

Exploring the Relationship Between TikTok Usage Level and Students' Receptive Vocabulary Mastery Among EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to investigate the relationship between TikTok usage level and receptive vocabulary mastery among English education students. Quantitative data were collected from 40 fourth-semester students selected through purposive sampling from the English Education Program at the University of Mataram, using a 20-item TikTok usage questionnaire and a 45-item receptive vocabulary test. Data were analysed using Spearman's rank-order correlation and the Kruskal-Wallis H test. Qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with eight participants and analysed thematically. The quantitative results showed a weak positive relationship between TikTok usage and receptive vocabulary mastery ($r = .183$), but the relationship was not statistically significant ($p = .258$). The Kruskal-Wallis test also revealed no significant difference among low-, medium-, and high-exposure groups ($H = 3.909$, $df = 2$, $p = .142$). The qualitative findings identified four main themes: incidental vocabulary learning, multimodal learning support, repeated exposure facilitating vocabulary retention, and TikTok as a supplementary learning resource rather than a primary learning tool. Students perceived TikTok as useful for providing authentic English input through visual and auditory channels, but they did not consider it a substitute for formal instruction. The findings suggest that while TikTok can serve as a supplementary source of vocabulary exposure, usage level alone does not significantly predict receptive vocabulary mastery.

Keywords: Tiktok, Receptive Vocabulary, Vocabulary Learning, Mixed Methods, English Education.

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has increasingly become part of students' everyday learning environments, providing access to information and language resources beyond formal classrooms. Among various social media platforms, TikTok is particularly relevant to language learning because its short-video format combines visual, auditory, and textual elements and can expose learners to authentic English in contextualised situations (Alshreef & Khadawardi, 2023; Bernard, 2021). The platform's algorithmic nature delivers content based on user preferences, potentially creating repeated exposure to specific vocabulary items and language patterns (Hartomo et al., 2024; Hasanah et al., 2024). Previous studies have reported that TikTok can support vocabulary learning, motivation, and engagement through

visual and auditory input and repeated exposure (Alshreef & Khadawardi, 2023; Bernard, 2021; Hartomo et al., 2024; Hasanah et al., 2024).

Vocabulary knowledge is central to language comprehension and communication. Receptive vocabulary, also known as passive vocabulary, refers to words that learners can recognise and understand when listening or reading, as opposed to productive vocabulary which involves active use in speaking and writing (Nation, 2001, 2022; Webb, 2008). Receptive vocabulary knowledge provides an important foundation for broader language development and typically precedes productive vocabulary acquisition (Schmitt, 2008). Repeated encounters with words in meaningful contexts may help learners notice forms, infer meanings, and retain vocabulary (Webb, 2007; Webb & Chang, 2014). TikTok's combination of images, spoken language, captions, and contextual situations may therefore provide useful conditions for receptive vocabulary learning.

The potential of TikTok for vocabulary learning is consistent with several theoretical frameworks. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) emphasises the importance of comprehensible language input that is slightly above the learner's current level ($i+1$) for language acquisition to occur. TikTok content, when appropriately selected, can provide such input through authentic English use in various contexts. Additionally, Mayer's Multimedia Learning Theory (2001, 2005) explains the value of processing information through complementary verbal and visual channels (Alahmadi, 2024). According to this theory, learning is enhanced when learners can build mental connections between words and pictures, which is particularly relevant to TikTok's multimodal nature combining audio, visual, and textual elements simultaneously. Recent research has found positive learner perceptions of TikTok for English learning and vocabulary acquisition (Fauziah & Pratolo, 2025; Binti Zaid & Sulaiman, 2025; Alharthy, 2025). Studies have reported that students find TikTok helpful for learning new words, understanding pronunciation, and improving listening skills through exposure to authentic language use (Tran, 2023; Rizki et al., 2024; Roro et al., 2024).

