ENGLISH LANGUAGE EXPOSURE AMONG INDONESIAN K-POP FANS IN SOCIAL MEDIA ROLE-PLAY COMMUNITIES

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This study examined how Indonesian K-pop fans experienced English language exposure through participation in social media role-play communities and explored the factors supporting their engagement with the language. Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the research used a qualitative phenomenological design with data collected from 20 fans through semi-structured interviews, observations, and documentation analysis. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was applied to analyze the data. The findings show that English exposure naturally emerges through activities such as writing captions, creating bios, joining RP schools, and participating in story-based interactions. These informal and interest-driven practices improve participants' confidence, motivation, and familiarity with English in ways rarely achieved in formal classrooms. Aesthetic motivations, peer influence, character immersion, and functional needs strongly support English use. The study highlights fan-based digital spaces as authentic, low-pressure environments for informal language learning and suggests exploring multiple fandom contexts in future research.

Keywords: English Exposure; K-Pop Fandom; Phenomenological Study; Roleplay; Sociocultural

1. INTRODUCTION

English has increasingly become a central medium of communication in education, business, and entertainment worldwide (Garras, 2025). In the Indonesian context, however, learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) continues to present considerable challenges. In recent years, various studies have identified significant challenges students face in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly in Indonesia (Irmayani et al., 2024). These challenges are compounded by learning conditions that are often far from ideal. In Indonesia, the learning conditions in English classrooms may be a nightmare for students, as they regularly come across hurdles in mastering the language (Irmayani & Masruroh, 2023).

Limited exposure to authentic language use and minimal opportunities for meaningful communication have been repeatedly highlighted as key barriers to language development (Jon et al., 2021). Although formal education remains the primary method of English instruction, many students find classroom-based learning inadequate for developing practical language skills (Sofeny et al., 2024). Traditional classroom settings frequently prioritize grammar and test preparation over real-life communication, resulting in learners who may excel in theory but lack confidence and fluency in authentic interactions. As a result, learners increasingly turn to informal, interest-driven environments to gain the language exposure they cannot find in formal education (Suber, 2024).

One such environment is the digital sphere. One of the most significant developments in this regard is the influence of digital environments on language acquisition, particularly through social media platforms. Unlike formal education, social media offers a participatory and interactive space where English naturally appears in diverse forms such as status updates, captions, and fan discussions. Social media is an interactive space where users naturally encounter and engage with English through passive exposure or active participation (Sofeny et al., 2022).

Among these digital spaces, K-pop fandom communities have emerged as dynamic platforms where fans connect across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Social media enables

fans to engage in diverse activities ranging from content sharing to collaborative storytelling, often requiring varying degrees of English use. One unique manifestation of this phenomenon is the K-pop role-play (RP) community, where fans assume the identities of idols or fictional characters and interact through scripted narratives and character-driven dialogues. Many fans in Indonesia feel that role-playing games provide a low-pressure, interest-driven environment where they can interact with the English language outside of the traditional academic environment. Role-playing often require users to improvise, negotiate meaning, and sustain interactions, all contributing to exposure to naturalistic language (Purwaningtyas & Oktara, 2023). Additionally, since writing is a fundamental component of role-playing games, participants actively practice composing messages, conveying ideas, and maintaining character consistency, thus strengthening their overall English proficiency (Irmayani et al., 2022).

To analyze this phenomenon, the study draws on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes that learning is socially mediated and occurs through interaction with cultural tools, peers, and more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978). Key concepts such as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding help explain how participants in RP communities learn language through collaborative dialogue, peer modeling, and shared cultural practices in digital spaces. This theoretical lens provides a framework for understanding how informal online interactions can support meaningful language exposure.

Although several studies have investigated the linguistic aspects of K-pop fandom, they primarily focus on general fan interactions rather than role-play (RP) activities. Malik and Haidar (2021) found that K-pop stan communities on Twitter enable fans to practice English authentically, fostering incidental learning and intercultural communication. Likewise, Faiza (2020) demonstrated that participation in global K-pop communities encourages vocabulary development and confidence through everyday English use. While these studies reveal the potential of fandom spaces for informal English exposure, none have specifically examined how linguistic engagement occurs within K-pop role-play communities where English is used creatively and interactively to sustain character-based communication.

