


## Incidental English Vocabulary Learning Through TikTok A Conceptual Analysis

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### A B S T R A C T

The widespread use of social media has reshaped how English as a Foreign Language learners encounter vocabulary beyond formal classroom settings, particularly through platforms such as TikTok that dominate daily digital routines. Although prior research has mainly highlighted TikTok's intentional pedagogical use, the potential of non-educational content to foster incidental vocabulary learning remains insufficiently explored. This conceptual study examines TikTok as an informal digital environment that supports unintentional English vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners. Drawing on theories of incidental vocabulary learning, informal language exposure, and recent scholarship on digital media in English Language Teaching, the analysis demonstrates that non-educational TikTok content provides frequent, meaningful, and contextualized lexical input. Entertainment videos, personal storytelling, trends, and lifestyle clips expose learners to authentic vocabulary embedded in real communicative situations. Algorithm-driven repetition reinforces lexical noticing and familiarity, while multimodal features such as visuals, captions, gestures, and audio cues strengthen form-meaning connections. In addition, code-switching practices by content creators and interactive comment sections create socially mediated spaces where learners negotiate meaning, observe pragmatic usage, and encounter colloquial expressions. These characteristics position TikTok as an informal digital learning ecology in which vocabulary development emerges naturally through everyday engagement rather than deliberate study. The study concludes that TikTok can effectively complement formal instruction by extending vocabulary exposure beyond classroom boundaries and integrating English learning into learners' routine digital practices across diverse global contexts. This perspective encourages educators to reconsider informal media as valuable linguistic resources supporting lifelong vocabulary growth beyond institutional learning spaces in contemporary digital societies.

**Keywords:** *Tiktok, Incidental Vocabulary Learning, Informal Digital Learning, Conceptual Study*

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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of social media has significantly transformed how individuals interact with language in their everyday lives, as digital platforms are no longer merely spaces for communication and entertainment but have increasingly functioned as environments where language exposure occurs continuously and often unintentionally. Among various social media platforms, TikTok has emerged as one of the most popular applications, particularly among young adults and students. Users typically access TikTok for entertainment purposes, such as watching short videos, following trends, or casually scrolling through content, rather than for explicit educational goals. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of TikTok content is delivered in English, including global trends, conversational expressions, slang, and locally produced videos that employ English-Indonesian code-switching. As a result, users are repeatedly exposed to English vocabulary in natural and contextualized ways without deliberate intention to learn, especially within informal digital environments (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). In contrast, English vocabulary instruction in formal EFL classrooms remains

largely dominated by intentional learning approaches, such as memorization, explicit explanation, and controlled practice. While these approaches are pedagogically structured, they often fail to reflect how learners encounter and acquire vocabulary outside the classroom. This discrepancy highlights a theoretical and pedagogical issue in English language teaching: vocabulary learning is not limited to conscious and planned instruction but also occurs incidentally through repeated exposure to meaningful input. From a theoretical perspective, incidental vocabulary learning emphasizes acquisition through meaning-focused input rather than deliberate study, yet this perspective remains underrepresented in classroom-based practices (Nation, 2017). In line with this view, recent studies in English language learning have demonstrated growing interest in the role of digital media and social networking platforms in supporting language development, showing that exposure to authentic language input through platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and online streaming media can facilitate vocabulary acquisition, listening skills, and learner motivation in informal learning contexts (Sockett, 2014);(Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). More recent scholarship has begun to focus specifically on TikTok as a potential medium for language learning, with several studies reporting that TikTok enhances learner engagement due to its short-video format, multimodal affordances, and algorithm-driven content delivery (Kaye et al., 2021);(Yang et al., 2025). Within ELT contexts, TikTok has been found to support pronunciation practice, speaking confidence, and listening comprehension when used intentionally as part of teacher-guided instructional activities (Basch et al., 2021);(Albashtawi & Al Bataineh, 2020). However, the majority of these studies conceptualize TikTok primarily as a pedagogical tool for planned learning, leaving limited discussion on how non-educational content contributes to vocabulary development incidentally.

