



Embedding Local Tourism in Vocabulary Learning for EFL Students

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2

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Abstract

This study reports on the development of VOCAyo, a digital vocabulary learning application designed to address the specific communicative needs of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Takengon, Central Aceh, with a focus on the tourism sector. Employing a qualitative research design guided by the Dick and Carey instructional model, the study concentrated on needs analysis to align vocabulary learning with authentic local contexts. Data were gathered from 120 students, 12 English teachers, and 9 tourism practitioners through open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Findings revealed a persistent gap between classroom instruction and the linguistic demands of real-world tourism. Students and teachers identified the lack of contextualized vocabulary in existing materials, while practitioners emphasized recurring communicative situations requiring descriptive, hospitality, and transactional English. Despite these gaps, learners demonstrated strong motivation, high levels of smartphone ownership, and readiness to engage in digital learning. VOCAyo was therefore conceptualized as a mobile-friendly, offline-capable application integrating localized vocabulary, interactive exercises, and built-in assessment features to ensure objectivity and usability. The study contributes to the field of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) by embedding localized socio-economic content into digital resources, thereby bridging the divide between EFL instruction and the communicative realities of the tourism industry.

Keywords: *EFL, instructional design, local tourism, mobile-assisted language learning, vocabulary learning*

Introduction

In the era of globalization, English proficiency is increasingly regarded as an indispensable skill, particularly in regions where economic development is closely linked with international engagement. Among the four macro skills, vocabulary has been consistently highlighted as the foundation of communicative competence. As Nation (2013) asserts, vocabulary is not just one component of language but the very basis of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as learners require sufficient lexical knowledge to decode meaning and to construct messages effectively (Monica et al., 2022). Schmitt (2020) further emphasizes that vocabulary learning is incremental and context-dependent, requiring repeated encounters in authentic settings for words to be truly acquired. Without adequate lexical resources, students may memorize lists of words for examinations but remain unable to engage meaningfully in real communication. This tension between rote memorization and functional use is especially visible in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts such as Indonesia. The Indonesian case illustrates broader global patterns while revealing specific local challenges (Taufik et al., 2021). International assessments such as the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI, 2023) consistently place Indonesia at a “low proficiency” level compared to regional neighbors like Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines. A persistent weakness lies in vocabulary mastery and the ability to transfer classroom learning into communicative practice. Richards and Renandya (2002) observe that EFL instruction across Asia often suffers from decontextualized syllabi, where vocabulary and grammar are taught abstractly, without attention to the sociocultural realities students inhabit. In Indonesia, these patterns have been repeatedly documented: textbooks tend to emphasize generic themes such as “school routines,” “shopping,” or “hobbies,” while neglecting contextually meaningful domains such as tourism, hospitality, or local livelihoods. As a result, students can recite sample dialogues yet struggle when confronted with real-life interactions, particularly with foreign visitors (Sari & Setiawan, 2023).

The local context of Takengon in Central Aceh provides a vivid illustration of this problem while also pointing to possible solutions. Takengon is renowned for its natural and cultural assets, including Lake Lut Tawar and the globally recognized Gayo coffee. Tourism has become a significant contributor to the local economy, with increasing flows of domestic and international visitors (Darmawati, 2018). For young people in Takengon, English is not only an academic subject but also a tool for economic participation, particularly in guiding, hospitality, and small business interactions. Yet, despite this socio-economic relevance, the English taught in local schools remains largely detached from these realities (Dasril et al., 2024). Students may learn how to describe “a library” or “a playground,” but rarely how to explain the process of coffee cultivation, give directions to Lake Lut Tawar, or narrate a Gayo cultural tradition. This misalignment creates a gap between education and the labor market, a gap that vocabulary-focused interventions can help to bridge (Kurniawan, 2022). Theoretical perspectives on vocabulary learning highlight the importance of contextualization, authenticity, and multimodality. Nation (2013) proposes a “four strands” model—meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency development—which together ensure balanced lexical growth. However, in EFL settings like Takengon, the strands are often skewed toward language-focused



learning, with insufficient opportunities for authentic input and output. Schmitt (2020) similarly argues that vocabulary must be situated within discourse communities to be retained; learning a word in isolation is far less effective than encountering it within meaningful tasks. Digital technologies, particularly mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), offer new opportunities to address this imbalance (Syahputri et al., 2024). As Stockwell (2010) notes, mobile devices enable “anytime, anywhere” learning, allowing students to engage with language beyond the classroom. Godwin-Jones (2017) adds that mobile tools are especially powerful when they incorporate localized content, personalization, and interactivity.

