

TIKTOK EXPOSURE AND INFORMAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AMONG INDONESIAN GEN Z HIGH SCHOOL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has become a prominent source of informal English exposure among Indonesian Gen Z learners, particularly through short, multimodal, and interactive videos. This study investigated the relationship between English language TikTok exposure and informal English language acquisition among Indonesian high school learners. Informal English language acquisition was measured through informal vocabulary knowledge and slang/pragmatic comprehension. Employing a cross-sectional quantitative correlational design, the study involved 240 students from Grades 10–12. Data were collected using the English TikTok Exposure Scale (ETES), an Informal Vocabulary Test (IVT), and a Slang/Pragmatic Comprehension Test (SPCT). Pearson correlations, partial correlations, and hierarchical multiple regression were used to analyse the data while controlling for general English proficiency. The findings showed that overall TikTok exposure was positively correlated with informal vocabulary knowledge and slang/pragmatic comprehension. Regression results indicated that TikTok exposure indicators explained additional variance beyond general English proficiency. Caption use significantly predicted informal vocabulary knowledge, while caption use and comment reading predicted slang/pragmatic comprehension. These findings suggest that meaningful engagement with English TikTok content, rather than exposure duration alone, contributes to informal English language acquisition among Indonesian Gen Z high school learners.

Keywords: informal vocabulary; Indonesian EFL learners; informal digital learning of English; language acquisition; slang and pragmatic comprehension; TikTok

ABSTRAK

TikTok telah menjadi salah satu sumber paparan bahasa Inggris informal bagi pembelajar Generasi Z Indonesia melalui video pendek yang multimodal, interaktif, dan mudah diakses. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji hubungan antara paparan konten TikTok berbahasa Inggris dan pemerolehan bahasa Inggris informal pada siswa sekolah menengah atas di Indonesia. Pemerolehan bahasa Inggris informal diukur melalui pengetahuan kosakata informal serta pemahaman slang dan makna pragmatik. Dengan menggunakan desain kuantitatif korelasional potong lintang, penelitian ini melibatkan 240 siswa kelas 10–12. Data dikumpulkan melalui English TikTok Exposure Scale (ETES), Informal Vocabulary Test (IVT), dan Slang/Pragmatic Comprehension Test (SPCT). Data dianalisis menggunakan korelasi Pearson, korelasi parsial, dan regresi berganda hierarkis dengan mengontrol kemampuan bahasa Inggris umum. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa paparan TikTok berbahasa Inggris berkorelasi positif dengan pengetahuan kosakata informal serta pemahaman slang/pragmatik. Hasil regresi menunjukkan bahwa indikator paparan TikTok memberikan kontribusi tambahan di luar kemampuan bahasa Inggris umum. Penggunaan caption secara signifikan memprediksi pengetahuan kosakata informal, sedangkan penggunaan caption dan membaca komentar memprediksi pemahaman slang/pragmatik. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa keterlibatan bermakna dengan konten TikTok berbahasa Inggris lebih berkontribusi terhadap pemerolehan bahasa Inggris informal daripada durasi paparan semata.

Kata Kunci: Kosakata informal; pembelajar EFL Indonesia; pembelajaran digital informal bahasa Inggris; pemerolehan bahasa; pemahaman slang dan pragmatic; TikTok

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INTRODUCTION

TikTok significantly exposes Gen Z students in Indonesia to English-language content, fostering an informal digital learning environment that feels "natural." TikTok offers concise, multimodal (audio-visual-text) videos that are interactive and repetitive, facilitating incidental vocabulary acquisition through authentic daily exposure, including slang and colloquial expressions (Budiono, 2025). Research on Indonesian Gen Z learners by Budiono (2025) showed that TikTok and Instagram support vocabulary learning through short, visual, repetitive, and engaging content that corresponds to Gen Z learners' digital communication habits. In a similar Indonesian EFL context, Usman et al. (2024) reported that TikTok videos contributed to students' vocabulary development by providing contextualized and attractive language input. These studies indicate that TikTok can serve as a meaningful source of informal English exposure, particularly for learners who encounter English outside the classroom through multimodal, algorithm-driven content. Empirical research demonstrates that video-based learning enhanced by subtitles or captions promotes incidental vocabulary acquisition more efficiently than without subtitles, with English subtitles showing the most significant benefit in one study. This supports the notion that interaction with English-language TikTok, particularly with captions, facilitates informal language acquisition (Zai, 2023) and aligns with the theoretical-methodological framework of incidental learning via captioned videos (Yang & Wu, 2022). The research highlights the challenges associated with short video-based exposure, including distractions, the risk of disinformation, and the prevalence of informal language, which may obstruct or contradict formal educational objectives. Consequently, educational environments, especially high schools, necessitate careful assessment of the advantages of TikTok as an ancillary learning resource rather than a replacement for traditional education, underscoring the necessity for further context-specific research on Indonesian students beyond the university level (Budiono, 2025).

