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The affordance limitations of short-form video platforms: micro-learning challenges in tiktok-mediated vocabulary acquisition

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ABSTRACT

In the era of digital transformation, TikTok has evolved from an entertainment platform into an alternative medium for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. However, its educational potential is often hindered by platform-specific obstacles. This descriptive qualitative study aims to analyze the empirical challenges faced by vocational high school students in utilizing TikTok for English vocabulary learning. Using purposive sampling, 10 students (n = 10) majoring in Building Modeling and Design Information (DPB) at SMK 7 Majene, Indonesia, were selected for their active academic use of TikTok. Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews and digital activity documentation, with trustworthiness established through triangulation of data sources. Employing the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña interactive model, thematic analysis revealed four primary challenges: (1) cognitive distractions driven by the entertainment-biased For You Page (FYP) algorithm; (2) superficial vocabulary comprehension forced by short-form video constraints; (3) linguistic inaccuracies and exposure to non-academic slang due to unverified content; and (4) the absence of instant corrective feedback in monologous digital communication. The empirical data demonstrate that students frequently experience screen-time loss and conceptual confusion, indicating that the platform's microlearning nature requires stringent student self-regulation and proactive teacher content curation to be effective.



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Introduction

Digital transformation in education has fundamentally altered classroom operational models, introducing both unprecedented opportunities and complex pedagogical barriers, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (Kurnia et al., 2023). Within this rapidly shifting digital landscape, vocabulary mastery remains the structural bedrock determining an EFL learner's capacity to decode, articulate, and express nuanced meanings in both receptive and productive modalities (Kusrini, 2012; Alizadeh, 2016). Lexical acquisition is non-linear; it is an incremental, long-term cognitive process driven by contextual exposure, continuous semantic processing, and sustained learner engagement (Schmitt, 1997; Ji & Shin, 2019). While textbook-bound paradigms traditionally restricted this process to rote memorization, contemporary digital environments offer decentralized spaces where language acquisition occurs fluidly outside formal institutional boundaries.

As a prime manifestation of this digital shift, short-form video-based social media platforms, most notably TikTok, have ever-present access to students' daily routines (Irianto et al., 2021; Khasanah, 2022). TikTok's dynamic multimodal framework, which fuses synchronized audio, bright visuals, and kinetic on-screen text, presents significant potential for flexible, high-engagement vocabulary learning (Lee, 2023; Alzubi, 2023). However, there is a critical empirical gap between digital consumption and digital literacy. Although vocational high school (SMK) students demonstrate high technical proficiency in navigating these digital interfaces for recreational purposes, they often lack the critical digital literacy and self-regulated learning strategies necessary to transform passive media consumption into structured academic development (Bakistuta & Abduh, 2023). Ideal digital microlearning requires students to possess the cognitive abilities to critically filter input, verify the credibility of sources, and cross-check information; however, preliminary observations indicate that SMK students largely remain passive recipients of algorithmic feeds, resulting in fragmented vocabulary retention and linguistic confusion.

Previous research has begun to identify common limitations of social media in language teaching. For example, Hutasoit et al. (2025) note that TikTok's short-form video format inherently limits the depth and structural sequence of instructional material. At the same time, Alzubi (2023) highlights the widespread risks of unverified social media content, which is often rife with non-standard slang, structural inaccuracies, and informal expressions that run counter to formal academic standards. Despite these initial insights, the existing literature has two critical shortcomings. First, previous studies have been heavily dominated by quantitative surveys that isolate variables at the higher education level, thereby failing to capture the real-world experiences, immediate frustrations, and qualitative nuances of digital learning barriers. Second, these studies overlook the specific socio-technical realities of regional vocational education (SMK), where the curriculum is heavily tailored to technical and practical English rather than abstract linguistic arts, making untargeted algorithmic disruptions particularly detrimental to their specific learning objectives.

To bridge these conceptual and methodological gaps, this study utilizes a descriptive qualitative approach rather than a quantitative or longitudinal experimental design. A qualitative framework is uniquely suited for this inquiry because it does not seek to measure statistical effects or quantify vocabulary gains over time; instead, it focuses on capturing the contextual depth of the phenomena. It aims to comprehensively dissect how and why specific architectural features of TikTok intersect with the daily digital behaviors of vocational students to produce distinct learning barriers. Operating within a regional vocational context in Majene, Indonesia, this study systematically unpacks the lived digital obstacles of these students. By explicitly categorizing these barriers into algorithmic entertainment distractions, structural duration constraints, source accuracy risks, and the complete absence of synchronous corrective feedback, this article provides a grounded, empirical counterweight to purely theoretical social media learning models.

