

LEARNING ENGLISH VOCABULARY THROUGH TIKTOK: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF SHORT VIDEOS

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Abstract

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This study aims to explore how short videos on the TikTok platform are used as a medium for English vocabulary learning by EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. Using a qualitative approach, this study analyzes the content of seven TikTok videos explicitly designed to teach vocabulary, as well as user comments as a reflection of learner response and engagement. The analysis shows that creators use various instructional strategies such as repetition, visual association, use of context, language games (word families and homophones), and humor to make the material interesting and understandable. User responses showed active interaction, positive affection, and strong motivation to learn, suggesting that social media such as TikTok has the potential to be an effective and inclusive language learning space. This study concludes that TikTok functions not only as an entertainment medium, but also as an edutainment tool that can support multimodal, contextual, and collaborative vocabulary learning. The findings have important implications for educators, learners, and content creators interested in using digital platforms for more dynamic and affordable language learning.

INTRODUCTION

In the midst of rapid technological advancement, social media has become an integral part of daily life for people around the world, particularly among younger generations. Platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok are no longer limited to entertainment purposes alone; they have evolved into multifunctional spaces that facilitate social interaction, information

exchange, and even informal learning. Studies have found that these platforms can foster autonomous learning, increase learner motivation, and provide authentic input (Wang & Vasquez, 2012; Manca, 2020). Among these platforms, TikTok stands out as one of the most revolutionary in the way it delivers content through short-form videos that are brief, engaging, and highly accessible. Its popularity as a learning tool, especially for acquiring foreign languages such as English, signals a new phenomenon in the field of education that deserves closer investigation, particularly within the scope of applied

linguistics. English, as an international language, plays a crucial role in nearly every aspect of modern life—whether in education, the workforce, technology, or global communication. Mastering English has become essential in our globalized world, particularly for students and professionals seeking to remain competitive (K. Shenbagam, 2024). However, not all learners have access to quality formal language education. In this context, social media like TikTok offer a new, inclusive and accessible opportunity for anyone who wants to learn English independently, anytime, anywhere. This marks a paradigm shift in language learning: from traditional classrooms to flexible, creative and interactive digital spaces.

LITERATURE REVIEW

An essential component of mastering English is vocabulary, as it serves as the foundation for all language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Newton, 2016). Without a sufficient range of vocabulary, learners will struggle to comprehend or convey messages effectively in both spoken and written communication. Traditionally, vocabulary instruction has relied on rote memorization, repetition, and textbook exercises. While these methods may help learners acquire basic word lists, they often lack meaningful context and fail to sustain learner engagement (Webb & Nation, 2017). In contrast, recent pedagogical approaches highlight the value of contextualized and multimodal input, allowing learners to encounter vocabulary in rich, varied, and authentic contexts (Coxhead, 2018). This shift opens the door for innovative platforms such as TikTok to be used as alternative, engaging mediums for teaching vocabulary—particularly for learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting. TikTok, launched globally in 2018, is primarily known for its short-form, user-generated videos. Though originally developed for entertainment, TikTok has increasingly become a space for educational content, often referred to as “EduTok.” The platform’s format—videos typically lasting between 15 seconds and 3 minutes—encourages concise and engaging presentations, making it suitable for microlearning (Corbeil et al., 2021).

Several educators and language enthusiasts have used TikTok to teach English vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, pronunciation, and grammar tips in creative ways. For example, creators often use storytelling, skits, visuals, and subtitles to make language input more engaging and memorable. A study by Tran, D.T. (2023), found that learners who followed English-learning accounts on TikTok reported increased motivation and improved retention of vocabulary due to the platform’s frequent, bite-sized content delivery.

TikTok's short-form video feature encourages creators to deliver messages in a concise and engaging way. This opens up opportunities for language teachers, learners, and content creators to develop vocabulary learning materials that are packaged in a fun and easy-to-understand way. For example, many videos on TikTok, such as "5 English slang words you need to know" or "Common English expressions for everyday conversation," are presented with interesting visuals, expressive facial expressions, the use of music, text, and examples of usage in sentences. All of these elements can help learners understand and remember new vocabulary more effectively because their learning experience is multimodal - combining visual, audio and kinaesthetic.