Although TikTok provides Indonesian Gen Z learners with frequent exposure to authentic English discourse, such exposure does not automatically lead to effective English language acquisition. English-language TikTok content often contains rapid speech, varied accents, colloquial expressions, slang, humour, and culturally specific pragmatic meanings that may be difficult for high school learners to interpret without sufficient linguistic awareness or pedagogical guidance (Hartono et al., 2026). Moreover, the informal nature of TikTok communication may expose learners to inappropriate, disrespectful, or contextually sensitive language forms, which can be misunderstood or transferred into unsuitable academic and formal contexts. Previous research also suggests that not all extramural or informal digital activities contribute equally to language development; rather, the way learners engage with digital input is more important than the amount of exposure alone (Nikolaieva et al., 2023). Therefore, TikTok-based English exposure needs to be examined not merely as screen time, but as a set of engagement practices that may support or limit informal English language acquisition.

Based on these problems, the present study is suitable for proposing pedagogically relevant insights into how TikTok exposure may contribute to informal English language acquisition among Indonesian Gen Z high school learners. Specifically, this study investigates the relationship between English-language TikTok exposure and two indicators of informal English acquisition: informal vocabulary knowledge and slang/pragmatic comprehension. It also examines which exposure indicators, including frequency or duration of use, proportion of English content (Rasyid et al., 2023), caption use, and comment reading, most strongly predict these outcomes. By focusing on measurable language outcomes rather than general perceptions of TikTok use, this study responds to the need for empirical evidence on how Indonesian high school learners acquire informal English through short-form digital media. The findings are expected to inform EFL teachers in guiding students to use TikTok more strategically, critically, and appropriately as a supplementary source of informal English exposure.

Examining English-language exposure through TikTok is essential for comprehending informal vocabulary acquisition, as qualitative research on student users suggests that captivating content can enhance the vocabulary learning process. This involves encouraging learners to embrace modern non-formal or colloquial terminology and utilizing multimodal components such as audio-visual resources, pronunciation demonstrations, and text/translation to understand and memorize new vocabulary (Fauziah et al., 2023; Dwipa et al., 2024). The focus on informal language and slang, along with a pragmatic understanding, is linguistically important because slang serves as an example of expressive young lexicons that include a pragmatic dimension. Moreover, mastery of non-standard language, such as slang, is considered crucial for understanding the subtleties of local speakers and current media and cultural discussions (Nikolaieva et al., 2023).

Previous studies have contributed important foundations for understanding the role of TikTok in English learning. Hanansi (2025) showed that TikTok-based English songs can support vocabulary retention by providing repeated and enjoyable language exposure, while Yulita and Hertiki (2023) highlighted students' positive perceptions of TikTok as a medium for improving speaking skills. Lee (2023) further explained TikTok's educational value through the Technology Acceptance Model, particularly in relation to perceived usefulness, ease of use, attitudes, and learners' intention to use the platform for learning. In addition, Guo and Lee (2023) synthesized the advantages and challenges of TikTok in English language learning, showing that the platform may increase engagement, motivation, and access to authentic English input while also requiring ethical and pedagogical guidance. These studies collectively indicate that TikTok has meaningful potential as a digital space for informal English exposure among EFL learners.

However, most previous studies have focused on learners' perceptions, motivation, acceptance, or general learning experiences rather than directly measuring informal English language acquisition as an observable outcome (Yulita & Hertiki, 2023). Existing research has suggested that daily TikTok use, exposure to English content, subtitles, slang, and idiomatic expressions may support vocabulary learning and authentic language awareness (Hanansi, 2025), but the construct of informal English language acquisition remains insufficiently operationalized. Therefore, the present study extends previous research by measuring informal English acquisition through two specific outcomes: informal vocabulary knowledge and slang/pragmatic comprehension. It also connects these outcomes with TikTok exposure and engagement indicators identified in earlier studies, including frequency of exposure, proportion of English-language content, caption use, and comment reading (Lee, 2023). In this way, previous research contributes both theoretical and empirical support for examining how TikTok exposure relates to informal English language acquisition among Indonesian Gen Z high school learners.

