

A Qualitative analysis of Vocabulary Profiling in Educational Tiktok Videos for English Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates vocabulary profiling in educational TikTok videos for English learning, aiming to identify vocabulary types and their contextual applications. Grounded in Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), the research addresses the problem of limited systematic studies on TikTok's role in vocabulary instruction within non-native English contexts. A qualitative design was employed, using purposive sampling of 10 high-engagement TikTok videos. Data were collected through video retrieval and analysed using a structured coding framework and thematic analysis. Findings indicate that most videos prioritize formal vocabulary, while informal expressions appear strategically for engagement. Additionally, formal vocabulary is often framed for both academic and professional contexts, and multimodal elements such as captions and voice-overs enhance word salience. These results suggest that TikTok can support microlearning. The study implies the need for structured integration of TikTok in language pedagogy and recommends future research on larger samples for better learning outcomes.

Keywords: Vocabulary Profiling, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), TikTok

INTRODUCTION

Social media is now viewed as a centre of entertainment and learning for many Malaysian youths. Available platforms provide learners with various videos, live chats for questions and short how-to clips that also host lessons. Recent estimates highlight that there is a high engagement of social media among Malaysians, including youth demographics (DataReportal, 2024). It was found by Malaysian higher education that students actively adopt social media as part of their study practices, which is linked to improved academic performance (Al-Rahmi et al., 2022). Al-Rahmi et al. (2022) stated that it has been observed that screens have become classrooms for informal but purposeful learning. One of the prominent social media platforms used in Malaysia is TikTok.

Despite rapid TikTok's growth among Malaysians, many learners do not use it for vocabulary study. Although there are short and motivating clips, they are lacking in terms of explanations on how the vocabularies can be used to form meanings. A recent scoping review highlights that while there are promising TikTok features that could be beneficial for ESL lessons, classroom applications remain uneven and underexplored (Tan et al., 2022). It is undeniable that there are advantages of learning vocabulary using TikTok that should be acknowledged. Thus, there is a need to design lessons that transform watching into beneficial word learning. A study that profiles vocabulary in educational TikTok can clarify what learners actually encounter in the videos/reels and also guide teachers toward concise, targeted interventions that make microlearning stick in everyday practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA)

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is an essential framework for understanding how various communicative modes, such as visual, auditory, textual, and gestural, work together to construct meaning in discourse. Rooted in semiotic theory, MDA analyses how these modes interact within specific contexts to create a cohesive narrative or message (O'Halloran, 2021). For platforms like TikTok, where videos combine different modes in

a short-form format, MDA provides an invaluable tool for exploring how these modes function in enhancing vocabulary acquisition. Li et al. (2023) suggest that MDA allows researchers to examine how multiple modes complement each other in fostering engagement and comprehension, especially in the context of language learning. TikTok videos often use visuals such as facial expressions, animations, and 15 on-screen text, alongside auditory cues like music and voice-overs, to create a rich, multimodal environment that aids learners in acquiring new vocabulary. The integration of these modes in TikTok videos did more than just adding layers of meaning, as it created a synergistic effect where each mode enhanced the others, leading to better learning outcomes. Edwards (2023) highlights that visual and auditory stimuli together are especially effective in improving memory retention and comprehension.

In the case of TikTok, the use of captions or on-screen text accompanying spoken language provided learners with multiple avenues to engage with new vocabulary. The current multimodal technique directly corresponds to the discoveries of Canestrino et al.(2022) who reinforce the idea that language exposure to a variety of formats contributes to cognitive processing especially in the field of education profoundly. Through MDA, this study has revealed how TikTok multimodal characteristics enabled a better interaction with both formal and informal vocabulary.

Connecting MDA to Past Studies and the Present Research

Previous studies have applied MDA to educational videos and classroom lessons, showing that multimodal resources significantly influence learner engagement and meaning formation (Yang & Chen, 2022). Research on language learning using social media also highlights that the inputs such as combining texts, sounds and visuals could support vocabulary acquisition and learners' retention (Li et al., 2022). In TikTok contexts, studies report that short-form videos facilitate incidental vocabulary learning although the analysis on types of vocabulary presented remains scarce (Lee, 2025). These findings suggest that although TikTok has the potential to support language learning, its depth of content depends on how the multimodal elements are organised and presented. Thus, this research addresses this gap by applying MDA to profile vocabulary in education TikTok videos, aiming to uncover patterns that can inform effective teaching and learning strategies.

