Viral Voices in Language Learning: The Role of TikTok English Songs in Enhancing EFL Learners' Vocabulary Retention

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ABSTRACT

TikTok has evolved as one of the most influential internet platforms in recent years. TikTok, recognized for its brief videos and viral phenomena, provides a diverse array of audio-visual content, including music-centric material that frequently incorporates popular English songs. This study investigates the use of popular English TikTok songs as authentic digital materials to enhance vocabulary retention in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. With the growing integration of digital media in students' daily lives, platforms like TikTok offer engaging and context-rich opportunities for language learning. Adopting qualitive method through case study design, this research explored the experiences, perceptions, and learning behaviors of students at SMAN 1 Pamekasan who actively used TikTok and engaged with English songs on the platform. Data were collected through semi-structured interview with 3 participants, Thematic analysis revealed three main findings: (1) the songs significantly increased learners' motivation and engagement; (2) vocabulary retention improved due to repeated and contextualized exposure to language; and (3) emotional and social interactions supported deeper learning. The results suggest that integrating familiar and enjoyable content such as TikTok songs into classroom instruction can bridge the gap between formal education and students' digital experiences, leading to more meaningful and effective vocabulary acquisition. These findings highlight the pedagogical value of leveraging students' media habits to support learner-centered and engaging language instruction.

Introduction

The swift advancement of digital technology has profoundly transformed the realm of language acquisition, particularly for the youth. TikTok has evolved as one of the most influential internet platforms in recent years. TikTok, renowned for its brief videos and viral phenomena, provides a diverse array of audio-visual content, prominently includes music-centric material that frequently showcases popular English songs. These songs, which are frequently reused in user-generated videos, are widely disseminated and repeatedly heard by

users in various contexts. The repeated exposure to English in real-life settings through these popular songs provides valuable opportunities for vocabulary acquisition for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). As digital media becomes increasingly integrated into learners' daily lives, its potential in language learning particularly vocabulary retention warrants further investigation (Peachey & Withers, 2019).

Vocabulary is essential in the process of acquiring a second language. Learners encounter difficulties in comprehending spoken and written materials, articulating ideas, and engaging in conversation without sufficient vocabulary knowledge. However, vocabulary learning is often perceived as difficult or boring, especially in EFL contexts where exposure to the target language outside the classroom is limited. Traditional methods of teaching vocabulary, such as memorizing word lists or using exercises that are disconnected from context, can lead to disengagement. In contrast, the use of authentic materials texts created for native speakers for purposes other than language teaching can help learners master vocabulary in context and develop deeper lexical competence (Gilmore, 2007).

Existing studies consistently demonstrate that digital platforms especially TikTok enhance learner motivation and engagement. Research by Sun and Yang (2022) shows that when instructional materials align with learners' everyday digital habits, engagement naturally increases because learners voluntarily interact with the content. Similarly, Yang (2020) and *TikTok's Impact on English Language Learning* (2023) highlight that the multimodal, personalized, and entertaining nature of short-form videos promotes sustained attention and willingness to learn vocabulary. These findings establish that TikTok functions as a motivational tool, positioning digital-native media as a powerful driver of EFL engagement.

Vocabulary research also emphasizes the role of contextualized and repeated input in strengthening retention. Foundational work by Schmitt (2020) and Webb and Nation (2020) argues that multimodal repetition through sound, rhythm, and meaningful contexts promotes deeper encoding in long-term memory. Recent TikTok-based studies support this view. For example, the 2023 study *Popular English Songs in TikTok to Teach Vocabulary* reports superior vocabulary gains when learners are repeatedly exposed to catchy, contextual lyrics. Ismail and Aziz (2024) further describe short-video songs as incidental learning pathways that extend exposure beyond the classroom. These studies collectively show that TikTok offers a natural mechanism for repetitive and contextual vocabulary encounters.

