

Vocabulary Learning via Social Media: A Descriptive Qualitative Study of University Students' Experiences with TikTok

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary knowledge underpins English proficiency, yet vocabulary learning in Indonesian universities is often treated as conscious memorization, while students are exposed to abundant English through social media. This study explores how undergraduate EFL students experience incidental vocabulary acquisition through TikTok and how the platform's multimodal affordances (short-form video, audio, captions, subtitles, visual context, repetition, and algorithmic recommendations) shape their vocabulary understanding, retention, and autonomous learning. Using a descriptive qualitative design, the study involves eight students of Muhammadiyah University of Makassar, purposively selected for their active TikTok use and regular exposure to English content. Data are collected through a screening questionnaire and semi-structured interviews and analysed thematically. Trustworthiness is supported by member checking, peer debriefing, thick description, and an audit trail. Six themes are anticipated: authentic contextualized exposure, multimodal support for form-meaning links, algorithmic repetition and retention, enjoyment and motivation, learner-initiated strategies, and challenges of distraction, unreliable content, fast speech, and excessive screen time. Rather than a substitute for formal instruction, TikTok is viewed as an informal mobile-assisted learning environment whose benefits depend on learners' motivation, attention, self-regulation, and critical digital literacy. The study offers context-specific evidence and pedagogical implications for integrating students' everyday digital practices into vocabulary instruction.

Keywords: TikTok, vocabulary learning, incidental vocabulary acquisition, mobile-assisted language learning, EFL undergraduates

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is an important part of proficiency in second and foreign languages. The learner needs a wide enough and well developed lexical repertoire for them to be able to grasp texts, follow spoken discourse, form ideas and communicate precisely. Learning a word is more than just memorizing dictionary definitions. It also involves knowledge about the form of a word, its pronunciation, spelling, grammatical behaviour, collocation, register, frequency and use in appropriate settings. This means a learner may be able to recognize a word when reading or

listening but unable to retrieve and use it productively when speaking or writing. This difference between receptive recognition and productive use is why the acquisition of vocabulary is a cumulative, complicated and long-term process and not a one-off act of memorizing [1].

In many EFL contexts, including English education at university level in Indonesia, vocabulary is still typically taught through word lists, translation, isolated sentence exercises and preparation for formal assessment. These strategies may create a preliminary form-meaning link but do not necessarily expose pupils to the pragmatic, cultural, phonological and contextual characteristics of lexical use. Words taught in isolation may become dormant information, with little opportunity for children to come across them again in meaningful discourse. If vocabulary training is not linked to real conversation, learners may know the Indonesian equivalent of an English word but not know how the word sounds in natural speech, what phrases normally go with it, or the social situations in which it is appropriate.

At the same time, today university students have access to so much English outside the classroom through mobile devices, streaming services, games, online communities, music, podcasts and social media. Such informal, out-of-class encounters are a prominent part of online English language instruction. “Informal digital learning is usually self-initiated, curiosity-driven and embedded in entertainment, socialisation or information searching, rather than conventional instruction. Increasingly, research is indicating that it is how learners use their time on-line (e.g. how they pay attention and engage strategically with language) rather than how long they stay on-line that counts for educational purposes. For example, Lai and Wang [2] found diverse relationships between digital activities of entertainment, sociability and information and receptive vocabulary knowledge, with strategic lexical processing reinforcing some of these relationships.

This is especially true for TikTok, which brings together short form video, sound, on-screen text, captions, subtitles, visual storytelling, comment engagement, remix functionality, and personalized content recommendation. Such features are expected to yield many encounters with real utterances, slang, set phrases, pronunciation variants and culturally situated language. A learner watching a cooking tutorial, a travel vlog, a comedy sketch, a beauty review, a study tip or an English-teaching account can be primarily interested in the content or entertainment value, but might at the same time notice new phrases and idioms. The present situation is an example of incidental vocabulary acquisition, when word learning is a by-product of a concentration on meaning rather than the primary or single purpose of the learner.

The notion of incidental learning does not imply that vocabulary is learned easily or without conscious effort. Webb, Uchiyara, and Yanagisawa’s [3] meta-analysis provided evidence of the substantial incidental vocabulary learning that can occur through meaning-focused exposure, although the extent of learning is influenced by factors such as proficiency, modality of input, materials, repetition, spacing, and methodological context. Their results also suggested that the benefits of watching alone were less than those of reading, listening or reading and listening. This finding is relevant for research on TikTok because it demonstrates that visual pleasure does not necessarily result in durable lexical learning. Learners may need to be exposed to the vocabulary more than once, to focus on the vocabulary, to use inferencing, to use captions, to use replay, to take notes, to check the dictionary or to have future opportunities to apply the word to help them preserve vocabulary.

