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LIVING ENGLISH THROUGH K-POP: AN IPA STUDY OF INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS' ACQUISITION EXPERIENCES

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ABSTRAK

Perkembangan media digital dan komunitas fandom daring telah menciptakan ruang informal baru bagi pembelajar EFL Indonesia untuk menemukan dan menggunakan bahasa Inggris di luar pembelajaran kelas formal. K-Pop fandom merupakan salah satu ruang tersebut, tempat penggemar dari berbagai latar belakang bahasa berkomunikasi terutama dalam bahasa Inggris melalui platform seperti TikTok, Instagram, X, dan Weverse. Namun, masih sedikit yang diketahui mengenai jenis input bahasa Inggris yang tersedia melalui interaksi komunikatif tersebut, maupun bagaimana pembelajar EFL Indonesia memaknai pengalaman pemerolehan bahasa mereka dalam konteks informal ini. Penelitian ini menjawab dua pertanyaan: (1) jenis input bahasa apa yang ditemukan dalam interaksi komunikatif K-Pop fandom, dan (2) bagaimana pembelajar EFL Indonesia mempersepsikan pengalaman pemerolehan bahasa Inggris mereka melalui praktik K-Pop fandom. Enam belas penggemar K-Pop Indonesia dengan pengalaman fandom lima hingga sepuluh tahun dan variasi tingkat keterlibatan komunikatif menjadi partisipan. Data diperoleh dari dokumentasi interaksi media sosial fandom dan wawancara semi-terstruktur yang dianalisis menggunakan Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Hasil menunjukkan bahwa input fandom bersifat berlapis dan multimodal, mencakup fitur leksikal, pragmatik, wacana, dan multimodal yang umumnya muncul bersamaan. Pengalaman hidup pembelajar direpresentasikan melalui lima tema pengalaman kelompok: pergeseran non-linear dari kecemasan menuju kepercayaan diri, motivasi parasosial yang terdiferensiasi, variasi tingkat partisipasi sosial, kontras fungsional antara penggunaan bahasa berbasis fandom dan kelas formal, serta rekonstruksi identitas diri sebagai pengguna bahasa Inggris yang bersifat parsial dan spesifik ranah. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa K-Pop fandom berfungsi sebagai ruang pemerolehan bahasa Inggris informal yang kaya namun terdiferensiasi, dan implikasinya bagi pendidik adalah bahwa teks autentik berbasis fandom dapat diintegrasikan sebagai bahan ajar pelengkap sambil tetap menyediakan latihan berbicara terstruktur yang tidak dapat dipenuhi oleh keterlibatan fandom semata.

Kata Kunci: *Input bahasa, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, K-Pop fandom, pembelajaran bahasa Inggris digital informal, pembelajar EFL.*

ABSTRACT

The growth of digital media and online fan communities has opened informal spaces in which Indonesian EFL learners encounter and use English outside formal classroom instruction. K-Pop fandom is one such space, where fans of diverse linguistic backgrounds communicate largely in English through platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, X, and Weverse. However, little is known about the specific kind of English input this communicative interaction provides, or about how Indonesian EFL learners themselves make sense of their acquisition experiences within this informal context. This study addressed two research questions: (1) what kind of

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language input is found in K-Pop fandom communicative interaction, and (2) how do Indonesian EFL learners perceive their English acquisition experiences through K-Pop fandom practices. Sixteen Indonesian K-Pop fans with five to ten years of fandom involvement and varying levels of communicative activity participated. Data were drawn from documentation of fandom social media interaction across multiple platforms and from semi-structured interviews analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results show that fandom input is layered and multimodal, combining lexical, pragmatic, discourse-level, and multimodal features that typically co-occur. Learners' lived experiences were represented by five group experiential themes: a non-linear shift from anxiety toward confidence, differentiated parasocial motivation, varying degrees of social participation, a perceived functional contrast between fandom-based and classroom-based language use, and a partial, domain-specific reconstruction of self-identity as an English user. These findings suggest that K-Pop fandom functions as a rich but internally differentiated informal English acquisition space, with practical implications for educators who may integrate authentic fan-generated texts as supplementary material while continuing to provide structured speaking practice that fandom-based exposure does not reliably supply.

