

The Role of TikTok and Instagram in Vocabulary Learning Among Indonesian Gen Z Learners

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Abstract

Considered as a foreign language in Indonesia, many Gen Z students still struggle to develop valid vocabulary skills in English, even though they have learned English from an early age and are supported by the Indonesian national curriculum, which requires English. Traditional lessons are often not suitable for the digital habits of today's students, who are more attracted to visual, colorful, and interactive content. While some studies have discussed digital media in education, attention has been given to short-form video platforms like TikTok and Instagram for vocabulary learning, especially in the Indonesian EFL context. The goal is to fill this gap by examining how these platforms can support vocabulary development. Using quantitative descriptive methods, data were collected from 33 Gen Z students through an online questionnaire. The respondents' results were then analyzed using percentage-based frequency tables accompanied by descriptive explanations. The analysis result indicates that TikTok and Instagram stand for significant role in vocabulary learning. Their multimodal features, combined with repetitive and engaging content, help learners naturally absorb new words. The findings emphasize the need for language teaching to adapt to the digital era with which learners are already familiar. One key recommendation for curriculum developers is to recognize social media as a useful supplementary learning tool.

Keywords: EFL, Gen Z, Instagram Reels, TikTok, Vocabulary Learning

1. Introduction

English has become an important global language, as noted by (Aluz et al., 2024), and is surely used in communication across various aspects such as international relations, education, business, and technology. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) from an early age and is included in the national curriculum as a compulsory subject at the junior and senior high school levels, with its implementation beginning to expand to elementary schools as well. However, the fact is that many Indonesian students continue to struggle to enrich a strong English vocabulary due to limited exposure to real-life English usage outside the classroom (Fauziah et al., 2023). In fact, teachers often find that students lack motivation and confidence when using English. According to the Minister of Education and Culture Regulation No. 22 of 2016 (Permendikbud No. 22 of 2016) concerning the Standards for Elementary and Secondary Education Processes, one of the goals of teaching English is to enable students to communicate effectively in various contexts. Meanwhile, traditional teaching methods tend to be unsuccessful in engaging students who are highly engaged in today's digital age, especially Gen Z students, who grow up with this modernization.

As Faruk (2025) has clearly stated, advances in digital technology have significantly transformed the concept of language learning in recent years. However, in fact, achieving communicative learning goals remains a challenge, especially for today's learners, Generation Z. This generation, born and closely connected to the modern environment, grows up surrounded by smartphones, apps, and social media. Their learning preferences typically prioritize speed, interactivity, visual content, and digital engagement. As a result, traditional pedagogical approaches that rely heavily on printed materials, passive instruction, or memorization often fail to engage students. Improvement is needed for teaching methods that incorporate digital platforms and reflect closely on students' daily lives to keep them

engaged and motivated in the language learning process. Current theories of second language implementation, such as multimodal learning and vocabulary acquisition, explain that language is learned more effectively when learners receive rich, engaging, and contextually meaningful input. Multimodal learning theory concern to the importance of integrating multiple communication modes, such as visual, audio, text, and gesture, to support comprehension and retention. As mentioned by Bouchey et al. (2021), multimodality in language education involves the management of various signaling systems to declare a unified message, which plays a crucial role in the process of second language acquisition. When students process language through multiple channels indirectly, they are more likely to get to know new vocabulary and relate it to real-life contexts (Istiqomah et al., 2025). In line with the previous study, learning vocabulary acquisition belongs to the unconscious learning of new words that occurs when learners focus on understanding content, rather than memorizing vocabulary lists (Laufer, 2014). This process often appears through activities like enjoying videos, playing games, or reading for any purpose, where learners are not consciously trying to learn the language but still encounter and absorb new words. In today's digital session, platforms like TikTok and Instagram are main examples of this kind of incidental and multimodal language exposure. These kinds of short-form video platforms are commonly used by young Indonesians, especially Gen Z, who interact daily for entertainment, humor, information, and self-expression.

Most of the content on these platforms is in English and includes elements such as subtitles, closed captions, hashtags, and audio narration, all of which support comprehension and vocabulary recognition. Through repeated exposure to this rich linguistic input in different ways in a fun, familiar, and relaxed environment, learners can naturally acquire new English vocabulary without formal instruction. While these platforms are not specifically designed for educational purposes, they provide a unique and sophisticated learning environment where language is embedded in real-world communication. This is in line with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, in Luo, (2024), which in detail shows the importance of comprehensible input in second language learning. TikTok and Instagram successfully provide this kind of language facilities in a fun and less pressure environment, making them particularly helpful for vocabulary practice. Since these applications have become an important part of students' daily activities and align with the natural way today's learners interact with social media content, it makes sense to claim how they can support English learning as a supplementary learning resource.

