

Leveraging TikTok for L3 Mandarin: Balancing Self-Directed Microlearning and Collaborative Engagement among Generation Z

Siti Khadijah Mohd Mohari¹, Nurain Jantan Anua Jah^{2*}, Norshuhana Mohd Noor³

^{1,2}Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Pahang, Bandar Tun Abdul Razak, Jengka, Pahang Malaysia,

³Kong Zi Institute, Universiti Malaya, Lembah Pantai, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

Empirical studies on short-form video platforms for third-language acquisition remain limited. The present study aimed to explore the attitudes and perceived impact associated with TikTok among 159 undergraduate studying Chinese as a third language at a public university in Pahang. Utilising a quantitative survey design, this study analysed student demographic details, their attitudes, and perceived educational contributions of the application. The results indicated strong technological acceptance and positive attitudes, where the students expressed high excitement towards TikTok-assisted vocabulary acquisition, citing its convenience. In addition, they also confirmed that it is a constructive strategy for language learning and disagreed that it wasted their time. In contrast, active peer collaboration scored the lowest of agreement. Thus, the study concludes that while TikTok serves mainly as an appropriate, highly motivating tool for self-directed vocabulary acquisition, its potential for collaborative learning is still underutilised. Language teachers are encouraged to incorporate the application as supplementary microlearning instruction, alongside structured collaborative activities. This will help to transition students from independent content consumption to collaborative communicative interaction.

Keywords: TikTok Video, Vocabulary, Third Language Acquisition, Chinese as foreign language, Generation Z

INTRODUCTION

A paradigm shift in learning a foreign language has been triggered by the rapid advancement of digital technology and Web 2.0, making a significant change toward highly interactive, multimodal learning environments (Abdelhamid et al., 2022). In Malaysia, there has been an increasing demand for mastering Chinese as a foreign language in the past decade due to China's increasing strength and noteworthy position in the world economy (Loh et al., 2021). This results in a growing demand for learning Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) in many Malaysian universities, with a high number of non-native students enrolling in Chinese language courses, especially Mandarin at local universities in Malaysia such as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). For those students, acquiring vocabulary is the one of the most crucial components of linguistic proficiency, which is extremely important for both reading comprehension and effective daily conversation (Rita & Subekti, 2023).

Nevertheless, traditional learning strategies, such as rote memorisation, likely fail to capture the attention of Generation Z students, who are digital natives attuned to multimedia-rich, fast-paced stimuli (Hamzah & Ismail, 2025). As a result, microlearning applications such as TikTok are gaining more traction among those students because of their attractive visual, audio and textual characteristics. Such applications enable the students to have an engaging, stress-free, entertaining medium that captures their attention and immerses them in authentic language contexts (Jumaat et al., 2025). This indirectly boosts their drive to acquire new

vocabulary and promote informal vocabulary learning outside the traditional classroom setting (Shanthi et al., 2025).

Notwithstanding the recognised educational potential of social media, a critical analysis of the literature finds a glaring lack of empirical research on the use of TikTok specifically for the Chinese vocabulary expansion. The majority of recent investigations on the usage of TikTok in learning a new language concentrate on its efficacy in English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) classrooms (Bernard, 2021; Jantan Anua Jah et al., 2024), leaving its use in Chinese language classrooms largely unexplored. On top of that, although ample recent studies have looked into the incorporation of TikTok into Project-Based Learning (PBL) for CFL students at UiTM (Leow & Hassan, 2026; Suprihatin & Kurniawan, 2023), there is a significant knowledge gap regarding students' perceptions and the specific mechanism by which the application aids in the internalisation of Chinese vocabulary. It is obvious that without substantial empirical evidence focusing on a specific group of students, language teachers have the risk of depending more on their instinct than on evidence-based teaching methods. That could cause unorganised implementations of the application in learning a language that only leads to distraction rather than intentional learning (Genelza, 2024; Meylina & Rahmiaty, 2023).

Designed to bridge a critical gap in the literature, the present study aims to evaluate the impact of TikTok on Chinese vocabulary acquisition among a public university in Malaysia. Specifically, this research is driven by two objectives: 1) What is the attitude of UiTM students towards using TikTok in vocabulary learning? and 2) How do TikTok videos foster Chinese vocabulary expansion?