Current research emphasizes the pedagogical benefits of TikTok and other social media platforms. As Lee [4] points out, informal language learning might be facilitated by the affordances of platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Gao et al. [5] discovered that using TikTok as an instructional tool was more successful than standard training in increasing MICE learners’ learning motivation and speaking skills. In the setting of Indonesia, junior secondary EFL learners obtained

superior scores in vocabulary when learning using TikTok videos [6]. Indonesian undergraduates viewed social networking sites as real conversation, interaction and language workout [7]. Nevertheless, a lot of research is quantitative, experimental or generic in a multi-platform manner and shows the benefits of social media for language learning.

Another qualitative topic lacking research: What are university students' perceptions of encountering, interpreting, remembering and applying English language when scrolling on TikTok in their everyday life? Learners' accounts are crucial because a platform feature can be valuable to one learner and troublesome to another. Captions may aid with spelling recognition, although they may be wrong or missing. Algorithms that repeat can increase the frequency of a phrase, but the feeds themselves may also restrict learners to a narrow number of topics. Short movies can reduce cognitive load and maintain attention. But rapid tempo and short duration may hinder deeper processing. Learners may also respond in numerous ways, for example by pausing, replaying, seeking up meanings, saving videos, copying speech, taking notes or just scrolling on.

This extended study is an extended version of the original manuscript and presents the qualitative analysis of eight undergraduate students of Muhammadiyah University of Makassar who are active users of TikTok and face English material. The original study's focus on incidental vocabulary learning and students' actual experiences with digital technology remains, but the present enhanced version clarifies the conceptual background, methodological openness and interpretative framework.

Therefore, this study tries to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the experience of EFL undergraduate students in incidental learning of English vocabulary through TikTok?
2. How do students view the multimodal features of TikTok, such as video, audio, captions, subtitles and visual context, in aiding or impeding word learning and retention?
3. What are the self-regulation and problems that affect the learner-initiated strategies in learning vocabulary through TikTok?

This study intends to address these concerns and contribute to the research on incidental vocabulary acquisition, Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and online informal learning of English. It also aims to provide pedagogical implications for teachers who desire to connect traditional vocabulary instruction with the digital areas that students currently voluntarily engage with.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Vocabulary Knowledge and the Nature of Lexical Development

Vocabulary knowledge is generally treated as a continuum rather than a known–unknown dichotomy. Learners may initially see or hear a word's visual or phonetic shape, connect it to a partial meaning, recognize it in different situations, comprehend its grammatical and collocational behavior and finally recall it productively. Nation [1] distinguishes between receptive knowledge and producing knowledge, and he stresses that word knowledge is composed of several components. This is a very important distinction for social media learning since a short contact may enable recognition but it does not ensure fruitful remembering or use.

Lexical development also depends on the frequency and quality of exposure. High frequency words are more likely to be seen again and again in different situations, while lower frequency words may require more conscious attention. The importance of repeated contacts is that one exposure is unlikely to offer all features of word knowledge. Each encounter can tell us about pronunciation, spelling, meaning, collocation, register or pragmatic function. Recurrence

on TikTok: When a popular term is used by several authors, or when a user replays or saves a video, or when the recommendation algorithm continues to show relevant content.

Context has a double role. It can allow learners to infer meaning through visual action, facial expression, objects, setting, conversation and associated text. However, contextual inference also can be wrong, especially in the case of very short videos or those that are culturally dense, hilarious, sardonic or rely upon background information. Feelings of understanding by learners should not be taken as evidence for full lexical knowledge. A qualitative study could illuminate what students mean when they say they have “learned” a word, and what evidence they use to judge whether they have retained it.

2.2 Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

Incidental vocabulary acquisition refers to the learning of vocabulary when learners are primarily concerned with understanding (or communicating) a message. The purpose does not have to be completely inattentive. They do not plan studying the vocabulary but learners may notice a word and figure out the meaning, or check a dictionary for a time. Thus incidental and purposeful learning are to be seen as points in a continuum. A pleasant TikTok session might become semi-intentional when the learner stops the video, reads a caption, looks up a meaning, or repeats a sentence out loud. One early theoretical model of how acquisition can be facilitated by comprehensible information is Krashen’s [8] input hypothesis. From this point of view, language growth is promoted when learners are given relevant content that is mostly comprehensible and contains elements somewhat beyond their current level of proficiency. The videos on TikTok offer visual context, gestures, captions, repetition, and topic familiarity to the input, which can make it more comprehensible. However, understandable input is a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustained vocabulary development. Attention, prior knowledge, frequency of exposure to the content and opportunity to recover it all count, too.

Webb et al. [3] report strong impacts of meaning-focused exposure in their meta-analysis of accidental L2 vocabulary learning, but average rates of learning vary as a function of input type and other factors. They found that observation of the audiovisual can be helpful to learning but may be less successful than types of training that pay more attention to lexical form. Thus, we need to analyze TikTok users’ interaction with captions, subtitles, replay options, and other factors rather than assuming that passive viewing will result in significant language acquisition.