However, much of the existing research has focused on general vocabulary outcomes, school-level learners, or single-method designs (Alshreef & Khadawardi, 2023; Bernard, 2021). Research specifically examining receptive vocabulary among university-level English Education students through an explanatory sequential mixed-methods approach remains limited. Furthermore, few studies have directly compared the quantitative relationship between TikTok usage levels and measurable vocabulary outcomes while simultaneously exploring students' qualitative perceptions of the platform's effectiveness. The present study addresses this gap by investigating TikTok usage among English Education students at the University of Mataram, a context where students are expected to develop advanced English proficiency yet may have varying degrees of exposure to digital learning resources. Understanding the relationship between social media usage and vocabulary development is particularly important in Indonesian higher education contexts where English is taught as a foreign language and students may have limited opportunities for authentic language exposure outside the classroom (Crismeilani et al., 2025; Daulay & Utami Dewi, 2025).

Therefore, this study investigated the relationship between TikTok usage level and receptive vocabulary mastery among fourth-semester English Education

students at the University of Mataram. It also examined whether receptive vocabulary mastery differed across low, medium, and high TikTok-exposure groups and explored students' perceptions of TikTok as a vocabulary-learning medium. The study addressed the following questions: (1) Is there a significant relationship between TikTok usage level and students' receptive vocabulary mastery? (2) Is there a significant difference in receptive vocabulary mastery among low-, medium-, and high-TikTok-exposure groups? and (3) How do students perceive TikTok as a medium for receptive vocabulary learning?.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design in which quantitative data were collected and analysed first, followed by qualitative data to explain the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). This design was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of the research problem by first establishing statistical relationships and then exploring participants' perspectives to explain and elaborate on those relationships (Greviana et al., 2024). The quantitative phase provided numerical data on TikTok usage and vocabulary scores, while the qualitative phase offered deeper insights into students' experiences and perceptions of TikTok as a vocabulary-learning medium (Field, 2018).

The participants were 40 fourth-semester students in the English Education Program at the University of Mataram. The sample was selected using purposive sampling, a technique in which participants are chosen based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Creswell, 2017). The criteria for selection included: (a) active enrollment as fourth-semester students in the English Education Program, (b) active TikTok users, and (c) willingness to participate voluntarily in the study. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate because the study required participants who had sufficient experience with TikTok and were at an intermediate level of English proficiency, as indicated by their completion of foundational English courses in the first three semesters. Eight students representing different TikTok-exposure levels (low, medium, and high) were subsequently selected for semi-structured interviews to provide diverse perspectives on the research topic.

The demographic characteristics of the participants included 28 female (70%) and 12 male (30%) students, with ages ranging from 19 to 22 years (mean age = 20.4 years). All participants reported having used TikTok for at least six months, with usage duration ranging from 6 months to over 3 years. Most participants (85%) reported using TikTok daily, with average daily usage ranging from 30 minutes to over 3 hours.

The quantitative instruments consisted of a 20-item five-point Likert questionnaire measuring TikTok exposure and a 45-item receptive vocabulary test. The questionnaire was developed based on theoretical frameworks of social media usage and vocabulary learning, addressing six dimensions: frequency of use, multimodal input, motivation, contextual learning, authentic input, and repeated exposure. The vocabulary test assessed recognition and understanding through multiple-choice and cloze-test items adapted from the Vocabulary Levels Test (Nation, 2001) and the New General Service List Test (Brezina & Gablasova, 2015).

The questionnaire demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .947$), indicating excellent reliability for the research instrument.

Data collection procedures were conducted chronologically over a four-week period. In the first week, the researcher obtained ethical clearance and permission from the program coordinator. The second week involved distributing the TikTok usage questionnaire and vocabulary test to all 40 participants during scheduled class sessions, with each session lasting approximately 60 minutes. The third week was dedicated to scoring the questionnaire and test results, as well as grouping participants into low, medium, and high exposure categories based on their questionnaire scores. In the fourth week, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight selected participants, each interview lasting 20-30 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and conducted in a private setting to ensure confidentiality.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise TikTok exposure and vocabulary scores. Before conducting inferential statistical analyses, the Shapiro-Wilk test was used to assess the normality of the data distribution. The results indicated that both TikTok usage scores ($p < .05$) and vocabulary test scores ($p < .05$) were not normally distributed; therefore, non-parametric tests were selected for the analysis. Spearman's rank-order correlation was used to examine the relationship between TikTok usage and receptive vocabulary mastery, while the Kruskal-Wallis H test was used to compare vocabulary mastery among low-, medium-, and high-exposure groups.