### **Non-Educational TikTok Content and Incidental Vocabulary Learning**

Despite TikTok's growing prominence in language education research, everyday user practices on the platform remain underexplored. In particular, non-educational TikTok content—such as entertainment videos, lifestyle content, humor, and trending challenges—frequently contains informal vocabulary, slang expressions, and pragmatic language use that differ from classroom-based materials. Learners are often exposed to such vocabulary through casual scrolling, without any conscious intention to learn. From an incidental learning perspective, repeated encounters with lexical items in visually rich and contextually meaningful settings may support vocabulary acquisition through inference and retention over time (Sockett, 2014);(Nation, 2017).

In addition, TikTok enables sustained exposure to English input through its algorithmic design, which repeatedly presents users with similar types of content based on viewing behavior. This repeated exposure may increase familiarity with certain lexical items and expressions, reinforcing incidental learning processes. However, existing research on TikTok in ELT contexts has largely focused on intentional instructional use, leaving the role of non-educational content in vocabulary development conceptually underexamined.

### **Code Switching Practices and Comment Sections as Sites of Meaning-Making**

Another distinctive yet underexplored feature of TikTok lies in its interactional and sociolinguistic dimensions. English-Indonesian code-switching, often referred to as “Jaksel English,” is commonly found in locally produced TikTok content. This form of language use reflects learners' sociocultural realities and presents English vocabulary within familiar linguistic frames. Code-switching may function as a form of semantic scaffolding that supports meaning construction and facilitates the incidental acquisition of new lexical items.

Moreover, TikTok's comment sections often serve as interactive spaces where users collaboratively negotiate meaning. When viewers encounter unfamiliar English expressions, they frequently seek clarification through comments, translations, or peer explanations. These interactions create opportunities for incidental vocabulary learning through social engagement and shared meaning-making. Such practices position vocabulary learning as a socially mediated process embedded in everyday digital interaction rather than as an individual and intentional activity.

### **Theoretical Perspective and Research Focus**

From a contemporary theoretical perspective, vocabulary learning is increasingly viewed as a dynamic process shaped by exposure, context, and interaction. Incidental vocabulary learning theory emphasizes that learners can acquire new lexical items through repeated exposure to meaningful and comprehensible input, particularly in authentic environments (Nation, 2017). Informal digital platforms such as TikTok provide conditions that align closely with this perspective, including multimodal input, repeated exposure, and socially embedded language use.

Despite the growing body of research on digital media in English language learning, there remains limited conceptual discussion on how the everyday characteristics of TikTok can be theoretically linked to established models of incidental vocabulary learning. In particular, existing studies rarely examine how non-educational content, localized code-switching practices, and user interactions collectively contribute to vocabulary development. Therefore, this article aims to provide a conceptual analysis of TikTok as an informal digital environment for incidental English vocabulary learning. By synthesizing theories of incidental learning, informal language exposure, and recent studies on social media use, this article examines how TikTok's content characteristics and interactional features may support vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners. The discussion in the following section is organized around these key themes to provide a coherent conceptual framework for understanding incidental vocabulary learning in digital contexts.

## METHOD

This study adopted a conceptual research design based on a systematic review and analysis of relevant literature. The purpose of conceptual research is to develop theoretical insights by critically examining, integrating, and synthesizing existing theories and scholarly discussions, rather than generating findings through primary empirical data collection (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015); (Snyder, 2019). Within the field of English language teaching, this approach is particularly appropriate for exploring emerging digital learning environments and language learning practices that take place beyond formal instructional settings, where theoretical clarification remains necessary (Nation, 2017).

The theoretical perspectives and scholarly sources examined in this study were selected according to their relevance to three central areas: (1) theoretical perspectives on incidental vocabulary learning in EFL contexts, (2) theories of informal and meaning-focused learning within second language acquisition, and (3) studies addressing digital media and social networking platforms in language education, with particular attention to TikTok. Foundational and recent works by scholars such as Nation, Sockett, Sundqvist, Sylvén, and Webb were prioritized due to their significant contributions to vocabulary learning and informal language learning research. Additionally, studies on self-access learning and digital media in ELT were included to support the conceptualization of language learning beyond the classroom (Priyatmojo & Rohani, 2017).