Keywords: *EFL learners, informal digital learning of English, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, K-Pop fandom, language input.*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of social media networks and participatory digital culture has significantly redefined the ecology of English language learning, establishing vast virtual spaces where learners encounter and produce language autonomously outside formal instructional walls. This transformative educational phenomenon is conceptually anchored in the framework of Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), which emphasizes learner-directed, interest-driven communicative engagement across varied digital environments (Lee & Dressman, 2018; Lee & Drajati, 2019). Within this expanding global landscape, international popular culture communities—most notably K-Pop fandoms—have emerged as prominent linguistic contact zones where transnational audiences congregate, interact, and negotiate socio-cultural meanings using English as an authentic *lingua franca* (Azzahrah et al., 2022; Malik & Haidar, 2020). For millions of Indonesian EFL learners who actively maintain daily fandom practices over multiple years, these digital networks provide continuous linguistic immersion, rich auditory-textual exposure, and immediate communicative opportunities that formal curricula often fail to deliver.

In the Indonesian educational context, prior empirical studies have consistently documented the positive contributions of K-Pop fan activities toward individual language attitudes, incidental vocabulary accumulation, and communicative self-assurance (Amalia, 2023; Anisa et al., 2024; Fatika & Wahyuningsih, 2024). Previous scholarly investigations have explored varied specialized fandom activities, ranging from fictional character role-playing on social microblogging platforms (Purwaningtyas & Oktara, 2023; Sabillah et al., 2025), hybrid multilingual code-mixing practices (Munawaro et al., 2025; Valerio-Ramos & Hernández-López, 2023), to the collaborative authoring of English fanfiction texts (Rahayu et al., 2024). Furthermore, contemporary investigations into parasocial interaction have illustrated that sustained emotional bonding toward media celebrities strongly stimulates intrinsic developmental drives and linguistic curiosity among adolescent learners (Beautemps & Bresges, 2022). Nevertheless, the broader literature continues to demonstrate notable

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limitations in explaining how diverse modalities of language input operate collectively within these interactive online settings.

Despite the growing volume of literature addressing digital fan practices, two critical empirical gaps persist in current second language acquisition scholarship. First, existing empirical studies predominantly conceptualize fandom participation as a singular, uniform activity, often omitting detailed descriptive mapping regarding the structural and functional types of English input that naturally circulate across these multimodal fan platforms. Second, very few empirical investigations have thoroughly examined how Indonesian EFL learners phenomenologically perceive, interpret, and make sense of their internal cognitive-affective transformations throughout years of self-directed language acquisition in fandom spaces. Exploring this subjective dimension is essential because, as established by modern input and interaction paradigms, the developmental value of linguistic exposure is profoundly mediated by how learners cognitively process, interpret, and emotionally respond to communicative events (Krashen, 2020; Long, 2020). Understanding these lived perceptual experiences provides crucial pedagogical insights into how informal digital interactions bridge affective barriers that commonly hinder classroom performance.

To address these dual empirical voids, this study adopts a multi-method qualitative design that synthesizes digital artefact documentation with in-depth phenomenological exploration. The linguistic input circulating within online K-Pop communicative spaces was documented and categorized through systematic qualitative content analysis across semantic, pragmatic, and visual dimensions. Concurrently, the lived acquisition trajectories of sixteen experienced Indonesian fan participants were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to capture their personal interpretations of communicative confidence, parasocial motivation, and identity development (Smith et al., 2022). Specifically, this research addresses two central inquiries: (1) what kinds of language input are present within the communicative interactions of K-Pop fandom social media, and (2) how do Indonesian EFL learners subjectively perceive and interpret their English acquisition experiences through sustained K-Pop fandom practices?