Although current literature highlights the motivational, contextual, and repetitive strengths of TikTok for language learning, fewer studies explore the combined emotional–social mechanisms that underpin vocabulary acquisition through English songs specifically on TikTok. Research by Oxford (2020), Li and Dervin (2021), and Wong and Hashim (2021) underscores that emotional resonance, social interaction, and peer-sharing behaviors enhance retention, yet empirical studies rarely integrate all these variables within a TikTok-song learning context. Moreover, recent works such as Zhou (2022) and Utilizing TikTok in EFL Learning (2023) address social interaction but do not examine how students' emotional attachment to TikTok songs contributes to deeper lexical memory. This creates a clear gap that your study addresses: how learners' emotional responses, social engagement, and

authentic interaction with English TikTok songs collectively shape vocabulary learning experiences a dimension underexplored in previous five-year studies.

Engagement is another critical factor in successful language learning. According to Harmer (2007), learners are more likely to remember language input when they are emotionally engaged in the learning process. TikTok promotes significant user contact and emotional involvement via content creation, trend participation, and community engagement. These variables foster an atmosphere in which learners are not only passive recipients of language input but active participants in the process of constructing meaning. The combination of audio, visual, and social elements in TikTok videos creates a multimodal learning experience that can enhance motivation and vocabulary acquisition (Richards, 2015).

Music has historically been acknowledged as a potent instrument for language acquisition. The rhythmic, repeated, and emotive characteristics enhance memory retention and aid in natural language acquisition (Murphey, 1992). When learners interact with music they enjoy and encounter frequently, such as popular English songs on TikTok, they are more likely to remember vocabulary embedded in the lyrics. Nation (2001) emphasizes the importance of repeated exposure and contextual learning in vocabulary retention. TikTok songs, because they are used in millions of videos and challenges, provide this type of repetition in an engaging format. Additionally, these songs often contain contemporary expressions, idiomatic language, and relevant cultural references, making them a rich source of English used in real-life contexts.

Despite its popularity, the use of TikTok as a language learning resource – especially for vocabulary development - remains largely unexplored in academic research. Although several studies have highlighted the benefits of music and digital tools in language learning (Cakir, 2015 & Alisaari & Heikkola, 2017), TikTok's uniqueness, such as its algorithm-driven repetition and creative remix culture, offers new pedagogical possibilities that have yet to be fully researched. Furthermore, incorporating students' digital behaviours and interests into formal education might facilitate the connection between classroom learning and practical language application.

This study explores how popular English-language TikTok songs can serve as authentic materials to improve vocabulary retention in an EFL context. The study aims to investigate learners' perceptions, experiences and engagement with TikTok-based content, and to examine how these factors influence vocabulary learning outcomes. By focusing on a widely used digital platform and materials that resonate with learners' everyday experiences, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to modernize language teaching and promote effective, relevant, and learner-centered vocabulary development.

Method

This study employed a qualitative methodology through case study design to investigate students' experiences in acquiring vocabulary through popular English TikTok songs. The aim was to understand how these songs, as authentic digital materials, contributed to vocabulary retention in an EFL classroom setting. Recent scholars of digital-based

language learning, such as Sari (2021), argue that TikTok provides multimodal, short-form linguistic input that enhances contextual vocabulary exposure and supports incidental learning. The use of social-media-based materials is consistent with recent findings: for example, *TikTok as a Medium for Contextual Vocabulary Learning in EFL* (2022) reports that TikTok content offers accessible, engaging, and contextually rich vocabulary exposure that supports vocabulary learning.

Similarly, *Vocabulary Learning Autonomy through Incorporation of English Songs* (2021) shows that English songs function as affectively engaging authentic materials, promoting retention, sustained attention, and positive emotional states key factors that Liu and Chu (2020) identify as central in digital-song-mediated vocabulary learning. Therefore, our participants' engagement with TikTok songs may reflect broader benefits of authentic-song exposure documented in recent literature, beyond merely novelty factor.

