

Exploring Vocabulary Learning Strategies through TikTok Among English Department Students at a University

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the vocabulary learning strategies employed by English Department students through TikTok. Although previous studies have highlighted TikTok as a useful platform for English learning, limited research has focused on how students apply vocabulary learning strategies while using the platform. This qualitative case study involved three English Department students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews and analyzed using data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that students employed seven vocabulary learning strategies, with determination, memory, and noticing strategies emerging as the most frequently used. These strategies operated as an interconnected process in which students noticed unfamiliar words, inferred or searched for their meanings, reinforced retention through repeated exposure, and applied newly acquired vocabulary in meaningful communication. The study concludes that TikTok supports autonomous and meaningful vocabulary learning by facilitating vocabulary discovery, retention, and practical application. The findings also provide practical implications for English teachers by demonstrating how short-form social media platforms can be integrated into vocabulary instruction to promote learner autonomy, increase engagement, and encourage students to develop effective vocabulary learning strategies beyond the classroom.

Keywords: *Tiktok, Vocabulary Learning Strategies, Vocabulary Learning, EFL Students, Qualitative Case Study*

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is widely recognized as a fundamental component of English language learning because it enables learners to understand and use language effectively. A sufficient vocabulary allows learners to comprehend spoken and written texts, express ideas accurately, and participate in meaningful communication. Nation (2001) emphasizes that vocabulary is essential for successful language use, as learners cannot communicate effectively without adequate lexical knowledge. Likewise, Schmitt (2000) argues that vocabulary development contributes significantly to overall language proficiency and supports the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Therefore, developing learners' vocabulary has become one of the primary concerns in English language teaching.

Vocabulary learning strategies play an important role in helping learners acquire, retain, and use new vocabulary effectively. Schmitt (1997) proposes that learners employ various strategies to discover and consolidate the meanings of unfamiliar words, while Nation (2001) complements this perspective by emphasizing strategies that encourage learners to notice and meaningfully use newly learned vocabulary. These theoretical frameworks indicate that vocabulary learning is an active and strategic process rather than simple memorization. Therefore, investigating how learners employ vocabulary learning strategies can provide

valuable insights into the process of vocabulary development across different learning contexts.

Social media has expanded language learning beyond the boundaries of formal classrooms by providing learners with flexible access to authentic language input. Within the framework of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Kukulska-Hulme & Shield (2008) explain that mobile technologies enable learners to engage in language learning anytime and anywhere through meaningful interaction with digital resources. Among various social media platforms, TikTok has emerged as a popular learning medium because its short-form videos, audiovisual features, and interactive content expose learners to authentic English in engaging contexts. Supporting this view, Hastomo (2022) highlighted that students perceived TikTok as an enjoyable and accessible platform that facilitated vocabulary learning through repeated exposure and contextualized language use.

The learning experiences offered by TikTok encourage learners to engage actively with new vocabulary instead of passively receiving information. Through repeated exposure to videos, captions, audio, and authentic language use, learners are able to infer word meanings, reinforce vocabulary retention, and apply newly acquired words in meaningful situations. Budiarta & Akmar (2024) found that TikTok supports autonomous vocabulary learning by encouraging learners to revisit learning materials and practice vocabulary independently. Likewise, Indah & Suhartatik (2025) highlighted that TikTok facilitates contextual vocabulary learning through authentic language input and interactive learning experiences. Therefore, TikTok provides a learning environment that enables learners to employ various vocabulary learning strategies naturally during the vocabulary learning process.

Preliminary observations conducted by the researcher among students of the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University indicated that TikTok has become one of the digital platforms frequently used for learning English vocabulary. Students reported using TikTok to discover unfamiliar words, understand vocabulary through contextualized videos, save useful learning content, and review videos repeatedly to strengthen vocabulary retention. Although students appeared to benefit from these learning activities, they employed different approaches when learning vocabulary through TikTok. These variations raised questions about the vocabulary learning strategies that students use while engaging with TikTok as a learning platform.

