

***TikTok* to Learn English Vocabulary: Voices of Indonesian Learners from English Departments**

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the perspectives of learners from English departments on the use of *TikTok* for second/foreign language (L2) vocabulary learning. This study is a continuation of a preceding survey study involving 116 learners from 26 universities in ten different provinces in Indonesia. The participants of the present study were six selected learners from three universities taken from the preceding study. This study employed semi-structured interviews and the interview data were analysed using Thematic Analysis. From the Thematic Analysis, the study found three recurring themes. They perceived various English videos on *TikTok* to be useful to facilitate vocabulary learning. English content created by native speakers was also perceived positively as a good vocabulary-learning resource. Nevertheless, they also noted that the effectiveness of *TikTok* as a vocabulary learning media largely depended on whether learners could optimally use it for learning purposes. Based on the findings, it is suggested that teachers bring *TikTok* into the class to optimally use its potential and leverage its popularity among learners. By doing so, teachers can also facilitate learners not only to be passive users but also to produce English content they could post on the platform. It can potentially make learning more fun and meaningful for learners.

Keywords: *English departments, English vocabulary, second/foreign language (L2), TikTok*

Introduction

Vocabulary mastery is paramount for second/foreign language (L2) learning. No matter how well learners learn grammar or how fluently they speak, without understanding the meaning of words, meaningful communication cannot be achieved (Sekhar & Chakravorty, 2017). The four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing cannot be mastered without learning the vocabulary (Muddin, 2018). Sekhar and Chakravorty (2017) argued that vocabulary learning can be done either explicitly or implicitly. In explicit vocabulary learning, learners engage in activities that focus attention on vocabulary. In comparison, incidental or implicit vocabulary learning occurs when the mind is focused elsewhere, such as on understanding a text or using language for communicative purposes. An example of incidental vocabulary learning is when learners learn vocabulary whilst reading texts in English, listening to audio or music, watching a movie, playing games, and many more.

Vocabulary is not always recognised as a priority in language instruction despite its paramount role (Thornbury, 2002). Moir and Nation (2008) noted that this may be attributed to the misleading belief vocabulary learning could happen by itself. Nonetheless, interest in vocabulary learning and its role in L2 learning in general has grown rapidly in recent years and specialists emphasise the need for a systematic and principled approach to vocabulary for both teachers and learners (Sekhar & Chakravorty, 2017). This becomes the basis rationale for conducting studies on vocabulary learning.

With the advancement of technology, furthermore, L2 learning including vocabulary learning can be facilitated using various technological tools. Perhaps, the most popular form of technology among learners in this digital age is social media allowing easy connectivity with

people worldwide. Concerning vocabulary learning, authors suggested that social media can make potential and effective learning platforms (Khan et al., 2016; Zainal & Rahmat, 2020). Several previous studies suggested that social media platforms, such as *Instagram* (Agustin & Ayu, 2021; Baruti & Subekti, 2023), *Facebook* (Monica et al., 2014), *YouTube* (Sivagnanam & Yunus, 2020) and *Twitter* (Alharthi et al., 2020) can be used to improve learners' L2 vocabulary. For example, a study in the Romanian context found that *Facebook* could be used to increase learners' vocabulary mastery and enhance confidence (Monica et al., 2014). More recently, a study in Indonesia by Agustin and Ayu (2021) reported that *Instagram* positively affected learners' listening skills and vocabulary mastery. Earlier, a literature review study by Alharthi et al. (2020) analysed research on the use of social media for vocabulary learning in various learning contexts from 2014-2018. The study suggested that the use of social media platforms could generally improve learners' engagement, motivation, and vocabulary development.

Regarding social media, among several social media platforms, *TikTok* is currently on the rise. *TikTok* is a platform for sharing short videos from all over the world (Rahmawati & Anwar, 2022). *TikTok* allows users to create, watch, and share short videos around 15 seconds – 3 minutes long (Xiuwen & Razali, 2021). Concerning language learning, social media linked with short videos can help improve learners' language mastery. Through its interesting short videos that can be watched by all users from various countries, *TikTok* could be used to learn foreign languages by its users (Xiuwen & Razali, 2021).