The outcomes of this study provide important practical implications for language teachers and instructional designers. By getting a clear picture of student perceptions and identifying the application functions for the students' vocabulary retention, they are able to develop more engaging, student-driven learning experiences. Ultimately, this study will provide CFL teachers with the ability to integrate TikTok application into students' daily habits, minimising anxiety while using the language and boosting Chinese vocabulary acquisition.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning Strategies to Acquire Vocabulary

Acquiring foreign language vocabulary in classroom contexts necessitates interactive, multidimensional strategies that go beyond traditional rote memorisation. Current educational studies increasingly prioritise the integration of multimodal digital tools to encourage engaging, immersive learning environments. To illustrate, short video platforms such as TikTok have become more popular among educators for their ability to utilise visual, audio, and textual cues to enhance student engagement and provide context for the new vocabulary (Jumaat et al., 2025; Shanthi et al., 2025). In addition, this approach has a strong theoretical backing to be effective for students learning a foreign language, as proposed in Lexical Chunking Theory. As suggested by the theory, students are more likely to absorb and retain a new vocabulary when it is introduced in integrated, functional phrases instead of isolated word forms (Jumaat et al., 2025). Moreover, incorporating targeted educational video materials within the language laboratory allows students to repeatedly listen to and repeat after the accurate pronunciation and intonation of the new word. This is crucial, especially for tonal languages such as Mandarin, where intonation and pitch control directly impact meaning (Astutiningtyas et al., 2023).

Practical classroom application is important for lexical development, in addition to the use of digital media. Language teachers are encouraged to utilise simulation-based activities and role-playing exercises, such as buying-and-selling scenarios, to create opportunities for students to use the target language in authentic settings (Astutiningtyas et al., 2023; Loh et al., 2021). To reinforce these practical methods, the teachers often incorporate the Project-Based Learning (PBL) framework, where students work together to script, design and produce videos. The collaborative production effectively combines the formal classroom instruction with informal, self-directed learning (Leow & Hassan, 2026; Zhou et al., 2022). By filming videos or capturing photos with descriptions in the foreign language, these seamless learning experiences allow students to contextualise the target vocabulary in their everyday lives immediately (Zhou et al., 2022).

Furthermore, leveraging gamified elements into language instruction plays a crucial role in long-term vocabulary acquisition. The use of interactive platforms like Kahoot! or Quizizz, together with other mobile applications which are created to practise lexical bundles of the target language, managed to turn vocabulary drill practices into engaging, low-anxiety learning activities (Abdullah et al., 2023). By providing instant formative feedback, these game-based interventions create a student-orientated learning environment aligned with the digital behaviour of Generation Z (Hamzah & Ismail, 2025). Ultimately, the precise combination of multimodal chunking techniques, authentic communicative simulations, student-led digital content creation, and gamification would maximise foreign language vocabulary retention.

Past Studies on Using TikTok to Learn Language

Emerging literature increasingly looks into the incorporation of social networking platforms, particularly TikTok as a powerful tool for foreign language learning. A number of recent studies have revealed that it has gained a lot of fans among Generation Z because of the platform's short, multi-modal videos, which are appealing to them. This trend is seen as a catalyst of 'microlearning' or 'bite-sized learning' (Ab Wahid & Jenuwa, 2024; Abdelhamid et al., 2022). As a result, numerous empirical studies have been conducted to examine its educational effectiveness, instructional efficacy and limitations across both English learning language (ESL/EFL) and CFL classrooms.

Existing literature heavily emphasises TikTok's efficacy in encouraging the expansion of vocabulary and communication proficiency. A meta-analysis conducted by Astaño (2025) revealed that the platform has a significant positive influence on communicative ability, especially on the dimensions of speaking, listening and writing. This is supported by empirical data from Malaysian primary schools, which confirms the growth of vocabulary acquisition among students, which is largely due to its engaging and user-friendly features (Hamzah & Ismail, 2025).