Despite the daily use of TikTok and Instagram by young people, there is a limited amount of research in Indonesia that specifically examines how these platforms help students develop their English vocabulary. Therefore, this study explores how Indonesian Gen Z EFL learners use TikTok and Instagram and examines whether these platforms can effectively support incidental vocabulary learning. Specifically, this study analyzes the frequency of students' usage, the types of content they engage with, and their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of these platforms in helping them learn new English words. By analyzing learners' behavioral patterns and attitudes, this study seeks to determine whether short-form video content on social media can serve as an additional tool for English vocabulary development. The findings of this study are expected to add to the body of research on digitally assisted language learning and provide practical guidance for educators who wish to incorporate more relevant and engaging media into their English language teaching practices.

2. Literature Review

A. The Importance of English in Global and Indonesian Contexts

English has become a global language of communication, essential in areas such as education, international diplomacy, business, and technology. Entering various fields in this world requires the

existence of English, which is considered a mandatory skill (Insyirah, 2015). Aluz et al., (2024) emphasized that English is widely used in cross-border interactions, making it a key competency in the 21st century. In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL) and is a compulsory subject in the national curriculum. English is also introduced at the elementary level. Despite formal instruction, many Indonesian students struggle to acquire a rich English vocabulary. One contributing factor is the limited exposure to real-life English outside the classroom, which hinders their confidence and fluency in speaking and writing (Fauziah et al., 2023). According to Insyirah (2015) and Laufer, (2008), in some countries, children are taught and encouraged to learn English as a second language. Even in those countries where English is not the main language.

The researcher found that many curricula in science, engineering, and technical education are written in English. From an evaluative perspective, although national policies such as Permendikbud No. 22 of 2016 emphasize communicative competence as the main goal of English language teaching, classroom practices often do not go well because they rely on traditional teaching methods. Vocabulary, as one of the crucial components of language, requires clear, repeated, and meaningful explanation to be retained and used effectively. However, classroom learning alone may not be able to provide this, especially if the language is not used in students' daily conversations. Therefore, other complementary approaches need to be explored to support vocabulary development. Exposure to English through informal and tangible media such as social media platforms can provide the ongoing interaction needed to reinforce vocabulary learning and help achieve national education goals.

B. Characteristics of Gen Z as Learners

Gen Z, or in the long term known as Generation Z, is defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, who are often referred to as digital natives due to their lifetime exposure to digital devices, social media, and internet connectivity (Ramirez, 2018), (Wajdi et al., 2024), and (Eganasrudin et al., 2024) explain that this generation prefers adaptable, interactive, and visually stimulating content, which shapes the way they learn. In the context of language learning, Gen Z learners often find it hard to understand or use passive or traditional methods that rely heavily on textbooks and lectures. On the other hand, Hendrastomo & Januarti (2023) said Gen Z refer to environments where they can actively engage with content by watching videos, creating content, or participating in discussions through digital devices. These preferences should be considered when designing effective educational strategies, especially in language education.

Basically, Gen Z's learning styles present both benefits and challenges. Based on (Eganasrudin et al., 2024) gen Z's comfort with technology makes them highly receptive to media-rich platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where content is short, engaging, and dynamic. For educators, it is suggested that language teaching can be extended to the digital spaces already inhabited by Gen Z. However, their limited attention span and preference for fast consumption can hinder in-depth learning unless properly guided. Teachers need to design assignments that connect students' digital habits to learning objectives. For example, students could be encouraged to look up new English vocabulary from the videos they watch. This approach honors their media habits while seamlessly integrating language learning into their routines, making vocabulary acquisition more relevant and engaging.

C. Multimodal Learning in Language Acquisition

Multimodal learning is an instructional approach that combines two or more sensory-based learning modes, visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and textual, to enhance students' comprehension, engagement, and memory retention. According to Bouchey et al. (2021) and Lim & Kessler (2024), multimodal learning emphasizes the use of multiple sign systems, including images, spoken language, written text, gesture, and sound, integrated to present meaningful content. This theory aligns with how

learners process real-life communication, where meaning is constructed not just from words, but from a combination of gestures. Lim & Kessler, (2024) stated that in second language acquisition, particularly English as a Foreign Language (EFL), multimodal input helps learners connect abstract vocabulary to concrete experiences. For example, listening to a word pronounced while simultaneously seeing it in subtitles and a visual context allows learners to build a stronger mental belief. Multimodal learning also shares inclusivity by addressing a variety of learning styles, catering to both visual and auditory learners, and those who benefit from movement or interactive activities.