In contrast, existing studies on K-pop RP communities have largely addressed social or emotional dimensions rather than linguistic ones. For instance, Purwaningtyas & Oktara, (2023) highlighted how idol role-playing contributes to self-identity formation, while Ramadhani and Vinansia Ramadhani & Hendro Wibowo (2023) examined the relationship between role-playing, loneliness, and self-discovery. These studies underscore the psychosocial functions of RP participation but overlook how such interactions may foster authentic English use and learning. Therefore, the present study fills this gap by focusing specifically on the linguistic dimension of K-pop RP communities.

Responding to this gap, the present study aims to: (1) Investigate how Indonesian K-pop fans experience English language exposure through participation in social media-based role-play communities; and (2) Identify the factors that support their engagement with English in these informal digital environments.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore Indonesian K-pop fans' experiences with English language exposure in social media role-play (RP) communities. A phenomenological design was chosen because it focuses on understanding the meaning participants assign to their lived experiences rather than seeking to generalize findings to a larger population. The research followed a qualitative, phenomenological design as described by Creswell (2018) aiming to capture the essence of participants' experiences. This design was appropriate for investigating how participants perceived their English language exposure within the unique setting of K-pop RP communities, where language learning often occurs informally through digital interactions.

The population of this study comprised Indonesian K-pop fans actively involved in RP communities on platforms such as Twitter (X), Instagram, and Telegram. The sample consisted of 20 participants selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research objectives. Inclusion criteria required participants to: 1) Willingly participate in a

voice-call interview 2) Have participated in K-pop RP activities for at least six months 3) Have used English either intentionally or incidentally within RP interactions. All participants voluntarily agreed to join the study after being informed of its purpose, procedures, and confidentiality measures.

Data were collected using three complementary techniques:

1. Semi-structured interviews: The researcher first designed an interview guide validated by an expert in qualitative research. Participants who met the inclusion criteria were contacted through direct messages and invited to join an online voice-call interview. Each interview lasted approximately 15-30 minutes and was conducted via WhatsApp or Telegram, depending on participants' platform preference. During the interview, the researcher used open-ended questions to explore participants' experiences with English exposure in RP activities. All sessions were audio-recorded with participants' consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

2. Non-participant observation: The researcher joined selected RP groups as a silent member to observe participants' interactions without influencing the communication flow. Observation focused on the use of English in bios, captions, event announcements, and conversation threads. Field notes were taken systematically to document linguistic patterns, frequency of English use, and interactional contexts. Observation took place over four weeks, ensuring that the data captured a range of typical RP activities.

3. Documentation analysis: Relevant written materials, including screenshots of RP posts, event announcements, and promotional content, were collected with participants' permission. These documents were categorized according to their linguistic functions (e.g., captions, dialogues, bios) and analyzed to triangulate findings from the interviews and observations. The documentation process aimed to validate participants' reported experiences by comparing them with naturally occurring language use within the RP communities.

The researcher designed and utilized several instruments to collect the data, including a validated semi-structured interview guide, observation sheets, and documentation checklists. The interview guide was reviewed by an expert to ensure its content validity. The researcher was responsible for administering these instruments, conducting the interviews and observations, and organizing the data. Supporting tools such as a mobile phone for recording, a laptop for transcription and data management, and cloud storage for secure documentation were also employed throughout the research process.

Data analysis followed the six-step Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework outlined by (Smith et al., 2009). The process began with reading and re-reading interview transcripts to achieve immersion in the data. The researcher then conducted initial noting, capturing descriptive observations, linguistic features, and conceptual insights. From these notes, emergent themes were developed to represent meaningful aspects of participants' experiences. Next, the researcher explored connections between themes to form coherent clusters within each case, looking for patterns while maintaining the individuality of participants' accounts. The analysis proceeded idiographically, treating each participant as a single case before moving toward cross-case analysis. In this stage, patterns and relationships across participants were identified to construct superordinate themes that reflected both shared experiences and unique perspectives. The entire analysis was recursive and Iterative rather than linear. The researcher repeatedly moved back and forth between raw data, emerging themes, and interpretative reflections to ensure depth, nuance, and credibility. Supporting evidence from observation notes and documentation was integrated throughout the process, allowing the researcher to contextualize participants' narratives and refine thematic interpretations.