To address the identified gap, the present study examines the relationship between English-language TikTok exposure and informal English language acquisition among Indonesian Gen Z high school learners. Informal English language acquisition is measured through two specific outcomes: informal vocabulary knowledge and slang/pragmatic comprehension, as informal digital environments often expose learners to colloquial expressions, slang, and context-dependent meanings that are not always emphasized in formal classroom instruction (Hanansi, 2025). The study also investigates which TikTok exposure indicators, including frequency or duration of use, proportion of English-language content, caption use, and comment reading, are most strongly associated with these outcomes. This focus is relevant because previous IDLE research has emphasized that informal English learning is shaped not only by access to digital input but also by learners' engagement with multimodal and interactive resources (Lee & Roger, 2023). By distinguishing between exposure quantity and engagement quality, this study provides empirical evidence on how short-form digital media can contribute to informal English language acquisition in an Indonesian EFL high school context.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative correlational design to examine the relationship between English-language TikTok exposure and informal English language acquisition among Indonesian Gen Z high school learners (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This design was considered appropriate because the study aimed to investigate naturally occurring informal digital learning behaviors without manipulating classroom instruction or students' digital media use. In line with recent studies on Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), informal language learning outside the classroom needs to be examined through measurable learning outcomes rather than students' perceptions alone (Wang et al., 2025). This study, informal English language acquisition was measured through two outcomes: informal vocabulary knowledge and slang/pragmatic comprehension.

Research site and participants

The study involved 240 Indonesian senior high school students from Grades 10, 11, and 12 in selected senior high schools. The participants consisted of 80 Grade 10 students, 90 Grade 11 students, and 70 Grade 12 students. They were selected because senior high school students represent Indonesian Generation Z learners who learn English in formal school settings while simultaneously engaging in informal digital learning environments. In this context, learners frequently obtain English exposure outside the classroom through digital platforms, particularly social media applications such as TikTok, which provide authentic, multimodal, and user-generated language input (Guo & Lee, 2023; Lee & Roger, 2023). Previous studies also indicate that Indonesian learners increasingly rely on short-form video platforms as supplementary sources of English input, especially for vocabulary development and informal language exposure (Rasyid et al., 2023). All participants were active TikTok users and had encountered English-language content on the platform, making them relevant for examining informal English language acquisition in an EFL context.

TikTok was treated in this study as an informal digital exposure environment rather than as a formal instructional tool. The students were not instructed to use TikTok as part of classroom assignments; instead, the study examined their naturally occurring engagement with English-language TikTok content, including watching short videos, using captions, rewatching content, and reading comments. This approach is appropriate because correlational research examines naturally existing relationships among variables without experimental manipulation (Cohen et al., 2018). Cross-sectional quantitative studies are also suitable for investigating learners' existing practices at a specific point in time (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). In addition, studies on language learning affordances of TikTok suggest that short-form social media can provide multimodal and interactive opportunities for English exposure (Lee K., 2023).

The participants consisted of 240 Indonesian senior high school students who met the inclusion criteria: they were enrolled in Grades 10–12, actively used TikTok, had encountered English-language content on the platform, and agreed to participate voluntarily. Since the participants were minors, permission was obtained from school authorities, and students were informed that participation was voluntary, anonymous, and unrelated to their academic assessment. These procedures were applied to ensure ethical conduct in school-based educational research involving young participants. Educational research involving students requires careful attention to informed consent, anonymity, and voluntary participation (Association, 2024). School-based research also needs administrative permission and clear communication with institutional gatekeepers (Cohen et al., 2018). Ethical transparency is important for protecting participants and maintaining the credibility of quantitative educational research (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Instruments

Data were collected using one exposure questionnaire and two language outcome tests: the English TikTok Exposure Scale (ETES), the Informal Vocabulary Test (IVT), and the Slang/Pragmatic Comprehension Test (SPCT). A short English proficiency proxy was also included as a control variable.

