

# **How Albanian University Students Experience Incidental English Vocabulary Acquisition Through Narrative Digital Gaming: A Qualitative Exploratory Study**

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## **Abstract**

**Background:** Research on incidental vocabulary acquisition through digital gaming has concentrated in Northern and Central Europe, leaving Southeastern European learners underexplored. While quantitative studies have established correlational patterns between gaming and vocabulary outcomes, less attention has been paid to how learners themselves perceive and experience this learning process.

**Purpose:** This qualitative exploratory study investigates how Albanian ESP university students who play narrative-driven video games perceive, experience, and articulate incidental English vocabulary acquisition through their gaming practices.

**Method:** A qualitative research design employed thematic analysis of open-ended survey responses and semi-structured follow-up questions from six purposively sampled participants at the Agricultural University of Tirana. Descriptive survey data provided participant profiling context. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model, themes were generated inductively and refined through iterative analysis until saturation was reached.

**Findings:** Four themes emerged: (1) authentic communicative immersion, wherein participants described gaming as placing them in consequential language situations; (2) vocabulary acquisition through multimodal reinforcement, particularly via in-game documents and contextual repetition; (3) affective engagement, characterised by enjoyment-driven learning; and (4) perceived advantages over formal instruction, with participants articulating that gaming provides richer contextualisation than textbooks.

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**Conclusion:** Participants' accounts suggest that narrative gaming constitutes a meaningful site of incidental English acquisition for Albanian learners. These findings provide hypothesis-generating groundwork and methodological insights for future large-scale investigation in this under-researched context.

**Keywords:** incidental vocabulary acquisition; extramural English; narrative gaming; qualitative research; thematic analysis; EFL; Albania; ESP

**JEL Codes:** Z32

## **Introduction**

In contemporary higher education, English proficiency functions as both an academic prerequisite and a determinant of professional opportunity. This reality has intensified pressure on university language programs to understand not only formal instructional outcomes but also the informal learning that occurs beyond classroom walls. The concept of Extramural English—defined as voluntary, self-initiated contact with English outside formal instruction (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012)—has emerged as a critical domain of inquiry, particularly as digital technologies create unprecedented opportunities for authentic language exposure.

Among extramural activities, commercial video gaming represents a uniquely immersive form of language contact. Players of narrative-driven titles such as *The Last of Us*, *The Witcher 3*, or *Red Dead Redemption* engage with substantial quantities of contextualised English while navigating complex plots and making consequential decisions. Quantitative research has established positive correlations between gaming and vocabulary outcomes: Sylvén and Sundqvist (2012) found that Swedish frequent gamers outperformed non-gamers on vocabulary measures, a pattern replicated by Cabraja (2016) and extended by Vnucko et al. (2024) in Slovak contexts. A meta-analysis by Thompson and von Gillern (2020) further corroborated these findings, demonstrating that video game-based instruction yields positive effects on vocabulary acquisition among English language learners across diverse educational settings.

However, while correlational evidence accumulates, less attention has been paid to how learners themselves perceive and experience vocabulary acquisition through gaming. Qualitative inquiry into learner perspectives can illuminate the mechanisms underlying statistical associations and generate hypotheses for future investigation. Such inquiry proves particularly valuable in under-researched contexts where large-scale quantitative studies are not yet feasible.

The present study contributes to the field in three ways: (1) it extends gaming-vocabulary research to the previously unstudied Albanian context, where English media exposure patterns differ from Northern Europe; (2) it foregrounds learner perspectives through qualitative methodology, complementing the predominantly quantitative literature; and (3)

it specifically targets narrative-driven game genres, a variable theoretically grounded in multimodal input theory (Beltrán-Palanques, 2024), to explore whether genre-specific features shape perceived learning experiences.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### ***1. Extramural English and Informal Learning***

The theoretical foundation for this study rests on the distinction between intramural and extramural language learning. While intramural learning occurs within formal educational settings under instructor guidance, extramural English encompasses all self-initiated contact with the target language outside the classroom (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012). For many contemporary learners, time spent engaging with English through digital media substantially exceeds formal instructional hours, creating what researchers have termed the "digital wilds" of language acquisition. A systematic review by Vnucko and Klimova (2023), synthesising findings from thirteen empirical studies, concluded that digital games constitute a beneficial environment for vocabulary development, though they cautioned that sample sizes in existing studies were often insufficient to draw broad generalisations.