To ensure validity, this study applied data triangulation by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and documentation. Triangulation enhanced the credibility of the themes by confirming them across multiple data sources rather than relying on a single perspective. Reliability was addressed by maintaining an audit trail throughout the research process, including detailed documentation of data collection procedures, coding decisions, and theme development stages. This transparency allows other researchers to trace the analytic process and enhances the dependability of the findings. Consistent use of the interview guide across participants also contributed to reliability by ensuring uniformity in data collection while still allowing for individual expression.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are presented based on two primary focuses aligned with the research objectives: (1) English language exposure within K-pop role-play (RP) communities and (2) factors supporting participants' engagement with English. Data were collected from 20 Indonesian RP participants through interviews, observations, and documentation.

English Language Exposure in K-pop RP Communities

The analysis revealed that participants' exposure to English occurred organically through various RP-related activities. Rather than deliberate language learning, English use emerged as an inherent aspect of interaction, creativity, and identity construction in RP communities. All 20 participants reported that they encountered English daily through captions, bios, and direct messages, while 17 participants mentioned using English actively when writing or responding to role-play updates.

> *"Pas bikin bio akun, terus pas PM… seringnya pake bahasa Inggris, tapi nggak yang panjang."*
> (When making an account bio or PM, I often use English, but not very long.) – P2

The most common forms of exposure included writing character bios (95%), composing captions (85%), and engaging in English-based RP events (70%). These activities allowed participants to experiment with vocabulary, structure, and tone in authentic communication settings. Over time, 14 out of 20 participants expressed noticeable improvement in vocabulary and writing fluency, while 11 participants felt more confident expressing themselves in English.

Participants also emphasized that English use enhanced their immersion and enjoyment in role-playing. P5 shared,

> *"Sekarang lebih pede nulis caption panjang pake bahasa Inggris, dulu nggak berani."*
> (Now I feel more confident writing long captions in English, I didn't dare before.)

This gradual confidence growth reflects incidental learning, language development that occurs through meaningful participation rather than structured teaching. The observation data further confirmed this trend: during four weeks of RP monitoring, over 70% of posts observed contained English elements, either in captions or dialogues. These findings show that RP functions as an informal yet effective space for authentic English practice.

Table 1. English Exposure among Participants

Type of Activity	Participants Mentioning (%)	Example Content	Observed Linguistic Gain
Writing character bios	19 (95%)	Introducing RP characters	Vocabulary Expansion
Writing captions or storyline posts	17 (85%)	Updating character stories	Improved writing fluency
Participating in RP events	14 (70%)	Event coordination or fan projects	Confidence building
English in conversations / PMs	13 (65%)	Chatting with mutuals	Comprehension and fluency
Observing others' english use	15 (75%)	Reading captions on timeline	Idiomatic expression learning

These patterns indicate that language exposure in RP settings is frequent, diverse, and situated within meaningful social engagement. The environment encourages natural acquisition through participation, aligning with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, where learning emerges from social interaction and cultural mediation.

Factors Supporting Engagement with English

In addition to language exposure, this study also identified several factors that encouraged and sustained participants' engagement with English in RP communities. Thematic analysis revealed three major dimensions: motivation, peer collaboration, and technological support. These factors are not isolated but interrelated, forming a self-sustaining ecosystem that keeps participants actively engaged in using English during RP interactions.

Motivation

Motivation appeared as the most prominent factor, reported by 18 out of 20 participants (90%). Participants described a combination of aesthetic, social, and functional motivations. Many stated that English was essential for maintaining the "idol-like" persona of their RP characters, while others viewed it as part of the K-pop aesthetic. P12 mentioned,

"Aku biasanya pake bahasa inggris biar keliatan lebih keren dan cocok sama image idolnya sih"
"I use English because it looks cooler and fits the idol image."

This aesthetic motivation gradually evolved into self-confidence and language ownership. Participants noted that receiving positive reactions to their English captions or event posts further encouraged them to continue writing in English. Such affective reinforcement reflects intrinsic motivation derived from identity performance and peer validation.

Peer Collaboration

Seventeen participants (85%) emphasized the role of peers in maintaining engagement with English. Most described how mutual friends or RP partners influenced their willingness to communicate in English. Observing others' captions or being corrected by peers provided subtle but powerful language input. P6 shared,

"Kadang nggak sengaja, soalnya di timeline sering liat mutual pake bahasa Inggris, jadi kebawa aja."
(Sometimes unintentionally, because I often see mutuals using English on the timeline, so I just get carried away.)