Furthermore, investigations into higher education settings consistently highlight positive attitudes toward TikTok as a learning instrument. For example, Rita and Subekti (2023) discovered that students in an Indonesian university agreed that the application is a user-friendly and engaging tool for real-world exposure. From a theoretical perspective, Jumaat et al. (2025) assert that TikTok enhances vocabulary retention through the Lexical Chunking Theory. The combination of visual, auditory and gestural elements permits creators to present vocabulary as functional, authentic "chunks" instead of isolated words. This creates strong mental anchors which facilitate memory retention and recall (Jumaat et al., 2025).

Expanding past vocabulary acquisition, research indicates that TikTok boosts intercultural communication and encourages learner autonomy. Mohammed et al. (2024) reported that a significant number of EFL learners used that platform to engage with different cultural content, which subsequently promoted empathy, cross-cultural awareness and digital identity. Reflecting this trend, language instructors and teachers are progressively moving from passive media consumption to dynamic, student-centred learning methodologies. Research by Leow and Hassan (2026) discovered the positive impact of TikTok on Project-Based Learning (PBL) for CFL students. Their findings showed that including students in the process of creating scripts, recording and editing videos of the target language significantly increased their confidence and teamwork. At the same time, it created a conducive environment that encourages constructive peer feedback (Leow & Hassan, 2026).

Despite the convincing advantages, existing literature consistently highlights critical limitations relating to the usage of TikTok in educational settings. Astaño (2025) identified three challenges of it, which are time constraints, technical issues and the different level of quality of user-generated learning content. Researchers highlight that students are exposed to a significant risk of distraction and potential addiction because of the application's nature as an entertainment-centric platform (Astaño, 2025; Shanthi et al., 2025). Additionally, the micro-video format poses a negative impact on the content depth of the subject and the formality of language usage, which may hinder the mastery of the target language (Astaño, 2025; Shanthi et al., 2025). As a result, some students may feel hesitant about the usage of the platform for long-term, deep-level academic learning (Rita & Subekti, 2023).

Ultimately, past studies confirm that TikTok is a multimodal and dynamic tool with the potential to transform the development of foreign language vocabulary acquisition and oral proficiency. Nevertheless, to fully utilise its potentials for language learning, language teachers and module developers must carefully plan learning materials, implement structured activities such as project-based learning (PBL), and foster critical media literacy to safeguard students against the potential drawbacks (Astaño, 2025; Leow & Hassan, 2026).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Lexical Chunking Theory and Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA)

According to Lewis's Lexical Chunking Theory, mastering a language is mostly achieved by memorising prefabricated phrases, or lexical chunks, rather than mastering isolated words and sets of grammatical rules. That being said, because of its short-form video format, TikTok is a compatible tool for students to use, as it could conceptualise foreign words in real-world conversations (Jumaat et al., 2025). Through the lens of MCDA, teachers could examine how content creators integrate different communication elements, such as gestures, textual design, colour scheme, and vocal cues, to support those lexical chunks and improve educational impact (Jumaat et al., 2025). By combining these frameworks, this study could demonstrate how the multimodal nature of TikTok could function as a powerful tool for cognitive support for students, which in turn would facilitate the retention of Chinese vocabulary and the proper use in conversation.

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

Grounded in social psychology, Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model is a well-established theoretical framework to describe and explain users' behaviour in accepting new digital technology (Hamzah & Ismail, 2025). According to this model, there are two key variables that will influence students' decisions to integrate TikTok into their learning process for a new language: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use (Hamzah & Ismail, 2025). Applying the Technology Acceptance Model, recent empirical studies have supported that perceived usefulness and ease of use are actually the key determiners of students in adopting new technology among foreign language students in Malaysian universities (Abdullah et al., 2023, as cited in Shanthi et al., 2025)

METHODOLOGY

The present study utilised a quantitative research design to investigate how TikTok contributes to the acquisition of Chinese vocabulary among 159 undergraduate students in UiTM Pahang and to explore their attitudes towards its use as a learning tool. Data collection relied on a structured survey adapted from prior research (Binti Mistar & Embi, 2016; Khan et al., 2021) and was distributed through Google Forms in class. The survey consisted of 26 items, divided into three sections: Section 1 gathered student demographic details and their TikTok usage (5 items); Section 2 examined student attitudes and perceptions towards the use of TikTok in vocabulary acquisition (8 items); and Section 3 gauged the perceived impact of TikTok videos in aiding them to acquire Chinese vocabulary (13 items). The students were asked to select the response that best reflected their opinions using a 5-point Likert scale for Section 2 and Section 3.