Past Studies on the Effectiveness of TikTok for Vocabulary Learning

Considering the heightened popularity of TikTok recently, there are several studies that have explored TikTok's role in vocabulary learning, often emphasising its engaging nature among learners. A quasi-experimental study by Xiuwen and Razali (2021) on 60 EFL undergraduates in China which compared TikTok-based lessons with traditional methods found significant improvement in vocabulary recall among group members that used TikTok-based lessons, attributed to short, repetitive clips and visual cues. Nevertheless, the study addressed challenges to sustain long-term retention if contents are developed without structured review. This suggests that while it is undeniable that TikTok can enhance initial learning, its effectiveness for long term learning is highly dependent on integration with systematic reinforcement strategies (Xiuwen & Razali, 2021; Rahmayani, 2022).

Another study by Rahmayani (2022) utilised a mixed-method design on 45 Indonesian high school students to examine TikTok's impact on vocabulary acquisition. Results showed that students perceived TikTok as motivating and enjoyable, which caused students to learn new words voluntarily. However, the study also highlighted some issues on distraction from non-educational content and lack of teacher guidance while watching the materials. These findings imply that TikTok has high potential for vocabulary learning, though its success rate relies heavily on curated content and guides from learning content experts. (Rahmayani, 2022; Syaifuddin et al., 2021).

Past Studies on Formal vs. Informal Vocabulary on TikTok

Syaifuddin et al. (2021) analysed 30 TikTok videos on English learning and found that the content was highly dominated by informal vocabulary, particularly in conversational phrases and slang. The study which employed content analysis, reported that only 35% of the words were formal and often linked to academic writing tips. This imbalance raises concerns about learners adopting informal expressions in formal settings, thus suggesting a need for clearer instructional learning (Syaifuddin et al., 2021; Schellewald, 2023; Valdovinos Kaye, 2022)..

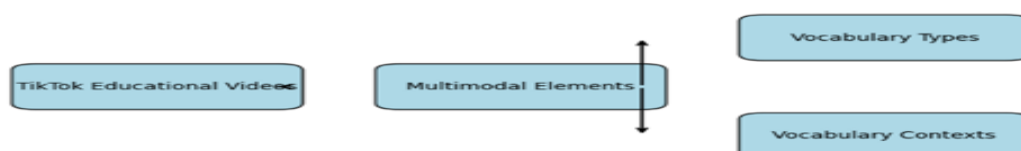
Besides that, Valdovinos Kaye (2022) examined TikTok's cultural dynamics and noted that most influencers often prioritise relatable, informal language to maintain viewers' engagement. Although this approach fosters authenticity, it may conflict with academic language goals. Similarly, Schellewald (2023) observed that the algorithm of TikTok emphasises on entertaining contents that have potential of high engagement which often includes colloquial vocabulary. These findings indicate that while informal language can motivate learners, it still puts the formal language acquisition and usage in risk of jeopardy (Valdovinos Kaye, 2022; Schellewald, 2023; Syaifuddin et al., 2021).

