

Teachers as Content Curators : Integrating TikTok into English Vocabulary Instruction for Secondary Students

Mutiara Zein^{1*}

¹ Universitas Sumatera Utara, Medan, Indonesia

*Email : mutiarazein938@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of teachers as content curators in integrating TikTok into English vocabulary instruction for secondary school students. While TikTok is widely used by students as a source of informal language input, its pedagogical potential remains underexplored from the educator's perspective. Using a qualitative approach, this research investigates how English teachers select, adapt, and utilize TikTok content in classroom settings to enhance vocabulary acquisition. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five English teachers and classroom observations in two secondary schools. The findings reveal that when thoughtfully curated, TikTok content can enrich vocabulary instruction by providing contextual, visual, and culturally relevant language exposure. Teachers reported that aligning TikTok videos with learning objectives and involving students in reflective discussions about content significantly increased engagement and retention. The study concludes with practical recommendations for teachers to effectively integrate short-form video content into vocabulary teaching strategies.

KEYWORDS: edutainment; english language teaching; TikTok, teacher curation vocabulary, instruction

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, digital media platforms have become increasingly popular among young learners, reshaping how they consume and interact with content. One such platform, TikTok, has gained widespread attention not only for entertainment but also for its potential educational value. With its short-form, visually rich, and algorithm-driven content, TikTok aligns well with the preferences of Gen Z learners who are highly responsive to multimodal and interactive media (Dwiyanti & Sari, 2021; Wang, 2022). The platform's algorithm curates personalized content feeds, exposing users to language use in real-world contexts, including pronunciation, slang, idiomatic expressions, and visual explanations of vocabulary.

Much of the existing research has focused on students as passive consumers of TikTok, examining how informal exposure to language via edutainment supports vocabulary acquisition (Basal, 2021; Kusmaryati & Manurung, 2023). However, limited attention has been given to the role of teachers as active mediators those who select, evaluate, and integrate this content meaningfully into classroom instruction. This study addresses that gap by shifting the perspective to teachers as content curators,

emphasizing their role in navigating the vast and diverse media landscape for instructional purposes (Hockly, 2013; Chien, 2021).

The integration of digital content into formal learning environments has become a defining feature of 21st-century pedagogy. In this context, teachers are no longer merely knowledge transmitters but also designers and facilitators of learning experiences (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). Curating digital resources, especially from social media, demands pedagogical sensitivity and digital literacy (Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2020). For language teachers, the process includes evaluating content for linguistic accuracy, cultural appropriateness, age suitability, and alignment with learning outcomes (Azhar & Iqbal, 2020).

Furthermore, vocabulary acquisition remains a foundational component of language proficiency, directly influencing students' reading comprehension, writing skills, and communicative competence (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). Using TikTok as a tool for vocabulary instruction combine Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis which emphasizes the importance of exposure to comprehensible input with the engagement and motivation benefits of edutainment (Lestari, 2022). Through curated videos, learners encounter authentic language used in various real-world and performative scenarios, which can reinforce retention and deepen understanding.

This study investigates how secondary school English teachers in Indonesia curate and integrate TikTok videos into their vocabulary instruction. It seeks to understand their strategies, criteria for content selection, and the instructional impact of using curated TikTok materials in class. The research highlights the pedagogical value of short-form video content and provides practical insights for teachers who wish to implement edutainment-based strategies in the EFL classroom.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the perspectives and practices of English teachers who integrate TikTok content into vocabulary instruction. A qualitative approach was chosen to gain an in-depth understanding of how teachers curate content, the criteria they apply, and the pedagogical strategies they use in classroom implementation (Creswell, 2014). This design is suitable for capturing subjective experiences and real-life practices in natural educational settings.

Population and Sample

The population of this study included secondary school English teachers in Medan, Indonesia. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met the following criteria:

- a. Currently teaching English at the junior or senior secondary level,
- b. Have experience using or curating TikTok videos as instructional material for vocabulary learning,
- c. Willing to participate in interviews and allow classroom observation.