Stating their implementation evaluation in digital learning environments, social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram offer natural multimodal language exposure. These short videos' content typically combines spoken English, music, facial expressions, body language, subtitles, and visual effects, making them a rich source of contextual input for vocabulary acquisition. Students can see words used in real-world scenarios, such as travel vlogs, tutorials, or comedy skits, enhancing their ability to understand nuances and connotations (Gilakjani et al., 2011). Teachers can classify these media based on language function (e.g., giving instructions, expressing opinions) or topic (e.g., food, fashion, school life), and then design learning worksheets or assignments related to them. For example, students may be asked to identify new vocabulary, guess the meaning from the context, and use the words in their own sentences or short videos. This makes vocabulary learning interactive, engaging, and relevant to Gen Z's digital preferences. Furthermore, Mukrim & Imran, (2025) stated that the use of multimodal materials increases learner autonomy and motivation, as students engage with content that they find enjoyable and relevant, helping to bridge the space between classroom learning and real-world communication.

D. Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

Incidental vocabulary acquisition is the process by which learners acquire new words unintentionally, usually while engaging in meaningful content rather than formal learning. Laufer, (2014) defines it as the unplanned, subconscious vocabulary learning that occurs during activities such as reading, listening to music, or watching videos. The learner does not intend to learn the vocabulary, but because the input is easy to understand and frequent, the new words are absorbed naturally over time. This method is different from explicit vocabulary learning, which focuses on memorization and testing (Zou & Yan, 2019). Refer to Material, (2019) incidental acquisition is most powerful when the learner is engaged and motivated by the content itself, as is often the case with entertainment media. Incidental vocabulary acquisition is a natural fit for informal learning contexts like social media (Al-Othman, 2025). TikTok and Instagram, for example, expose users to real, repetitive English usage through entertaining, culturally rich videos. This exposure supports vocabulary learning without pressure or anxiety. Students easily remember words because they see them used in context alongside images, emotions, or humor, which increases the likelihood of long-term retention. Teachers can design follow-up activities where students list new words from the videos they watch and explain their meanings. This method also encourages learner autonomy and self-directed learning, essential skills in modern education. However, it requires careful integration to ensure incidental learning becomes meaningful and intentional over time.

E. Social Media in Language Learning

Social media has evolved from being a mere communication tool to a dynamic space for learning, collaboration, and self-expression. In the topic of language learning, social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and X offer learners the opportunity to encounter authentic language in an informal, real-time setting. These platforms expose users to a variety of vocabulary, grammar patterns, and cultural nuances embedded in native-level content. Nasution (2022) explains that social

media serves as a participatory environment where learners are not just passive recipients of information but also content creators and collaborators. The real-time interactions, comments, and user-generated content found on these platforms enable learners to practice their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, depending on their level of engagement (Aluz et al., 2024). The informal nature of social media also reduces language anxiety and encourages more frequent and independent exposure to English, especially for EFL learners.

Integrating social media into English language learning offers important pedagogical advantages and considerations. On the one hand, social media encourages learner autonomy, enhances digital literacy, and supports incidental learning through content such as memes, short videos, tutorials, and comment threads. According to Ghafa (2023), teachers can design activities that incorporate hashtags, challenges, or language-based content analysis. For example, learners can be tasked with following English-language influencers or channels relevant to their interests and then reporting on new vocabulary or expressions they learn. On the other hand, because much of the content on social media is unfiltered and informal, learners may be exposed to slang, abbreviated language, or incorrect grammar. Therefore, educators must act as facilitators who guide learners on how to engage with content critically, verify meaning, and distinguish between formal and informal usage. Despite the challenges, when used intentionally, social media provides a rich, flexible, and highly engaging environment that reflects the communicative, multimodal, and fast-paced contexts in which modern English is actively used.

Although digital technology and social media are increasingly integrated into language education, most existing research focuses on formal digital tools such as learning apps or traditional platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. Meanwhile, the potential of emerging short-form video platforms such as TikTok and Instagram that are very popular among Gen Z remains underexplored, especially in the context of vocabulary acquisition. While theories such as multimodal learning and incidental vocabulary acquisition support the use of engaging and contextual content for effective language learning, there is a lack of empirical research linking these theories to actual practices among Indonesian EFL learners. In particular, research examining how Indonesian Gen Z learners perceive, engage with, and benefit from TikTok and Instagram in enriching their English vocabulary is still scarce. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the role of these platforms in incidental vocabulary learning among young Indonesian EFL learners.

