

ENHANCING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH THE INTEGRATION OF VIRTUAL REALITY (VR): A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION

Lutin Nur Rohmi Rahayu

Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah Misbahudin Ahmad. E-mail: luthiennur@gmail.com

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A B S T R A C T

The rapid evolution of educational technology has introduced immersive tools such as Virtual Reality (VR), which can reshape language learning experiences. This qualitative study investigates how VR integration influences English learning among university students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The research focuses on learners' and instructors' perspectives, their engagement with VR, and the pedagogical implications of its use. Data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations at a private university in Indonesia. Thematic analysis revealed that VR contributes to increased motivation, authentic exposure to language use, and improved communicative confidence. Nonetheless, participants encountered challenges such as limited technical infrastructure and insufficient institutional support. The study concludes that VR can substantially enrich English learning when aligned with appropriate pedagogical planning and professional development for educators.

INTRODUCTION

The integration of technology in education has become a defining characteristic of modern learning environments. Within the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), innovations such as Virtual Reality (VR) have provided new opportunities to bridge the gap between classroom learning and authentic communication. Traditional EFL classrooms often face limitations in offering genuine contexts for language use. VR, by contrast, provides simulated, interactive environments that allow students to experience real-life communicative situations (Merchant et al., 2014).

In recent decades, immersive learning has attracted researchers' attention because it enables experiential and contextual learning (Kolb, 1984). Through VR, learners can engage with virtual spaces—such as restaurants, airports, or academic conferences—where English is used naturally. This approach fosters not only linguistic development but also intercultural understanding and pragmatic awareness.

The growing emphasis on digital transformation in higher education, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, has encouraged institutions to incorporate new

technologies into their curricula. However, implementing VR in developing contexts such as Indonesia remains challenging due to limited facilities, training, and policy guidance (Rahimi & Fathi, 2021).

This study aims to explore how VR supports English learning in a university EFL program. The research specifically investigates (1) learners' perceptions of VR-assisted learning, (2) the pedagogical benefits observed, and (3) the practical challenges faced by instructors and students. The results provide insights for educators and policymakers who seek to design more interactive, learner-centered environments using immersive technologies.

METHOD

A qualitative descriptive design was adopted to capture participants' experiences and attitudes toward VR integration in English classes. This approach allowed for in-depth exploration of the meanings participants attach to their learning experiences rather than focusing on measurable variables (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the data revealed four dominant themes related to the implementation of VR in English learning: (1) heightened motivation and engagement, (2) authentic contextual learning, (3) enhanced communicative confidence, and (4) obstacles in technology and pedagogy.

Heightened Motivation and Engagement

Students consistently described VR as stimulating and enjoyable. They appreciated being "transported" into interactive scenarios that made learning English feel meaningful. One student shared, "When I practice English in a virtual market or café, it feels real and fun, not just like doing class tasks." Lecturers confirmed that VR sessions generated higher levels of participation and reduced classroom passivity.

Authentic Contextual Learning

The immersive nature of VR exposed students to realistic communicative contexts. Learners engaged in simulated travel, professional interviews, and social interactions with virtual avatars. Such activities allowed them to apply vocabulary, grammar, and expressions in contextually rich situations, promoting deeper understanding of language functions and cultural subtleties.

Enhanced Communicative Confidence

Students noted that VR reduced their anxiety and fear of speaking English. Many felt that practicing in a virtual space allowed them to make mistakes without embarrassment. This safe environment built self-assurance and willingness to communicate—an essential component in second language acquisition (Makransky & Lilleholt, 2018).

Technological and Pedagogical Challenges

Despite its advantages, participants encountered limitations. Technical issues such as unstable internet connections and device compatibility hindered smooth implementation. Lecturers also highlighted the lack of institutional resources and structured training for designing VR-based instruction. Some students experienced dizziness during longer sessions, suggesting the need for ergonomic and health considerations in class planning.

Discussion

The findings emphasize that VR can reshape English learning into an interactive and experiential process. The heightened motivation observed aligns with constructivist theories, which argue that learners acquire knowledge actively through experience and interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). VR supports this process by creating meaningful environments that encourage exploration and collaboration.

Authenticity emerged as a major pedagogical benefit. By simulating real-world contexts, VR bridges the gap between classroom content and actual language use. This finding echoes Peixoto et al. (2019), who found that immersive environments help learners develop pragmatic competence and cultural understanding.

Additionally, increased confidence in communication corroborates earlier studies (Li & Wong, 2021), suggesting that virtual spaces lower affective barriers such as anxiety. When learners feel psychologically safe, they are more willing to experiment with new language forms and engage in conversation.

However, consistent with Rahimi and Fathi (2021), the research also highlights institutional and technical constraints. Without sufficient training, educators may fail to maximize VR's pedagogical potential. Infrastructure investment and continuous professional development are therefore essential for sustainability.

While VR should not replace traditional classroom practices, it can effectively complement them by providing experiential extensions of lesson content. For example, after a grammar or vocabulary lesson, students might explore a virtual city to use the target language in action. Such synergy fosters deeper retention and meaningful learning.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative exploration confirms that Virtual Reality can serve as a transformative tool for university-level English instruction. It nurtures motivation, provides authentic exposure to language use, and strengthens communicative confidence. Nevertheless, its effectiveness depends on appropriate pedagogical frameworks, institutional readiness, and teacher competence.

To harness VR's full potential, higher education institutions should develop policies supporting digital innovation, provide funding for technological facilities, and include VR pedagogy in teacher training programs. Future studies may explore the long-term impact of VR on learners' proficiency and investigate hybrid models that combine VR with Augmented Reality (AR) and Artificial Intelligence (AI).

In conclusion, VR integration represents not just a technological enhancement but a pedagogical shift toward experiential, student-centered, and contextually rich English learning.

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