Several empirical studies support the effectiveness of digital and contextualized approaches. Azar and Nasiri (2014) found that mobile-based vocabulary exercises improved learner autonomy and long-term retention. Chen and Hsu (2020), working with Taiwanese students, showed that gamified vocabulary apps enhanced motivation and performance, provided that scaffolding was built in. In the Indonesian context, Fitriani et al. (2019) reported that tools like Quizlet increased vocabulary recall, though without strong cultural anchoring, the transfer to authentic use remained limited. Setiawan and Sulistyono (2021) piloted a local vocabulary game and found that contextualized scenarios improved learner engagement. Collectively, these studies point to two important principles: first, digital media can facilitate vocabulary growth, and second, contextual relevance is essential for sustained impact. It is at this intersection of digital innovation and contextualized content that the present study is situated. By embedding local tourism scenarios into a mobile vocabulary learning application, this study seeks to align language instruction with the socio-economic realities of Takengon. The project, titled VOCAyo, integrates vocabulary items derived from authentic communicative situations—guiding, hospitality, and transactions—into interactive mobile tasks. In doing so, it responds directly to the needs of students, teachers, and tourism practitioners who consistently identified a lack of contextualized vocabulary as a barrier to effective communication. The name itself, VOCAyo, combines “vocabulary” and “Gayo,” symbolizing the fusion of linguistic development with local identity (Fata & Mutia, 2017).

This study contributes to ongoing debates in applied linguistics and educational technology in several ways. First, it demonstrates how the Dick and Carey instructional design model (2015) can be adapted to digital media development in EFL contexts, ensuring that the application is pedagogically grounded rather than merely technological (Moriyanti et al., 2019). Second, it shows how vocabulary instruction can move beyond generic lists toward socio-economically relevant content, thus closing the gap between school and workplace. Third, it adds to the growing literature on MALL by illustrating how mobile tools can be localized, lightweight, and offline-capable, thereby addressing infrastructural challenges common in rural Indonesian schools. Finally, it underscores the role of vocabulary learning not only as an academic pursuit but also as a pathway to economic empowerment in tourism-driven communities. In short, embedding local tourism into vocabulary instruction is not only an educational innovation but also a social and economic intervention. By linking Lake Lut Tawar to the classroom, the study positions language learning as both a means of personal growth and a vehicle for community development (Rahman et al., 2022). The following sections of this paper outline the research design, data collection, and findings that informed the

development of VOCAyo, before turning to a discussion of its implications for pedagogy, policy, and practice (Hanief et al., 2024).

Literature Review

Vocabulary learning has long been recognized as central to language acquisition, as it directly underpins learners' ability to comprehend and produce meaningful discourse. Nation (2013) highlights vocabulary as one of the "building blocks" of language, suggesting that without an adequate lexical repertoire, learners cannot achieve communicative competence regardless of their grammatical knowledge. Schmitt (2020) extends this view by emphasizing that vocabulary knowledge is both breadth (knowing many words) and depth (knowing how to use them appropriately in context). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, particularly in Asia, breadth often dominates because curricula and textbooks prioritize word lists and memorization over contextualized, functional vocabulary (Richards & Renandya, 2002). This imbalance leads to situations where students recognize isolated words but fail to apply them effectively in authentic communication (Kanca, 2024).