Five English teachers from three different schools were selected as the sample for this study. This number was sufficient for generating rich qualitative data, as the focus was on depth rather than breadth (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Data Collection Techniques

Data were gathered through two primary techniques:

- a. **Semi-Structured Interviews**
Each participant was interviewed individually using a semi-structured format that allowed for both guided and open-ended responses. Interview questions explored how teachers discover TikTok content, the criteria used in curation, methods of integration into classroom teaching, student responses, and encountered challenges.
- b. **Classroom Observations**
To supplement the interview data, non-participant classroom observations were conducted. Each teacher was observed during at least one vocabulary lesson that incorporated TikTok

content. Field notes were taken to document instructional methods, student engagement, and classroom dynamics.

Tools or Instruments Used

- a. Interview Guide: A set of open-ended questions developed by the researcher to explore teachers' experiences and decisions regarding content curation.
- b. Observation Checklist: Used to monitor the use of TikTok content, teacher-student interaction, and student engagement.
- c. Field Notes and Voice Recordings: Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed for analysis. Field notes were taken during observations to provide contextual understanding.

Data Analysis Methods

Data from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis followed these steps:

- a. Familiarization with data through reading and re-reading transcripts,
- b. Generating initial codes related to content curation, teaching strategies, engagement, and challenges,
- c. Searching for themes by grouping related codes,
- d. Reviewing and refining themes to ensure they captured significant aspects of the data,
- e. Interpreting and reporting themes in relation to the research questions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings from the interviews and classroom observations of five English teachers who curate and integrate TikTok videos into vocabulary instruction for secondary school students. Through thematic analysis, four major themes emerged:

Teachers' Curation Strategies and Criteria

Teachers reported that selecting appropriate TikTok content requires careful screening and evaluation. The most common criteria for curation included:

- a. Alignment with the lesson's vocabulary focus,
- b. Clarity of language and pronunciation,
- c. Relevance to students' daily lives,
- d. Age-appropriate content,
- e. Cultural sensitivity.

All participants emphasized the need to preview videos thoroughly to avoid inappropriate language or distractions. For example, Teacher A shared:

"Before showing it in class, I always watch the full video twice. I avoid slang-heavy content and make sure the speaker uses proper pronunciation."

This aligns with Hockly's (2013) view that teachers must act as "digital curators," filtering the overwhelming volume of content into meaningful instructional material.

Integration Techniques in the Classroom

Teachers used TikTok videos in various creative ways:

- a. Warm-up Activities: Showing a video to introduce a new word or theme.
- b. Listening & Vocabulary Tasks: Asking students to list new words from the video and use them in context.
- c. Discussion Prompts: Using the video as a stimulus for speaking practice or writing.
- d. Post-viewing Exercises: Creating mind maps or short responses using target vocabulary.

Teacher C integrated a TikTok video that explained "confusing English words" as a lead-in to a lesson on synonyms. Students were then asked to create sentences using the words shown in the video.

These practices reflect constructivist learning theory, in which learners actively engage with real-world content (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). The visual and dynamic nature of TikTok helped students better retain vocabulary and grasp contextual usage.

Student Engagement and Motivation

All teachers observed a notable increase in student interest and engagement when TikTok was integrated into lessons. Students reportedly showed:

- a. Improved focus during vocabulary activities,
- b. More willingness to participate in class discussions,
- c. Greater confidence in using new words.

Teacher D noted:

“Students usually tune out when we use the textbook, but with TikTok, they’re curious. They even start asking to make their own videos.”

This observation aligns with Lestari (2022) and Basal (2021), who found that TikTok’s interactive nature can boost motivation and make vocabulary learning more relatable to digital-native learners.

Challenges in Implementation

Despite its benefits, teachers also reported several challenges:

- a. Time-consuming content selection,
- b. Risk of off-task behavior when students browse TikTok on their own,
- c. Lack of institutional guidance or policy for social media use,
- d. Internet access issues in some classrooms.

Teacher B stated:

“It’s effective, but it takes time to find the right video. I also need to monitor students so they don’t open unrelated content.”