Studies on *TikTok* for learning purposes have been conducted in various contexts where the platform is popular among learners, for example in the US (Mekler, 2021), Saudi Arabia (Alghameeti, 2022), China (Liu, 2023; Xiuwen & Razali, 2021; Yang, 2020), Thailand (Rahmawati & Anwar, 2022), and Malaysia (Anumanthan & Hashim, 2022). In China, a study involving 187 secondary school learners by Yang (2020) reported the positive attitudes of the participants toward *TikTok* and its various features assisting them to expand their vocabulary. Similarly, a study involving 50 Saudi Arabian secondary school learners by Alghameeti (2022) also reported relatively similar findings. In Malaysia, a study involving 45 primary school learners by Anumanthan and Hashim (2022) investigated the use of *TikTok* to facilitate the learning of regular verbs. Results revealed that not only did learners enjoy learning using *TikTok* in class, but their ability to sentence construction involving regular verbs had also increased. Similarly, a study involving nine primary school learners in Thailand by Rahmawati and Anwar (2022) also reported that learners' vocabulary post-test results increased almost twofold compared to those of the pre-tests after they learned vocabulary using *TikTok*. Despite the relatively uniform results in favour of *TikTok* to facilitate learning, a study by Mekler (2021) involving college learners in the general education context reported different results. The study reported that the more time the participants spent on *TikTok*, the more likely they were distracted by *TikTok* when they were supposed to pay attention to lessons and complete schoolwork. This finding could serve as a reminder that *TikTok* could serve as a 'double-bladed sword' regarding learning. It can either positively or negatively affect it depending on how it is used.

Furthermore, in Indonesia, *TikTok* users have reached 99.79 million as of July 2023 (Statista, 2023) and reasonably, several studies on *TikTok* for language learning have been available as well (Cahyono & Perdhani, 2023; Erwani et al., 2022; Novitasari & Addinna, 2022; Pratami & Syafryadin, 2023; Pratiwi et al., 2021; Rahman, 2021). These studies generally reported favourable results regarding *TikTok* to facilitate language learning. For example, a study by Cahyono and Perdhani (2023) reported several key perceptions of learners regarding *TikTok*. The platform could facilitate learners to discover new phrases through hashtags, learn new words, improve language skills, and gain new knowledge of various accents and vocabulary used internationally.

Despite the possible merits of the aforementioned studies on *TikTok* for language learning in Indonesia, some aspects still warrant further investigations. For example, the aforementioned studies were confined to the boundaries of certain universities or even language classes. Hence, they were all small-scale in nature. Conducting studies on *TikTok* involving more diverse participants from various institutions may offer merits and be worthwhile. To answer this particular need, we have conducted a survey study involving 116 Indonesian learners from English departments from 26 universities in 10 different provinces. The survey study reported that the participants had generally positive attitudes toward *TikTok* for vocabulary learning. Nonetheless, in some aspects, they seemed to question the effectiveness of *TikTok* as a learning medium. To this end, the present follow-up qualitative study was conducted to clarify and investigate the phenomenon deeper by involving representatives of the survey participants in the preceding study. To this end, the present study intends to answer this research question: What are the perspectives of L2 learners from English language departments on the use of *TikTok* for vocabulary learning?

Method

Research design and participants

The present study employed a qualitative research design. As such it focused more on in-depth descriptions of a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This study used semi-structured interviews as the method of data collection. The interview method aims to reveal participants' views and perspectives on the addressed topic and provides a particularly sound foundation for obtaining insights into the participants' experiences regarding a certain topic of interest (Jentoft & Olsen, 2019)

This study is the continuation of a preceding quantitative study involving 116 learners from both English language education and English letters departments from 26 universities and 10 provinces in Indonesia. This preceding survey study found that learners generally reported highly positive attitudes toward the use of *TikTok* for vocabulary learning. However, in several items, some learners seemed to report ambivalent attitudes, seemingly questioning the effectiveness of *TikTok* for vocabulary learning.