One important dimension in vocabulary learning is contextualization. Research shows that learners retain and apply vocabulary more effectively when it is embedded in meaningful scenarios (Webb, 2007). Authentic contexts—such as service encounters, travel, or cultural explanations—provide repeated, purposeful exposure that strengthens retention. In Indonesia, however, English instruction has often been criticized for its generic orientation (Aji, 2016). Textbooks commonly include topics such as "shopping" or "school routines" but neglect locally relevant domains like tourism, hospitality, or agriculture (Hamied, 2012). As a result, learners memorize decontextualized phrases but struggle to interact with foreign visitors in tourist destinations. Studies by Marzulina (2018) and Fitriani et al. (2019) confirm that when vocabulary instruction is localized—for instance, linked to students' communities—engagement and retention improve significantly. The rise of digital technologies has introduced new opportunities to address these gaps. Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) has gained prominence as a flexible, interactive medium for vocabulary acquisition. Stockwell (2010) argues that mobile devices extend learning beyond the classroom, enabling frequent and personalized practice. Godwin-Jones (2017) further notes that mobile learning is most effective when it includes interactivity, feedback, and localized content (Kemendikbud, 2020). A meta-analysis by Lin and Lin (2019) confirms that mobile vocabulary applications generally enhance motivation, autonomy, and retention, though their effectiveness depends on design features such as gamification and scaffolding (Melanie Surya & Moramowati, 2023).

Several empirical studies demonstrate the potential of MALL in vocabulary instruction (Asri et al., 2023). Azar and Nasiri (2014) showed that Iranian learners using mobile vocabulary drills achieved greater long-term retention than those relying on traditional methods (Akbulut, 2007). Chen and Hsu (2020) designed a gamified vocabulary app for Taiwanese students, finding that gamification improved learner motivation, provided it was tied to pedagogical goals. In the Indonesian context, Fitriani et al. (2019) observed that Quizlet supported short-term recall but lacked local relevance, limiting transfer to authentic use. More recently, Setiawan and Sulisty

(2021) developed a local vocabulary game and found that contextualized scenarios improved learner engagement, although their study did not evaluate long-term gains. Despite these advances, two gaps remain (Usman et al., 2019). First, many MALL applications provide generic vocabulary (airport, sports, global travel) rather than tailoring content to learners' socio-economic contexts. Second, assessment features are often overlooked, leaving teachers without tools to track learner progress or ensure objectivity (Widyastuti & Kusumadewi, 2018). In rural areas like Takengon, where tourism is central to economic development, such gaps are critical. Learners need vocabulary not just for general communication but for specific tasks—guiding visitors to Lake Lut Tawar, narrating Gayo cultural traditions, or describing coffee production. Embedding these local contexts into a digital tool bridges the divide between classroom instruction and real-world communication (Lestari & Sutrisna, 2022), while integrated assessment ensures accountability and pedagogical value (Aisyah & Hidayatullah, 2023).

Thus, the literature establishes three core insights: (1) vocabulary is fundamental but often neglected in contextual depth, (2) digital and mobile platforms enhance motivation and practice, and (3) local adaptation remains rare but crucial for sustained learning. By situating itself within these discussions, the present study contributes a novel approach through the development of VOCAyo, a mobile vocabulary learning application designed specifically for Takengon's tourism sector.

Method

This study employed a qualitative research design with a focus on needs analysis to explore the linguistic demands of the tourism sector in Takengon and the readiness of students and teachers to address them. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives, communicative practices, and instructional challenges, which are essential for grounding the development of VOCAyo in authentic contexts. Participants were purposively selected from three groups. The first consisted of 120 students from four senior high schools in Takengon (SMAN 1, SMAN 2, SMAN 4, and SMAN 8), who represented the primary end-users of VOCAyo. The second group included 12 English teachers from the same schools, who provided insights into classroom practices and curriculum implementation. The third group comprised nine local tourism practitioners—tour guides, homestay operators, and small business owners—who contributed knowledge of real communicative situations and lexical demands in the field. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and practitioners as well as open-ended questionnaires distributed to students. The interviews explored communicative situations in tourism, essential skills, challenges in English use, alignment of school materials with workplace needs, and expectations for contextualized media. The questionnaires focused on frequency of English use, perceived vocabulary needs, interest in digital tools, and expectations for local content. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed alongside written responses using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Codes were generated, grouped into categories, and refined into broader themes. Triangulation of data across students, teachers, and practitioners ensured the credibility of the findings and minimized potential bias. This methodological design allowed the study to capture not only the mismatch between classroom English and tourism communication but also the aspirations of learners and educators for more

