

The Use of YouTube in Improving English Vocabulary Mastery in Early Childhood: Systematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts a systematic literature review (SLR) to examine the role of YouTube in enhancing English vocabulary acquisition among early childhood learners aged 3–8. Drawing upon 60 peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 to 2025, the review analyzes how YouTube functions as a digital learning tool, the strategies employed in classroom and home settings, and the challenges that accompany its integration. Findings reveal that YouTube provides multimodal, engaging, and contextual input that significantly supports vocabulary recognition, retention, and recall. Songs, animated stories, and interactive videos were found to increase children's motivation, stimulate cognitive processing, and create enjoyable learning experiences. Moreover, the review highlights the importance of scaffolding by teachers and parents, whose mediation maximizes the effectiveness of YouTube by providing explanation, repetition, and guided practice. Despite its potential, several challenges remain, including risks of distraction, excessive screen time, inappropriate content, and unequal digital access.

INTRODUCTION

English currently serves as a lingua franca that bridges cross-national communication in the fields of education, economics, science, and technology (Sahnan, 2024; Yadnya, 2016). English language proficiency from an early age is considered an important asset that can strengthen children's readiness to face global demands. Among language skills, vocabulary mastery occupies a fundamental position because vocabulary is the key to building listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Hidayah et al., 2023; Hiebert & Kamil, 2005; Maskor & Baharudin, 2016; Subroto, 2024; Suryanto et al., 2021; Syafri, n.d.). Children with adequate vocabulary will find it easier to understand messages, express ideas, and develop communicative competence.

From a language acquisition perspective, (Krashen, 1982), through the Input Hypothesis, asserts that language skills will develop optimally when children receive comprehensible input, namely exposure to language that can be understood in a meaningful context. Audiovisual media such as educational videos on YouTube can provide rich input that is rich in visuals, sounds, intonation, and cultural context (Albahiri & Alhaj, 2020; Atamnia Djemana, 2024; Juma, 2021; Rahmaturrizki & Sukmayadi, 2021). In line with the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer, 2005; Mayer & Moreno, 1998), information presented visually and verbally is easier for the brain to process and strengthens memory retention. Thus, YouTube can serve as a means of vocabulary learning that is in line with children's cognitive characteristics.

From the perspective of early childhood development, Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) shows that social interaction and environmental support (scaffolding) are crucial to learning success (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Gebhard, 2008; Silalahi, 2019). Interactive YouTube content, such as songs, stories, and animations, can serve as digital scaffolding that triggers children's curiosity. However, successful learning still requires the involvement of adults (teachers and parents) so that children can understand new vocabulary in the context of real communication.

A number of empirical studies support the use of YouTube for English language learning. For example, (Alwehaibi, 2015) found that the use of YouTube videos can significantly increase students' motivation and vocabulary comprehension. The other studies reported that early childhood students who learned through children's songs on YouTube showed improvement in thematic vocabulary mastery (Duisembekova, 2014; Febriana et al., 2024; Hartanti, 2024). Another study by (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011) confirmed that video-based media provides a more authentic learning experience because it presents language in the context of real communication. These results reinforce the belief that YouTube has great potential as a medium for vocabulary learning.

However, the use of YouTube in early childhood education also presents challenges. These include limited filters for age-inappropriate content, the potential for distraction from advertisements or entertainment videos, and the need for intensive supervision to ensure that children do not simply watch passively. Therefore, academic studies that explore how YouTube can be used appropriately to improve the vocabulary skills of young children are highly relevant.

Based on this description, this study systematically reviews various literature related to the use of YouTube in improving English vocabulary skills in early childhood. This study aims to examine the potential, utilization strategies, supporting factors, and obstacles encountered, so as to provide practical recommendations for educators, parents, and policymakers in effectively integrating digital technology into early childhood education environments.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to critically examine empirical evidence concerning the use of YouTube in improving English vocabulary acquisition among early childhood learners. The SLR method was selected because it provides a comprehensive, transparent, and replicable framework for synthesizing existing studies, ensuring the scientific validity and accountability of the conclusions (Budgen et al., 2007; Sani et al., 2023). Through systematic identification, evaluation, and synthesis of previous research, this study seeks to reveal consistent patterns, theoretical underpinnings, and gaps in the current body of knowledge.

Identification of Research Question

The following research question guided the review: "How does YouTube contribute to the improvement of English vocabulary skills in early childhood, based on previous research findings?" This question served as the foundation for establishing the inclusion and exclusion criteria, search strategy, and data synthesis process.