For the aforementioned reason, six survey participants were invited for this follow-up study. The selection was based on their mean scores in the preceding study. With ten Likert-scale items in the preceding study, each of which had 1-5 possible points, the possible overall mean scores of the participants' responses could range from 10 up to 50 points. In the present study, three participants were selected from the group with high mean scores (35-50) and three were selected from moderate mean scores (25-34). Due to the generally positive attitudes of the participants toward *TikTok*, no participants were in the low mean score category. These six participants consisted of one male learner and five female learners. They were from three different universities.

Data collection and analysis

The instruments used in this study was an interview checklist and human instrument. The checklist consists of questions derived from the research question of this study. The sample questions include "Do you use *TikTok* for language learning purposes or not? Can you elaborate on your response?" and "Do you think *TikTok* is an effective platform for English vocabulary learning or not?" The human instrument was the first author of this report. This is in line with the reiteration of Creswell (2014) that in qualitative research, the researchers also become the instruments of data collection.

The interviews were conducted within a week from 29 April 2023 up to 5 May 2023. The interviews were conducted in the Indonesian language, the language with which the

participants were more proficient at the time of data collection. This was to allow for elaborated responses without any linguistic barriers that may compromise the quality of the interview data. Based on the interview participants' responses, follow-up questions were asked to obtain more elaborate responses concerning the research question.

After all the interviews had been conducted, the interview data were further analysed. First, the recordings were transcribed verbatim and the original transcripts were fully translated into English. Next, the English transcripts were analysed using Thematic Analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2016). The first step was to familiarise oneself with the data by reading the interview transcripts repeatedly. The next was to code or annotate the transcripts. The next thing was to search, review, and define the themes (Clarke & Braun, 2016). Themes, in this case, refer to recurring responses or similarities across the dataset that answered the research question. After the themes had been formulated, interview excerpts best representing each theme were selected for report writing. The names of the interview participants appearing in this report have been anonymised using pseudonyms.

Ethical consideration

The present study implemented at least three principles of research ethics: autonomy, justice, and confidentiality (Israel & Hay, 2006). First, the selection of the interview participants was also based on whether they indicated their willingness to be interviewed when they filled out the questionnaire in the preceding survey study. We selected interview participants only from the group who indicated their willingness. Then, before the interview was conducted, the prospective participants were asked to read and sign the interview consent form detailing the purposes of this study, our identities, and their rights and responsibilities as participants (Gray, 2014). At this stage, they could walk away from the interview freely if they decided to do so. The principle of justice was maintained by prioritising the needs of the participants over our needs. For example, we adjusted ourselves to the availability of the participants for interviews. Furthermore, the confidentiality principle was implemented through the use of pseudonyms throughout this report to protect their identity and privacy (Allen & Wiles, 2016).

Findings and Discussion

The present study aims to investigate the perspectives of L2 learners from English language departments on the use of *TikTok* for vocabulary learning. To this end, six participants from three different universities were invited for semi-structured interviews. The pseudonyms of the participants were Anna (Female/F), Caca (F), Hesti (F), Nana (F), May (F), and Nicko (Male). Thematic Analysis of the interview transcripts produced three recurring themes and these themes can be seen in Table 1.

Table 3. EFL students' perspectives on the use of *TikTok* to learn English vocabulary

Theme 1	Learners could learn English vocabulary through watching various English videos on <i>TikTok</i> .
Theme 2	The effectiveness of <i>TikTok</i> in facilitating vocabulary learning depended on how properly learners used it.
Theme 3	<i>TikTok</i> enabled learners to learn English vocabulary through English native-speaker content creators.

In the following parts, each of the themes will be reported and further discussed.

Theme 1: Learners could learn English vocabulary through watching various English videos on TikTok.