The target population of the study consisted of all undergraduates enrolling in Mandarin as a foreign language course at UiTM Pahang. The data collection process was conducted over a two-week sampling window. A digital survey was distributed through WhatsApp and Telegram at the end of their Chinese language class sessions to ensure student engagement. Collected datasets were subsequently exported to SPSS Version 28 for quantitative analysis. To interpret student responses, descriptive analysis comprising frequencies, mean scores, and standard deviations was used.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 159 students participated in the survey. They were mainly comprised of females, comprising 131 students (82.4%), while male students accounted for 28 people (17.6%). The largest age group comprised

students aged 21–23 years (106 students, 66.7%), followed by those aged 18 to 20 years (37 students, 23.3%), and the remainder were those older than 24 years (16 students, 10.1%). In terms of academic background, the majority of them comprised pure science students (101 students, 63.5%), followed by business students made up of 55 students (34.6%) and technical science students (3 students, 1.9%). A notable percentage of students reported themselves being “Less Proficient” (116 students, 73%). A slightly higher percentage of students considered themselves as “Proficient” (21 students, 13.2%), as compared to those who are “Not Proficient” (20 students, 12.6%), and the smallest portion of them believed them to be “Proficient” (2 students, 1.3%). All of them had a TikTok account and were active users of the application, with 67 students (42.1%) agreeing and 25 students (25%) strongly agreeing that they use TikTok.

Table 1 Demographic Profile and TikTok Usage Mean Scores ($N = 159$)

Demographic variables	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	28	17.6
	Female	131	82.4
Age group	18-20	37	23.3
	21-23	106	66.7
	24 and older	16	10.1
Study Programme	Pure Sciences	101	63.5
	Business	55	34.6
	Technical Sciences	3	1.9
Level of Chinese Proficiency	Not Proficient	20	12.6
	Less Proficient	116	73
	Proficient	21	13.2
	Very Proficient	2	1.3
I usually use TikTok in my life.	Strongly Disagree	3	1.9
	Disagree	9	5.7
	Neutral	55	34.6
	Agree	67	42.1
	Strongly Agree	25	15.7

The descriptive statistics for the eight items assessing attitudes and perceptions towards using TikTok for Chinese language acquisition revealed that students had favourable perceptions and attitudes. They reported to have the highest enthusiasm for employing the application for learning Chinese language words ($M=3.89$, $SD = 0.91$), as 108 (67.9%) of them agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. They also have positive behavioural intention in using the application in the future ($M=3.78$, $SD = 0.91$), expressing a willingness to use it continuously for acquiring Chinese vocabulary. Matching this level of agreement, the students confirmed that the application is convenient to be used for the particular purpose ($M=3.77$, $SD=0.89$).

Comparable positive responses were described for the educational evaluation of the application. The students reported that TikTok facilitated their language learning ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.84$) and had no intention of putting a halt on its usage ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 0.96$). In addition, they believed that the application enhanced their language learning process ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 3.57$) and managed to maintain the retention of the vocabulary and its usage ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.93$). Conversely, collaborative behaviour recorded the lowest level of agreement among the students. Only 42.8% of the students admitted that they shared new Chinese vocabulary with their friends ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 1.02$).