#### **2.2 Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition: Conceptualisation and Operationalisation**

Incidental vocabulary acquisition refers to the learning of lexical items as a by-product of engaging with meaningful input, without explicit study intent (Hulstijn, 2001). Unlike intentional vocabulary study, where learners deliberately memorise word lists or complete targeted exercises, incidental acquisition occurs when attention is directed primarily toward message comprehension rather than linguistic form. Hulstijn (2001) emphasises that the distinction between incidental and intentional learning is not absolute but rather exists on a continuum, with the degree of involvement in processing determining retention outcomes. Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) operationalised this continuum through their Involvement Load Hypothesis, proposing that vocabulary retention is conditional upon the amount of need, search, and evaluation involved in processing unfamiliar words.

In this study, incidental vocabulary acquisition is operationalised through learners' retrospective accounts rather than experimental measures. Specifically, the construct is accessed through participants' attributions of vocabulary learning to gaming engagement rather than deliberate study, their descriptions of the circumstances under which such learning occurred, and their perceptions of how gaming-derived vocabulary compares to formally instructed vocabulary. Such operationalisation through learner accounts aligns with the study's qualitative exploratory design and acknowledges the limitations inherent in self-report methodology.

### ***2. Multimodal Input in Narrative Games***

Narrative-driven games present language through multiple simultaneous channels: spoken dialogue, written subtitles, environmental text, and in-game documents such as letters,

journals, and codex entries. Beltrán-Palanques (2024) argues that comprehending video game narratives requires players to integrate these "semiotic resources" in ways that construct meaning through coordinated processing. Such multimodal input may enhance retention by providing redundant encoding pathways and rich contextual scaffolding. The consequential nature of gaming-where comprehension directly affects gameplay outcomes-may further heighten attention to linguistic input in ways that passive media consumption does not.

## **Research Questions**

Given the qualitative, exploratory nature of this investigation, the study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Albanian university students who play narrative-driven games describe their experience of encountering and learning English vocabulary through gameplay?

RQ2: What specific features of narrative games do participants identify as contributing to their vocabulary acquisition?

RQ3: How do participants perceive gaming-derived vocabulary learning in comparison to formal English instruction?

## **Methodology**

### **1. Research Design**

A qualitative exploratory design was employed to investigate how Albanian university students perceive and experience incidental vocabulary acquisition through narrative gaming. Qualitative methodology was selected as appropriate for this investigation because the research aimed to understand participants' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes rather than to establish causal relationships or test hypotheses (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The exploratory orientation acknowledges the nascent state of gaming-vocabulary research in Albanian contexts and positions the study as hypothesis-generating rather than hypothesis-testing.

### **2. Participants and Sampling**

Given the exploratory qualitative nature of this study, a small purposive sample ( $n = 6$ ) was recruited, which imposes significant constraints on the generalisability and inferential depth of the findings. Six undergraduate students from the Agricultural University of Tirana participated, selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) current enrolment in an ESP course, (2) self-reported regular engagement with narrative-driven games in English, and (3) willingness to provide detailed responses about gaming experiences. All participants were Albanian native speakers aged 19–22, with English proficiency levels ranging from upper-intermediate to advanced as assessed by their ESP course performance.

In qualitative research, sample size is determined by the principle of information richness rather than statistical representativeness (Patton, 2015). Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) demonstrated that thematic saturation typically occurs within six to twelve interviews when participants share key characteristics relevant to the research questions, finding that basic elements for metathemes were present as early as six interviews in their analysis of sixty in-depth interviews. Braun and Clarke (2021) further emphasise that thematic analysis prioritises data depth and richness over sample size, with small samples appropriate for exploratory studies seeking to identify patterns warranting future investigation. Nevertheless, the limited sample restricts the scope of claims that can be made, and findings should be interpreted as preliminary insights rather than definitive conclusions.

### **3. Data Collection**

Data were collected through a multi-part survey instrument administered via Google Forms, comprising: (1) demographic questions, (2) a gaming habits inventory assessing frequency, genre preferences, and language settings, (3) an adapted language attitude scale, (4) a 25-item vocabulary recognition test calibrated to narrative gaming contexts, and (5) open-ended questions inviting extended responses about participants' perceived experiences of vocabulary acquisition through gaming. The vocabulary test and attitude scale were adapted from Vnucko et al. (2024), with modifications to include vocabulary items more representative of narrative game genres played by Albanian students. Open-ended questions constituted the primary data source for qualitative analysis.