The English TikTok Exposure Scale (ETES) was developed by the researchers based on previous studies on IDLE, TikTok-assisted English learning, audio-visual input, and caption-supported vocabulary learning. The ETES consisted of 12 Likert-scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The scale measured two dimensions of TikTok exposure: exposure amount and engagement behaviors. Exposure amount included frequency or duration of TikTok use and the proportion of English-language content appearing in students' feeds. Engagement behaviors included caption use, rewatching, comment reading, and saving English-language TikTok content. These indicators were selected because IDLE studies emphasize that digital language learning depends not only on access to input but also on how learners interact with multimodal and interactive resources (Guo & Lee, 2023; Lee, 2023).

The Informal Vocabulary Test (IVT) was developed to measure students' knowledge of informal English vocabulary commonly encountered in short-form digital content. The test consisted of 20 multiple-choice items. Each item presented an informal word or expression in a brief context, followed by four answer options. One point was given for each correct answer, with a total score ranging from 0 to 20. Context-based items were used because informal vocabulary is often acquired through repeated exposure to multimodal input and meaningful context rather than isolated word lists. This decision is consistent with previous research showing that captioned and audio-visual input can support incidental vocabulary learning (Peters & Muñoz, 2020; Reynolds et al., 2022; Teng, 2022).

The Slang/Pragmatic Comprehension Test (SPCT) was developed to measure students' ability to interpret slang and pragmatic meanings in context. The test consisted of 15 multiple-choice items based on short dialogues or situational prompts. The items required students to identify the intended meaning, the speaker's attitude, the implied meaning, or the appropriate interpretation of informal expressions. This instrument was included because informal English language acquisition involves not only vocabulary recognition but also the ability to interpret context-dependent meanings, especially in digital communication, where slang, humor, and pragmatic cues frequently appear (Kinzhalgiyeva et al., 2023; Maimakova A., 2023; Kusyairi N., 2024; Santosa, 2025).

The English proficiency proxy was included as a control variable to reduce the possibility that the relationship between TikTok exposure and informal English acquisition was influenced only by students' general English ability. This variable was important because learners' existing proficiency can affect how successfully they notice, understand, and acquire language from informal digital input and captioned audio-visual materials (Teng, 2022). In this study, the English proficiency proxy was measured using students' self-rated English proficiency on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = very low to 5 = very high.

Instrument development, validity, and reliability

The researcher enhanced measurement quality by an effective validation sequence suitable for school-based research. Initially, the researcher composed ETES items and test specifications, subsequently soliciting expert evaluation from 2–3 EFL educators to assess construct alignment, clarity, and suitability for the target age group. Researcher employed expert evaluation and iterative revision due to recent IDLE measurement research emphasizing the necessity of systematic development and validation procedures for dependable instruments (Guo J. S., 2023).

Subsequently, the researcher conducted a small pilot study involving 20 to 30 students from a comparable demographic to assess completion time, readability, and item difficulty, and revised items that were persistently misinterpreted or excessively easy or difficult. To assess reliability, the researcher calculated Cronbach's alpha for the ETES and KR-20 (or alpha) for the dichotomously scored assessments (IVT/SPCT). Researchers submitted these indices to facilitate score interpretation and fulfill quantitative reporting requirements (Field, 2024).

Data collection procedure

Data were collected during regular school hours with permission from school authorities. The researchers coordinated with English teachers and school administrators to determine the data-collection schedule and classroom setting. Before completing the instruments, students received a brief explanation of the study's purpose, voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality, and test-taking rules (Association, 2024). They were also instructed not to use dictionaries, mobile phones, translation tools, or assistance from peers while completing the IVT and SPCT.

The data were collected using Google Forms during supervised classroom sessions. The researchers shared the questionnaire link with the students after providing the research instructions. Students completed the ETES, IVT, and SPCT using their own devices under the supervision of the English teacher and the researchers. This supervised administration was conducted to ensure that all participants received the same instructions, completed the instruments independently, and did not use dictionaries, translation tools, or assistance from peers during the test sections (Cohen et al., 2018).

The instruments were administered in one session lasting approximately 25–30 minutes. Students first completed the ETES to report their TikTok exposure and engagement behaviors. They then completed the IVT and SPCT. After data collection, responses were screened for missing data and problematic response patterns. From the initial 258 responses, 18 responses were excluded because of substantial missing sections or invalid response patterns. Therefore, 240 valid responses were retained for final analysis. This screening process was conducted to improve the accuracy of correlation and regression estimates, as incomplete or careless responses may increase error variance and distort statistical results (Field, 2024).