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics for Attitudes and Perceptions

Item	Statement	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Mean (M)	Std Dev (SD)
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7	I am excited to use TikTok for vocabulary learning.	2 (1.3%)	7 (4.4%)	42 (26.4%)	64 (40.3%)	44 (27.7%)	3.89	0.91
5	I will use TikTok in learning Chinese vocabulary in future.	2 (1.3%)	9 (5.7%)	48 (30.2%)	63 (39.6%)	37 (23.3%)	3.78	0.91
3	Learning Chinese language using TikTok is convenient for me.	1 (0.6%)	9 (5.7%)	52 (32.7%)	61 (38.4%)	36 (22.6%)	3.77	0.89
2	Using TikTok was effectively improving my language learning.	1 (0.6%)	9 (5.7%)	55 (34.6%)	67 (42.1%)	27 (17.0%)	3.69	0.84
6	I will not stop using TikTok for learning Chinese vocabulary.	5 (3.1%)	9 (5.7%)	49 (30.8%)	64 (40.3%)	32 (20.1%)	3.69	0.96
1	The use of TikTok increased my language learning productively.	3 (1.9%)	9 (5.7%)	55 (34.6%)	67 (42.1%)	25 (15.7%)	3.64	0.88
4	TikTok application helped my Chinese vocabulary retention and its usage.	3 (1.9%)	13 (8.2%)	61 (38.4%)	55 (34.6%)	27 (17.0%)	3.57	0.93
8	I use TikTok to share new Chinese vocabulary with my friends.	3 (1.9%)	21 (13.2%)	67 (42.1%)	36 (22.6%)	32 (20.1%)	3.46	1.02

Overall, the students described TikTok as a useful tool to acquire Chinese vocabulary based on the descriptive analysis of the 13 items in the survey. Its user-friendly characteristic received the highest endorsement ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.88$) by the students, and they affirmed that employing the application to learn Chinese vocabulary was both a good idea ($M = 4.07$, $SD = 0.94$) and an interesting strategy ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 0.89$). They also rated the application highly in terms of skill development and instructional variety. They claimed that they could navigate the functions of the application to find information on TikTok easily ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.89$), and it provided diverse vocabulary learning strategies ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.88$). Scores reduced slightly for the items measuring enhanced learning opportunities ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 0.85$), general usefulness in Chinese language learning ($M = 3.66$, $SD = 0.93$), and difficulty levels ($M = 3.63$, $SD = 0.93$). On the other hand, the lowest ratings were given for negative statements where the students overall disagreed that TikTok impeded vocabulary learning ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.10$) and wasted their time ($M = 2.18$, $SD = 1.13$).

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics for TikTok's Contributions

Item	Statement	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Mean (M)	Std Dev (SD)
10	TikTok was easy to use.	4 (2.5%)	3 (1.9%)	9 (5.7%)	57 (35.8%)	86 (54.1%)	4.37	0.88
21	Learning Chinese Vocabulary through TikTok is a good idea.	1 (0.6%)	10 (6.3%)	29 (18.2%)	56 (35.2%)	63 (39.6%)	4.07	0.94
9	Vocabulary learning through TikTok is a fun way of language learning.	3 (1.9%)	4 (2.5%)	32 (20.1%)	69 (43.4%)	51 (32.1%)	4.01	0.89
11	It was easy for me	1	10 (6.3%)	28	72	48	3.98	0.89

	to become skilful in discovering information via TikTok.	(0.6%)		(17.6%)	(45.3%)	(30.2%)		
16	Vocabulary learning through TikTok makes attractive learning.	2 (1.3%)	4 (2.5%)	39 (24.5%)	65 (40.9%)	49 (30.8%)	3.97	0.88
15	TikTok offered varied ways of vocabulary learning.	2 (1.3%)	6 (3.8%)	45 (28.3%)	65 (40.9%)	41 (25.8%)	3.86	0.89
18	Vocabulary through TikTok saves the time.	2 (1.3%)	8 (5.0%)	48 (30.2%)	60 (37.7%)	41 (25.8%)	3.82	0.92
20	I found that TikTok is useful in my Chinese language learning.	1 (0.6%)	8 (5.0%)	49 (30.8%)	64 (40.3%)	37 (23.3%)	3.81	0.87
14	The utilisation of TikTok increased the vocabulary learning chances.	2 (1.3%)	5 (3.1%)	65 (40.9%)	59 (37.1%)	28 (17.6%)	3.67	0.85
17	It takes less time to pass on the Vocabulary related information through TikTok.	2 (1.3%)	11 (6.9%)	62 (39.0%)	51 (32.1%)	33 (20.8%)	3.64	0.93
19	Difficulties level is varied in learning vocabulary via TikTok.	2 (1.3%)	12 (7.5%)	76 (47.8%)	44 (27.7%)	25 (15.7%)	3.49	0.89
12	TikTok makes obstacles in learning vocabulary.	15 (9.4%)	41 (25.8%)	58 (36.5%)	30 (18.9%)	15 (9.4%)	2.93	1.10
13	TikTok usage is waste of time for vocabulary learning.	51 (32.1%)	58 (36.5%)	31 (19.5%)	9 (5.7%)	10 (6.3%)	2.18	1.13