Although previous studies have investigated the use of TikTok in English language learning, most have focused on learners' perceptions, the effectiveness of TikTok as a learning medium, or its impact on vocabulary acquisition. Limited attention has been given to how learners employ vocabulary learning strategies while learning through TikTok, particularly among students in the English Education Study Program at Tadulako University. Therefore, this study aims to explore the vocabulary learning strategies employed by English Department students through TikTok. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to a better understanding of vocabulary learning strategies in digital learning environments and provide insights for integrating TikTok into English vocabulary instruction.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore the vocabulary learning strategies used by English Education students through TikTok. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled an in-depth understanding of students' experiences, perceptions, and learning behaviors within their natural learning contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The case study design was selected to provide a comprehensive description of how vocabulary learning strategies were implemented while participants engaged with English-language content on TikTok, allowing the researcher to investigate the phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). Rather than measuring learning outcomes quantitatively, the study sought to understand the processes through which students discovered, retained, and applied new vocabulary using the platform. This approach is consistent with qualitative research, which emphasizes

exploring participants' perspectives and interpreting the meanings they assign to their learning experiences (Patton, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

The participants were three English Education students at Tadulako University selected through purposive sampling. The selection was based on four criteria: (1) they were active undergraduate students in the English Education Study Program; (2) they had regularly used TikTok for learning English vocabulary for at least six months; (3) they frequently accessed English-language educational content, such as vocabulary, pronunciation, or conversation videos, at least three times per week; and (4) they were able to describe and reflect on their vocabulary learning experiences in detail. These criteria ensured that the participants possessed rich, relevant, and sustained experiences capable of providing meaningful insights into the research objectives. Before participation, all students received information about the study and voluntarily signed informed consent forms, confirming their willingness to participate and permitting the use of anonymized data for research purposes.

Two research instruments were employed to collect the data. First, a structured questionnaire adapted from Schmitt (1997) and Nation (2001) vocabulary learning strategy frameworks was used to identify the range and frequency of strategies employed by the participants while learning vocabulary through TikTok. The questionnaire consisted of closed- and open-ended items covering determination, social, memory, cognitive, metacognitive, noticing, and consolidation strategies. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview protocol containing open-ended questions that explored participants' learning routines, reasons for selecting particular strategies, perceived benefits, challenges encountered, and examples of how newly acquired vocabulary was applied in real communication. The questionnaire findings also served as the basis for developing probing interview questions to obtain richer explanations.

Data collection was conducted sequentially by administering the questionnaire followed by individual semi-structured interviews. The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles et al. (2019), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. To enhance the credibility of the findings, methodological triangulation was employed by comparing questionnaire and interview data, while member checking was conducted by allowing participants to review the interview summaries to ensure the accuracy of interpretations (Miles et al., 2019). In addition, peer debriefing with an experienced qualitative researcher was undertaken to improve analytical rigor and minimize researcher bias. Throughout the study, participants' identities were protected through pseudonyms, and all collected data were treated confidentially and used solely for academic research purposes. The interpretation of participants' vocabulary learning experiences was also informed by sociocultural perspectives, emphasizing that learning is mediated through interaction with digital tools and social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978), as well as mobile-assisted language learning principles that highlight the role of mobile technologies in supporting flexible and autonomous language learning (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study present and discuss the answers to the two research questions regarding vocabulary learning strategies employed through TikTok. The findings were obtained from the questionnaire and semi structured interviews conducted with the participants. The discussion is organized according to each research question, followed by the interpretation of the findings based on the relevant theories and previous studies.

What Vocabulary Learning Strategies Are Used When Learning through TikTok?

The findings revealed that the participants employed seven vocabulary learning strategies while learning English vocabulary through TikTok. Based on the frameworks proposed by Schmitt (1997) and Nation (2001), the identified strategies consisted of five strategies from Schmitt's taxonomy, namely determination, social, memory, cognitive, and metacognitive strategies, as well as two strategies from Nation's framework, namely noticing and generative

strategies. These findings demonstrate that the participants employed a variety of vocabulary learning strategies while engaging with TikTok content to support their vocabulary learning.

Determination

The interview findings revealed that determination strategies were employed by the students to identify the meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary encountered while watching TikTok content. Rather than depending on direct explanations from others, the students actively explored various features available on TikTok to infer word meanings independently. They relied on contextual information from videos, captions, and comment sections to understand unfamiliar vocabulary. When these sources were insufficient, they confirmed the meanings by using dictionaries or artificial intelligence (AI). These findings indicate that TikTok provided students with multiple learning resources that supported independent vocabulary discovery.

SS01: *"When I come across unfamiliar vocabulary on TikTok, I usually try to understand its meaning from the context first. I also use AI to check the meaning of the word and often replay the video several times until I fully understand how the word is used."*

The interview excerpt demonstrates that the student did not immediately depend on external assistance but first attempted to infer the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary through contextual understanding. AI was used as a supporting tool to verify the meaning, while repeatedly watching the video helped strengthen the student's comprehension of the vocabulary in its authentic context.