RESEARCH METHOD

This investigation employed a qualitative multi-method research design, combining documentary content analysis with Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to capture both the objective characteristics of linguistic input and the subjective depth of learners' lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). Qualitative documentary analysis was applied to examine linguistic artifacts extracted from public fan exchanges, whereas IPA was selected for interview interpretation due to its explicit idiographic commitment and double-hermeneutic methodology, wherein the researcher seeks to make sense of the participant making sense of their personal social world. The research was carried out within digital online environments connecting participants across several geographical regions in Java and South Kalimantan, Indonesia, spanning from October 2025 to July 2026.

The participants in this study comprised 16 Indonesian EFL learners (aged 18–25 years) who had maintained active involvement in K-Pop fandom activities for five to ten years. Selection was conducted through purposive snowball sampling to recruit individuals exhibiting varied communicative habits, ranging from highly expressive, reciprocal digital posters to predominantly receptive, silent readers. The sample size aligned with the established methodological conventions of IPA, which prioritize a small, relatively homogeneous purposive sample to facilitate detailed idiographic examination. Data collection integrated two

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primary empirical techniques: semi-structured in-depth online interviews conducted via virtual conferencing software (lasting 20 to 35 minutes per session) and documentary compilation of naturalistic digital artifacts, including screenshots of participants' public comments, replies, private messages, and multimedia fan posts on *TikTok*, *Instagram*, *X*, and *Weverse*.

Data processing followed the rigorous six-stage procedural framework for IPA proposed by Smith et al. (2022), consisting of verbatim transcription, close iterative reading, exploratory linguistic and conceptual annotation, emergent theme formulation, case-by-case clustering, and cross-case pattern synthesis. In parallel, collected textual artifacts were classified along functional dimensions of lexical variation, pragmatic speech acts, and multimodal semiotics. Methodological trustworthiness was maintained by fulfilling Guba's evaluative criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), incorporating source triangulation between interview narratives and recorded social media posts, comprehensive audit trail documentation, reflexive researcher journaling, and direct member-checking sessions with participants to confirm interpretive accuracy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The empirical data collected from artifact documentation and in-depth interviews revealed a clear typology of digital engagement patterns among the sixteen Indonesian K-Pop fans. Participants demonstrated distinct interactional habits, varying along an expressive continuum that ranged from continuous conversational production to reflective, observational reading. These communicative orientations influenced the frequency with which learners tested their linguistic hypotheses and engaged with global interlocutors online. To provide a clear systemic overview of the research subjects' interactional profiles prior to examining specific linguistic features and lived experiences, the engagement patterns and participant distributions are displayed in the following table.

Table 1. Overview of Participants' Engagement Patterns and Interactional Characteristics

Engagement Pattern	Descriptive Modality of Digital Participation	Research Participants
Active Reciprocal Engagement	Proactively and consistently produces English through public commenting, conversational replying, live streaming chats, and collaborative fan projects.	P1 (Nita), P2 (Syief), P3 (Shof), P4 (Tasyi), P5 (Devi), P6 (Luvi)
Selective/Occasional Engagement	Produces English contextually during high-stakes fandom events such as album comebacks, streaming goals, or focused peer discussions.	P7 (Nais), P8 (Auryn), P9 (Ai), P10 (Sasa), P11 (Riri)
Receptive-Oriented Engagement	Focuses predominantly on observing transnational fan discussions, consuming translated multimedia, and reading English updates with minimal active output.	P12 (Am), P13 (Nanad), P14 (Aniri), P15 (Ami), P16 (Is)

Note. Categorized based on interview self-reports and empirical verification of digital artifacts collected during fieldwork.

As documented in Table 1, the research cohort reflected three distinguishable engagement categories that shaped their exposure to and usage of the target language. The

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active reciprocal group demonstrated high self-efficacy by using English to debate, organize voting, and converse with foreign fans, whereas the receptive group primarily utilized English as a cognitive processing bridge to consume multimedia content. The middle group exhibited strategic communication, opting to produce English only when driven by urgent fandom goals. These divergent interactional dynamics provided the practical context through which diverse forms of language input were received and negotiated by the learners.