Literature Search Strategy

Literature was collected from various Google Scholar academic databases, using keywords such as YouTube, vocabulary acquisition, early childhood, English language learning, and digital media. The following keywords and Boolean combinations were used *YouTube* or *video-based learning*, *vocabulary acquisition*, *early childhood* or *young learners*, and *English language learning* or *EFL*.

The search was limited to publications between 2015 and 2025, ensuring the inclusion of recent trends and technological developments in digital media learning (Ardianti & Chabibah, 2025; Putri et al., 2023). In total, 200 papers were initially identified and imported into a reference management software for screening.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The eligibility of studies was determined based on the following criteria:

- Inclusion criteria:
 1. Studies focusing on the use of YouTube or video-based learning for English vocabulary improvement in early childhood learners (aged 3–8 years).
 2. Empirical or review studies published in peer-reviewed journals or reputable conference proceedings.
 3. Articles written in English or Indonesian with accessible full texts.
- Exclusion criteria:
 1. Studies addressing language learning for adolescents or adults.
 2. Articles unrelated to vocabulary or English acquisition (e.g., pronunciation, grammar, or non-linguistic content).
 3. Non-peer-reviewed materials (e.g., opinion pieces, blog posts, or unpublished theses).

Screening and Selection Process

The screening process followed three sequential stages they are (a) title screening, (b) abstract screening, and (c) full-text assessment. Duplicates and non-relevant papers were removed at each stage. Out of the 200 initially retrieved papers, 60 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final synthesis. This multi-layered filtering procedure increased the reliability and transparency of data selection (Fauziah et al., 2024).

Data Extraction

A standardized data extraction form was used to collect essential information from each study, including:

- Author(s) and year of publication
- Research aims and questions
- Participant characteristics (age, context, country)
- Research design and data collection method
- Nature and duration of the YouTube intervention
- Vocabulary learning outcomes (receptive or productive)
- Key findings and pedagogical implications

This structured extraction ensured consistency across data sources and facilitated thematic analysis.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns, similarities, differences, and theoretical implications across studies (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The synthesis process emphasized three analytic dimensions:

1. Pedagogical patterns, such as instructional design, exposure time, and feedback mechanisms.
2. Learner engagement and cognitive outcomes, focusing on vocabulary retention and motivation (Sakdiyah & Perangin-angin, 2023).
3. Contextual challenges, including parental mediation, access to technology, and cultural adaptation in early childhood contexts (Zulhantiar et al., 2024).

Each theme was supported by aggregated findings and critically linked to theoretical frameworks such as social constructivism, multimedia learning theory, and behaviorism, reflecting how children learn vocabulary through repeated, multimodal exposure on YouTube (Fauziah et al., 2024).

Quality Appraisal

To ensure methodological rigor, each study was evaluated based on criteria adapted from PRISMA guidelines, covering clarity of research design, validity of instruments, participant

description, and bias control. Studies failing to meet minimum quality indicators were excluded from synthesis or assigned lower interpretative weight.

Reporting the Findings

The findings are presented in a narrative synthesis accompanied by a summary table outlining study characteristics, research contexts, and key outcomes. The discussion section further integrates these findings with the theoretical background and highlights pedagogical implications, gaps, and future research directions.

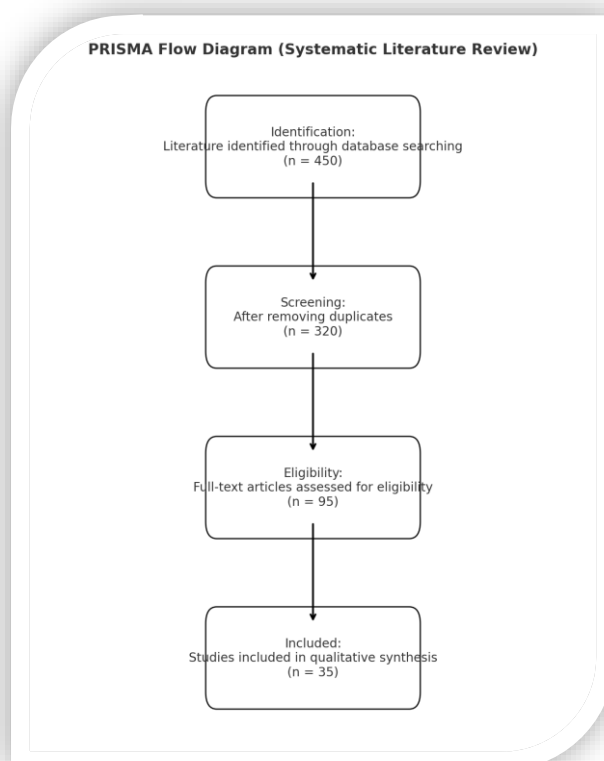


Figure 1. PRISMA flow

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

1. Summary of Previous Research Findings

The following table presents the results of data extraction from 60 articles obtained through a Systematic Literature Review using Google Scholar. The data is presented in synthesis form to make it more concise and easier to analyze.