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the empirical challenges experienced by EFL learners within decentralized digital learning environments. Rather than measuring statistical correlations or implementing experimental interventions, this approach was selected to explore how and why TikTok's platform architecture and algorithmic features interact with students' behaviors and contribute to learning barriers. The research was conducted at SMKN 7 Majene, Indonesia, involving eleventh-grade students enrolled in the Building Modeling and Information Design (DPB) program, which consisted of approximately 60 active students. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on an initial open-ended screening questionnaire distributed to the entire target population. The inclusion criteria required participants to actively use TikTok for exploring English vocabulary for a minimum of three hours per week, as verified through smartphone screen-time monitoring; to have recurrently searched for or saved English-language tutorials during the preceding three months; and to voluntarily agree to participate in audio-recorded interviews. Based on these criteria, ten students were selected as participants and coded as Informants R1 through R10 to maintain confidentiality. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached at the tenth participant (n = 10), at which point subsequent narratives no longer generated substantially new thematic categories.

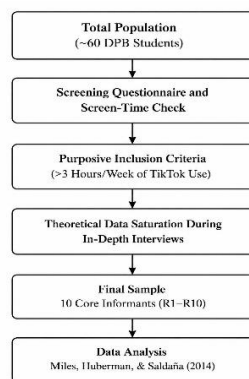


Figure 1. Participant Selection and Data Analysis Procedure

The qualitative data collection process employed two mutually reinforcing instruments to obtain both subjective accounts and supporting digital evidence. The primary instrument was a semi-structured in-depth interview guide designed to explore four key thematic areas: shifts in students' cognitive focus, the temporal and structural limitations of short-form video clips, the accuracy of English-language content, and patterns of digital communication and interaction. To establish content validity, the interview guide was reviewed and validated by a senior faculty member specializing in English Language Teaching (ELT) and Educational Technology. Prior to formal data collection, pilot interviews were also conducted with two vocational high school students who were not included in the research sample. The pilot process was used to refine question wording, improve clarity, and eliminate potentially ambiguous terms. In addition to the interviews, documentation of participants' digital activities was used as a supplementary data source to contextualize and support their interview responses. Participants provided verified screenshots of their TikTok viewing history, collections of saved and frequently viewed educational videos, and personal digital vocabulary notes. These digital traces were used to strengthen the interpretation of participants' reported experiences and provide additional evidence concerning their actual engagement with TikTok for English vocabulary learning.

The qualitative data were analyzed systematically using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves three concurrent and iterative phases: data reduction, data organization, and conclusion drawing and verification. During the data reduction phase, all audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, followed by line-by-line open coding to identify meaningful statements related to students' learning constraints, while irrelevant narrative elements were excluded from further analysis. In the data organization phase, the coded text segments were arranged into an analytical matrix, and conceptually related codes were grouped into four thematic structures: algorithmic homepage navigation, video duration compression, material verification risks, and monological interaction gaps. During the conclusion and verification phase, emerging interpretations were continuously reviewed and cross-checked to ensure credibility and confirmability. Data source triangulation was conducted by comparing participants' interview statements with their documented digital activities, including screenshots and application histories. When discrepancies occurred between self-reported learning behaviors and available digital records, the digital documentation was treated as the primary reference and followed by direct clarification with the respective participants. In addition, participant review was conducted by returning the completed verbatim transcripts and analytical theme maps to Informants R1–R10, allowing them to review, confirm, and validate whether the interpretations accurately represented their experienced learning challenges. Through these iterative procedures, the analysis sought to maintain consistency between the empirical data, thematic interpretations, and participants' reported experiences.

Results and Discussions

A thematic analysis of verbatim transcripts and verified digital activity documentation from ten key informants (N=10) in the 11th-grade Building Modeling and Information Design (DPB) program at SMKN 7 Majene successfully identified the socio-technical barriers hindering optimal English vocabulary learning on TikTok. To verify construct saturation and ensure empirical transparency, a systematic frequency distribution matrix was compiled to illustrate the precise analytical weight of each emerging theme (see Table 1). Qualitative reliability was strictly maintained through a verification process conducted jointly with all ten participants, as well as strict triangulation of data sources.

Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Core Learning Barriers Experienced by Informants (N=10)

Primary Thematic Categories	Specific Empirical Manifestations	Informant Count (n)	Emergence Percentage (%)
Algorithmic Entertainment Distraction	Cognitive displacement via FYP scrolling; loss of academic track; screen-time management failure.	10	100%
Structural Duration Constraints	Fragmented instructional delivery ("piece-by-piece"); superficial semantic comprehension.	8	80%
Academic Inaccuracy & Slang Exposure	Dialect/pronunciation inconsistency; exposure to non-academic slang or vulgar lexicons.	7	70%
Feedback Deficit & Unidirectional Modes	Absence of immediate corrective feedback; reliance on monologous instructional modes.	9	90%

Algorithmic Entertainment Distraction and Cognitive Displacement

The empirical data indicate that algorithmic diversion represents the most pervasive and severe barrier, reported by 100% of the participants (n=10). TikTok's hyper-personalized *For You Page* (FYP) algorithm creates an intense psychological pull by continuously injecting entertaining, non-educational media such as mini-vlogs, short dramas, K-pop videos, comedy routines, and dance trends directly into the student's learning stream. This algorithmic architecture induces involuntary attention switching, shifting the user's cognitive state from intentional academic pursuit to passive media consumption. Informants regularly reported losing control over their screen-time allocation, spending 30 to 60 minutes consuming recreational videos before recovering their initial academic objective, or abandoning it entirely:

Extract 1: "... for example, distractions from entertainment content as well as difficulties in finding suitable learning materials." (Informant R1)

Extract 2: "... distractions from entertainment content, such as nature-related videos, sometimes cause me to forget to study, even for 30 minutes to an hour." (Informant R3)

Extract 3: "The difficulty I experience when learning through TikTok is being distracted by irrelevant videos that suddenly appear." (Informant R8)

Theoretically, these findings expand the scope of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) (Zimmerman, 2000) and the cognitive load framework (Sweller, 2011) in mobile environments. In digital spaces, learner engagement depends heavily on sustained attention allocation. When an algorithm bombards users with highly stimulating visual cues, it overloads their inhibitory control mechanisms. This process supports the view that endless scrolling through social media fragments working memory capacity, thereby significantly undermining the motivation to complete tasks.

The empirical findings regarding vocational school students in this study indicate that, without strict, predefined digital self-regulation strategies, immersive platform designs effectively reduce students' learning autonomy, thereby transforming these educational tools into sources of cognitive distraction. This is consistent with previous research showing that excessive scrolling through social media causes severe fragmentation of academic focus (Lee, 2023; Solidjonov, 2021; Inderawati et al., 2021; Lau, 2017).

Structural Duration Constraints and Superficial Comprehension

The second structural challenge involves TikTok's foundational video duration constraints, which impacted 80% of the core sample (n=8). This format acts as a double-edged sword because it limits the delivery of material to be in-depth, comprehensive, and systematic. Informants observed that complex vocabulary concepts are routinely delivered "piece-by-piece" or split into multi-part clip series. Due to the randomized nature of the FYP feed, locating consecutive parts on a creator's profile page proves difficult and frustrating, disrupting the learner's cognitive continuity:

Extract 4: "...Short TikTok videos tend to limit deeper understanding of vocabulary. Sometimes, the explanation feels incomplete, and when I try to find the continuation, it is not available, which can be confusing." (Informant R7)

From a lexical acquisition perspective, gaining comprehensive word knowledge requires understanding its orthographic form, semantic variations, syntactic constraints, and appropriate register choices across formal and informal communicative boundaries. The hyper-concise format of short-form clips forces creators to sacrifice linguistic depth for engagement metrics, leading to superficial semantic processing among students.

This operational constraint confirms that mobile micro-learning platforms struggle to serve as standalone environments for systematic language development. The brevity of the delivery mode strips vocabulary items of essential contextual frameworks, requiring students to possess the supplementary initiative to verify and expand their understanding through traditional reference materials. This structural limitation strongly supports criticisms raised by DeCarrico (2001), Hutasoit et al. (2025), and Inderawati et al. (2021), who argue that the temporal limitations of short-form clips inherently restrict the pedagogical sequencing required for deep vocabulary internalisation.

Content Accuracy Risks and Exposure to Non-Academic Slang

Linguistic inaccuracy and source credibility issues emerged as significant barriers for 70% of the participants (n=7). Because TikTok operates as an open ecosystem lacking institutional peer review, scientific quality screening, or academic validation, the credibility of its language models varies drastically. Students frequently reported conflicting instructions regarding phonetic execution and semantic definitions, stemming from unverified creator backgrounds, regional dialect variations, and rapid speech rates. Additionally, the platform exposes learners to non-standard slang, abbreviations, and informal colloquialisms that undermine formal academic requirements:

Extract 5: *"The spelling does not always match the pronunciation. For example, the word 'water' can be pronounced differently."* (Informant R5)

Extract 6: *"....not all English-language content on TikTok is suitable for vocabulary learning, as it may contain incorrect usage. Sometimes, one video presents a concept in one way, while another presents it differently, which can be confusing if learners rely on only one source."* (Informant R8)

Extract 7: *".... I find it easy to believe information or content that may not be academically accurate."* (Informant R9)

These findings highlight a distinct sociolinguistic vulnerability within vocational education contexts. Learners who lack a robust prior linguistic foundation often struggle to differentiate between standard academic English and casual internet slang. The absence of content verification filters exposes unguided students to flawed or highly informal language models. Consequently, the commercial pressure to prioritize communicative style and aesthetic charm over grammatical precision limits the platform's academic utility.