The analytical process employed a thematic and conceptual approach. Initially, relevant theories and key concepts were identified and categorized based on their emphasis on vocabulary exposure, meaning-focused input, repetition, and social interaction. Subsequently, the defining characteristics of TikTok as a digital platform—including short-form video content, multimodal input, algorithm-driven repetition, and interactive comment features—were examined in relation to these theoretical frameworks (Kaye et al., 2021); (Yang et al., 2025). These analytical stages enabled a synthesis of theoretical insights to explain how TikTok can be conceptually framed as an informal digital environment that facilitates incidental English vocabulary learning among EFL learners.

Rather than assessing vocabulary learning outcomes or learner performance, this study aimed to establish theoretical connections between TikTok's platform affordances and established models of incidental vocabulary learning and informal second language acquisition. Accordingly, a conceptual research design was considered the most suitable methodological approach for addressing the objectives of the present study.

**Respondents**

This study did not involve human respondents or participants in the conventional sense. In line with the nature of conceptual research, no surveys, interviews, or experimental procedures were conducted. Instead, the focus of analysis was English-related TikTok content encountered by EFL learners in informal digital contexts. This included non-educational TikTok videos containing English vocabulary, slang expressions, and English-Indonesian code-switching, as well as interactional practices found in comment sections where users negotiate meaning and clarify unfamiliar lexical items. Consistent with studies on self-access and informal language learning, the unit of analysis in this study was the learning environment and language practices rather than individual learners (Priyatmojo & Rohani, 2017).

**Instruments**

The primary instruments of this conceptual study were theoretical frameworks drawn from incidental vocabulary learning theory, informal language learning, and digital media studies. Key concepts of incidental learning, such as meaning-focused input, repeated exposure, and contextualized language use, were adopted as analytical lenses to interpret how vocabulary acquisition may occur without deliberate learning intention (Nation, 2017);(Peters & Webb, 2018). In addition, perspectives on informal digital learning environments were used to explain how social media platforms facilitate language exposure beyond classroom settings (Sockett, 2014);(Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016).

The selection of these theoretical frameworks was based on their relevance to the characteristics of TikTok as a digital platform, including its multimodal content, algorithm-driven repetition, and user-generated interaction. Previous conceptual and empirical studies on digital media, such as podcasts and self-access learning environments, provided further justification for applying these frameworks to TikTok. These studies demonstrate how non-classroom media can support language development through authentic exposure and autonomous engagement, thereby supporting the theoretical grounding of the present analysis (Priyatmojo & Rohani, 2017);(Priyatmojo et al., 2022).

**Procedures**

The procedures of this conceptual study consisted of several stages. First, a systematic selection of relevant literature published within the last decade was conducted to identify key theories and findings related to incidental vocabulary learning, informal digital learning, and social media use in English language teaching. Priority was given to studies that discuss vocabulary acquisition through exposure, meaning-focused input, and informal learning environments in order to ensure conceptual relevance.

Second, the characteristics of TikTok as a digital platform were examined conceptually by identifying recurring features discussed in the literature, such as short-video format, multimodality, algorithmic content distribution, and interactive comment sections (Kaye et al., 2021);(Yang et al., 2025). These platform characteristics were then mapped onto theoretical constructs from incidental vocabulary learning to explore how they may support unintentional vocabulary exposure and meaning construction.

Third, localized language practices, particularly English-Indonesian code switching commonly referred to as "Jaksel English," were conceptually examined as forms of authentic linguistic input. This stage aimed to connect sociolinguistic practices observed on TikTok with theories of vocabulary learning and meaning-making in informal digital environments.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted through qualitative thematic and conceptual analysis. Relevant theories and platform characteristics were examined to identify recurring themes related to vocabulary exposure, contextual meaning-making, repetition, and social interaction. These themes were then interpreted in relation to established theories of incidental vocabulary learning to explain how TikTok may function as an informal learning ecology for EFL learners (Nation, 2017);(Sockett, 2014).