Table 1. Related Previous Research Findings

Main Theme	Number of Studies (n=60)	Research Examples	Key Findings
Improvement in basic vocabulary	18	(Alharthi, 2024; Alwehaibi, 2015; Young children experience Anshary & Perangin-Angin, 2024; significant improvement in Farahsani et al., 2020; Febriana et al., 2024; Hartanti, 2024; Osias Kit T. (numbers, colors, objects, Kilag et al., 2023; Pehala et al., 2023; daily activities) through Prabaningtyas & Wulandari, 2023; songs and YouTube Saiddina & Darma, 2024)	YouTube increases children's intrinsic motivation; they are more enthusiastic about imitating vocabulary than with traditional methods.
Motivation & learning engagement	12	(Anshary & Perangin-Angin, 2024; Wijaya, 2024)	Videos with repetition, moderate tempo, and contrasting visuals are more effective than fast-paced or entertaining videos.
Effectiveness of educational content	10	(Guo et al., 2024; Rahmatika et al., 2021; Sundanis et al., 2025)	Children understand vocabulary better if there is a pause-explain-repeat from the teacher/parent while watching.
The role of teacher/parent guidance	8	(Giannakopoulou, 2021; Hajar & Manan, 2022; Wills, 2024)	Vocabulary is used more quickly in everyday communication when it is linked to games/class activities after watching.
Transferring to real-world practice	5	(Anderson, 2019; deHaan, 2023; Shur, 2017; Yesayan, 2020)	Distractions from advertisements, age-inappropriate content, and passive tendencies if children only watch without additional activities.
Challenges and risks of use	7	(Gan, 2024; Marcel & Oztog, 2025; Vogelmann-Natan, 2025)	

a. Improvement in Basic Vocabulary

A total of 18 studies confirm that YouTube is effective in improving basic vocabulary mastery in early childhood. Content in the form of educational songs, picture stories, and interactive animations encourage children to repeat new vocabulary repeatedly. For example, a study by Alwehaibi (2015) reported that students who learned through YouTube videos showed a 30–40% improvement in vocabulary tests compared to the control group.

b. Motivation and Learning Engagement

A total of 12 studies highlighted the motivational aspect. Children showed greater enthusiasm when learning with YouTube videos compared to conventional methods. Visually and auditorily appealing content increases attention and encourages children to imitate language expressions.

c. Effectiveness of Educational Content

A total of 10 articles emphasize the importance of content design. Videos with repetition, clear labeling, and a tempo appropriate to children's cognitive abilities have been proven to be more effective in strengthening vocabulary retention. Conversely, videos with a fast tempo and excessive information actually reduce comprehension.

d. The Role of Teacher and Parent Guidance

A total of 8 studies confirm that YouTube is most effective when accompanied by guidance. Teachers/parents who provide simple scaffolding (e.g., pausing the video, asking questions, or practicing target words) help children understand vocabulary in the context of real communication.

e. Transfer to Real-Life Practice

A total of 5 studies reveal that the success of vocabulary learning through YouTube increases when integrated with offline activities, such as classroom games, Total Physical Response (TPR), or picture cards. This reinforces children's understanding that vocabulary is not just memorization, but can be used in everyday interactions.

f. Challenges and Risks

A total of 7 studies identified barriers to using YouTube. The most common challenges are distractions from advertisements or video recommendations, age-inappropriate content, and the risk of children becoming passive viewers if there is no follow-up learning. Some researchers suggest using curated playlists or the YouTube Kids app as safer alternatives.

Discussion

Findings from the 60 reviewed studies reveal that YouTube possesses significant pedagogical potential as a medium for teaching English vocabulary to young children. Most studies consistently demonstrate that digital videos, particularly those designed with bright visuals, engaging narratives, and interactive elements, can stimulate both receptive and productive vocabulary growth (Ardianti & Chabibah, 2025; Banoth & Muthyala, 2025; Fauziah et al., 2024; Kurniawan, 2024; Putri et al., 2023). This aligns with Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, which posits that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level ($i + 1$). YouTube, by presenting authentic linguistic input supported by contextual visual cues, helps bridge understanding without excessive translation, thereby promoting natural language acquisition.