2.3 Mobile-Assisted Language Learning and Mobile-Assisted Vocabulary Learning

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning is language learning facilitated by portable, connected devices that offer access across time and space. It is not only mobile that gives educational value, but also immediacy, personalization, multimodality, connectivity and learner control. Smartphones enable learners to switch smoothly between exposure and action: they can hear a word, replay it, check its meaning, copy it into their notes, ask a question in comments, or use it in a message.

Mobile-assisted vocabulary acquisition has evolved from specific flashcard and dictionary applications to more general digital ecosystems including social networking platforms. A recent meta-analysis of Zhou and Zhou [9] synthesized 65 experimental and quasi-experimental studies and found that mobile applications were generally supportive of vocabulary learning, with stronger outcomes under some conditions such as longer treatment duration and educationally oriented applications. The authors also point out that general-purpose programs can introduce distracting content. Thus, TikTok is a fruitful but complicated case: it gives authentic, engaging and customized input, yet it was initially created to grab attention and entertain and not for methodical vocabulary teaching.

Thus, the educational efficiency of TikTok should be studied by looking at the interplay between design of the platform, content features, learner agency and learning methodologies. A technologically deterministic position that assumes that learning is a result of the platform itself would miss the way that learners selectively perceive and act upon affordances. The same replay button is a learning affordance only when used by a user to rehearse pronunciation or examine meaning.

2.4 Multimodality, Dual Coding, and Vocabulary Processing

TikTok material is by its nature multimodal. Spoken language, written captions, subtitles, music, gesture, facial expression, visual objects, animation, editing, and spatial arrangement are all ways of communicating meaning. This is consistent with Paivio's dual coding hypothesis that verbal and nonverbal information are stored in connected systems [10]. Learners may have many ways of remembering when a word is linked to visual, motion, sound and written form. From this theoretical standpoint it is easy to understand why young people often say that they remember sentences they have heard in hilarious or colorful films.

Multimodality may strengthen form meaning relationships in a number of ways. The audio channel conveys information about pronunciation and prosody, the captions about the orthographic form, the visual scenes about the referential or situational context, and the repetitive editing may highlight important expressions. For example, in the instance of a student, the word "overwhelmed" can be heard, can be perceived as a subtitle and also in the form of creative acting afraid. The phrase can be linked with an emotionally important situation. Convergence might make an unknown item more salient than a decontextualized list.

But multimodality also presents cognitive hurdles. Split attention is when you have rapid cuts, background music, decorative writing, multiple voices, emoticons and comments all at once. Captions are generated automatically. Might not be 100% correct. Producers may use non-standard spelling, slang, or a regionally determined accent. Aslan and Sirojtdinovna [11] assessed vocabulary-based Instagram reels and found that although the learners appreciated the multimodal input, they had concerns with the speed, the short length of the videos, the presence of extraneous material and the constraints of the site. The tensions are directly applicable to TikTok and illustrate the significance of a balanced affordance/limitation study.

2.5 TikTok as an Informal Language-Learning Environment

TikTok is no impartial vessel of videos. Its recommendation system constantly adjusts the material feed based on user behaviors including viewing length, replay, likes, searches, followers, comments, and sharing. From a learning perspective, personalization can boost topic relevance and recurrent exposure. If a student follows accounts about teaching English, foreign entertainment, travel, gaming, lifestyle etc. they may acquire incremental English input. Repetition among producers may acquaint learners with common language and pronunciation patterns. Lee [4] conceptualizes the educational potential of Instagram and TikTok in terms of affordances that arise from the interaction between the characteristics of the platforms and the aspirations of the users. This ecological concept is beneficial in that it understands that social media was never originally conceived as a formal language learning system. Learners practice language in unique ways using searchable hashtags, duets, comments, short movies, captions and creator networks.

Empirical research are increasingly showing evidence of potential benefits. Alghameeti [12] and Alshreef and Khadawardi [13] found that learners had positive opinions of TikTok for expanding vocabulary. Gao et al. [5] found better motivation and speaking proficiency in a TikTok-supported teaching condition. Vocabulary gains were found among Indonesian EFL learners who received TikTok-based instruction [6]. At a larger level, Apoko and Waluyo [7] discovered that

Indonesian university students perceived social media as a facilitator of real communication, English practice, engagement, and learning methodologies.

Nevertheless, the evidentiary basis remains varied. Studies vary in the age group, the institutional context, the learning design, the duration of exposure, the outcome measures, and whether the TikTok use is formal, teacher-directed, self-directed, or incidental. A qualitative focus on naturalistic experiences of university students can complement experimental evidence by providing insight into the processes of perceived learning: what draws attention, how meanings are constructed, which words are remembered, and when amusement becomes learning.