This phenomenon is interesting to study because it shows the integration of

entertainment and education (edutainment) in the context of language learning. TikTok is not only a passive entertainment tool, but also an active and dynamic learning space. Learners not only receive information, but can also respond through comments, save and share videos, or even create their own versions. This interaction reflects the emotional and cognitive engagement that is an important part of the language learning process. The question that arises, however, is: to what extent are short videos on TikTok effective in helping English language learners expand their vocabulary? How are vocabulary learning strategies organized by content creators? And how do learners respond to this content?

These questions are the starting point of this research. In this article, researcher will conduct a qualitative study of a series of TikTok videos that explicitly aim to teach English vocabulary, and analyze user comments as a reflection of learners' responses to the content. This research focuses on two main aspects: first, how vocabulary learning strategies are applied in short video content on TikTok; and second, how users or learners respond to and interpret this content as part of their learning process.

This research aims to explore how English vocabulary is taught and learned through TikTok videos, using a qualitative approach to analyze both the content of selected videos and the comments from viewers. The study will focus on identifying the teaching strategies used in vocabulary-related TikToks, as well as analyzing the responses and engagement of learners who interact with the content. By doing so, the study hopes to shed light on the role of social media in facilitating language learning, and to provide insights for educators, learners, and content creators interested in leveraging digital platforms for educational purposes.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses qualitative research, which is used to understand a human or social phenomenon through a comprehensive and complex description, which can be presented in the form of words, reporting detailed views obtained from informants, and carried out in natural situations (Walidin, Saifullah & Tabrani in Fadli, 2021). According to Creswell & Creswell (2023) define qualitative research as an approach to exploring and understanding the meanings individuals or groups attach to a social or human problem. Naturally emerged methods are involved in this research process, such as interviews, observations, and document analysis. Qualitative researchers often work in the field, focus on participants, and analyze data inductively—from specific data to general patterns—with an emphasis on participants' subjective meanings and developing a complex, holistic understanding of the issue in question.

The data analysis technique employed in this research is qualitative descriptive analysis. The descriptive method is a method of explaining, analyzing, and classifying something through various techniques, surveys, interviews, questionnaires, and tests. It attempts to explore and make sense of linguistic facts deeply relying on the gathered data. In the realm of applied linguistics, qualitative descriptive methods are valuable for examining language learning and teaching in naturalistic settings. Nassaji (2015) emphasizes that these methods are well-suited for capturing the complexities of second language acquisition, where controlled experimental designs may not be feasible or reflective of real-world classroom dynamics. By focusing on naturally occurring data, researchers can gain insights into learners' behaviors and experiences without

manipulating variables. The data are examined by locating, classifying, and interpreting linguistic attributes that emerge in the study object, including words, phrases, or sentence patterns relevant to the research problem.

The primary data in this study are English-language TikTok videos that have been selected for their potential in supporting vocabulary learning. The videos are sampled purposively against standards of relevance of content, ease of language, educational intent, and popularity. The materials selected predominantly feature creators specializing in English vocabulary teaching, explaining word meaning, contextual use, idioms, and expressions. Transcripts of spoken language and on-screen language of these videos are considered as primary data to analyze. These materials are examined to observe what kinds of vocabulary are presented, what multimodal practices are adopted, and how students engage with them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents selected TikTok content focused on English vocabulary learning, followed by qualitative analysis of the video content and user responses. The aim is to understand the teaching strategies used and how learners interact with such content in informal digital spaces.

Data 1

Username: *@MiketheChameleon*

Title/Caption: Common Household Vocabulary

Content:

- Introduces 6 common household words: *sink, broom, socket, bucket, dustpan, rag.*
- Words are pronounced clearly with on-screen text.
- Each word is accompanied by a visual representation (image or video).

Teaching Strategies:

- Repetition.
- Visual support (images and text).
- Clear pronunciation and friendly, engaging tone.

Sample User Comments:

- *“I did think I had pretty good knowledge in English until I saw this video. Thank youuuuu! It helped me!!”*
- *“I love it but you so beautiful and you learn English very good”*
- *“It's helpful”*
- *“Thank you, teacher,”*

This video showcases how simple, well- delivered content can fill knowledge gaps in unexpected ways. By combining images, on- screen text, and clear pronunciation, the creator uses multimodal techniques that support both comprehension and retention. The use of common objects (e.g., *dustpan, rag*) makes the content relatable and practical.

The comments suggest that users not only appreciated the content but felt encouraged by it. One learner wrote, *“I thought I knew English until I saw this,”* showing how informal content can reveal learning blind spots.