Peer interaction thus acted as both social scaffolding and motivation amplifier. In many cases, collaborative storytelling or event organization became spaces for natural negotiation

of meaning. This corresponds with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, in which learning emerges from social collaboration within the Zone of Proximal Development.

Technological Support

Fifteen participants (75%) reported using technological tools to assist their English communication. The most commonly mentioned were Google Translate, Grammarly, and ChatGPT. Initially, these tools were used to correct grammar or find vocabulary; over time, participants described internalizing patterns and relying less on assistance. P3 stated,

"Awalnya sering translate, lama-lama hafal sendiri."
(At first I often used translation, but over time, I memorized the words myself.)

Rather than reducing authenticity, technological support allowed participants to sustain communication and confidence, especially in complex role-play situations. These tools also fostered self-directed learning, bridging linguistic gaps while preserving creative flow.

Table 2. Factors Supporting English Engagement among Participants

Factor	Participants Reporting (%)	Common Manifestations	Illustrative Function
Motivation	18 (90%)	Aesthetic preference, identity performance, positive feedback	Sustain consistency in English use
Peer Collaboration	17 (85%)	Mutual encouragement, observation, informal correction	Provide scaffolding and social validation
Technological Support	15 (75%)	Use of Google Translate, Grammarly, ChatGPT	Enhances confidence and linguistic accuracy

The combination of these three factors demonstrates that engagement in English use within RP communities is multidimensional. Motivation creates initial interest; peer collaboration fosters social connection and shared learning, and technology ensures accessibility and linguistic confidence. Together, these factors form a supportive ecosystem that enables participants to sustain English communication naturally, without external pressure or formal instruction.

These findings reinforce the sociocultural notion that language development occurs through mediated social participation. The participants' sustained engagement reflects how digital communities driven by shared interest and collaborative creativity can provide authentic contexts for informal language learning.

The findings illustrate that English exposure and engagement within K-pop RP communities are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. Exposure provides participants with authentic opportunities to use English, while motivation, social collaboration, and digital tools sustain that engagement over time. These intertwined processes demonstrate that language learning can occur informally through shared interests and community participation rather than formal classroom instruction.

The role of motivation observed in this study aligns with prior research emphasizing interest-driven learning in fandom spaces. Similarly, peer interaction supports Vygotsky's view of social mediation, where learning occurs through collaboration with more capable others. In RP communities, participants learn English as a by-product of creative play, identity construction, and social bonding.

Technology further enhances this learning process by offering accessible linguistic assistance and encouraging autonomy. The combination of human and digital mediation reflects the evolving nature of informal learning in the digital age. Through these interconnected factors, RP communities emerge as authentic, low-pressure environments where learners can explore English meaningfully while engaging in culturally resonant

activities.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This study concludes that Indonesian K-pop fans experience English language exposure naturally and meaningfully through their participation in social media-based role-play (RP) communities. English use emerges as an integral part of RP practices, embedded in captions, bios, conversations, and event activities. Allowing participants to engage with the language in authentic, creative, and socially driven contexts. These experiences foster incidental vocabulary learning, writing fluency, and confidence, demonstrating that RP communities can serve as informal yet effective environments for meaningful English learning.

The findings further highlight that participants' sustained engagement with English is shaped by three interrelated factors: motivation, peer collaboration, and technological support. Motivation encourages consistent participation through aesthetic and identity-related goals, while peer interaction provides social validation and learning scaffolds. Technological tools such as Google Translate, Grammarly, and AI assistants complement these social factors by lowering barriers and supporting linguistic accuracy. Together, these elements create a self-sustaining ecosystem that nurtures confidence, curiosity, and continuous English use.

Practically, these findings encourage educators to integrate creativity and digital interaction into English learning. By designing role-based or fan-inspired projects, teachers can provide students with authentic opportunities to practice English meaningfully and confidently beyond conventional classroom formats. At the theoretical level, this study provides a foundation for future research exploring online fandoms as alternative sites of language learning. Further studies could extend this inquiry to other fan communities, compare linguistic practices across platforms, or examine the long-term effects of RP participation on language proficiency and intercultural communication.

Overall, this research reinforces the idea that language learning thrives when learners are emotionally invested and socially connected. K-pop RP communities demonstrate that authentic, interest-driven participation can transform informal digital spaces into meaningful environments for linguistic growth, creativity, and self-expression.

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