This investigation into L3 students' perceptions of TikTok for Chinese language vocabulary learning at a public university in Malaysia reveals a clear dichotomy; although the students possess high intrinsic motivation for the platform, they also express noticeable social reluctance when using it. Firstly, they displayed favourable attitudes and strong affective reception, primarily driven by intrinsic motivation and perceived convenience. The highest consensus among the students was regarding their excitement to employ the platform for vocabulary learning, closely followed by a strong intention for continuous usage. Furthermore, the students also confirmed the platform's practical feature whereby it is exceptionally easy to use for their daily lexical learning. However, positive attitudes did not yield collaborative learning practices. As indicated in Table 2, TikTok was primarily viewed as an independent, self-directed learning instrument rather than a collaborative learning tool. In spite of the students' high receptivity to personal content consumption, they seldom initiated collaborative learning practices on the application.

Those outcomes resonate with the data presented by Rita and Subekto (2023) and Ining (2021), who revealed that undergraduates demonstrated positive attitudes and possessed high perceived convenience when employing TikTok to widen their Chinese vocabulary. With the highest ratings, the students stated that they enjoyed it very much when using TikTok in vocabulary learning. Similar preference was observed in many studies done before, such as in Rahmati & Anwar (2022), Hastomo et al. (2022), Alshreef & Khadawardi (2023) and Efivania et al. (2025). Moreover, the strong intention for sustaining the usage of the application substantiates the Technology Acceptance Model framework, as reported in Abdullah et al. (2023) and Teoh (2025), which posits that perceived usefulness and ease of use are the significant drivers among students in adopting technology in their learning routines.

Contrary to Leow and Hassan (2026), who reported that employing TikTok in project-based learning encourages teamwork and peer feedback among students, the findings of this study reveal that the students are inclined to carry out self-directed learning. The observed reluctance among them to engage in collaborative learning highlights the importance of conscious and structured pedagogical intervention by the language teachers or curriculum developers. Such hesitance to active oral production mirrors the findings of Hamzah and Ismail (2025), who reported that lack of confidence is a major root cause for Generation Z to create or produce education content, despite high viewing motivation. Additionally, the high TikTok acceptance among the students in this study aligns with Astaño (2025), which identified academic level as one of the prominent moderating factors of TikTok educational effectiveness, with university students demonstrating the most positive effect.

Several limitations should be recognised. Firstly, the size of the respondents in the present study was confined to 159 students from a single public university in Pahang, which limits the generalisation of the results to broader institutional or geographical settings of tertiary educational institutions in Malaysia, which is similar to the limitation described by Hamzah and Ismail (2025). Secondly, this study relied on self-reported survey data, which was probably exposed to subjective response patterns and social desirability bias. The respondents could exaggerate positive perceptions as compared to actual learning behaviours. Lastly, the nature of this study focused solely on students' perceptions of the vocabulary retention without having any objective assessments of the actual impact. This contrasts to the experimental designs in the studies done by Anumanthan and Hashim (2022) and Rahmawati and Anwar (2022), which described post-test results and improvements. Despite these constraints, this study offers several practical insights. Language teachers could capitalise on students' strong interest and perceived convenience by incorporating curated short-form videos to support foreign language learning. To enhance peer interaction, teachers should deliberately integrate structured PBL activities in their classrooms, including pair work tasks, collaborative scriptwriting, or cooperative video assignments (Leow & Hassan, 2026). Future studies should employ longitudinal experimental designs with pre- and post-tests to measure vocabulary retention efficacy between multimodal short-form media and traditional rote approaches, thereby addressing the long-term retention issues highlighted by Astaño (2025) and Jumaat et al. (2025).

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