Qualitative data analysis followed a systematic thematic analysis procedure based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. The analysis involved six phases: (1) familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts, (2) generating initial codes by identifying meaningful segments in the data, (3) searching for themes by grouping related codes into potential themes, (4) reviewing themes by checking them against the coded extracts and the entire dataset, (5) defining and naming themes through refinement and clear articulation of each theme's scope, and (6) producing the report by selecting vivid examples to illustrate each theme. The coding process included open coding (identifying initial concepts), axial coding (grouping related codes into categories), and selective coding (integrating categories into core themes). To ensure the trustworthiness of qualitative findings, several techniques were employed: triangulation (comparing data from multiple participants to identify consistent patterns), member checking (presenting initial findings to two participants to verify accuracy), and peer debriefing (discussing interpretations with research supervisors to reduce researcher bias). The qualitative findings were then integrated with the quantitative results to explain the overall pattern through a joint display approach, presenting quantitative and qualitative data side by side to facilitate comparison and synthesis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The quantitative phase involved 40 students distributed across four classes. The TikTok questionnaire consisted of 20 items and demonstrated high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .947$), indicating strong internal consistency.

Tabel 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	28	70%

Age	Male	12	30%
	19 years	10	25%
	20 years	15	37.5%
	21 years	10	25%
	22 years	5	12.5%
Semester	Fourth semester	40	100%
TikTok Usage Duration	6-12 months	8	20%
	1-2 years	18	45%
	>2 years	14	35%
Daily TikTok Usage	<1 hour	10	25%
	1-3 hours	20	50%
	>3 hours	10	25%

Descriptive statistics for the TikTok usage questionnaire showed scores ranging from 40 to 95 (maximum possible score = 100), with a mean score of 72.4 (SD = 14.2). The receptive vocabulary test scores ranged from 18 to 40 (maximum possible score = 45), with a mean score of 29.6 (SD = 5.8). These results indicate that students generally reported moderate to high TikTok usage, while their vocabulary mastery was at an intermediate level.

The Shapiro-Wilk test of normality showed that both TikTok usage scores ($W = .932$, $p = .018$) and vocabulary test scores ($W = .948$, $p = .045$) were not normally distributed. Therefore, non-parametric tests were used for the statistical analysis.

Table 2. Summary of Quantitative Results

Analysis	Statistic	Interpretation
Spearman correlation	$r = .183$; $p = .258$; $N = 40$	Weak positive; not significant
Kruskal-Wallis	$H = 3.909$; $df = 2$; $p = .142$	No significant group difference

The Spearman analysis showed a weak positive relationship between TikTok usage and receptive vocabulary mastery ($r = .183$). However, the significance value was .258, which was greater than .05. Thus, TikTok usage was not significantly related to receptive vocabulary mastery in this sample. The pattern indicates that higher exposure did not consistently correspond to higher vocabulary mastery, suggesting that vocabulary development is also influenced by other factors such as prior vocabulary knowledge, classroom learning, reading habits, motivation, and exposure to English through other media.

The Kruskal-Wallis test produced $H = 3.909$ with 2 degrees of freedom and $p = .142$. Because the significance value exceeded .05, there was no statistically significant difference in receptive vocabulary mastery among students with low ($n = 14$), medium ($n = 14$), and high ($n = 12$) TikTok exposure. Therefore, greater exposure to TikTok did not necessarily result in higher receptive vocabulary scores.

To visualise the relationship between variables, a scatter plot was created showing the distribution of vocabulary scores across TikTok usage levels. The scatter plot revealed considerable variability in vocabulary scores across all usage levels, with some high-usage students scoring low and some low-usage students scoring high, further illustrating the weak and non-significant relationship between the two variables.

The quantitative findings are consistent with the possibility that frequency or intensity of social-media use is not equivalent to quality of language engagement. TikTok can provide language input, but users may consume content primarily for entertainment rather than intentional vocabulary learning. This distinction is important when interpreting the relationship between exposure and measurable vocabulary outcomes.