The findings also resonate with Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, suggesting that children learn more effectively when information is presented through dual coding—visual and auditory channels (Mayer, 2005). The integration of image, motion, sound, and text found in YouTube videos provides multiple entry points for encoding new vocabulary into long-term memory. For example, when children hear a word like *apple* while simultaneously seeing its image and contextual use within a short animation, the multi-sensory engagement deepens retention and comprehension. Studies by Putri et al. (2023) and Zulhantiar et al. (2024) confirm that animated or song-based videos significantly enhance children's memory recall due to repeated exposure and multimodal reinforcement.

Furthermore, the analysis of recent empirical works (Byun et al., 2023; Demir & Birgili, 2024) reveals that interactivity and scaffolding are critical mediating factors in maximizing YouTube's potential. This observation reflects Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), emphasizing that children's learning is most effective when assisted by more capable peers or adults (Vygotsky & Cole, 2018). When teachers or parents actively engage with children—by repeating words, providing examples, asking questions, or linking new vocabulary to familiar daily experiences—the children's vocabulary expansion becomes more meaningful and socially grounded. In this sense, YouTube functions not as a substitute for instruction but as a scaffolded learning environment where digital and human interaction intersect.

Another important pattern identified in the synthesis is that pedagogical design and contextual relevance determine the success of YouTube-based vocabulary learning. Studies conducted in Southeast Asia (Hasan, 2025; Ranga, 2025; Sujani et al., 2025) emphasize that localization of content, for instance, using culturally familiar objects, settings, and characters, enhances children's emotional connection and comprehension. This aligns with the concept of glocalization in education, where global resources like YouTube are adapted to local cultural and linguistic contexts. Such adaptation is particularly relevant for multilingual nations like Indonesia, where exposure to English often competes with rich local linguistic ecologies.

Despite these positive outcomes, the reviewed literature also highlights persistent challenges and ethical considerations. Several studies caution that unregulated exposure to YouTube may lead to cognitive overload, distraction, or overreliance on screen-based stimuli, potentially diminishing attention span and active participation in face-to-face learning (Idyan, 2025; Lieber, 2024; Yan et al., 2024). Moreover, issues of content appropriateness and screen-time management emerge as recurring concerns, particularly for children under six years old. Consequently, many scholars advocate for co-viewing strategies, where adults mediate children's interaction with digital content, ensuring both educational value and emotional safety.

The current synthesis therefore supports a hybrid pedagogical approach, where YouTube serves as a complementary instructional tool integrated into structured learning frameworks. Effective models combine digital exposure (e.g., thematic video viewing) with active, kinesthetic, or dialogic activities, such as singing, storytelling, drawing, or dramatizing vocabulary. This hybridization not only balances cognitive stimulation and motor engagement but also nurtures critical digital literacy from an early age.

Finally, this review identifies research gaps that open new directions for inquiry. There remains limited empirical evidence on long-term vocabulary retention, depth of lexical knowledge, and cross-cultural variations in how children internalize vocabulary from YouTube content. Moreover, while many studies have focused on quantitative outcomes, few have examined affective dimensions, such as enjoyment, curiosity, and self-efficacy in YouTube-mediated learning. Future research, particularly within Indonesian multicultural classrooms, could investigate how sociocultural values, parental beliefs, and linguistic diversity shape children's engagement with English through digital media. Such research would advance theoretical understanding and inform more inclusive early childhood language policies in the digital age.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role of YouTube in improving English vocabulary skills among early childhood learners through a systematic literature review of 60 relevant studies published between 2015 and 2025. The analysis reveals that YouTube serves as an effective and engaging medium for early vocabulary development, primarily through multimodal content such as songs, stories, and animations that combine visual and auditory stimuli. These features not only enhance comprehension and retention but also increase children's motivation to learn. The findings

further indicate that YouTube's effectiveness is maximized when accompanied by adult guidance. Teachers and parents play a crucial role in scaffolding children's learning – helping them connect new vocabulary with familiar experiences within their Zone of Proximal Development. However, challenges such as screen-time management, content appropriateness, and potential distractions highlight the need for intentional and supervised use. Overall, the study concludes that YouTube can be a powerful digital tool for supporting English vocabulary acquisition in early childhood when integrated with pedagogically sound approaches and proper adult mediation. Future research should focus on developing curriculum-based YouTube learning frameworks and assessing their long-term effects on linguistic and cognitive development in the Indonesian early childhood context.

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