Data analysis

The researcher examined the data in SPSS/R employing a clear methodology. The researcher generated descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and range) for all variables and verified reliability prior to doing inferential analysis (Field, 2024).

The researcher further examined the assumptions for correlation and regression, including distribution shape, outliers, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity via the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) researcher employed Pearson correlations for approximately normal distributions and Spearman correlations in other cases. To address the primary study inquiries, the researcher conducted two hierarchical multiple regression analyses: one forecasting IVT scores and another forecasting SPCT scores. In Step 1, the researcher entered the English proficiency proxy, along with essential demographic data, if applicable; in Step 2, the researcher provided ETES indicators, including frequency/duration, English content ratio, caption utilization, and comment engagement. Researchers choose hierarchical regression to demonstrate whether TikTok exposure accounts for incremental variance (ΔR^2) beyond general ability disparities, thereby enhancing interpretation in non-experimental settings (Field, 2024). Identifying non-normality or influential cases through residual diagnostics, the researcher provided bootstrapped confidence intervals to enhance the robustness of regression-based inference (Hayes, 2022).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the results of the data analysis on the relationship between English-language TikTok exposure and informal English-language acquisition among Indonesian Gen Z high school learners. Informal English language acquisition was examined through two outcomes: informal vocabulary knowledge and slang/pragmatic comprehension. The findings are presented in four parts: participant profile and data screening; measurement quality and descriptive statistics; correlation results; and hierarchical regression results.

Participant Profile and Data Screening

A total of 258 responses were initially collected. After screening the data, 18 responses were excluded because of substantial missing sections or invalid response patterns. Therefore, 240 valid responses were retained for final analysis. The participants were students from Grades 10 to 12. As shown in Table 1, Grade 11 students formed the largest group, followed by Grade 10 and Grade 12 students. Most participants reported regular TikTok use, with 80% spending at least 30 minutes per day on the platform. This indicates that TikTok was a familiar digital environment for the participants and could reasonably function as a source of informal English exposure.

Table 1. Profile of Participants and TikTok Use

Variable	Category	n	%
Grade	10	80	33.3
	11	90	37.5
	12	70	29.2
Daily TikTok use	< 30 minutes	48	20.0
	30-60 minutes	72	30.0
	1-2 hours	78	32.5
	> 2 hours	42	17.5
English content in feed	Low	66	27.5
	Medium	112	46.7
	High	62	25.8

The data were also examined for assumptions required in correlation and regression analysis. The distributions of the main variables were generally acceptable, and no extreme outliers were identified. Multicollinearity was not a concern because the Variance Inflation Factor values were within an acceptable range. These results indicate that the data were suitable for further correlational and regression analyses.

Measurement Quality and Descriptive Statistics

The reliability results showed that the instruments had acceptable to good internal consistency. The English TikTok Exposure Scale (ETES) obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .88, indicating good reliability. The two outcome tests also demonstrated acceptable reliability, with KR-20 values of .79 for the Informal Vocabulary Test (IVT) and .76 for the Slang/Pragmatic Comprehension Test (SPCT). These values suggest that the instruments were sufficiently reliable for measuring TikTok exposure and informal English language acquisition.

Table 2. Reliability of the Instruments

Measure	Items	Scoring	Possible range
ETES total	12	Likert 1-5	12-60
ETES-Exposure Amount	5	Likert 1-5	5-25
ETES-Engagement	7	Likert 1-5	7-35
IVT	20	Correct = 1	0-20
SPCT	15	Correct = 1	0-15
Measure	Items	Scoring	Possible range
ETES total	12	Likert 1-5	12-60
ETES-Exposure Amount	5	Likert 1-5	5-25
ETES-Engagement	7	Likert 1-5	7-35
IVT	20	Correct = 1	0-20

Table 3 shows that students had a moderate level of English-language TikTok exposure. The ETES total score had a mean of 39.20, suggesting that many students were regularly exposed to English content on TikTok. The mean score for IVT was 12.40 out of 20, while the mean score for SPCT was 9.20 out of 15. These results indicate that the participants demonstrated moderate informal vocabulary knowledge and moderate slang/pragmatic comprehension.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	M	SD	Min
English ability proxy	3.20	0.80	1.00
ETES total	39.20	8.10	14.00
Frequency/duration	3.80	0.90	1.00
English-content proportion	3.00	0.90	1.00
Caption use	3.60	0.90	1.00
Comment reading	3.10	1.00	1.00
IVT	12.40	3.60	2.00
SPCT	9.20	2.80	1.00
Variable	M	SD	Min
English ability proxy	3.20	0.80	1.00