The analysis also drew on insights from previous studies on digital media and informal language learning to strengthen theoretical interpretation. In particular, research on self-access

learning environments and podcast-based learning was used to support the argument that language development can occur outside formal classrooms through authentic and autonomous engagement with English input (Priyatmojo & Rohani, 2017);(Priyatmojo et al., 2022). Rather than producing empirical findings, the outcome of this analysis is a coherent conceptual explanation that integrates theory, digital practices, and sociolinguistic phenomena related to incidental vocabulary learning on TikTok.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

#### Non-Educational TikTok Content as Incidental Vocabulary Exposure

The conceptual analysis reveals that non-educational TikTok content plays a significant role in exposing EFL learners to English vocabulary incidentally. Content such as comedy sketches, lifestyle videos, daily vlogs, and trending challenges frequently incorporates English words, phrases, and expressions as part of natural communication rather than instructional discourse. These lexical items often appear embedded within meaningful situations, allowing viewers to focus on understanding the message rather than consciously attending to language form.

Moreover, the platform's design encourages brief yet frequent exposure to language. The short duration of TikTok videos allows users to encounter multiple instances of English vocabulary within a relatively short period of time. As users scroll through content casually, they may encounter the same lexical items across different videos and communicative contexts. This pattern of exposure increases familiarity with vocabulary items and supports gradual lexical recognition without intentional memorization.

The findings further indicate that incidental vocabulary exposure on TikTok is not limited to isolated words but also includes multiword expressions, colloquial phrases, and slang commonly used in informal spoken English. Such exposure introduces learners to pragmatic and sociolinguistic aspects of vocabulary that are often underrepresented in formal EFL materials. Overall, non-educational TikTok content provides a rich source of contextualized vocabulary input that emerges naturally from everyday digital engagement.

#### Code Switching Practices and Comment Sections as Meaning-Making Spaces

Another key finding concerns the role of code-switching practices and user interaction in facilitating meaning-making processes. English-Indonesian code-switching is frequently observed in locally produced TikTok content, where English lexical items are inserted into Indonesian discourse. This linguistic practice presents new vocabulary within familiar syntactic and semantic structures, enabling viewers to infer meaning through contextual and cultural cues.

In addition to content-level exposure, TikTok's comment sections function as interactive spaces where users collaboratively negotiate meaning. When encountering unfamiliar English words or expressions, viewers often ask questions, provide translations, or explain meanings to one another. These interactions create informal opportunities for vocabulary clarification that occur organically within social interaction rather than through teacher-led instruction.

The findings suggest that vocabulary learning on TikTok is shaped not only by passive exposure but also by active participation in meaning-making practices. Through observing and engaging in comment-based interactions, learners may reinforce their understanding of new lexical items and gain confidence in interpreting informal English usage. These interactional dynamics position TikTok as a socially mediated environment for incidental vocabulary learning.

#### TikTok as an Informal Digital Learning Ecology

The analysis further indicates that TikTok can be conceptualized as an informal digital learning ecology in which vocabulary development emerges from the interaction of multiple platform features. Vocabulary exposure occurs through the combination of multimodal input, including spoken language, visual cues, captions, and background audio, which collectively support meaning construction and lexical inference.

Algorithm-driven content personalization also contributes to sustained exposure to similar types of language input. As users engage with certain genres of content, TikTok's recommendation system presents related videos that often reuse similar vocabulary and expressions. This repeated exposure across contexts supports gradual lexical familiarity over time.

Taken together, these findings suggest that TikTok provides an environment where vocabulary learning occurs as a by-product of routine digital practices. Rather than functioning as a structured instructional medium, TikTok operates as an informal learning space where vocabulary development is embedded within entertainment-driven and socially interactive activities.

## **Discussion**

### **Incidental Vocabulary Learning and Meaning-Focused Input**

The findings related to non-educational TikTok content can be interpreted through contemporary theories of incidental vocabulary learning, which emphasize learning through meaning-focused engagement rather than deliberate study. Current second language acquisition research highlights that learners may acquire vocabulary when they are exposed to comprehensible and meaningful input while their primary attention is directed toward understanding messages (Nation, 2017);(Hulstijn, 2015).