The review of past studies reveals that TikTok has become an engaging format that supports vocabulary learning, yet its educational impact is still inconsistent. Even though the integration of multimodal features and language learning and teaching enhance motivation, they also introduce some challenges such as cognitive overload and lack of academic guidance. These limitations highlight a need for an analysis of vocabulary types and multimodal integration in educational TikTok videos to bridge the gap between the real practice and instructional practices.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of the study is illustrated in Figure 1. It illustrates the relationship between TikTok educational videos and vocabulary learning outcomes, which is mediated by multimodal elements. The elements could be in the forms of captions, visuals, and audio, which are also TikTok's unique elements. This shapes the presentation and understanding of vocabulary types and their contextual uses. TikTok educational videos serve as the independent variable influencing two main dependent variables: vocabulary types (formal and informal) and vocabulary contexts (how formal vocabulary used for academic and professional). This framework is grounded in Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), which describes how various modes, such as words, gestures, images, and sounds, are combined and coordinated to create and convey meaning. Multimodal elements act as a mediating factor, determining how effectively vocabulary is conveyed and understood. The arrows show how multimodal integration is vital for linking video content to vocabulary learning objectives.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore vocabulary profiling in educational TikTok videos. As stated by Bhandari (2023), qualitative design is suitable for understanding meanings, patterns and contextual nuances. This study also examines how multimodal elements and vocabulary types interact in authentic learning. Since real practice data is used in the study, this provides a better understanding on how vocabulary learning could be enhanced through TikTok videos. This may address some prespectives in which quantitative methods may not be able to capture (Yin, 2023). Thematic analysis is employed to interpret the data as it is widely acknowledged for its flexibility to analyse qualitative date and identifying themes emerged.

(Braun & Clarked, 2021). In this study, the themes emerge from coding vocabulary types and contextual usage.

The sample of the study consists of 10 TikTok videos that specifically address English learning content. The sample size was chosen as previous study by Abidah (2024) and Aho (2022) examined 10 and 6 videos for vocabulary learning respectively. These justify using a small number of samples for analysing multimodal features and vocabulary patterns. This method is also able to capture diverse vocabulary types used in various contexts. The sample was purposively selected based on the specific criteria such as videos with high engagement of vocabulary learning contents.

Instrument in this study involves a structured coding framework developed based on Multimodal Discouse Analysis (MDA). For this coding sheet, vocabulary was divided into formal and informal, and from formal vocabulary, categorised into academic or professional contexts. This is similar to the tool used by Santhi et al. (2024)'s study which examine multimodal elements in TikTok videos with a similar coding framework.

The data collection procedure involved accessing the videos from the TikTok platform and carefully selecting the ones that fulfilled the criteria. The duration was one month. It was then analysed using thematic analysis through the use of coding sheet. In order to ensure validity of data, frequency counts were applied to measure the number of occurrences of types of vocabulary and also number of formal vocabularies used in the academic or professional contexts, ensuring that the thematic interpretation reflects real distribution patterns. As stated by Morgan (2022), frequency counts emphasise transparency and confirm the relevance of emerging themes in thematic analysis. To ensure reliability of the study, a reliability check was conducted using Cohen's Kappa, an interrater reliability test performed by an expert to measure the level of agreement in categorising the vocabulary. The expert independently reviewed a subset of the data using the same coding guidelines. The resulting Kappa values were 0.81 for vocabulary type and 0.76 for usage context, indicating strong agreement. These results demonstrate that the coding was applied consistently and reliably, with minimal subjectivity in the classification process. Halpin (2024) highlights its importance in ensuring coding consistency across multiple coders.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RQ1. What types of vocabulary are used in high-engagement TikTok videos aimed at English learning?

Formal vs. Informal Vocabulary Usage in TikTok Videos (V1–V10)					
Video ID	Formal (%)	Informal (%)	Formal Word Count	Informal Word Count	Dominant Vocabulary Type
V1	37%	63%	7	12	Informal
V2	73%	27%	8	3	Formal
V3	59%	41%	13	9	Formal

V4	75%	25%	6	2	Formal
V5	100%	0%	16	0	Formal
V6	67%	33%	14	7	Formal
V7	76%	24%	19	6	Formal
V8	63%	37%	10	6	Formal
V9	50%	50%	10	10	Balanced
V10	50%	50%	10	10	Balanced

The findings reveal that formal vocabulary was more prevalent than informal vocabulary in the majority of the videos. Seven out of ten videos featured a higher proportion of formal words, with videos such as V5 and V7 displaying an overwhelming use of formal vocabulary, with 100% usage in V5 and 76% in V7. These videos primarily introduced advanced vocabulary items such as lacklustre, assuage, opaque, and enigma, which are suitable for academic or professional contexts. In contrast, videos such as V1 and V2 illustrate how informal vocabulary plays a complementary role. V1, for instance, had 63% informal vocabulary, using casual expressions in storytelling to support formal grammar instruction. However, V2, despite its casual tone, maintained 73% formal vocabulary, demonstrating that formal transitional phrases like in short and to begin with were taught within an informal delivery style.