Social

The interview findings showed that social strategies were employed by the students to reinforce their vocabulary learning through interaction with others. Instead of learning vocabulary individually, the students used TikTok as a medium to observe how words were used in communication and to practice newly learned vocabulary in real interactions. They expanded their vocabulary by reading comment sections, engaging in conversations with friends, and communicating with English speakers through online platforms. These activities enabled the students to develop a deeper understanding of vocabulary meanings and improve their confidence in using new words in authentic communicative contexts.

SS01: *"I often use newly learned vocabulary when writing captions on social media, chatting with friends, or having virtual conversations with English speakers through online communication platforms."*

The student's statement illustrates that newly acquired vocabulary was not only understood receptively but was also actively applied in authentic communication. Using newly learned words in daily interactions allowed the student to strengthen vocabulary mastery while developing greater confidence in communicating in English.

Memory

The interview findings revealed that memory strategies were employed by the students to retain newly learned vocabulary while engaging with TikTok content. The students strengthened their vocabulary retention through repeated exposure, including replaying videos, repeating word pronunciation, and reviewing newly learned vocabulary regularly. These learning activities enabled them to become more familiar with the meanings, pronunciation, and usage of unfamiliar words, thereby improving long-term vocabulary retention.

SS01: *"I often replay TikTok videos several times because repeating the content really helps me remember and understand new vocabulary."*

The interview indicates that repeated exposure to TikTok content enabled the student to reinforce vocabulary retention more effectively. By replaying the videos several times, the student was able to strengthen both vocabulary comprehension and memory, making unfamiliar words easier to recognize and recall in future learning situations.

Cognitive

The interview findings revealed that cognitive strategies were employed by the students to actively process vocabulary learned through TikTok. Rather than simply watching the videos, the students engaged in various learning activities, such as saving videos for future review, writing unfamiliar vocabulary in their notes, translating new words, and applying them in meaningful contexts. These activities encouraged students to process vocabulary more actively and helped them develop a deeper understanding of newly learned words while engaging with TikTok content.

SS01: *"I usually save the video, write the new vocabulary in my notes, review the words I have written, and then use the vocabulary in my daily conversations."*

The student's explanation demonstrates that TikTok served as more than a source of vocabulary input. By saving videos for later study, taking notes, reviewing unfamiliar words, and applying them in daily communication, the student actively processed vocabulary through a series of learning activities that strengthened both vocabulary comprehension and practical language use.

Metacognitive

The interview findings revealed that metacognitive strategies were employed by the students to manage and monitor their vocabulary learning through TikTok. The students organized their learning by saving videos containing useful vocabulary, revisiting them regularly, and reviewing newly learned words to maintain consistent learning progress. Rather than relying on incidental exposure, they deliberately planned and monitored their learning activities, allowing them to strengthen vocabulary retention and develop more effective learning habits while engaging with TikTok content.

SS01: *"I usually save TikTok videos that contain useful vocabulary, and then I watch them repeatedly as part of my learning process."*

The excerpt reflects that the student intentionally managed the vocabulary learning process by selecting relevant TikTok content for future study and revisiting it regularly. Saving and rewatching the videos enabled the student to monitor learning progress and reinforce vocabulary understanding through continuous and well-organized learning activities.

Noticing

The interview findings revealed that noticing strategies were employed by the students to increase their awareness of unfamiliar vocabulary while engaging with TikTok content. The students carefully observed how new words were presented and used in videos before attempting to understand or use them. Continuous exposure to vocabulary in authentic TikTok content encouraged the students to pay closer attention to word forms, meanings, and contextual usage. This process enabled them to build vocabulary awareness as an essential foundation for subsequent learning activities.

SS01: *"The first thing I do is pay attention to how the word is used in the content, and then I look up its meaning until I fully understand what the word means."*

This statement highlights that the student considered observing vocabulary usage in TikTok content as the initial step in learning unfamiliar words. By focusing on how vocabulary was used before searching for its meaning, the student developed a deeper awareness of contextual word usage, making the learning process more meaningful and effective.

Generative

The interview findings revealed that generative strategies were employed by the students to extend the use of vocabulary learned through TikTok into new communication contexts. After acquiring unfamiliar vocabulary from TikTok content, the students actively experimented with the words by creating simple sentences, incorporating them into conversations, and applying them in everyday communication. These learning activities

enabled the students to move beyond understanding word meanings toward using vocabulary productively and appropriately in different situations.

SS01: *"I usually create simple sentences using newly learned vocabulary and also make spontaneous sentences with those words because it helps me remember the vocabulary more effectively."*

The interview findings imply that the student actively transformed vocabulary learned through TikTok into meaningful language production by creating original sentences. This practice allowed the student to explore vocabulary in different contexts, strengthening both vocabulary mastery and the ability to use newly learned words more confidently in real communication.