Documentary analysis of the digital artifacts confirmed that the linguistic input accessible within K-Pop social spaces is multi-layered, authentic, and multimodal, encompassing four co-occurring dimensions. First, lexical input provided exposure to contemporary English slang (*cooked*, *corny*, *lit*, *slay*), alongside specialized fandom jargon (*bias*, *stan*, *comeback*, *want to sell*, *scammer*) that appeared repeatedly across high-interest contexts. Tasyi (P4) noted: *"The terms I remember most vividly from transactions are want to sell, want to buy, and scammer,"* while Nita (P1) highlighted: *"I frequently encounter English slang words like bop, fire, and slay that are never taught in school textbooks."* Second, pragmatic input embodied expressive speech acts, including messages of admiration (*"I'm proud of you, Nunu"*), collective directives (*"Keep streaming ARMY!"*), and face-saving apologies used when messaging idols (*"I'm not very good at English so I use translate, hope you understand"*).

Third, discourse-level input demonstrated transnational code-mixing and digital turn-taking, wherein Indonesian and English were combined smoothly (*"Definisi the real boyfriend coded"*), accompanied by unglossed Korean honorifics (*maknae*, *sunbaenim*). Fourth, multimodal input integrated typographical text with emotive semiotic markers, where emojis served as contextual intensifiers (e.g., using the crying emoji 😭 to amplify joy) and communal identity emblems (such as 💜 for BTS fans). The four input dimensions rarely operated in isolation; rather, they converged within single discussion threads, presenting learners with rich, holistic communicative models.

Following the idiographic and cross-case analysis of interview transcripts, the lived experiences of Indonesian EFL learners were organized into five group experiential themes. The first theme, moving from anxiety toward confidence through an uneven trajectory, captured how participants transitioned from translation dependence to communicative autonomy. Syief (P2) recounted his cognitive evolution: *"When I first joined, I had to open Google Translate every single minute because I was terrified of making grammatical mistakes, but gradually I gathered the courage to express my own thoughts directly."* Conversely, Aniri (P14) described enduring apprehension: *"I still feel intimidated and rarely comment because I worry that native speakers might judge my grammar."*

The second theme highlighted affective and parasocial engagement as a potent motivational force that sustained long-term language practice. Ami (P15) explained: *"My childhood dream was to master English specifically so that if I ever attended an international fan meeting in South Korea, I could speak directly to my favorite members without barriers."* The third theme reflected participants' varying degrees of social participation, demonstrating that even receptive engagement fostered meaningful incidental acquisition. Is (P16) remarked: *"When you encounter new expressions unintentionally while scrolling through fan discussions, your curiosity pushes you to look up the definitions, and those words stick in your memory much longer than classroom vocabulary lists."*

The fourth theme captured a sharp functional contrast between the low-stakes environment of fandom platforms and the evaluative atmosphere of formal classrooms. Syief (P2) observed: *"In the fandom space, we communicate casually without anxiety because the*

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ultimate goal is mutual understanding, whereas in the classroom, the fear of making errors and receiving low grades often paralyzes our willingness to speak." Finally, the fifth theme revealed that participants' reconstruction of their self-identity as competent English users remained domain-specific, enhancing their digital written literacy while leaving spoken conversational fluency largely unaffected. Ami (P15) admitted: *"In digital comment sections and group chats, I feel completely fluent and confident, but the moment I have to speak English face-to-face, I freeze up completely because I lack real-time oral practice."*

Discussion

The multi-layered nature of linguistic input observed in K-Pop digital spaces confirms that contemporary informal language learning is inherently multimodal and contextually distributed. When learners navigate fan interactions on *TikTok*, *Instagram*, and *X*, they are exposed to complex semiotic systems where written vocabulary, visual emblems, and pragmatic speech acts mutually reinforce communicative intent (Hafner et al., 2015). This incidental exposure to diverse lexical items across varied communicative contexts supports lexical retention and cognitive depth far more effectively than isolated memorization lists (Frances et al., 2020; Rezai et al., 2024). The pervasive occurrence of bilingual code-mixing and digital abbreviations reflects the authentic sociolinguistic realities of international online communication, aligning with recent empirical observations of participatory fan cultures (Munawaro et al., 2025; Valerio-Ramos & Hernández-López, 2023).