context-driven, digital solutions. By concentrating on qualitative insights, the study ensured that the design of VOCAyo would be grounded in authentic local needs and ecologically valid communicative practices.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the persistent gap between classroom English instruction in Takengon and the actual communicative demands of the tourism sector. Through questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, three major dimensions emerged: the needs and existing competencies of students and teachers, the authentic communicative situations faced by local tourism practitioners, and the readiness of learners and schools to adopt a digital intervention such as VOCAyo. These findings are then discussed in relation to existing literature on vocabulary learning, contextualized pedagogy, and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL).

The needs analysis revealed that students viewed their current English learning experiences as overly generic and disconnected from real-life contexts. Questionnaire responses indicated that 78% of learners perceived classroom topics such as shopping or daily routines as irrelevant to the tourism encounters they often observed in their community. Instead, they expressed a strong need for vocabulary that could help them guide tourists to Lake Lut Tawar, describe cultural practices, and explain the uniqueness of Gayo coffee. Teachers echoed this concern, with ten out of twelve admitting that existing textbooks did not support authentic communication. Their reliance on word lists and rote memorization meant that while students could recall vocabulary for examinations, they struggled to use it spontaneously in communicative tasks. These results align with Nation's (2013) argument that vocabulary depth—knowing how to use words in context—is more important than sheer lexical breadth. Similarly, Schmitt (2020) stresses that vocabulary learning must move beyond memorization toward contextualized application, a shift clearly needed in Takengon.

In terms of competencies, rubric-based evaluations indicated that students had acquired a foundation in basic conversational English, particularly greetings, introductions, and simple transactions. However, they consistently underperformed in descriptive and situational language use, such as providing directions, narrating cultural practices, or promoting local products. Interviews with teachers confirmed that learners frequently froze during role plays with simulated tourists, lacking both confidence and lexical resources. This finding resonates with Webb's (2007) study, which emphasized that repeated practice in authentic contexts enhances retention and application of vocabulary. The absence of such contextual practice in Takengon highlights why students' competencies plateaued at a basic level. The perspective of tourism practitioners further sharpened this picture. Interviews with guides, homestay operators, and small business owners revealed three recurring clusters of communicative needs: guiding and describing, hospitality and service, and transactions. Tour guides reported the challenge of explaining routes and cultural traditions in English, often resorting to gestures or translation apps. Homestay operators faced difficulties in welcoming guests, explaining facilities, and handling requests politely—tasks that demanded both hospitality language and cultural sensitivity. Small business owners highlighted the need for transactional vocabulary, including product descriptions, pricing, and occasional bargaining. The

convergence of these findings demonstrates that local tourism communication requires far more than simple conversational English; it demands functional vocabulary tailored to service encounters. This supports Richards and Renandya's (2002) argument that EFL instruction must be linked to learners' real-life communicative goals.

The instructional analysis confirmed that current materials were misaligned with these needs. Document reviews showed that textbooks prioritized generic words such as "library" or "post office," which bore little relevance to tourism. Sentence structures were limited to rigid frames like "This is a pen," offering little scaffolding for authentic interaction. Curriculum goals were communicative in theory but overly broad in practice, while competency standards omitted tourism-specific abilities. These systemic shortcomings reflect Hamied's (2012) critique of English education in Indonesia, where textbooks and curricula fail to account for local socio-economic contexts. Teachers in the focus groups confirmed that despite attempts to adapt materials creatively, the lack of resources constrained their efforts. Learner and context analysis, however, offered encouraging evidence for the feasibility of a digital intervention. Data indicated that 72% of students showed greater motivation when lessons related to tourism and local culture, reinforcing the principle that relevance drives engagement (Marzulina, 2018). Moreover, 85% of students reported owning smartphones, though many devices were basic Android models, and internet connectivity was inconsistent. School facilities were uneven, with classrooms equipped with projectors but limited access to institutional Wi-Fi or computer labs. Teachers highlighted that while administrative support for digital integration was emerging, it varied across schools. These findings suggest that VOCAyo must be lightweight, mobile-friendly, and capable of offline use—conditions consistent with Stockwell's (2010) recommendation that mobile learning adapt to learners' technological realities.