This study found that all (six out six) participants mentioned that *TikTok* was an effective platform to learn English vocabulary. They commented:

"What I always do is searching for contents I like," "...for example about English slang or other languages aspect. Then, I will learn from that." (Anna/F)

"...someone makes daily activities vlog using English, I will be more interested in watching the content because I want to get the real context of the vocab used," (Nana/F)

"I learn English vocab from TikTok ... at that time I saw several videos in my TikTok timeline or we could call it as For Your Page (FYP)... there are lots of videos about learning English." (Caca/F)

"Usually, I learn (vocabulary) on TikTok through landscaping videos, (with) an English caption." (Nicko/M)

"TikTok really gives us the exposure of English content. So, if we really want to use TikTok to learn English, then it would happen." (Hesti/F)

"I usually learn English vocabulary from entertainment videos... we can be entertained as well as learn." (May/F)

From the excerpts, it can be seen that English videos on *TikTok* affected the participants' English vocabulary knowledge, and as suggested in the excerpts, it happened mostly in an unintentionally way. The pattern was that when they watched *TikTok* videos on the topic or content they liked, they would learn new vocabulary as the by-product result. This finding was to a certain extent similar to findings of several previous studies (Erwani et al., 2022; Rahmawati & Anwar, 2022; Yang, 2020). A study involving Indonesian junior high school participants by Erwani et al. (2022) also reported the participants' favourable attitudes towards using *TikTok* for vocabulary learning. It reported that 63.7% of the participants agreed that *TikTok* could help them to learn vocabulary through English teachers from all over the world who made English content on *TikTok*. Earlier, a quantitative study involving 187 Chinese secondary school learners in Australia by Yang (2020) also reported that short videos on *TikTok* helped the participants master English vocabulary. In Thailand, a study involving nine primary school learners by Rahmawati and Anwar (2022) also found that the participants' vocabulary mastery evidenced with their post-test results increased by 95% after the teachers taught them vocabulary using *TikTok*.

Though similarities have been reported across different studies, several key points need to be highlighted. In this study, the participants did not seem to consciously and intentionally use *TikTok* to improve their vocabulary. Intentional learning through *TikTok* was achieved in the previous studies where *TikTok* explicitly incorporated in language classes (Rahmawati & Anwar, 2022; Yang, 2020). However, the lack of learning intention reported in the present study may not necessarily be a bad thing. As far as this theme is concerned, the English department learners in this study seemed to be able to absorb new vocabulary from English content whilst surfing on *TikTok* for purposes which may not originally be educational. This could enrich and sharpen their mastery in addition to the formal instruction they received in their departments.

Theme 2: The effectiveness of TikTok in facilitating vocabulary learning depended on how properly learners used it.

This study found that five participants stated the effectiveness of *TikTok* to learn English vocabulary depending on how properly learners used it. Regarding this, the participants commented:

“I think learning vocabulary through TikTok will be effective if learners use it properly.” (Caca/F)

“Learning from TikTok is effective, but it must be used appropriately for learning English.” (May/F)

“It (TikTok) is effective for people who intentionally want to learn English” (Nana/F)

“It (TikTok) is effective, but it may also depend on the people who use it. If, for example, you really want to learn English, you cannot just rely on TikTok, but you can use TikTok as one of your learning resources.” (Anna/F)

“The effectiveness of TikTok depends on students’ motivation and learning style.” (Hesti/F)

From the excerpts, it can be seen that in the participants’ views, the extent to which *TikTok* was an effective learning media and resource for vocabulary learning largely depended on learners’ intentions and motivation to actually use it for learning purposes. Alizadeh (2013) stated that language learning motivation is a combination of effort, desire, and attitude toward language learning. Concerning this study, learners’ attitudes toward the use of *TikTok* should manifest in effort and desire to learn English vocabulary using the platform. For example, if learners wish to learn English vocabulary using *TikTok*, they must consistently use *TikTok* to learn it and minimise using it for other, non-educational purposes.

