomy in learning, ease of access to learning, context-embedded language input, and opportunities for communication. These affordances helped EFL students learn English idioms beyond their formal training, facilitate learners' comprehension of idioms, and increase the productive knowledge of idioms in natural contexts.

Meanwhile, participants experienced some challenges such as, difficulties understanding idiomatic meaning, few explanations from content makers, subtitles disappearing very fast, and lack of direct feedback. This indicated that without guidance from others, Instagram Reels cannot adequately support self-directed learning of English idioms. The study contributes to the literature of social media-facilitated language learning with respect to Instagram Reels' function as an affordance-rich learning resource beyond simple vocabulary acquisition. The difference between this study and others on the issue of social media-facilitated learning, that the prior focused on students' motivation and vocab learning, whereas this study explains how combined repeated input, multimodal representations and context embedded language use facilitate the learning of idioms and moreover extending to productive use of the idioms on real contexts, closing the gap between receptive and productive idiomatic knowledge.

Furthermore, the findings have practical pedagogical implications. Instagram Reels can be used as a complementary tool to classroom instruction to increase students' input with authentic English language, enriching the lessons focusing on figurative language. It is important for teachers to stimulate students to use social media critically while giving directions on the meaning of challenging idiomatic expression. Likewise, the creators of content can give more detailed explanations to their videos for more effective idiomatic learning.

Finally, one limitation of this study is the small size of the sample and its use of only one institution, thus limiting the generalization of the findings to other EFL students from other institutions. Further research should involve learners from different institutional backgrounds and use different approaches (longitudinal designs or mixed-methods designs) to probe the



relationship between learners' experiences of using Instagram Reels to learn English idioms and actual language learning performance.

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