Data 2

Username: @jayfujiwara

Title/Caption: Words That End in "ink"

Content:

- Introduces six English words with the same ending sound: *pink, link, sink, think, drink, blink*.
- Each word appears as on-screen text and is pronounced clearly by the speaker.

Teaching Strategies:

- Focus on word families (rhyme-based vocabulary group).
- Visual text synchronized with pronunciation.
- Repetition of sound pattern to reinforce phonological awareness.

Sample User Comments:

- “*Good practice*”
- “*I like the way you doing in your class, thanks teacher*”

This video emphasizes phonetic similarity to introduce vocabulary, a common technique in early language learning that builds both word recognition and pronunciation skills. By focusing on words with the same ending sound “-ink”, the creator taps into *phonological awareness*, which plays a vital role in vocabulary development.

The strategy of grouping similar- sounding words helps reduce cognitive load, allowing learners to focus on patterns. The comments suggest that viewers find this approach effective, with phrases like “*Good practice*” and “*Thanks teacher*”, implying that the video feels both educational and structured. The clear and repetitive format, though simple, mirrors in-class pronunciation drills, which may explain why users refer to the creator as a “*teacher*.” This reinforces the notion that platforms like TikTok can simulate a mini-classroom experience for language learners, especially when structure and clarity are prioritized.

Data 3

Username: @carolinakowanz

Title/Caption: Texting Abbreviations with Mike!

Content:

- Explains commonly used internet and texting abbreviations such as:
 - *WYD* (What are you doing?),
 - *LOL* (Laughing out loud),
 - *MF* (Mother...),
 - *NGL* (Not gonna lie),
 - *WTF* (What the...).
- Includes a short, humorous skit showing how each abbreviation is used in real conversation.

Teaching Strategies:

- Authentic context through dialogue/skit.
- Slang and informal expression focus.
- Visual and spoken explanation of abbreviations.

Sample User Comments:

- “What does LMAO mean???”
- “Wdym is what do you mean” “I don’t know what ‘ml’ means”

This video taps into a crucial area often overlooked in formal education—*slang and digital language use*. The creator not only introduces abbreviations but places them in a relatable social context through a short skit, aligning well with the concept of *situated learning*. Learners don’t just memorize definitions—they *see* how language works in interaction. Comments show that viewers are engaged and actively participating in meaning negotiation. Instead of passive viewers, they become co-constructors of knowledge, asking and answering each other’s questions like “What does LMAO mean?” or “WDYM is what do you mean”. This reflects the emergence of *peer-supported learning communities*, where language learning becomes a collaborative, informal process.

Data 4

Username: @english.with.lucy

Title/Caption: 5 Words That’ll Upgrade Your Vocabulary

Content:

- Introduces five advanced English words: astute, bespoke, eloquent, lucid, melodious.
- Each word is displayed as on-screen text, pronounced clearly, and explained briefly.
- Each word includes a short example sentence for context.

Teaching Strategies:

- Repetition and clear enunciation.
- Visual aid with definitions.
- Contextualization through sample sentences.

Sample User Comments:

- “Thank you I’m fluent now, I’ll always be grateful.”
- “Your English accent is so melodious, I’m into it.”
- “Thank you for this lesson. Mercy!”

This video focuses on enriching learners’ vocabulary by introducing less common yet useful words. The presentation is elegant in its simplicity: each word is pronounced, defined, and used in context—helping learners not only understand meaning but also see usage.

The combination of pronunciation, definition, and example supports incidental learning, where learners absorb new language naturally through exposure. Viewers’ comments show not just gratitude but also emotional connection “I’m fluent now, I’ll always be grateful”—demonstrating how motivational and affective elements play a role in vocabulary acquisition. Moreover, the use of precise, high-level vocabulary elevates the perceived value of the content. Learners feel they’re gaining something “exclusive” or “elegant,” making the video not just educational, but aspirational. This highlights how social media can appeal to learners’ identities as competent, evolving language users.

Data 5

Username: @starvicks5

Title/Caption: Compound Nouns

Content:

- Introduces compound words formed by combining two nouns (e.g., lady + finger = ladyfinger, cow + boy = cowboy, hot + dog = hotdog).
- Each compound noun is accompanied by an image, visual text, and clear pronunciation.
- Repetition is used to reinforce word formation and pronunciation.