2.6 Learner Autonomy, Self-Regulation, and Digital Literacy

Informal learning on social media places a lot of load on the learners. The notion of autonomy includes not only the freedom to choose content but also the ability to set goals, choose resources, monitor comprehension, assess progress, and manage behaviour. Students can follow English-language content creators, save interesting videos, form collections, repeat pronunciations, record new phrases, or take the initiative and hunt for explanations on TikTok. These activities make inadvertent exposure a more intentional learning.

The endless scroll feature of TikTok could lead to use beyond the learner's goal. Equally important is self-regulation. Students may begin with the English curriculum but they quickly lapse into irrelevant fun. Notifications, comments, trends and movies that trigger emotion can break prolonged concentration. Hence, efficient informal learning involves metacognitive awareness, i.e., the learners need to be able to detect when they are learning, decide which things need greater attention, examine unclear interpretations and control time on the platform.

You need certain key online literacy skills, too. There's a huge range in authenticity and reliability of content on TikTok. Language producers may oversimplify explanations, present their own thoughts as regulations, or reproduce erroneous subtitles. What students need is a way to test meaning and usage against reputable dictionaries, corpora, textbooks, instructors, or many examples. Accordingly, the study does not regard online literacy as an ancillary issue but as a mediating factor of the educational impact of exposure to social media.

2.7 Conceptual Framework

The study's conceptual framework hypothesizes that the incidental vocabulary learning through TikTok is based on the interaction of four dimensions. First, platform affordances offer audiovisual input, captions, searchability, replay, storage, and algorithmic repetition. Secondly, content features affect lexical accessibility through topic familiarity, speech rate, visual clarity, authenticity and linguistic complexity. Third, student factors such as competency, vocabulary background, interests, motivation, attention and digital habits. Fourth, learners can notice, infer, playback, check meanings, save, take notes, imitate and employ.

Vocabulary outcomes are defined as observed changes in recognition, understanding, pronunciation awareness, spelling, recall and productive use. Since this is a qualitative study, the goal is not to determine effect size but to reconstruct how learners make sense of these processes and how they discern between ephemeral exposure and meaningful learning. Distraction, disinformation, fast speech, cognitive overload and screen-time concerns may impair the exposure learning link, whereas repetition, strategic attention and verification may increase it.

Table 1. Conceptual dimensions of incidental vocabulary learning through TikTok

Dimension	Analytical indicators
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Platform affordances	Short video, audio, captions, subtitles, replay, save, search, comments, personalized recommendations
Content characteristics	Topic, authenticity, speech rate, linguistic complexity, visual clarity, creator credibility
Learner factors	Proficiency, prior vocabulary, interest, motivation, attention, media habits, digital literacy
Learner strategies	Inferencing, replaying, dictionary consultation, note-taking, imitation, saving, sharing, subsequent use
Perceived outcomes	Form recognition, meaning comprehension, pronunciation awareness, spelling, recall, productive use
Constraints	Distraction, inaccurate content, fast speech, brevity, overload, unregulated screen time

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The present study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze how the participants interpret and describe their vocabulary learning experience on TikTok. A qualitative method is suitable since the phenomenon includes perceptions, habits, strategies, emotions and context-dependent meaning-making, which cannot be captured properly by numerical scores alone. The study does not aim to test whether TikTok causes vocabulary growth, or to generalise statistically to all university students. Instead, it is an attempt to give an in-depth account of the experience of inadvertent lexical exposure by a small group of EFL undergraduates in an everyday digital setting.

The descriptive approach focuses on the language of the participants but also permits the researcher to interpret trends among narratives. The unit of analysis is the reported experience of the participant of encountering, understanding, recalling, validating and potentially employing English words or expressions retrieved from TikTok. The study also investigates participants' appraisals of certain platform characteristics and the factors that facilitate or hinder learning.

3.2 Research Setting and Participants

The study is carried out at Muhammadiyah University of Makassar, Indonesia. The participants were eight undergraduate students of EFL who were purposively sampled. The use of purposive sampling is because the research involves individuals who can provide information-rich descriptions of the use of TikTok and exposure to English terminology. The small sample allows for in-depth interviewing and both within-case and cross-case analysis.

Participants are included if they: are currently an undergraduate student; are active TikTok users; are regularly exposed to videos in the English language; can recall examples of unfamiliar or newly learned English words from TikTok; and are willing to participate in a recorded interview. Students that infrequently use TikTok and do not come across English content are excluded, as they will have minimal experience related to the research topics.

Table 2. Proposed participant selection criteria

Criterion	Operational definition
Enrollment	Active undergraduate student at Muhammadiyah University of Makassar
Usage platform	Frequently uses TikTok ideally more than a few days a week
Exposure English	Watches Regularly scheduled English language or English subtitled programming
Relevance to experience	Might be able to show examples of new language or idioms found on TikTok
Consent	Voluntary willingness to participate and to be audio-recorded
Exclusion	Insufficient TikTok use, insufficient exposure to English, or unable to give relevant examples

3.3 Research Instruments

It uses two instruments. (1) is a screening questionnaire that assesses eligibility and collects contextual information. The questionnaire questions about how frequently and for how long they use TikTok, what type of material they follow, how often they are exposed to English, if they use captions/subtitles, and if they have seen or learnt English words through TikTok. The screening questionnaire is not a standardized evaluation tool, but is intended to choose appropriate persons and to provide interview prompts.