How Do Students Apply Vocabulary Learning Strategies While Engaging with Tiktok Content?

The findings revealed that the students applied vocabulary learning strategies through a continuous learning process while engaging with TikTok content. Rather than relying on a single strategy, they combined several vocabulary learning strategies to understand, retain, and use newly encountered vocabulary. The implementation of these strategies occurred naturally throughout the learning process, indicating that each strategy complemented the others in supporting vocabulary development through TikTok.

The learning process generally began when the students encountered unfamiliar vocabulary while watching TikTok videos. They first paid attention to how the words were used in context before identifying their meanings through captions, comment sections, contextual clues, dictionaries, or artificial intelligence (AI). This initial process enabled the students to develop an understanding of unfamiliar vocabulary based on authentic language use presented in TikTok content.

After understanding the meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary, the students strengthened their vocabulary knowledge through repeated learning activities. They replayed videos, saved useful content for future review, took notes on unfamiliar words, reviewed vocabulary regularly, and monitored their own learning progress. These activities allowed the students to reinforce vocabulary retention while continuously engaging with learning materials available on TikTok.

The final stage involved using newly learned vocabulary in meaningful communication. The students applied the vocabulary by constructing simple sentences, participating in conversations, writing social media captions, and using newly learned words in daily communication. This process demonstrates that the students gradually moved from recognizing vocabulary to using it productively in various communicative situations after learning through TikTok.

Discussion of Data Analysis

The present study demonstrates that TikTok functions as more than a platform for vocabulary exposure; it creates a digital learning environment that enables students to employ multiple vocabulary learning strategies throughout the learning process. Rather than applying these strategies independently, the students integrated determination, social, memory, cognitive, metacognitive, noticing, and generative strategies to understand, retain, and use unfamiliar vocabulary encountered in TikTok content. This finding corroborates Schmitt (1997) taxonomy, which proposes that vocabulary acquisition involves the integration of multiple complementary strategies rather than reliance on a single learning technique. It also reinforces Nation (2001) view that effective vocabulary learning requires learners to actively process, revisit, and apply newly acquired vocabulary in meaningful contexts. Therefore, the present study suggests that TikTok not only exposes learners to new vocabulary but also facilitates the integration of multiple vocabulary learning strategies within an authentic digital learning environment.

An important insight emerging from this study is that the implementation of multiple vocabulary learning strategies was closely associated with the learning affordances provided by TikTok. Features such as short-form videos, captions, comment sections, replay functions,

and video-saving options enabled students to encounter vocabulary repeatedly, observe how words were used in authentic contexts, and revisit learning materials whenever necessary. These features created opportunities for students to learn vocabulary autonomously while remaining actively engaged with the learning process. This interpretation is consistent with Nation (2001) argument that repeated exposure and meaningful engagement play a crucial role in vocabulary acquisition. It also aligns with previous studies by Dorasa (2025), Budiarta & Akmar, (2024); Indah & Suhartatik (2025), which emphasize that TikTok promotes vocabulary learning by providing contextualized, engaging, and learner-centered learning experiences.

Another important contribution of this study lies in its explanation of how vocabulary learning strategies were implemented as an interconnected learning process rather than as isolated learning techniques. The students did not rely on a single strategy while learning through TikTok; instead, they moved flexibly from noticing unfamiliar vocabulary, understanding its meaning, strengthening retention through repeated exposure, and finally applying the vocabulary in meaningful communication. This learning process illustrates that vocabulary acquisition in a digital environment is dynamic and self-directed, with each strategy supporting different stages of learning. While previous studies have primarily highlighted TikTok's effectiveness in improving vocabulary learning, the present study provides a more detailed understanding of the learning process by demonstrating how multiple vocabulary learning strategies are integrated throughout students' engagement with TikTok content. These findings also reinforce Paivio's (1990) Dual Coding Theory, which suggests that combining verbal information with visual representations facilitates deeper processing and long-term vocabulary retention. Therefore, this study contributes to the growing body of research by offering a comprehensive explanation of how TikTok supports autonomous and meaningful vocabulary learning through the integration of multiple learning strategies.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that students employed seven vocabulary learning strategies while learning through TikTok, namely determination, social, memory, cognitive, metacognitive, noticing, and generative strategies. Rather than using these strategies independently, students integrated them throughout the vocabulary learning process to understand, retain, and apply newly learned vocabulary. These findings suggest that TikTok functions not only as a source of authentic language input but also as a digital learning environment that supports autonomous and meaningful vocabulary learning. Therefore, this study contributes to a better understanding of how vocabulary learning strategies are implemented through TikTok and provides pedagogical insights for integrating social media into vocabulary instruction.

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