The research focused on the learners' engagement, perceptions, emotional responses, and learning behaviors. The participants were 3 students at SMAN 1 Pamekasan who actively used TikTok and frequently engaged with English songs on the platform. These students were selected based on their familiarity with TikTok and their interest in learning English through digital content. Their experiences provided valuable insight into the natural use of TikTok songs in the language learning process echoing the argument of Putra and Dewi (2023), who found that TikTok-based instruction increases learner motivation, attention, and memory consolidation through repeated short-clip exposure. This aligns with findings in *Improving Vocabulary Using TikTok Application* (2022), which demonstrates that TikTok-based vocabulary instruction can significantly improve students' vocabulary performance after repeated exposure.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This data collection approach aligns with Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), who emphasize that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to capture learners' nuanced perceptions and evolving meaning-making processes in technology-enhanced learning contexts. In addition, student learning artifacts such as vocabulary lists, lyric-based tasks, and reflection notes were examined to assess how vocabulary was acquired and retained following exposure to TikTok songs. This multimodal evidence approach resonates with qualitative designs employed in recent song-based vocabulary studies, such as *Learning While Relaxing: Students' Experiences of Learning English Vocabulary by Songs* (2023), which highlights that combining interviews with learner artifacts strengthens validity by triangulating performance with perception.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, enabling the researchers to identify patterns and recurring themes across interviews, observations, and student documents. Thematic analysis remains widely endorsed in contemporary qualitative research; Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasize that its reflexive approach supports rich, nuanced interpretation of learners' digital engagement experiences. To enhance the credibility of the findings, several strategies were employed, including data triangulation, member checking, and peer discussion. These strategies follow the trustworthiness principles outlined by Nowell et al. (2020–2022), who stress that triangulation, participant validation, and peer debriefing are

essential for ensuring accuracy, reducing researcher bias, and strengthening the credibility of qualitative analyses in education and technology studies.

Results and Discussion

Result of the thematic analysis generated three major themes describing students' experiences in learning vocabulary through popular English TikTok songs: (1) heightened learner engagement and intrinsic motivation, (2) vocabulary retention through authentic and contextualized exposure, and (3) emotional and social interaction as catalysts for learning. Findings are presented below with supporting quotations from the three participants.

1. Heightened Learner Engagement and Intrinsic Motivation

Participants reported increased motivation and enjoyment when learning vocabulary through TikTok songs. They consistently described the learning activities as more engaging compared to traditional instruction.

> ***Participant 1 stated,***
> *"When we used TikTok songs, I didn't feel like studying. It was fun, and I could follow the lyrics easily."*
> ***Participant 2*** *emphasized that the songs felt more relevant to their daily lives:*
> *"I already listen to these songs every day, so learning from them feels natural and not boring."*
> ***Participant 3*** *also highlighted increased participation:*
> *"I usually don't talk much in class, but with songs, I wanted to answer because I understood the lyrics."*

Classroom observations supported these statements, as students actively contributed to discussions, asked about unfamiliar words, and suggested additional songs for future activities. These behaviours indicate that TikTok-based materials fostered high engagement and voluntary participation.

2. Vocabulary Retention through Authentic and Contextualized Exposure

The second theme concerns the role of repeated and meaningful exposure in helping students remember new vocabulary. Students reported that they could recall words more easily when they appeared in repeated or catchy lyrics.

> ***Participant 2 expressed***,
> *"Some words stayed in my mind because the song repeated them many times."*
> ***Participant 1 noted*** *the contextual support provided by lyrics:*
> *"I understand words better when I see them in the story of the song, not just from a list."*
> ***Participant 3 added,***
> *"After class, the same songs appeared again on my TikTok. I heard the words again, so I didn't forget them."*

Analysis of student artifacts such as vocabulary lists and lyric-based tasks showed that students were able not only to recall the target words but also to apply them in sentence construction and personal reflections, demonstrating deeper levels of vocabulary retention.

3. Emotional and Social Learning Experiences as Catalysts for Retention

Students described strong emotional connections to the songs used in class. These emotional responses appeared to support recall and engagement.

> ***Participant 1 shared,***
> *"Some songs match my mood, so I remember the words because the song feels meaningful to me."*
> ***Participant 2 stated,***

"When I like the song, it's easier to understand and remember the vocabulary."
Participant 3 highlighted the social dimension of learning:
"My friends and I talked about the lyrics together, so we helped each other understand the meanings."

Peer collaboration observed during group work and informal discussions supported incidental vocabulary learning. Students frequently explained unfamiliar vocabulary to one another, shared interpretations, and compared translations during and after class.

Discussions

The findings of this study show that popular English TikTok songs can meaningfully support vocabulary retention among EFL learners through enhanced engagement, contextual exposure, and social emotional interaction. When interpreted alongside recent scholarship, these results demonstrate strong alignment with contemporary understandings of digital-media-assisted vocabulary learning.