The second instrument is a semi-structured interview schedule. Semi-structured interviews offer stability for the participants, but they also allow for follow up questions that are pertinent to the individual's experience. The guide is divided into six sections: general use of TikTok; types of English content encountered; memorable examples of vocabulary learning; views on video, audio, captions, subtitles and visual context; ways of understanding and remembering new words; and challenges, self-regulation and verification practices.

Participants are asked to think about specific movies, words, phrases or creators to generate tangible, not abstract, responses. If they can, they might be requested to show a video they have stored, or to describe the actions they took after noticing a word. Such critical-incident cues may signal the shift from exposure to awareness, comprehension, rehearsal and recall.

3.4 Data Collection Procedures

Data gathering is done in four stages. The researcher will administer the screening questionnaire to potential participants and match the replies with the inclusion criteria. Second, eligible students are given an information sheet which outlines the objective of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, confidentiality procedures, recording and the possibility to withdraw. Written informed consent is sought before interview .

Third, the individual semi-structured interviews are carried out in a quiet place or through a secured online meeting platform. The interviews are intended to run between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on the richness of the participants' responses. Interviews will be performed in English, Indonesia or a mix of the two as needed to enable participants to accurately communicate their experiences. English fluency during the interview is not considered by the researcher to be proof of vocabulary learning, as this study is about experience, not about assessment of oral skill.

Fourth, Audio recordings are transcribed verbatim. If participants speak in Indonesian, suitable excerpts may be translated into English for reporting. The translation decisions are recorded; the researcher keeps the intended meaning and communication tone of the source utterances. Participants are assigned a code (e.g., P1, P2, P3) and identifying information is removed from transcripts.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data are analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Analysis starts with reading and re-reading interview transcripts, and listening to recordings to acquire familiarity with the data. The researcher produces initial notes about experiences with terminology, platform characteristics, emotional responses, methods, perceived outcomes, and obstacles. Then, the first codes are created throughout the whole dataset. Codes can be semantic, representing explicit statements such as “I read the subtitle” or interpretative, representing larger meanings such as “caption-mediated form recognition.

Related codes were clustered into candidate themes . Visual context might be a topic of codes related to motions, objects, facial expression, and settings; algorithmic and learner-controlled repetition might be a theme of codes related to replay, recurrent trends and repeated author explanations. Candidate themes should be considered in relation to the coded extracts and the entire dataset to verify they are internally coherent, and that there are clear and identifiable distinctions between them. Themes are then defined and identified in such a way as to explain their core organizing principle. The final analysis is not only a list of positive and negative perceptions. It considers connections between topics, e.g., how fun sustains exposure but also scrolling for too long, or how captions help with spelling but wrong automated text causes confusion. Interpretive reporting involves quotes from participants, common themes across cases, differences in experiences, and linkages to past research.

Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña [14] state that the stages of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing are complementary strategies for arranging the analysis. A coding matrix allows participants to be compared across research topics. Analytic memos show developing views and alternative explanations.

Table 3. Alignment of research questions, data sources, and analytical focus

Research focus	Primary data	Analytical indicators
RQ1: Student experiences	Screening questionnaire; interview narratives; critical incidents	Types of content, circumstances of exposure, noticing, meaning inference, memory, later use
RQ2: Multimodal features	Interview accounts; participant examples of videos or captions	Audio, captions, subtitles, visual context, pronunciation, spelling, cognitive load
RQ3: Strategies and challenges	Interview accounts; follow-up probes	Replay, saving, searching, dictionaries, imitation, note-taking, distraction, credibility, time regulation

3.6 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is discussed in terms of credibility, transferability, reliability and conformability [15]. Credibility is enhanced by asking participants to provide specific examples, employing follow-up queries, comparing statements throughout the interview, and member verifying a brief summary of each participant's important points. Having a coworker or supervisor debrief your findings can challenge your premature interpretations and discover evidence you may have missed.

Thick explanation of the institutional context, participant criteria, digital habits, content categories and data collection techniques facilitates transferability. We do not intend to make a universal assertion, but rather to provide enough background for readers to determine the extent to which our findings might apply to different EFL university settings.

Dependability is addressed by an audit trail including versions of the interview guide, recruiting decisions, transcripts, codebooks, topic modifications, analytic memoranda, and methodological judgments. Confirmability is assisted by connecting interpretations with participant excerpts, recording the researcher's assumptions, and considering cases that disprove the main pattern. Reflexive notes are kept to record how the researcher's own attitudes regarding TikTok and digital learning may affect inquiry and interpretation.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

Participation is voluntary and students are advised that refusal or withdrawal will not impact their academic status. All reports employ pseudoanonymized participant codes and personal identifiers are deleted. Audio files and transcripts are stored securely and are accessible solely for research reasons. As participants may refer to TikTok creators, usernames or identifiable movies, the researcher does not replicate account data unless the content is available, ethically appropriate to quote and relevant for analysis.