This theme may indirectly highlight the default nature of *TikTok* as a social media rather than a learning media. As social media, the platform offers many entertainment and entertaining posts not necessarily related to learning, let alone language learning or vocabulary learning. Thus, learners’ planned actions to actually use the platform for learning may be pivotal to influence whether learners could actually take advantage of the platform for their learning optimally. As previously mentioned, results in Theme 1 suggested that unintentional vocabulary learning through *TikTok* may not necessarily a bad thing. Nevertheless, to achieve more optimal learning through *TikTok*, learners should consciously increase their exposure to English content.

Theme 3: TikTok enabled learners to learn English vocabulary through English native-speaker content creators.

Through the interviews, this study found that four participants viewed *TikTok* as a platform which could help them to enrich their English vocabulary through videos created by English native speakers. Anna, Nana, Caca, and May claimed that native content creators in *TikTok* helped them to learn English vocabulary. They explained:

“..., it is good to use their (native speakers’] videos to learn because they are trying to simplify English and they make it so easy to learn.” (Anna/F).

"... They (native speakers' contents) are more contextual, so I believe." "... Most of the time, I follow the native speakers so that we can get what the vocabulary really looks like." (Nana/F)

"Because if they are native, they speak directly in their daily language, even though sometimes their accent (speech) is very fast, it (the delivery) let me learn the language in the real context." (Caca/F)

"In TikTok, if the native speakers tell something, they more like roleplay." "...For example, the material is about 'in' on 'at', you will know the vocabulary 'in' English and the context (of its usage)." (May/F)

From the excerpts, it can be seen that native speakers on *TikTok* were seen as reliable source of English learning content. The content was considered helping in enriching the participants' vocabulary through facilitating them to understand the context of its usage. This finding was in line with a finding of a study by Rahmawati and Anwar (2022) involving nine Thai primary school students. Most of their participants also believed that learning English vocabulary through native speakers on *TikTok* facilitated positively influenced their vocabulary mastery.

The finding in this theme suggested the positive impact of English native speakers' content on learners' vocabulary. However, rather than watching videos on native speakers, learners can be directed to watch videos their teachers have made and posted for the purpose of their language classes. In turn, learners, with the modelling from the teachers, can make their own English content. This way, not only will learners and teachers be users of English content on the platform but they can also be creators. This could possibly promote more meaningful learning for learners.

Conclusion

In conclusion, several key points need to be highlighted. This study found that watching various English videos on *TikTok* was reported to facilitate vocabulary learning. Learners also reported being able to learn vocabulary through English native-speaker content creators. Nevertheless, they also reported that the effectiveness of using *TikTok* for learning vocabulary largely depended on how properly they used the platform for learning.

The following are possible pedagogical implications informed by the findings of this study. *TikTok* can be a possible learning resources and media for English teachers to teach vocabulary their classes. Nevertheless, English teachers must also ensure the optimal uses of the platform for learning purposes if it is used during the class session. That is to ensure that learners do not use it to access content not related to the lesson. Incorporating *TikTok* in class instruction also means that teachers should be ready not only to use the existing content for possible learning resources but also to be the content creators. Learners can be tasked to watch content their teachers have made. It can be used as a learning source or possible language input. It can also be used as a model based on which learners create their own relevant English content. This way, learning can be learner-centred and potentially more fun and meaningful for them.

The limitation of the study may be attributed to at least two factors. First, whilst this study was a continuation of a preceding survey study, the interview data may lack information on whether learners actually did what they said. Hence, this study may lack data on how participants actually used *TikTok* for vocabulary learning or the extent to which they did that. Second, the limitation also relates to the fact that the first researcher who conducted the

interview was a novice researcher with no prior interviewing experiences. This to a certain degree may compromise the quality of the interview data, including its depth and richness.

Informed by the findings and limitations, this study has some suggestions for future studies. First, future studies could conduct a classroom action research study in vocabulary classes at English departments by means of pre-tests, post-tests, and class observations. That is to see the extent to which *TikTok* usage could influence learners' vocabulary achievement. Next, *TikTok* involves other potential aspects of language skills such as speaking and listening. Hence, it may be worthwhile to conduct studies on the influence of *TikTok* on speaking in the case of content creating learners and on listening in the case of learners who use *TikTok* as the receivers or consumers of the content.

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