3. Method

This study used a mixed descriptive approach to explore how TikTok and Instagram contribute to English vocabulary learning among Indonesian Generation Z learners. The study combined quantitative and qualitative data to provide a broader understanding of learners' usage patterns, perceptions, and experiences. The study focused on learners aged 15 to 28 who actively engage with English content on these platforms. A descriptive design was chosen to highlight real-world language learning behaviors outside of the formal classroom environment.

Primary data were collected through two instruments: an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Forms to 33 respondents to collect data on the frequency of social media use, types of content, and perceived vocabulary gains. Additionally, a smaller group of 5 participants was selected for follow-up interviews conducted via WhatsApp chat, voice calls, or video calls. These interviews aimed to gain deeper insights into how learners interact with English content, what strategies they use, and whether they feel their vocabulary has increased as a result.

Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including percentages and mean scores, to identify general trends and patterns in language learning behavior. Meanwhile,

qualitative data were analyzed thematically, using coding to identify recurring ideas, such as the types of content that were most useful, specific words learned, and learner motivations. This method provides a holistic understanding of the informal learning processes taking place through TikTok and Instagram and helps connect learners' self-reported experiences with theoretical frameworks such as incidental vocabulary acquisition and multimodal learning.

4. Result and Discussion

A. Social Media Usage Among Gen Z Learners

Table 1 presents an overview of the demographic profile and English language background of the study participants. A total of 33 Gen Z respondents participated in the survey, with the majority aged between 19 and 22 years. Most participants were college students, mostly female. Regarding their English language proficiency, participants were asked to rate their own level of proficiency on a five-point Likert scale. The mean score was 3.00, indicating that most respondents self-identified as having an intermediate level of English proficiency. This background provides important context for interpreting their engagement with English-based language content on social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram.

After identifying the demographic background of the respondents, the next section explores their social media habits, with a particular focus on their use of TikTok and Instagram. Since this study aims to test the potential of these platforms for vocabulary learning, understanding how often and for how long participants engage with these platforms is critical. Frequency of use, duration of daily exposure, and types of content consumed provide important context for interpreting how incidental vocabulary acquisition may occur through these digital channels. The following data outlines respondents' self-reported patterns of TikTok and Instagram use as part of their daily routines.

The figure above illustrates the frequency and duration of TikTok and Instagram usage among respondents. As shown, the majority of participants (over 80%) reported using TikTok frequently, with a comparable percentage indicating regular engagement with Instagram. These platforms appear to be deeply integrated into the daily lives of Gen Z students, with most participants spending over two hours per day consuming content on one or both platforms. This statement is in line with Septin et al., (2025). These high levels of engagement suggest that social media is not just a recreational activity but also an important part of their everyday digital environment.

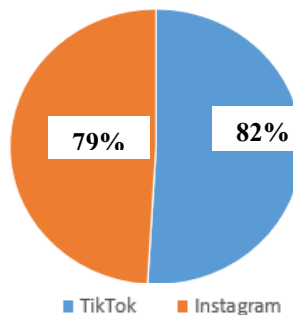
The findings revealed that both platforms are highly popular and frequently used by participants. Specifically, 82% of respondents reported that they "often" use TikTok, while 79% said they frequently use Instagram. Additionally, the majority of participants reported that they spend more than two hours per day engaging with content on one or both platforms. These statistics underscore the dominant role that short-form video platforms play in Gen Z learners' digital routines. For many respondents, these apps are not simply a source of entertainment but a regular part of their daily habits, used during commutes, study breaks, or downtime, and this is in line with what (Faruk, 2025) found. This consistency and duration of use suggest that learners are exposed to a large amount of linguistic input, often without consciously seeking it out. Through their habitual use, TikTok and Instagram become normalized environments for routine, unstructured language engagement. Unlike formal teaching tools, which may require structured settings or conscious learning, these platforms offer spontaneous, real-world English use experienced in an anxiety-free, user-driven environment. Content is tailored by algorithms to reflect user interests, increasing the likelihood that learners will repeatedly encounter certain vocabulary in diverse contexts (Fauziah et al., 2023). For example, learners who are interested in fashion or travel may frequently see English terms related to those topics, reinforcing vocabulary through repeated exposure and contextual variation.