The study also understands that discussing screen time, online behavior and language skills may make individuals feel judged. Interview questions are thus structured in a nonjudgmental way. The researcher stresses that the objective is not to prove that TikTok is educational, but to comprehend different experiences, whether that means not learning much, being distracted, or having an unpleasant experience.

ANTICIPATED FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thus the text at hand is a description of a planned qualitative study, not one that includes finished interview transcripts. This section provides an analytically based framework of predicted themes, not an empirically constructed set of 'findings'. The themes below should be confirmed, changed, split, merged or rejected following careful investigation of the actual data. For the final publishable paper, include full participant excerpts and an explanation of typical and atypical experiences for each theme.

4.1 TikTok as a Source of Authentic and Contextualized Lexical Exposure

The first expected theme is TikTok as a source of everyday English as opposed to textbook input. People would say they notice words in comedy, music, gaming, beauty, travel, gastronomy, education, lifestyle or news videos. lexicon may be experienced by learners as something they use to communicate posture, identity, humor, emotion and social interactions and not as stand-alone aspects, since the language is immersed in recognized communicative processes.

Meaning can be made through contextualized exposure. "Craving" could be represented by a maker with food saying they want some, "awkward" could be demonstrated with facial

expression and uncomfortable conversation, “budget-friendly” could be utilized in trip advice with costs and visual examples. In such instances, learners might use a mixture of linguistic and nonlinguistic information to produce an approximation meaning without immediate recourse to the dictionary.

This topic would be in line with the notion that information focused on meaning might lead to inadvertent acquisition of vocabulary. It would also add to previous research in revealing how pupils view genuineness. For some, authenticity may be in the language as it is spoken naturally by native or experienced speakers. Others mean relevancy to things, lingo or events that they think they will encounter. But the research has to be careful, because there’s the possibility of “authentic” content with non-standard language, planned performance, regional variation or misinformation.

4.2 Multimodal Scaffolding of Form Meaning Connections

Another anticipated pattern is that participants feel that the combination of visual context, audio, captions, and subtitles supports comprehension and recall. Audio may assist pupils associate spelling with pronunciation, especially for words previously encountered solely in print. Captions can help partition rapid speech, emphasize spelling and allow the learner to search for a word accurately. Visual action, gesture and objects can assist students in deducing meaning when spoken language alone is challenging.

Participants may also characterize multimodal redundancy, where the same communication is transmitted over many means. Such redundancy can boost salience and provide numerous paths to understanding. A learner who hears an expression, sees it on screen and sees it performed out may feel more confident about its meaning than a learner who comes across it in a word list.

But perhaps the analysis indicates that multimodal support is uneven. Automated captions might misrepresent pronunciation, delete words or show homophones wrongly. Decorative text may be overly small, or vanish abruptly. Music can overwhelm speech, and quick editing can overwhelm attention. Therefore, multimodality needs to be understood as a range of possible scaffolds, whose usefulness depends on the quality of design, the learner’s competency and attentional control.

4.3 Repetition, Replay, and Algorithmic Reinforcement

A third theme one can expect is repetition. Participants may recall words since they are seeing them a lot in trends, memes, songs, comment sections or related media. In the case of English content, algorithmic recommendations can lead to increased exposure to similar lexical terms. Learner control of repetition may occur by repeating, saving, downloading or revisiting videos.

This theme may help illuminate the distinction between frequency of exposure and cognitive involvement. Just seeing something over and over again doesn’t make you learn if you’re only paying attention to the visual fun. However, a few significant encounters can be impactful if a student pauses to check the meaning, imitates the pronunciation and then notices the term elsewhere. So the participants’ tales may combine platform-induced repetition with self-guided rehearsal.

The expected results may also suggest that repetition is beneficial to different parts of word knowledge at different times. First encounters may build familiarity, following encounters may reinforce meaning, later examples may disclose collocations or pragmatic application. These descriptions would reflect vocabulary growth as incremental, and would be consistent with Nation’s multidimensional concept of lexical knowledge.

4.4 Enjoyment, Curiosity, and Motivation

TikTok learning will probably be fun for those who participate, with personally relevant content and low-stakes inquiry. Short films are a breather for the mind from the burden of long academic writings. Humor, story, music and creative personality can spark curiosity and result in more exposure. Students can argue for an intriguing film instead of any other typical vocabulary work.