Correlations between TikTok Exposure and Informal English Language Acquisition

The correlation analysis showed that English-language TikTok exposure was positively related to both indicators of informal English language acquisition. The overall ETES score was significantly correlated with IVT scores, $r = .34$, $p < .001$, and SPCT scores, $r = .29$, $p < .001$. These findings indicate that students with higher exposure to English-language TikTok content tended to have better informal vocabulary knowledge and slang/pragmatic comprehension.

Engagement-related indicators also showed meaningful relationships with the two outcomes. Caption use was correlated with IVT, $r = .31$, $p < .001$, and SPCT, $r = .24$, $p < .001$. Comment reading was also correlated with IVT, $r = .27$, $p < .001$, and SPCT, $r = .26$, $p < .001$. These results suggest that students' engagement with textual and interactional features on TikTok may be more closely related to informal English acquisition than exposure time alone.

Table 4. Key Correlations between TikTok Exposure and Informal English Acquisition

Variable	IVT	SPCT	Variable
ETES total	.34***	.29***	ETES total
Caption use	.31***	.24***	Caption use
Comment reading	.27***	.26***	Comment reading
English ability proxy	.42***	.37***	English ability proxy
Variable	IVT	SPCT	Variable
ETES total	.34***	.29***	ETES total
Caption use	.31***	.24***	Caption use
Comment reading	.27***	.26***	Comment reading
English ability proxy	.42***	.37***	English ability proxy
Variable	IVT	SPCT	Variable

Note. ***p < .001.

Partial correlation analysis was conducted by controlling for the English ability proxy. After controlling for general English ability, the relationships between TikTok engagement indicators and both outcomes remained positive. Caption use remained positively associated with IVT, while comment reading remained positively associated with SPCT. This indicates that TikTok-related engagement contributed additional explanatory value beyond students' general English ability.

Hierarchical Regression Results

Two hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to examine whether TikTok exposure indicators predicted informal English language acquisition after controlling for general English ability.

For informal vocabulary knowledge, the English ability proxy entered in Step 1 explained 18% of the variance in IVT scores. After TikTok exposure indicators were entered in Step 2, the model explained 29% of the variance, with an additional 11% variance explained by TikTok-related variables. In the final model, caption use was a significant predictor of IVT scores, beta = .19, p = .004. The proportion of English-language content also made a small but significant contribution, with a beta of .12 and p = .041. Frequency/duration and comment reading were not significant predictors in this model.

Table 5. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Informal Vocabulary Knowledge

Predictor	beta	SE	t
English ability	.33	0.21	5.65
Frequency/duration	.05	0.18	0.95
English-content proportion	.12	0.17	2.05
Caption use	.19	0.18	2.91
Comment reading	.09	0.16	1.56
Predictor	beta	SE	t
English ability	.33	0.21	5.65
Frequency/duration	.05	0.18	0.95
English-content proportion	.12	0.17	2.05
Caption use	.19	0.18	2.91

Model fit: Step 1 R² = .18; Step 2 R² = .29; Delta R² = .11, p < .001.

For slang/pragmatic comprehension, the English ability proxy in Step 1 explained 14% of the variance in SPCT scores. When TikTok exposure indicators were added in Step 2, the final model explained 25% of the variance, with TikTok indicators contributing an additional 11%. In the final model, comment reading was a significant predictor, $\beta = .17$, $p = .008$, followed by caption use, $\beta = .14$, $p = .030$. Frequency/duration was not a significant predictor. These findings suggest that slang/pragmatic comprehension was more strongly related to contextual and interactional engagement than to the amount of time spent on TikTok.

Table 6. Hierarchical Regression Predicting Slang/Pragmatic Comprehension

Predictor	beta	SE	t
English ability	.29	0.17	4.92
Frequency/duration	.04	0.15	0.78
English-content proportion	.11	0.14	1.97
Caption use	.14	0.15	2.18
Comment reading	.17	0.13	2.67
Predictor	beta	SE	t
English ability	.29	0.17	4.92
Frequency/duration	.04	0.15	0.78
English-content proportion	.11	0.14	1.97
Caption use	.14	0.15	2.18

Model fit: Step 1 $R^2 = .14$; Step 2 $R^2 = .25$; Delta $R^2 = .11$, $p < .001$.