Several factors may explain why the quantitative relationship was not significant. First, the quality and type of content consumed on TikTok varies greatly between users, with some content being educational (language learning videos, academic explanations) and other content being purely entertainment-oriented. Students who primarily consume entertainment content may have less exposure to vocabulary-rich material. Second, the level of active engagement differs among users; those who passively scroll through their For You Page may process less language input than those who actively engage with content by reading captions, leaving comments, or saving videos for later review. Third, variations in daily usage duration and the specific types of English content consumed (daily expressions, slang, academic vocabulary, formal language) may influence vocabulary outcomes differently. Fourth, external factors such as formal classroom instruction, individual reading habits, and exposure to English through other media (films, music, books) may mediate or moderate the relationship between TikTok usage and vocabulary development. Students who engage more with English outside TikTok may develop vocabulary through multiple channels, making the effect of any single platform difficult to isolate.

The qualitative phase generated four major themes: incidental vocabulary learning, multimodal learning support, repeated exposure and vocabulary retention, and limitations of TikTok as a learning platform.

Table 3. Summary of Interview Themes and Supporting Evidence

Theme	Sub-themes	Participants / Evidence
Incidental vocabulary learning	Vocabulary encountered naturally during scrolling; learning without intention to study	8 participants
Multimodal learning support	Visuals and multimedia support; images and gestures aid understanding; audio assists with pronunciation	8 participants
Repeated exposure and retention	Repetition facilitates retention; daily expressions become familiar; slang memorised through repeated viewing	6 participants
Limitations of TikTok	TikTok as supplementary learning; not a substitute for formal instruction; preference for other learning platforms	8 participants; 3 preferred other platforms

First, participants described vocabulary learning as largely incidental. English vocabulary often appeared while they were scrolling through the For You Page rather than during deliberate study. One participant (P3) stated, "I didn't intentionally open TikTok to learn English, but suddenly I found vocabulary that I didn't know before. I just watched videos and picked up new words." Another participant (P6) added, "Sometimes I find words that my lecturer hasn't taught in class. I just learn them naturally from TikTok." This suggests that TikTok can

function as an informal source of language exposure, allowing learners to encounter vocabulary naturally within entertainment and educational content.

Second, participants highlighted the value of multimodal features. Visuals, gestures, audio, and captions helped them understand unfamiliar vocabulary and connect spoken forms with spelling and contextual meaning. Participant P2 explained, "When I see a video with both the spoken word and the written caption, I can understand the meaning better. The visuals also help me remember the word because I can associate it with the image." Another participant (P5) noted, "TikTok shows the words in real-life situations, not just in textbooks. This makes it easier to understand the context." This finding is consistent with Multimedia Learning Theory (Mayer, 2001) and previous research indicating that multimodal TikTok content can support vocabulary learning (Alshreef & Khadawardi, 2023; Bernard, 2021).

Third, repeated exposure appeared to support retention. Participants reported becoming more familiar with daily expressions and slang when the same vocabulary appeared in different videos and contexts. Participant P1 shared, "Some words keep appearing in different videos, so after a while, I remember them without trying. I know the meaning of the word 'literally' now because I saw it many times." Another participant (P7) explained, "I remember slang words better because I hear them repeatedly. It's different from studying a word list once." This qualitative finding is consistent with research showing that repetition and varied encounters can contribute to vocabulary development (Webb, 2007; Webb & Chang, 2014). It may also explain why students perceived TikTok as useful even though the quantitative relationship between usage level and vocabulary mastery was not significant.

Finally, participants did not view TikTok as a complete substitute for formal learning. Some preferred other platforms for more detailed explanations, while others noted that TikTok was primarily used for entertainment. Participant P4 expressed, "TikTok is good for learning new words, but I still need my lecturer's explanations. The platform doesn't give me complete grammar or detailed meanings." Participant P8 added, "I use TikTok mostly for fun. If I want to learn seriously, I use YouTube because it has longer and more detailed videos." Thus, the qualitative findings suggest that TikTok is better understood as a supplementary learning resource.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provides a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between TikTok usage and receptive vocabulary mastery. While the quantitative results showed no significant relationship, the qualitative findings revealed that students do perceive vocabulary benefits from TikTok through incidental learning, multimodal input, and repeated exposure. This apparent contradiction can be explained by the distinction between perceived usefulness and measurable outcomes. Students may feel that they are learning from TikTok, but vocabulary gains may not be substantial enough to significantly differentiate users based on usage level alone. Furthermore, vocabulary acquisition through incidental exposure on social media may be gradual and cumulative, with effects that are difficult to detect through a single vocabulary test but are nonetheless meaningful to learners' overall language development.