From these findings, the learning objectives for VOCAyo were formulated to be both specific and measurable, such as enabling students to give directions to local attractions or describe Gayo coffee. This addressed one of the gaps identified in prior research on MALL. While Chen and Hsu (2020) showed that gamification can increase motivation, their study cautioned that design must remain pedagogically grounded. VOCAyo responded to this by embedding gamified exercises within situational scenarios, ensuring that motivation served instructional goals. Similarly, Setiawan and Sulisty'o's (2021) localized vocabulary game showed that students engaged more when content was tied to their environment, yet their study lacked assessment features. VOCAyo advances this by integrating built-in assessment tools—auto-scoring, rubrics, and dashboards—to support both learners and teachers. The integration of assessment is a particularly novel contribution. Prior studies (Burston, 2015; Lin & Lin, 2019) have noted that many digital applications neglect reliable evaluation, leaving teachers without tools to track progress. By incorporating features for objectivity, ease of use, and fairness—such as randomized item order, blind scoring, and exemplars—VOCAyo addresses this weakness. This ensures that vocabulary learning is not only engaging but also accountable, bridging the gap between technology-driven practice and classroom assessment.

The discussion of these findings highlights both challenges and opportunities. The gap between classroom English and tourism communication is substantial, rooted in generic

curricula and limited materials. Yet, the readiness of students and schools for digital tools provides a strong foundation for innovation. The results confirm Schmitt's (2020) claim that vocabulary learning must be context-driven, while extending it by showing how local socio-economic realities—such as Takengon's reliance on tourism—can directly inform instructional design. The study also aligns with Godwin-Jones (2017), who argued that mobile learning is most effective when it integrates localized content. In this case, VOCAyo demonstrates how embedding local attractions, products, and cultural practices into a mobile application can transform vocabulary learning from rote memorization into meaningful, situated practice. At the same time, the study acknowledges limitations. The prototype stage of VOCAyo has not yet been tested longitudinally, and findings are limited to one geographic area. Nevertheless, the implications are significant. By aligning EFL instruction with tourism, VOCAyo empowers students with both communicative competence and economic agency, offering a model that can be adapted for other rural contexts where education and local industries intersect.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the urgent need to bridge the gap between classroom English instruction and the communicative realities of Takengon's tourism sector. The findings consistently revealed that while students had mastered basic conversational English—greetings, introductions, and simple transactions—they lacked the descriptive and situational vocabulary essential for guiding tourists, narrating cultural practices, and promoting local products. Teachers confirmed that textbooks remained generic, over-reliant on memorization, and poorly aligned with workplace demands, while tourism practitioners highlighted recurring communicative situations requiring hospitality and transactional language. Together, these perspectives underscored the mismatch between academic instruction and local economic needs. At the same time, the study revealed strong enabling factors for innovation. Students expressed high motivation when learning was tied to tourism and cultural contexts, and the majority owned smartphones, making them ready for mobile-assisted learning. Teachers supported the development of supplementary media provided it was curriculum-aligned, easy to integrate, and equipped with assessment tools. These findings informed the design of VOCAyo, a mobile-friendly and offline-capable application embedding localized vocabulary, interactive tasks, and built-in assessments. By doing so, VOCAyo directly addressed the earlier identified gap, offering a solution that is both pedagogically robust and socio-economically relevant.

The implications of this study are twofold. First, it contributes to the growing field of mobile-assisted language learning by showing how localized content can enhance vocabulary acquisition and learner engagement. Second, it illustrates how educational technology can link language learning with community development, empowering students to participate more effectively in the tourism economy. Nonetheless, the study is limited by its focus on one geographic area and by the prototype stage of VOCAyo. Future research should conduct longitudinal testing, expand implementation to other contexts, and explore integration with broader digital ecosystems. In this way, VOCAyo can evolve from a local innovation into a replicable model for context-driven EFL instruction.

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