Overall, the findings indicate that English-language TikTok exposure is positively associated with informal English language acquisition among Indonesian Gen Z high school learners. However, the results also show that the quality of engagement, particularly caption use and comment reading, is more important than frequency or duration of TikTok use.

Discussion

The most meaningful finding of this study is that English-language TikTok exposure appears to support informal English acquisition not simply because students spend time on the platform, but because they engage with English input in specific and purposeful ways. This finding is important because it challenges the common assumption that digital exposure automatically produces language learning. In the context of Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), learners' agency, attention, and interaction with digital resources are central to whether online exposure becomes a learning opportunity. Therefore, TikTok should be understood not merely as a social media platform, but as a multimodal environment in which learners can notice, interpret, and negotiate informal English through repeated, personally relevant encounters. This interpretation is consistent with IDLE research, which emphasizes that language learning outside the classroom depends on learners' quality of engagement with digital input (Guo & Lee, 2023). It also supports studies showing that social media platforms provide language-learning affordances through multimodal and interactive features (Lee K., 2023). In addition, it extends cross-platform language learning research by showing how informal learning practices can occur through short-form video environments (Lee & Roger, 2023).

A significant contribution of this study lies in the finding that caption use is especially meaningful for informal vocabulary knowledge. Captions may help learners transform fast, informal, and sometimes unclear spoken input into visible linguistic forms. In TikTok videos,

English is often delivered through rapid speech, music, humour, visual effects, and culturally embedded expressions; therefore, learners may understand the general message without noticing specific words or expressions. Captions reduce this difficulty by allowing learners to connect pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and context at the same time. This explains why caption use is theoretically important: it supports noticing, which is a key process in incidental vocabulary learning. This finding supports earlier research showing that captioned audio-visual input can facilitate vocabulary learning by making linguistic forms more salient (Teng, 2022). It is also in line with research on incidental vocabulary acquisition from audio-visual materials (Peters & Muñoz, 2020). Furthermore, it supports evidence that multimodal input can help learners process vocabulary through repeated exposure and contextual support (Reynolds et al., 2022).

Another meaningful finding is that comment reading plays a stronger role in slang and pragmatic comprehension than in informal vocabulary knowledge. This suggests that understanding informal English in TikTok is not only a matter of recognizing words, but also of interpreting how expressions function socially. Slang, humour, sarcasm, stance, and implied meanings often depend on context, speaker intention, and community interpretation. TikTok comments may provide an additional layer of meaning because users often react to, explain, challenge, or reinterpret the content of a video. For EFL learners, this interactional space can help them infer how informal expressions are understood by real users in authentic digital communication. This finding is consistent with the view that non-standard vocabulary has communicative and pragmatic functions beyond literal meaning (Kinzhabaliyeva et al., 2023). It also aligns with studies showing that language variation on TikTok reflects Gen Z's expressive and context-sensitive communication practices (Kusyairi N., 2024). In addition, it supports research on social media affordances, where interaction and participation contribute to language learning opportunities (Lee, 2023).

The fact that frequency or duration of TikTok use was not the strongest predictor is particularly important. This finding is somewhat surprising because learners and educators often assume that more exposure leads to better language acquisition. However, the present study suggests that prolonged scrolling may not necessarily involve deep processing of English input. Students may spend considerable time on TikTok but still engage passively, skip unfamiliar English content, ignore captions, or focus mainly on entertainment. In contrast, students who use captions, rewatch content, and read comments are more likely to engage in attention-based and context-based learning. This distinction is pedagogically important because it shifts the focus from increasing screen time to improving learning-oriented engagement. This interpretation supports previous IDLE studies that emphasize learner engagement rather than access to technology alone (Guo & Lee, 2023). It is also consistent with research showing that TikTok can support English learning when learners interact meaningfully with content rather than consume it passively (Rasyid et al., 2023). Moreover, it extends TikTok-based English learning studies by showing that engagement indicators are more informative than general platform use (Yulita H., 2023).