This underscores critical digital literacy needs: to navigate such spaces successfully, students must develop the critical agency to independently cross-reference social media content against authorized lexical databases. This empirical concern strongly reinforces the views of Alzubi (2023), Polanco-Levicán and Salvo-Garrido (2022), and Widianingsih and Sulistiani (2024) regarding digital information overload, where the abundance of unverified data necessitates strict critical appraisal and data-filtering skills among independent language learners.

Feedback Deficit and Unidirectional Communication Gaps

The final challenge involves the monologue-driven, unidirectional interaction pattern inherent to TikTok's educational ecosystem, reported by 90% of the informants (n=9). In contrast to conventional classrooms that facilitate real-time dialogic exchange, TikTok restricts communication to an asynchronous framework. When students experience conceptual ambiguity or pronunciation confusion, they cannot receive immediate clarification or personalized error correction from the content creator. While comment features exist, their practical utility for academic dialogue is limited due to low creator response rates and high volumes of casual text:

Extract 8: *"..... When I have a question, I cannot ask for clarification immediately."* (Informant R6)

Extract 9: *".... I prefer learning English from books because the explanations are clearer than those on TikTok."* (Informant R8)

Extract 10: *".... However, sometimes I need to search for additional information on Google."* (Informant R2)

In modern language pedagogy, direct interactive negotiation of meaning is vital for target language internalization (Long, 1996). It allows learners to test hypotheses, secure immediate feedback, and correct structural errors. TikTok's asymmetric communication model cuts off this interactive loop, leaving students as isolated observers of an educational monologue. The lack of interactive support often forces students back toward traditional text resources or secondary web searches to clear up linguistic confusion.

This structural limitation demonstrates that while short videos excel at initial vocabulary introduction, they cannot replace the interactive depth of formal teacher-led instruction. As Harmer (2015), Lightbown and Spada (2021), and Cheung et al. (2021) emphasize, communicative competence cannot be effectively nurtured without interactive feedback mechanisms, proving that social media serves best as an auxiliary tool rather than a comprehensive instructional replacement.

Conclusions

This descriptive qualitative investigation concludes that the use of TikTok for English vocabulary acquisition among regional vocational high school students presents multidimensional challenges related to behavioral engagement, platform structure, content validity, and interaction quality. Based on the data collected from ten participants ($n = 10$), thematic saturation was considered to have been reached when substantial redundancies emerged across the data-reduction and thematic-analysis processes. In relation to the first research objective, the findings indicate that TikTok's highly personalized For You Page (FYP) algorithm can become a significant source of distraction, potentially shifting students' attention from academic activities toward passive entertainment. Regarding the second research objective, the short-form micro-learning structure of TikTok may limit the depth of vocabulary presentation by providing fragmented information and reducing opportunities for extended contextualization and deeper semantic understanding. Concerning the third research objective, the open nature of the platform exposes students to varied linguistic input, including slang, informal expressions, and potentially inaccurate language, while the predominantly unidirectional format provides limited opportunities for corrective feedback and individualized interaction. These findings contribute to the conceptualization of mobile micro-learning platforms as volatile educational environments, in which technological affordances may coexist with structural and pedagogical limitations. Rather than positioning TikTok as inherently ineffective for vocabulary learning, this study demonstrates that its educational usefulness is influenced by algorithmic personalization, content duration, linguistic reliability, and the availability of meaningful interaction. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within the contextual and methodological boundaries of this qualitative investigation. Future research is recommended to employ explanatory sequential mixed-methods designs to examine the identified challenges across larger populations, longitudinal designs to investigate vocabulary retention over extended periods, and multi-analyst qualitative frameworks, potentially incorporating Cohen's kappa where appropriate, to strengthen the consistency and transparency of thematic coding. Overall, this study highlights the importance of critically examining not only the affordances of social media platforms for language learning but also the ways in which their underlying architecture may shape students' attention, exposure to linguistic input, and opportunities for vocabulary development.

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