Enjoyment may indirectly promote learning by increasing the time spent on task and voluntary engagement. For instance, motivational and oral-proficiency gains were found by Gao et al. [5] in a systematic TikTok-supported learning setting. Generally, students of Indonesian higher education are interested in social media as a real practice [7]. This can be supplemented by qualitative study that can elucidate what forms of enjoyment are educationally productive. But pleasure is confused too. The same things that make us vulnerable are the same things that lead to compulsive scrolling, divided attention and time wasting. They want to watch videos and learn English, but they end up with something different. Then, motivation should not be considered as equally beneficial. Productivity requires some harmony between reason for learning, self regulation and entertainment to be motivated.

4.5 Learner-Initiated Vocabulary Strategies

Another expected topic is the tactics learners use when they encounter unknown terminology. This may include: inferring from what it sees, reading the comments, turning on captions, replaying the sound, slowing down the video, searching TikTok or Google, looking up in bilingual or monolingual dictionaries, translating the phrase, saving the video, writing the word down on notes, repeating it out loud, reproducing the intonation or trying to use it in conversation and writing.

Conceptually, these exercises are important because they show learner agency. Exposure is gained by the kids on TikTok but then it becomes learning by choices. Some tactics are to understand. Some are for memory; some are for use. The shape can be recognized by reading and repeating captions. I suppose I'll have a little bit to eat and then I'll have a little something to drink." That may aid the pronunciation." May help to get back later.

There may also be limited or contradictory evidence of the use of strategy for the data. Some may flick through it, vaguely understanding. Some only look for common or connected to their activities words. The observed difference supports the premise that the strategic involvement and purpose of media use impact informal learning outcomes as proposed by Lai and Wang [2].

4.6 The Boundary Between Incidental and Intentional Learning

Participants' experiences can compromise a precise distinction between incidental and deliberate learning. The student opens TikTok for fun, sees some expression that he or she does not understand, looks up the meaning, saves the video to examine later. The first contact is accidental, the rest are deliberate. Another learner might purposefully follow a creator who teaches English but pay attention to the jokes rather than the desired language. Intention thus can alter in the course of an incident.

The study should concern these transitions, rather than classify each participant to a set category. This approach recognizes that today's digital learning is flexible. Interest-driven browsing, algorithmic recommendation, and purposeful study can exist side by side. And perhaps the pedagogical potential of TikTok is precisely in its ability to instigate purposeful learning from serendipitous meetings.

4.7 Challenges: Distraction, Speed, Reliability, and Digital Well-Being

The final anticipated theme is the constraints of language learning on TikTok. There's always new material coming in to the site so they will probably get distracted. Even with guidance, students

can be sidetracked by unrelated videos and notifications. General-purpose mobile apps may result in poorer or more varied learning results than educational apps, in part due to distractions such as these [Zhou & Zhou, 2026].

The video is short and the speed of speech could be possibly creating trouble. Students may understand the subject as a whole but not the individual words. Dropped syllables . Slang . Different accents . Music in the background . People talking over each other . And it is quite a bit harder to hear . Likewise, Aslan and Sirojtdinovna [11] found that quick speech and brief videos posed problems for the learners who turned to social media for vocabulary development.

And then there is the issue of truth of contents. We all have different gifts. Captions may be inaccurate. Uses popular explanations which sometimes be too basic. A film is memorable so that students remember a false interpretation Therefore, research should explore how participants judge credibility and the validation of information.

Digital well-being is as important. Prolonged scrolling can affect studies, sleep or concentration. Some participants might believe TikTok helps them with language, others would be concerned about screen time. These apparently opposing visions cannot be summed up in a positive-negative valuation. Instead, they frame TikTok as an ambivalent learning arena where freely available material is combined with methods to attract commercial attention.

Table 4. Provisional thematic framework for analysis

Provisional theme	Interpretive focus
Authentic contextual exposure	Vocabulary embedded in contemporary, interest-based, and socially meaningful content
Multimodal scaffolding	Visual, audio, captions, subtitles, gesture, and text support comprehension and form recognition
Repetition and retention	Trends, algorithmic recommendation, replay, and saved videos create repeated encounters
Enjoyment and motivation	Humor, relevance, and short-form content sustain voluntary exposure but may encourage overuse
Learner strategies	Inferencing, searching, dictionary use, note-taking, imitation, saving, and later use
Constraints and digital literacy	Distraction, fast speech, inaccurate captions, unreliable explanations, and screen-time concerns

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study has several potential implications for teaching EFL vocabulary. Professors might first embrace the informal internet exposure to which students are already used, rather than treating social media and classroom learning as two distinct spheres. Students could be invited to bring in examples of phrases or idioms they have seen on TikTok, explain the context, examine the meaning, locate collocations and contrast casual use with formal or academic equivalents. This approach views students' everyday digital practices as resources while supporting critical academic research.

Secondly, lecturers can teach a repeatable vocabulary acquisition method for short films. A basic procedure could be: find the overall sense, re-play with subtitles, find the target expression, deduce the meaning from context, check from a reliable source, note pronunciation and collocation, use the item in an original sentence. Thus, cognitive processing is introduced to incidental exposure, yet the motivational force of authentic content is maintained.