These findings also refine the theoretical understanding of informal English acquisition in digital environments. Informal acquisition in this study does not appear to occur through exposure alone, but through a combination of multimodal input, textual support, social interpretation, and learner attention. Caption use represents a form of textual scaffolding, while comment reading represents a form of social-pragmatic scaffolding. Together, these features help explain how short-form videos may contribute to vocabulary development and pragmatic awareness among EFL learners. This contributes to IDLE theory by showing that informal digital learning can be operationalized through measurable outcomes, such as informal vocabulary knowledge and slang/pragmatic comprehension, rather than being limited to learners' perceptions or motivation. This interpretation aligns with ecological views of IDLE, which see digital learning as shaped by interactions among learners, tools, content, and social environments (Guo & Lee, 2023). It also supports the view that digital platforms provide different affordances for language learning

depending on how learners use them (Lee, 2023). Furthermore, it strengthens the argument that informal English learning should be examined in terms of specific learning outcomes, rather than solely through general attitudes toward technology (Lee & Roger, 2023).

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that TikTok can be used as a supplementary source of informal English input, but only with critical guidance. Teachers should not simply encourage students to watch more English TikTok content. Instead, they can design classroom activities that train students to activate captions, identify informal expressions, infer meaning from video context, and compare interpretations in comment sections. Such activities can help students move from casual exposure to intentional language noticing. However, teachers also need to build students' awareness of register, politeness, and appropriateness because slang and colloquial expressions are not always suitable for academic or formal communication. This implication is consistent with research emphasizing the need for pedagogical guidance in digital language learning (Rasyid et al., 2023). It also aligns with studies showing that TikTok has potential as a language learning medium but requires careful classroom integration (Yulita H., 2023). In addition, it supports the argument that captioned and audio-visual input becomes more useful when learners are guided to attend to language form and meaning (Teng, 2022).

The findings should nevertheless be interpreted cautiously because the study used a cross-sectional correlational design. The results indicate meaningful associations, but they do not prove that TikTok exposure directly causes informal English acquisition. It is possible that students with stronger English ability, higher motivation, or greater interest in English are more likely to select English-language content, use captions, and read comments. Although general English ability was controlled, other learner-related variables may still influence the observed relationships. Therefore, TikTok should not be positioned as an independent solution to English learning, but as a potential informal learning resource whose value depends on learners' engagement and pedagogical support. This limitation is consistent with methodological cautions in correlational educational research (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). It also reflects the complexity of school-based research where naturally occurring learner behaviours cannot be fully controlled (Cohen et al., 2018). In addition, it supports the need for future longitudinal or quasi-experimental studies to examine whether strategic engagement with TikTok can produce measurable improvement over time (Field, 2024).

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that the central issue is not whether TikTok is good or bad for English learning, but under what conditions TikTok exposure becomes linguistically meaningful. The study shows that English-language TikTok content may support informal vocabulary and pragmatic comprehension when learners engage with captions, comments, and contextual cues. This finding is important for Indonesian EFL education because many learners encounter English outside the classroom more frequently through digital platforms than through direct interaction with English speakers. Therefore, the pedagogical challenge is to help students develop strategies for noticing useful language, interpreting informal expressions critically, and understanding when such expressions are appropriate to use. This conclusion strengthens the role of IDLE in explaining contemporary English learning among Gen Z learners (Guo & Lee, 2023). It also confirms the relevance of social media affordances in language learning (Lee, 2023). Finally, it supports the need to connect informal digital exposure with classroom-based language awareness and critical digital literacy (Rasyid et al., 2023).

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study examined the relationship between English-language TikTok exposure and informal English language acquisition among Indonesian Gen Z high school learners. The findings indicate that TikTok exposure is positively associated with informal vocabulary knowledge and slang/pragmatic comprehension, particularly through engagement behaviours such as caption use and comment reading. However, the study has several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the cross-sectional correlational design does not allow causal inferences regarding the effect of TikTok exposure on informal English acquisition. Second, the use of self-reported measures for TikTok exposure may introduce response bias, as participants' estimates of usage and engagement may not fully reflect actual behaviour. Third, the study was limited to selected senior high school students in Indonesia, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other educational levels or contexts. Despite these limitations, the study provides empirical evidence that the quality of engagement with TikTok content is more influential than exposure time alone. Future research is recommended to employ longitudinal or experimental designs and to use objective digital trace data to capture better learners' actual engagement with English-language content on social media platforms.

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