### **4. Data Analysis**

Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model: (1) familiarisation through repeated reading, (2) systematic generation of initial codes, (3) collation of codes into potential themes, (4) review and refinement of themes against the dataset, (5) definition and naming of themes, and (6) production of the analytical report. This approach was selected for its theoretical flexibility and compatibility with exploratory research aims.

The analysis proceeded inductively, allowing themes to emerge from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories. Codes were generated at the semantic level, focusing on explicit content while remaining attentive to implicit meanings. Theme development was iterative, with ongoing refinement until internal coherence was achieved. A colleague familiar with the research context reviewed the final coding framework to check for interpretive coherence (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Quantitative survey data were analysed descriptively to provide participant profiling context; however, ceiling effects in vocabulary scores prevented meaningful statistical differentiation among participants.

## Findings

### 1. *Participant Profile: Descriptive Context*

Given the restricted sample ( $n = 6$ ) and observed ceiling effects in vocabulary scores, the quantitative findings presented here should be interpreted as descriptive profiles rather than inferential evidence of a causal or correlational relationship between gaming and vocabulary acquisition. All six participants reported playing narrative-driven games in English for four or more hours weekly. Vocabulary test scores ranged from 22 to 25 out of 25 items, with a mean of 23.67 and minimal variance. Language attitude scale scores were uniformly high. While this ceiling effect prevented quantitative differentiation, it confirms that participants possessed advanced receptive vocabulary knowledge consistent with their status as engaged gamers.

### 2. *Qualitative Findings: Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses yielded four themes characterising participants' perceived experiences of vocabulary acquisition through narrative gaming.

*Theme 1: Authentic Communicative Immersion.* Participants consistently described narrative gaming as placing them in situations requiring genuine communicative engagement. Unlike passive media consumption, gaming demanded active comprehension with consequences for gameplay progression. One participant explained: "When a character gives you instructions and you don't understand, you can't continue. You have to figure out what the words mean." This theme reflects the consequential nature of gaming language input, where comprehension directly affects player agency.

*Theme 2: Multimodal Vocabulary Reinforcement.* Participants identified specific features of narrative games that facilitated vocabulary acquisition: simultaneous audio and subtitle presentation, in-game documents providing contextual elaboration, and repeated encounters with vocabulary across gameplay. One respondent noted: "The letters and journals in games—they use the same words in different situations, so you learn from context." This theme aligns with the multimodal input processing described in the theoretical framework.

*Theme 3: Affective Engagement and Reduced Anxiety.* All participants emphasised the role of enjoyment in their vocabulary learning through gaming. Several contrasted the low-anxiety gaming environment with the evaluative pressure of classroom settings. One participant stated: "In games, nobody is judging you if you don't understand. You can just try again." This affective dimension echoes findings from broader research on emotion and language learning (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Horwitz et al., 1986).

*Theme 4: Perceived Advantages Over Formal Instruction.* Participants articulated perceived advantages of gaming-based vocabulary exposure compared to formal instruction, particularly regarding contextualisation and memorability. Representative

comments included: "Words from games stay in my head because I remember the scene, the character who said them" and "Textbook vocabulary feels artificial. Game vocabulary is real because someone is actually using it." These perceptions suggest that the narrative embedding of vocabulary may enhance retention through episodic memory associations.

## **Discussion**

The thematic findings offer insight into how Albanian university students experience and articulate incidental vocabulary acquisition through narrative gaming. While the exploratory nature of this study precludes causal claims, participants' accounts align with theoretical expectations and prior research findings.

The theme of authentic communicative immersion resonates with Beltrán-Palanques's (2024) multimodal framework, which posits that narrative games require active integration of linguistic and visual information under conditions of consequential engagement. Participants' descriptions of gaming as qualitatively different from passive media consumption—requiring comprehension for successful progression—suggest that the interactive nature of games may create optimal conditions for noticing and encoding unfamiliar vocabulary.