Teaching Strategies:

- Use of visual text and imagery to support understanding.
- Clear articulation and repetition of compound nouns

Sample User Comments:

- “Interested 🍌”
- “Please don’t tired until I become full of vocabulary!”
- “Wow”

This video effectively teaches the concept of compound nouns, a vital area of vocabulary that supports both grammar and lexical development. The strategy of showing both the parts (e.g., *hot + dog*) and the resulting word (*hotdog*) visually, accompanied by pronunciation, facilitates both form-focused and meaning-focused input.

Repetition of form and sound helps reinforce retention, while visuals assist in linking meaning with mental images. The comment section reveals emotional resonance and sustained motivation. One user wrote, “*Please don’t tired until I become full of vocabulary!*”—a statement that reflects both gratitude and ongoing interest. Such responses show that short-form videos can provide not only linguistic input but also sustained encouragement, contributing to learner confidence in informal settings.

Data 6

Username: @jayfujiwara

Title/Caption: English in the Bathroom

Content:

- Presents vocabulary items commonly found in the bathroom: toilet paper, toilet, sink, mirror, shower, towel, towel rack, foot mat, scale, milk (the last one used humorously).
- Each word is shown as a label directly attached to the object.
- The labels are read aloud with clear pronunciation.

Teaching Strategies:

- Labeling real-life objects (visual association).
- Oral repetition of vocabulary.
- Humor is used to maintain interest and engagement.

Sample User Comments:

- “*Very unique way of teaching; no one does this.*”
- “*Make a lot this video. very good job*”

This video represents a highly contextualized vocabulary teaching method, where learners encounter words directly associated with tangible, everyday items. By placing labels on actual bathroom objects, the creator offers a form of situated vocabulary learning—grounding language in physical, familiar space. The clear pronunciation and visual text make it easy for learners to both see and hear the target words, which supports multimodal learning. Moreover, the inclusion of the word “milk”—clearly out of place in the bathroom—adds a playful twist that captures attention and invites humor, which is known to enhance memory retention (Badli & Dzulkifli, M. A., 2013).

The comments suggest strong user engagement, with viewers recognizing the teaching method as innovative (“no-one does this”) and asking for more. The light humor helps reduce anxiety around language learning, reinforcing the idea that fun and learning can—and perhaps should—coexist on platforms like TikTok.

Data 7

Username: @Aaron’s.English

Title/Caption: Different meaning, same sound

Content:

- Presents pairs of English words that are pronounced similarly but have different meanings (homophones or near-homophones), including:
 - I / Eye
 - See / Sea
 - Can / Can’t
 - Want / Won’t
 - Hour / Our
- Each pair is followed by brief definitions and example sentences.
- Words appear as text onscreen and are read aloud clearly.

Teaching Strategies:

- Focus on pronunciation and meaning differentiation.
- Use of examples in context to aid understanding.
- Visual and audio input for reinforcement.

Sample User Comments:

- “The hardest one is ‘can’ and ‘can’t’.”
- “‘Flour’ (Tepung) sounds the same, but ‘desert’ (makanan penutup) and ‘desert’ (padang pasir) are different.”
- “Why is ‘hour’ sometimes pronounced like ‘hor’ in song lyrics?”

This video provides a compact lesson on homophones and commonly mispronounced pairs, which are often stumbling blocks for EFL learners. The creator uses a compare- and-contrast approach, supported by visual and auditory reinforcement, to help learners distinguish between words that sound alike but differ in meaning and usage. Such videos foster phonological awareness, a key skill in second language acquisition that aids both listening and speaking skills (Sila, 2021).

User comments indicate that the audience is actively engaging with the material—not just passively watching, but reflecting, contributing, and asking questions (e.g., “Why is ‘hour’ sometimes pronounced like ‘hor’ in song lyrics?”). This shows how short-form videos can serve as springboards for extended, informal discussions around language nuances—blending formal instruction with learner curiosity.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that TikTok has become an effective and interesting learning medium for expanding English vocabulary, especially for students in Indonesia who want to learn independently and flexibly. Through its compact, creative and multimodal short video format, TikTok is able to deliver vocabulary material in a way that is easy to understand and remember. The learning strategies used by content creators - such as the use of images, text, clear pronunciation, example sentences and humorous sketches - increase users' emotional and cognitive engagement.

Users' responses in the comments section show that they are not just passively receiving information, but are actively asking questions, discussing, and even sharing their own understanding. This reflects the formation of a collaborative and supportive learning community in the digital space. Some comments show gratitude, interest and motivation to continue learning, suggesting that the edutainment approach in TikTok can increase confidence and enthusiasm for learning English.

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