Table 1. Data of the Respondents

Category	Details
Total Respondents	33
Age Range	19-22 years old
Gender	Female Majority
Education Level	Mostly University Students
English Proficiency Level	Average self-rating: 3/5
Proficiency Description	Intermediate EFL Learners (self-rated)

Source: <https://lnk.ink/fVZFB>

Figure 1. The Social Media Usage



Additionally, the informal nature of these platforms supports a type of passive learning that can be particularly effective for vocabulary development. Learners often absorb new words while watching videos for entertainment purposes, which aligns with the principles of incidental vocabulary acquisition. As mentioned by Hendrastomo & Januarti, (2023) Gen Z learners are digital natives who have grown up surrounded by digital technology; they naturally gravitate toward interactive, visual, and fast-paced media formats as mentioned by. The immersive design of TikTok and Instagram, with their constant mix of text, visuals, speech, and sound effects, caters to this learning style and encourages deep engagement. Furthermore, frequent and meaningful engagement with content on these platforms can serve not only to entertain but also to support implicit and playful language acquisition. Based on these observations, TikTok and Instagram can be seen not only as distractions from formal education but also as rich informal learning environments. Both are untapped pedagogical resources, where language learning occurs organically and contextually. Therefore, understanding the depth of learner engagement with these platforms is essential to exploring their full potential in supporting English language education in the 21st century.

B. *The Role of Social Media in Vocabulary Learning*

The second research question investigated how the use of TikTok and Instagram contributes to vocabulary development among Indonesian Gen Z EFL learners. Based on the questionnaire results, the majority of participants stated that they often encounter new English words while watching videos on the platforms. Many respondents reported that English expressions presented through subtitles, captions, or spoken narration helped them better understand and remember new vocabulary. These findings support the concept of incidental vocabulary acquisition, where language learners acquire new words passively during other activities, such as watching entertaining or informative content. Participants also noted that they often remembered new words more easily when they appeared in an interesting context, such as memes, viral trends, story videos, or tutorial-style content, and this contrasts with research conducted by (Nasution, 2022), which found that social media users found it difficult to remember quick content. The visual, textual, and audio elements provided by TikTok and Instagram create a multimodal learning environment that aligns with how Gen Z learners prefer to receive information. These learners benefit from short-form content that is interactive, emotionally resonant, and contextually meaningful, a

feature often missing from traditional classroom instruction. The ability to understand vocabulary used in real-world situations, accompanied by body language, tone, imagery, and reactions, deepens comprehension and retention.

Furthermore, the repeated occurrence of common vocabulary in similar videos due to content algorithms provides natural reinforcement and pattern recognition. This repetition, combined with the contextual relevance of each word, helps reinforce the meaning of the words without the need for direct memorization, as found in (Fauziah et al., 2023; Laufer, 2014). Consequently, social media platforms inadvertently serve as a source of structured input, offering frequent, easy-to-understand exposure to English that builds learners' vocabulary knowledge over time. This experience echoes Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which states that language acquisition exists when students are exposed to easy-to-understand language applied that is slightly above their current level (Al-Othman, 2025; Ghafa, 2023; Mukrim & Imran, 2025). TikTok and Instagram provide this in the form of relaxed, fun content that lowers learners' affective filters and encourages spontaneous engagement with the language. Additionally, several learners shared that using these platforms increased their confidence in understanding and using English vocabulary in real-world conversations or academic assignments. This suggests that incidental learning through social media can have a positive impact not only on vocabulary acquisition but also on learners' motivation and self-efficacy. When learners feel that they are learning English outside of formal education, it builds a sense of autonomy and relevance in their language journey. In turn, this motivates continued exposure and exploration. Overall, the findings suggest that social media plays a significant role in providing authentic, engaging, and multimodal English input, an important foundation for building vocabulary in the digital age.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the influence of TikTok and Instagram Reels on vocabulary development among Indonesian Gen Z EFL learners. The study findings indicate that both platforms are not only highly popular among learners but also serve as effective media for incidental vocabulary acquisition. With the majority of respondents using these apps daily for more than two hours, TikTok and Instagram have become deeply integrated into their routines, providing frequent and engaging exposure to English content. The study also revealed that participants frequently encountered new English vocabulary through subtitles, spoken dialogue, and on-screen text while watching short-form video content. These multimodal features allow learners to absorb and internalize new words in a meaningful and contextual way, reinforcing key principles of current second language acquisition theories such as multimodal learning and the Input Hypothesis. In addition, the informal, entertaining, and non-threatening nature of the platform increases learners' motivation and confidence in using English. In conclusion, TikTok and Instagram Reels offer valuable yet underutilized opportunities for vocabulary development, especially for digitally-savvy learners. Integrating these platforms into English learning strategies can increase learner engagement and vocabulary retention. As the educational landscape continues to shape, further research is recommended to investigate how teachers and curriculum designers can leverage these platforms more appropriately and effectively in EFL instruction.

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