TikTok aligns closely with this theoretical perspective, as users typically engage with content for entertainment purposes rather than language learning goals. Vocabulary exposure occurs incidentally as learners process meaning, visuals, and narratives presented in videos. Repeated encounters with lexical items across different videos may facilitate noticing and gradual lexical consolidation, which are considered essential processes in vocabulary development (Ellis, 2015);(Peters & Webb, 2018).

Recent research further emphasizes that informal digital environments can provide sufficient quantity and variability of input to support vocabulary growth over time (Peters & Webb, 2018); (De Wilde et al., 2020). Conceptually, TikTok exemplifies how incidental vocabulary learning may occur through everyday digital engagement without explicit pedagogical intervention.

### **Social Interaction, Digital Mediation, and Vocabulary Development**

The findings concerning code-switching and comment-based interaction can be discussed through interactionist and sociocultural perspectives on language learning. Contemporary interaction research underscores the role of meaning negotiation, clarification, and peer support in facilitating language development (Long, 2015).

In digitally mediated environments, social interaction extends beyond face-to-face communication and becomes embedded within online platforms. Recent studies on informal digital language learning indicate that collaborative meaning-making and peer explanations can support vocabulary acquisition in social media contexts (Benson, 2017);(Reinders & Wattana, 2014);(Ardianti & Faricha Maula Chabibah, 2025). TikTok comment sections exemplify these processes by allowing users to collectively interpret and explain language encountered in videos.

Code switching practices further support vocabulary learning by situating new lexical items within familiar linguistic frames. From a sociolinguistic perspective, such practices may reduce cognitive load and facilitate lexical inference, particularly for learners operating in bilingual digital spaces. This discussion reinforces the view that vocabulary learning is socially situated and shaped by interactional practices within digital environments.

### **Informal Digital Learning Ecologies and Implications for ELT**

Conceptualizing TikTok as an informal digital learning ecology contributes to ongoing discussions in English language teaching regarding the expanding boundaries of language learning contexts. Recent ELT research acknowledges that language learning increasingly occurs across multiple settings, including digital and informal environments that complement classroom instruction (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015);(Goh, 2017).

Rather than positioning TikTok as a replacement for formal vocabulary instruction, this discussion highlights its potential role as a supplementary environment that provides

continuous exposure to authentic language input. Informal digital platforms may support learner autonomy, sustained engagement, and low-anxiety interaction with English, which are key conditions for long-term language development (Lee & Dressman, 2018);(Sockett & Kusyk, 2021).

Overall, this conceptual discussion underscores the importance of recognizing learners' everyday digital practices as part of contemporary language learning ecologies. By theoretically linking TikTok's platform characteristics with established models of incidental vocabulary learning, this article contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how vocabulary development may occur beyond formal classroom settings.

## CONCLUSIONS

This conceptual study has explored TikTok as an informal digital environment that facilitates incidental English vocabulary learning among EFL learners by integrating theories of incidental learning, informal language exposure, and recent research on digital media in language education. The analysis demonstrates that non-educational TikTok content provides repeated, contextualized, and multimodal exposure to English vocabulary through everyday digital practices, while code-switching phenomena and comment-based interactions function as socially mediated spaces for meaning negotiation and lexical clarification. These characteristics align closely with contemporary views of incidental vocabulary learning, which emphasize meaning-focused input, repeated exposure, and contextualized use rather than deliberate memorization (Nation, 2017);(Peters & Webb, 2018). By conceptualizing TikTok as an informal learning ecology shaped by algorithm-driven repetition, multimodality, and social interaction, this study extends prior discussions that predominantly frame social media as a tool for intentional instruction (Sockett, 2014);(Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). The contribution of this article lies in offering a theoretical perspective that recognizes learners' everyday digital engagement as a meaningful site of vocabulary development, complementing formal EFL instruction rather than replacing it (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015);(Goh, 2017). While this study does not aim to measure empirical learning outcomes, it provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical research to examine how incidental vocabulary exposure through platforms such as TikTok may interact with classroom-based learning and contribute to long-term vocabulary development in EFL contexts.

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