These challenges are consistent with Rahimi and Yadollahi (2020), who emphasized that integrating social media into education requires clear structure and teacher preparedness.

Synthesis with Literature

The findings confirm the potential of TikTok as a pedagogical tool when teachers act as curators. Rather than allowing students to passively consume content, teacher-curated materials support intentional learning, grounded in specific outcomes and guided by instructional strategies (Chien, 2021; Wang, 2022).

Moreover, by aligning curated content with Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1985), teachers provide students with comprehensible, engaging input, fostering natural vocabulary acquisition. The study also supports the TPACK framework (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge), demonstrating how technology, pedagogy, and content can be effectively integrated by skilled educators.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored how English teachers in secondary schools function as content curators by integrating TikTok videos into vocabulary instruction. The findings demonstrate that TikTok, when thoughtfully selected and pedagogically guided by teachers, can serve as a valuable tool for vocabulary learning in English language classrooms.

Teachers in the study employed clear criteria in curating TikTok content, ensuring that videos were appropriate, relevant, and aligned with learning goals. They integrated the videos in diverse instructional ways such as warm-up activities, vocabulary reinforcement tasks, and discussion prompts to increase engagement and support comprehension. Students responded positively, showing heightened motivation, focus, and confidence in using new vocabulary.

However, the integration of TikTok is not without challenges. Teachers reported difficulties related to content filtering, distraction management, and technical limitations, including unreliable internet access. These findings suggest that while TikTok holds promise as an educational tool, its effectiveness depends significantly on the teacher's role in guiding its use.

The study highlights the importance of teacher agency and digital literacy in using social media platforms for educational purposes. Teachers are not only facilitators but also designers of meaningful learning experiences in today's digital age. By curating short-form video content with clear instructional goals, they can bridge the gap between students' digital habits and formal language education.

It is recommended that schools and teacher-training programs provide support for educators to develop curation skills and media literacy, enabling them to effectively integrate platforms like TikTok into their teaching. With proper guidance, TikTok can evolve from a mere entertainment platform into a powerful edutainment resource that enhances vocabulary instruction and overall language acquisition.

Acknowledgments

The researcher acknowledges her institution, her school, her students in junior high school for supporting her in finishing this research.

REFERENCES

- Azhar, K. A., & Iqbal, N. (2020). Digital tools for vocabulary learning: An analysis of student perceptions. *Indonesian Journal of EFL and Linguistics*, 5(2), 213–227.
- Basal, A. (2021). TikTok as a language learning tool: Pre-service teachers' perspectives. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, 16(18), 84–92.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Chien, S. C. (2021). Teachers as content curators: Redefining professional development in the digital era. *Journal of Educational Technology Development and Exchange*, 14(2), 25–39.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dwiyanti, N. L. P. M., & Sari, P. N. (2021). TikTok for EFL students: Fun learning media for vocabulary development. *JELLT*, 5(4), 321–330.
- Greenhow, C., & Lewin, C. (2016). Social media and education: The conflict between productivity and distraction. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 41(1), 1–15.
- Hockly, N. (2013). Designer learning: The teacher as curator. *ELT Journal*, 67(4), 392–398.
- Krashen, S. D. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. Longman.
- Kusmaryati, E., & Manurung, K. (2023). The effectiveness of TikTok-based vocabulary instruction in junior high school. *J-SHMIC Journal of English for Academic*, 10(1), 44–51.
- Lestari, R. P. (2022). Edutainment in the EFL classroom: TikTok for vocabulary enrichment. *Journal of English Language Teaching and Learning*, 8(2), 89–98.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Rahimi, M., & Yadollahi, S. (2020). Social media use in education: A review of benefits and challenges. *Journal of Educational Technology*, 17(3), 23–32.
- Richards, J. C., & Schmidt, R. (2010). *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* (4th ed.). Pearson.
- Wang, Y. (2022). The use of TikTok for teaching vocabulary: Opportunities and pitfalls. *International Journal of Instructional Media*, 49(3), 188–205.