Third, instruction needs to develop multimodal literacy. Students need to know that visual context and captions can be helpful to meaning, but they can also mislead you. Activities can test automatic captions against actual speech, study the importance of gesture and image in interpretation, and verify a creator's explanation. Students might also think about register, slang, accent and pragmatic meaning differences.

Fourth, curated TikTok content can be used by teachers for extra input, especially for pronunciation, conversational expressions, formulaic language and cultural context. Use should be curated and directed by specified outcomes, not by unfettered scrolling through class. Teachers should review the content, evaluate privacy and accessibility, provide assistance with transcripts if needed, and offer other resources for students who do not use TikTok.

Fifth, digital self-regulation must be taught as a learning ability. Learners can set time limits, create separate collections for studying, follow credible educational accounts, turn off unnecessary notifications and arrange short review sessions outside the app. Reflection diaries assist learners to differentiate between exposure, recognition, retention and productive usage.

Finally, assessment must not imply that excellent perceptions equate to measurable gains in vocabulary. Future classroom interventions might include learner narratives, when possible, with vocabulary tests, delayed recall activities, learning journals, saved-video analysis or digital trail data. This mixed evidence would also help to discover informal activities that lead to sustained learning.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE STUDY

The study contributes contextually to the literature by concentrating on Indonesian EFL undergraduates at Muhammadiyah University of Makassar whose digital learning experiences are still under-represented in the international literature. It also contributes in a process-oriented way by looking at how students go from meeting a word to perceiving it, comprehending it, validating it, retaining it and maybe applying it.

The study situates incidental vocabulary acquisition theoretically within the framework of MALL, multimodality, learner autonomy and online informal learning of English. The paradigm moves beyond assigning learning to audiovisually exposed individuals and points to the dynamic interplay between affordances of the platform, content, learner attributes, and strategic activity.

Methodologically, the study blends experimental and survey research with qualitative information from in-depth interviews. Student stories can provide data on ambiguous, contradictory, and context-dependent experiences that may not be captured by fixed-response questionnaires. They include confusion about whether a word has actually been learnt, the role of personal interest, movement between incidental and intentional learning, and the tension between motivation and distraction.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Limitations of the Proposed Study. First, it is a deliberately limited sample from a single university. The results will be described rather than statistically representative, and application to other

contexts should be done with caution. Future study could compare students across universities, disciplines, skill levels, geographies or age groups.

Secondly, the study relies heavily on self-reported experience. Participants could forget facts, overestimate how much they have learnt, or report socially desirable practices. Future research could offer more evidence through the use of learning diaries, screen-recorded sessions, saved-video collections, vocabulary assessments, stimulated recall, or longitudinal monitoring.

Third, perceived retention is not necessarily permanent knowledge. "A participant may have immediate knowledge of a term after it is presented but not recall it later or use it correctly." Future study should separate form recognition, meaning recognition, meaning recall, pronunciation, collocation and productive use in delayed measures.

Fourth, the TikTok platform and its recommendation mechanisms are still expanding in terms of their capabilities. Results from one period may not hold after changes to the interface, policy or algorithm. Researchers should report when data were collected and what features participants utilized.

Fifth, the study may have missed students who declined to utilize TikTok for grounds of ethics, religion, privacy, accessibility, or well-being. Future research needs to compare TikTok with other short video or social media sites and include the thoughts of non-users.

Finally, the quality of content and linguistic accuracy should be assessed more extensively in future studies. A multimodal discourse analysis of the movies identified by the participants as informative could complement the interview data and show how artists visually and aurally develop explanations of terminology.

CONCLUSION

TikTok is an important but equivocal context for accidental vocabulary learning in English. The short-form audiovisual materials can expose university students to modern idioms, pronunciation patterns, spelling, visual context and recurrent language use that is outside the formal teaching. The teaching potential of the platform is enhanced when learners detect lexical terms, make connections between verbal and visual information, replay content, check meanings, remember useful examples and try to utilize them later.

Exposure should not be confused with acquisition at the same time. Viewing conditions may produce limited vocabulary gains when learners do not attend to lexical form, and TikTok introduces challenges related to distraction, rapid speech, inaccurate captions, uneven content quality, and excessive screen time. Therefore, the platform should be considered a supplemental informal resource, not a substitute for structured training, systematic practice or reputable reference books.

The planned descriptive qualitative study will provide an in-depth assessment of how eight EFL undergraduates at Muhammadiyah University of Makassar experience this setting. Its importance is not in demonstrating that TikTok is helpful for everyone, but in understanding when students feel learning happens, how they do so, and the conflicts they face. Such evidence can allow educators to create vocabulary education that is relevant to learners' digital lives, while promoting autonomy, critical literacy and responsible use of technology.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in the conduct of this research.

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