The emphasis on in-game documents and contextual repetition as vocabulary acquisition mechanisms aligns with established principles of incidental learning (Hulstijn, 2001; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Vocabulary encountered repeatedly across varied contexts, reinforced through multiple modalities, and embedded in emotionally engaging narratives would be expected to yield stronger retention than decontextualised list learning.

Participants' perceived advantages of gaming over formal instruction echo findings from Vnucko et al.'s (2024) Slovak study, where interview respondents similarly described gaming as providing more authentic and engaging English exposure than classroom activities. This cross-cultural consistency—between Slovak and Albanian learners—suggests that certain features of the gaming-vocabulary relationship may generalise across European EFL contexts.

## ***Limitations***

Several methodological limitations constrain the interpretation of these findings and warrant explicit acknowledgement.

*Sample size and generalisability.* The sample of six participants, while appropriate for exploratory thematic analysis seeking to identify patterns (Guest et al., 2006; Patton, 2015), cannot support generalisable claims about Albanian learners broadly. The study's findings should be interpreted as preliminary insights that warrant replication with larger, more diverse samples. Future research should employ systematic random sampling to enhance external validity.

*Purposive sampling bias.* The purposive sampling of students who already play narrative games in English may have selected for individuals predisposed to positive perceptions of gaming as a learning medium. This selection bias limits the extent to which findings can be generalised to non-gaming or casual gaming populations (Patton, 2015).

*Self-report limitations.* The reliance on self-report data introduces well-documented methodological concerns. Self-reported measures are susceptible to social desirability bias, wherein respondents may present themselves in ways that conform to perceived cultural norms or researcher expectations (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007; Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Additionally, retrospective accounts of vocabulary acquisition are subject to recall bias, as participants may reconstruct their learning experiences based on current beliefs rather than accurate memories (Pekrun et al., 2020). Future research should triangulate self-report data with objective vocabulary measures, such as pre-post testing designs, to enhance construct validity.

*Ceiling effects.* The near-universal high scores on the vocabulary test (range: 22–25 out of 25) prevented meaningful quantitative differentiation among participants. This ceiling effect may reflect instrument limitations—specifically, that the test items were insufficiently difficult to discriminate among advanced learners—or genuinely high vocabulary knowledge among gaming participants. Either way, the absence of variance precludes correlational analysis and limits the conclusions that can be drawn about vocabulary-gaming relationships (Read, 2000).

*Cross-sectional design.* The cross-sectional design captures participant perceptions at a single time point and cannot establish temporal relationships between gaming exposure and vocabulary development (Muñoz, 2011). Longitudinal research tracking vocabulary growth over time would provide stronger evidence regarding the developmental trajectory of incidental acquisition through gaming.

## Conclusions

This qualitative exploratory study investigated how Albanian university students who play narrative-driven video games perceive and experience incidental English vocabulary acquisition. Thematic analysis of participants' accounts yielded four themes—authentic communicative immersion, multimodal vocabulary reinforcement, affective engagement, and perceived advantages over formal instruction—that collectively suggest narrative gaming constitutes a meaningful site of informal English learning for this cohort.

The alignment of these findings with patterns reported in Swedish (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012) and Slovak (Vnucko et al., 2024) contexts invites reflection on possible explanatory factors. Albania's media ecology may play a contributory role: unlike some neighbouring regions with established dubbing traditions, Albanian television and streaming platforms predominantly retain original English audio with subtitles, exposing viewers to authentic

English input from early childhood. This sustained ambient exposure, combined with widespread access to international gaming platforms through digital distribution services, may explain why Albanian students articulate gaming-language experiences similar to their Northern European counterparts despite geographic and linguistic distance. However, such contextual interpretation remains speculative and warrants systematic investigation.

The study's primary contribution lies in extending gaming-vocabulary research to a previously unstudied Southeastern European context and in foregrounding learner perspectives through qualitative methodology. The findings generate testable hypotheses—particularly regarding the role of narrative genre and multimodal reinforcement—that merit large-scale quantitative investigation. For ESP educators in Albanian higher education, these preliminary findings suggest that students' extramural gaming activities may warrant recognition as legitimate sites of English exposure, potentially informing needs analysis and pedagogical design.

Future research should expand the participant base to enable statistical analysis, incorporate objective vocabulary gain measures through pre-post designs, and systematically compare learners who play narrative versus non-narrative games. The methodological groundwork established here—including adapted instruments and thematic frameworks—provides a foundation for such investigations.

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