From a phenomenological perspective, the five experiential themes demonstrate that the linguistic utility of digital input is heavily mediated by individual affective investment, active interaction, and personal communicative histories. The shift from foreign language anxiety to digital communicative confidence reported by active participants illustrates that low-pressure online environments significantly reduce affective barriers, thereby fostering a robust willingness to communicate (Lee & Drajati, 2019; MacIntyre et al., 1998). This observed developmental progression aligns with Krashen's (2020) updated affective filter formulations and Long's (2020) interaction hypothesis, which emphasize that comprehensible input yields optimal developmental value when learners actively negotiate meaning in emotionally supportive settings. The parasocial bonds formed between fans and global idols serve as a durable affective catalyst, driving learners to invest cognitive effort in self-directed translation and communicative composition (Beautemps & Bresges, 2022). Such fan-driven practices thereby position digital spaces not merely as sources of linguistic input but as sites of identity performance in which learners negotiate their evolving selves through transcultural authoring and community participation (B et al., 2021; Han, 2021; Shafirova, 2020; Shafirova et al., 2020; Vázquez-Calvo, 2020; Vázquez-Calvo & Thorne, 2022).

However, the findings clearly indicate that informal digital learning spaces cannot serve as a complete substitute for formal instructional environments. While K-Pop fandom interactions provide extensive reading input and asynchronous written practice, they provide minimal opportunities for real-time oral production and systematic syntactic feedback. Consequently, learners develop a fragmented linguistic identity: they perceive themselves as highly literate and confident digital communicators, yet remain anxious and hesitant during spontaneous face-to-face spoken interactions. This domain-specific competence underscores the functional complementarity between informal digital learning and formal classroom teaching. Informal fandom engagement fosters communicative courage, cultural motivation, and contemporary lexical acquisition, whereas formal classroom instruction remains essential for developing grammatical precision, formal academic registers, and structured oral discourse.

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CONCLUSION

This study concludes that online K-Pop fandom spaces provide Indonesian EFL learners with an authentic, multi-layered linguistic environment encompassing contemporary informal vocabulary, expressive pragmatic speech acts, transnational code-mixed discourses, and multimodal semiotic codes. The lived experiences of fan learners reveal that sustained informal engagement facilitates a meaningful, albeit non-linear, reduction in language anxiety and fosters communicative confidence within written digital settings. Furthermore, this acquisition trajectory is intrinsically driven by parasocial emotional connections and informal peer interaction, creating a functional contrast with formal classroom settings where evaluative pressure frequently constrains active participation. Nevertheless, because communicative activities in fandom spaces are predominantly text-based and asynchronous, the resulting linguistic identity reconstruction remains domain-specific, leaving spontaneous spoken conversational competence largely undeveloped.

These findings suggest that secondary and tertiary EFL educators should strategically acknowledge and utilize the linguistic affordances of participatory fan cultures. Teachers can bridge informal and formal learning by incorporating authentic fan-generated texts, contemporary digital idioms, and multimodal discourse analysis into reading and writing instructional tasks. Concurrently, formal classroom sessions must be deliberately optimized to provide structured speaking opportunities, phonological training, and communicative tasks that digital fandom environments fail to supply. For future researchers, it is recommended to conduct longitudinal investigations employing mixed-method designs to track the quantitative development of learners' communicative proficiency over time, as well as comparative analyses across different digital pop-culture domains.

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