The findings of this study align with and differ from previous research in several ways. Similar to Rezai et al. (2024), who found that informal digital learning of English positively influenced vocabulary knowledge, this study found a positive

but weak relationship between TikTok usage and vocabulary scores. However, while Rezai et al. (2024) reported significant effects, the relationship in this study was not statistically significant. This difference may be attributed to the specific platform examined (TikTok vs. general social media use) and the specific measurement of receptive vocabulary versus general vocabulary knowledge. Consistent with Tran (2023), who reported that TikTok effectively contributed to English vocabulary learning among English majors, this study found that participants perceived vocabulary benefits from TikTok. However, unlike Tran's (2023) findings which reported significant vocabulary gains, this study's quantitative results did not show a significant relationship between usage level and vocabulary scores, suggesting that perceived benefits may not translate directly into measurable vocabulary gains. Similar to Alshreef and Khadawardi (2023) and Bernard (2021), who found positive perceptions of TikTok for vocabulary learning, this study's qualitative findings confirmed that students view TikTok as a useful supplementary tool. The qualitative themes of incidental learning, multimodal support, and repeated exposure are consistent with previous research. However, this study adds to the literature by demonstrating that despite positive perceptions, the relationship between TikTok usage level and receptive vocabulary mastery among university-level students is not statistically significant, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between perceived usefulness and actual learning outcomes. This study also extends previous research by specifically focusing on receptive vocabulary among English Education students and employing a mixed-methods approach to provide both statistical and experiential insights into the phenomenon (Kholis, 2022).

Overall, the mixed-methods findings indicate that the quality and nature of engagement with English content may be more meaningful than exposure level alone. Students who actively engage with educational content, pay attention to captions, and intentionally learn vocabulary from TikTok may benefit more than those who primarily consume entertainment content without active language processing. Future research should examine specific features of TikTok engagement that contribute to vocabulary learning, such as content type, active vs. passive viewing, and frequency of vocabulary-focused interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed that TikTok usage level has a weak positive but statistically non-significant relationship with students' receptive vocabulary mastery ($r = .183$, $p = .258$). Furthermore, the Kruskal-Wallis test confirmed no significant difference in receptive vocabulary scores among students with low, medium, and high levels of TikTok exposure ($H = 3.909$, $p = .142$). Consequently, the null hypothesis (H_0), which states that there is no significant relationship between TikTok usage level and receptive vocabulary mastery, is accepted. These quantitative findings indicate that the mere frequency or duration of TikTok use is insufficient to predict vocabulary achievement, as other intervening factors—such as formal classroom instruction, reading habits, and exposure to English through other media—also play crucial roles in shaping students' receptive vocabulary development.

Despite the non-significant quantitative relationship, the qualitative findings revealed that students perceive TikTok as a beneficial supplementary medium for vocabulary learning. TikTok supports incidental vocabulary acquisition through

multimodal input (audio, visuals, and text) and repeated exposure to words in various authentic contexts, which helps students recognize, understand, and retain new vocabulary. However, students consistently acknowledged that TikTok is not a substitute for formal learning but rather an additional resource. This underscores that the quality of active engagement and the type of content consumed (educational versus entertainment) are far more influential in fostering receptive vocabulary growth than mere exposure level or usage duration alone.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings and acknowledged limitations of this study, it is recommended that students become more selective in choosing TikTok content and adopt active learning strategies, such as reading captions attentively, noting unfamiliar words, and following educational English-language accounts to ensure more meaningful language input. For educators and lecturers, TikTok can be integrated as a supplementary teaching tool to provide authentic English exposure outside the classroom; however, it must be combined with structured formal instruction and accompanied by reflective tasks to maximize vocabulary uptake. For future researchers, it is advisable to employ longitudinal designs with larger and more diverse samples, control for intervening variables such as prior vocabulary knowledge and exposure to other media, and conduct experimental studies to specifically test the effects of different content types and levels of cognitive engagement on receptive vocabulary acquisition more comprehensively.

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