Other videos such as V3, V4, V6, and V8 followed a similar pattern, blending formal vocabulary with minimal informal expressions to enhance learner engagement. V3 introduced professional terms like communication and adjust, while V4 showcased high-level adjectives such as infallible and jubilant. V6 featured formal workplace-related language, including prioritise and emotionally regulate, with informal expressions like gonna and literally adding relatability. V8 used a direct comparison between casual and formal vocabulary, helping viewers understand and memorise terms like audible and tangible. Meanwhile, V9 and V10 presented an even 50/50 mix, combining formal alternatives like in my opinion and frankly with informal expressions such as I'm not gonna lie. These videos provided structured vocabulary improvement through side-by-side substitution techniques.

Overall, the analysis shows that TikTok creators strategically combine formal and informal vocabulary to enhance comprehension and engagement. Formal vocabulary, although dominant, is often introduced within casual, accessible formats. This reflects a consistent pattern where informal language supports the understanding of formal terms without reducing the educational value of the content. The blending of vocabulary types demonstrates that high-engagement TikTok videos aimed at English learners are not only entertaining but also effective in presenting advanced vocabulary in meaningful and memorable ways.

RQ2. How is formal vocabulary used for academic versus professional purposes as shown in popular English educational TikTok videos?

Use of Formal Vocabulary in Academic vs. Professional Contexts (V1–V10)			
Video ID	Academic Use	Professional Use	Contextual Focus
V1	✓	✗	Grammar instruction in academic writing
V2	✓	✗	Structured sequencing in essays

V3	✗	✓	Interpersonal language for workplace settings
V4	✓	✓	Adjectives relevant for formal arguments and evaluations
V5	✓	✓	Descriptive precision applicable in reviews and feedback
V6	✗	✓	Communication strategies for interview contexts
V7	✓	✓	Vocabulary applicable in both reports and analyses
V8	✓	✓	Substitution of casual terms with formal alternatives
V9	✓	✓	Word distinctions with wide usage in formal discourse
V10	✓	✓	Formal phrases adaptable to speech and essays

From the findings, it is evident that formal vocabulary on TikTok is frequently employed with purposeful alignment to either academic or professional contexts, and in many cases, both. Videos such as V1 and V2 demonstrate a strong academic orientation. In V1, formal terms are embedded within grammar teaching that targets sentence construction and punctuation rules, aiding learners in mastering structural accuracy for academic writing. V2 similarly introduces higher-level organisational phrases, which encourages the consistency of paragraph development and refining written argument flow. These are the skills necessary in formal academic assessments.

In contrast, V3 and V6 are highly involved with professional domains. V3 included verbal tactics that are often used in the workplace, and it employs the vocabulary that are heavily used to show emotional intelligence in communication. On the other hand, V6 highlights expressions that are frequently used in job interviews and performance discussions, encouraging users to express experiences with professionalism and confidence.

Videos V4 through V10 show presentations of formal vocabulary with the flexibility to serve both academic and professional functions. In V4, for example, advanced adjectives are introduced in ways that can enhance evaluative language in essay arguments or support objective descriptions in formal meetings. V5 further illustrates this versatility by using formal terminology appropriate for structured reviews, allowing application in contexts that range from classroom critique to workplace reporting. Similarly, V7 and V8 teach formal alternatives to common expressions, promoting grammar accuracy in diverse settings. Videos such as V9 and V10 provide direct comparisons between similar formal terms that highlight sophistication when used.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

RQ1. What types of vocabulary are used in high-engagement TikTok videos aimed at English learning