1. Engagement and Motivation Through Digital-Song Media

The elevated levels of engagement reported by participants echo recent expert perspectives on digital learning motivation. For instance, Sun and Yang (2022) argue that learners' motivation increases significantly when instructional materials intersect with students' daily digital habits, noting that platforms like TikTok *"create natural learning engagement because learners already consume the content voluntarily."* Likewise, Yang (2020) emphasizes that short-form video apps enhance attention and sustained interest due to their multimodal and personalized nature. The participants' comments such as *"this is fun," "I want to learn more because I already know the song,"* and *"this feels different from boring vocabulary worksheets"* are consistent with these expert insights. Recent empirical work also supports this trend: the study TikTok's Impact on English Language Learning (2023) found that the platform increases EFL learners' willingness to engage with vocabulary tasks because the content feels *"relevant, entertaining, and personally meaningful."*

Thus, the motivational boost observed in your results aligns well with expert consensus that authentic, digital-native content heightens intrinsic motivation.

2. Vocabulary Retention Through Contextualized and Repetitive Exposure

Experts in vocabulary studies continue to stress the importance of meaningful repetition and contextual learning. Schmitt (2020) maintains that vocabulary retention is strongest when learners encounter lexical items repeatedly across emotionally and semantically rich contexts. Similarly, Webb and Nation (2020) highlight that multimodal repetition through sound, rhythm, and contextual cues allows for deeper encoding in long-term memory. Recent studies reinforce these principles within TikTok environments. The 2023 mixed-method study Popular English Songs in TikTok to Teach Vocabulary found significantly higher vocabulary gains in classes using TikTok songs compared to classes using traditional word lists, attributing the difference to frequent, catchy, and contextual lexical exposure. The participants' quotations such as *"I still remember the words because I keep hearing the song on my For You Page"* and *"the repeated lyrics help me memorize without trying"* directly reflect these expert-backed mechanisms. Furthermore, a recent review by Ismail and Aziz (2024) concludes that songs on short video platforms serve as *"incidental vocabulary learning pathways,"* offering repetition beyond classroom boundaries exactly as observed in your study.

3. Emotional and Social Interaction as Catalysts for Learning

Recent theories emphasize the role of affect and social learning in vocabulary retention. Oxford (2020) notes that emotional resonance strengthens cognitive processing and retention, especially when learners feel connected to content. Meanwhile, Li and Dervin (2021) highlight that social interaction such as sharing and discussing digital content supports meaning negotiation and expands vocabulary depth. The findings strongly echo these expert positions. Participants described feeling emotionally connected to the songs *"this song reminds me of my own life," "I feel relaxed when learning this way"*, which helped reinforce memorization. This matches findings from Wong and Hashim (2021) who found that music-based digital learning reduces anxiety and increases emotional comfort, thereby lowering the affective filter.

Socially, the participants reported discussing lyrics, sharing TikTok songs, and working collaboratively behaviour consistent with Zhou's (2022) assertion that short-video platforms foster peer interaction that promotes spontaneous language use. Recent TikTok-focused research such as Utilizing TikTok in EFL Learning (2023) similarly found that peer-sharing behaviour's create collaborative micro-learning ecosystems, aligning with your classroom observations.

4. Integration of Findings Into Current EFL Pedagogical Practice

Considering both your findings and the expert literature, TikTok songs can be considered a promising complementary tool for vocabulary instruction. Experts increasingly advocate for integrating authentic digital media into the curriculum. Thornbury (2022) argues that vocabulary learning becomes more durable when based on *"lived linguistic input,"* while Reinders and Benson (2021) emphasize supporting students' digital autonomous learning practices.

Conclusion

This study concludes that popular English TikTok songs serve as effective and engaging authentic materials for vocabulary retention in EFL contexts. The repetitive nature of TikTok songs supports memorization, while the emotional and cultural relevance of the content increases learners' motivation and participation. The integration of familiar, enjoyable digital media into classroom activities bridges the gap between formal instruction and students' daily language exposure, promoting meaningful learning. Through repeated listening, active engagement, and contextual understanding, TikTok songs help learners internalize vocabulary more effectively than traditional methods. These findings highlight the pedagogical value of incorporating students' digital habits into language education and encourage further exploration of digital platforms as tools for learner-centered vocabulary instruction.

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