The analysis revealed that most TikTok videos depicted formal vocabulary while a smaller percentage integrated informal expression for engagement. This is congruent to the study by Syaifuddin et al. (2021) which reported that formal terms appear in many academic-focused clips while informal vocabulary dominates TikTok lessons driven for engagement. The presence of informal vocabulary though limited reflects as a strategy to maintain relatability as stated by Schellewald (2023). These patterns suggest that TikTok educators balance linguistic emphasis with audience appeal. This duality however indicated that while formal vocabulary remains central for instructional goals, informal elements play the essential role as a bridge to sustain learner motivation and contextual relevance. On this note, although informal vocabulary used in TikTok videos retain learners' engagement and make the contents relatable, it may cause some drawbacks, especially for those aiming to improve their language skills. This is because if learners are overly exposed to casual or slang expressions, they may be confused with the correct formal usage. Recent studies suggest that constant exposure to informal language can influence how students write academically, which may lead them to use inappropriate vocabulary in their essays or reports (Angelica et. al, 2023). Therefore, to address the nature of

TikTok that usually provide short videos, which may cause limited time for lessons, it should be balanced with guidance to avoid long term-effects on learners' academic writing competence.

Overall, the use of formal vocabulary in these videos reflects a strategic educational balance. Some videos adopt a focused academic lens, equipping students with the linguistic tools required for examinations and scholarly writing. Others take a practical professional angle, addressing the realities of communication in employment contexts. However, the most effective videos are those that blur these boundaries and offer learners vocabulary that transfers seamlessly between classrooms and workplaces. This integration suggests that TikTok, while informal in platform design, can support serious language development when designed with intentional instructional goals.

RQ2: How is formal vocabulary used for academic versus professional purposes as shown in popular English educational TikTok videos?

In the results, it can be seen that the creators have a high tendency to employ formal vocabulary with a flexible adaptation to academic and professional use. Some videos had a heavy emphasis on academic application with sentence connectors and descriptive words used in essay writing, whereas others emphasised career-related language with application in interviewing, communicating at work, etc. Some videos were able to unite the two fields and displayed a trend to teach vocabulary that can be applied in multiple real-life scenarios. In total, eight out of ten videos applied formal vocabulary in academic contexts, while seven featured usages suitable for professional settings.

This variability substantiates the perception by Sanmee (2024), according to whom social and cultural context is also of significance in the understanding and application of vocabulary. In the given case, despite the widespread opinion about TikTok as an informal platform, the content has strong educational potential. It is turned into a dynamic area where formal vocabulary may serve the needs of the academic community as well as professional communication aims. Notably, six videos demonstrated clear dual-context application, where vocabulary could be used in both classroom writing and workplace interactions. To give an example, videos such as V4 and V5 proved that advanced adjectives and formal linking phrases are teachable in short videos when complemented by examples that people can relate to or by simple explanations.

The manner in which formal vocabulary is used in all these various contexts also reflects the departure from traditional teaching techniques, which tend to view academic and professional language as distinct. Creators merged these goals instead of separating them. This is in line with the situation on the ground where learners are supposed to apply formal vocabulary in various fields of their lives. The approach is aligned with the view of Gulzar et al. (2024), who discovered that students become motivated when they find language useful outside the classroom. Videos such as V7, V8, V9, and V10 provided vocabulary instruction that was equally relevant for formal reports and verbal self-expression, reinforcing this combined learning goal. The results indicate that TikTok, despite its informal nature, can address the linguistic needs of contemporary learners who have to traverse the academic and professional landscapes.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, the paper demonstrates how the TikTok creators managed to make academic and professional vocabulary teaching a success with careful content planning. By doing that, they provide their learners with language input which is both realistic and adaptive and assists them in the preparation for communication in various real-life situations. It also highlights the potential of TikTok as the potential platform for informal learning that may be able to gauge students' attention and motivation in vocabulary learning. For future research, it is recommended for researchers to include learner feedback, assessments, or observational data for data triangulation which are deemed suitable. Besides that, it is also recommended to investigate the effects of informal vocabulary exposure on formal academic writing and professional communication. Incorporating TikTok content into structured, teacher-guided activities may offer useful strategies for classroom application. Additionally, long-term studies could investigate how well learners retain and apply vocabulary acquired through TikTok, contributing to more informed language teaching practices.

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