EFL Students' Perceptions Toward the Use of TikTok Trending English Songs in Vocabulary Learning

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Abstract

This study examines senior high school EFL students' experiences and perceptions of incidental vocabulary acquisition through English songs on TikTok. Using a qualitative descriptive design with a phenomenological approach, the research was conducted at SMA Shalahuddin, Malang, with three purposively selected students from grades X-XII. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and supporting documentation, such as TikTok screenshots and lyric displays, and analyzed thematically using Miles and Huberman's interactive model. The findings indicate that English songs on Tik Tok provide meaningful extensive listening input through repeated, algorithm-driven exposure, which supports incidental vocabulary learning. Students often replayed songs due to enjoyment, emotional engagement, and personal relevance, facilitating the acquisition of pronunciation, slang, and contextual expressions. They also showed self-directed learning behaviors, including using translation tools and consulting peers or family members. Although distractions sometimes reduced concentration, students consistently perceived Tik Tok songs as beneficial for vocabulary development. Overall, TikTok functions as an effective informal learning environment for vocabulary acquisition, though the small sample size limits generalizability and calls for further research with broader participants.

Keywords: *Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition; TikTok English songs; Extensive Listening*

Introduction

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in second language (L2) learning, as it underpins learners' abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Chiew & Hanim Ismail, 2021:1299; Maria & Sujarwati, 2025:373). Despite its importance, many EFL learners continue to struggle with vocabulary mastery, which limits their comprehension and communicative competence (Rahayu, 2023:854). Vocabulary acquisition is particularly challenging because it requires repeated exposure, meaningful contextual use, and learning approaches that align with learners'

interests Rosyada-AS & Apoko (2023:490). Previous studies have reported that low motivation, difficulty interpreting word meanings, pronunciation problems, and limited access to learning resources are common obstacles in vocabulary development (Aji et al., 2023; Kusumawati et al., 2024; Rahmah et al., 2023). These challenges indicate the need for learning opportunities that provide frequent exposure, engagement, and accessibility beyond formal classroom instruction.

One approach that addresses these needs is extensive listening, which refers to continuous, relaxed exposure to authentic spoken language in meaningful contexts, often outside instructional settings (Nurhayati & Rini, 2025; Rukmana et al., 2023). Extensive listening supports vocabulary growth by allowing learners to encounter words repeatedly and incidentally without explicit memorization. In this context, incidental vocabulary acquisition is understood as the unintentional learning of new words that occurs while learners are focused on understanding meaning or enjoying content rather than deliberately studying vocabulary (Krashen, 1982). With the widespread use of social media among adolescents, TikTok has emerged as a platform that naturally facilitates extensive listening through short-form videos, particularly trending English songs that repeatedly appear on users' For You Page (McCashin & Murphy, 2023; Najihah & Septiani, 2024). These Tik Tok trending English songs, defined as popular English-language songs frequently circulated and algorithmically promoted on TikTok, provide learners with repeated and emotionally engaging auditory input in their daily routines.

Previous research has shown that music-based learning can enhance vocabulary engagement, motivation, and retention engagement (Alharthi, 2024; Damayanti & Mauriyat, 2025; Fitri et al., 2024; Kamil, 2024; Maghfiroh et al., 2025; Sitompul et al., 2025; Susanti, 2024). Studies on TikTok further indicate that auditory exposure through short videos supports listening comprehension and contextual vocabulary learning (De Matta et al., 2023; Setiawan et al., 2024). However, most of these studies are conducted in classroom-based or teacher-guided settings, focusing on instructional use rather than learners' everyday experiences.

What remains underexplored is how learners acquire vocabulary incidentally through repeated exposure to trending English songs on TikTok's algorithm-driven For You Page, where learning occurs informally through enjoyment, emotional engagement, and routine media consumption. In addition, although external distractions such as notifications and environmental noise are known to interfere with attention and retention (Adhani & Remijn, 2023:178), their role in TikTok-based extensive listening and vocabulary learning has received limited scholarly attention.

Addressing this gap is important because TikTok represents a dominant digital environment for adolescents, where language exposure occurs naturally outside pedagogical control. Understanding how algorithmic repetition, learner motivation, emotional connection, and external distractions interact in shaping incidental vocabulary acquisition can inform more realistic models of informal

language learning. Therefore, this study explores EFL students lived experiences and perceptions of vocabulary acquisition through trending English songs on TikTok in their daily lives.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions:
1. How do EFL students experience vocabulary acquisition through trending English songs on TikTok?
2. What are students' perceptions of the contributions of trending English Tik Tok songs to their vocabulary learning?

The novelty of this study lies in its phenomenological focus on real-life digital interaction, examining incidental vocabulary learning as it naturally occurs within algorithm-driven, youth-centered online environments. Practically, the findings are expected to inform teachers and curriculum designers about the potential of Tik Tok songs as a supplementary resource for vocabulary learning beyond the classroom.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design with a phenomenological approach to explore senior high school EFL students lived experiences and perceptions of incidental vocabulary acquisition through English songs on TikTok. A phenomenological approach was selected because it allows researchers to capture participants' everyday experiences and meaning-making processes as they naturally occur in informal digital environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Van Manen, 2016 in Haque & Ahmad, 2025:1). This design aligns with the study's objective to understand not only what vocabulary students acquire, but how they experience incidental learning through repeated exposure, enjoyment, and engagement with Tik Tok content.

The research was conducted at SMA Shalahuddin, Malang, East Java, where TikTok is widely used by adolescents for entertainment, self-expression, and informal learning. Three EFL students-one from each grade level (X, XI, and XII) were selected using purposive sampling. Including participants from different grade levels was intended to enrich the data by capturing variations in linguistic maturity, learning autonomy, and exposure to English. The selection criteria required students to (1) regularly encounter English songs on TikTok and (2) experience diverse external conditions, such as extracurricular involvement, part-time work, or noisy home environments, which could influence attention and learning. In line with phenomenological research principles, a small sample size was considered appropriate, as the focus was on depth of understanding rather than statistical generalization.

Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews. Each participant took part in one in-depth interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian with occasional English terms to allow participants to express their experiences comfortably and authentically. The interview protocol consisted of ten open-ended questions adapted from (Amelia &

Indriyani, 2021; Hutasoit et al., 2025), covering five thematic areas: perceived usefulness of Tik Tok songs, enjoyment and emotional engagement, learning motivation, vocabulary learning difficulties, and external distractions. The interview instrument was reviewed and validated by an English education expert to ensure content relevance and alignment with the study's theoretical orientation.

To support data credibility and provide contextual evidence, documentation was also collected. This included interview audio recordings, screenshots of English song content encountered by participants on TikTok, and displayed song lyrics accessed during or after viewing. Screenshots were selected based on participants explanations of songs that contributed to their vocabulary learning, while lyric displays were used to illustrate how participants engaged with unfamiliar words. These documents were not analyzed independently but functioned as triangulation and contextual support for interview data, helping to confirm participants' narratives and clarify learning processes.

Data analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model, consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and coded line-by-line to identify meaningful units related to incidental vocabulary acquisition. Initial codes were grouped into categories and then synthesized into broader themes during the data display stage. Conclusions were drawn by identifying recurring patterns across participants while remaining grounded in their lived experiences, consistent with phenomenological analysis (Mattimoe et al., 2021:2).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was supported through careful transcription and prolonged engagement with the data, as well as peer discussion with fellow researchers to review coding decisions. Dependability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail that documented analytic decisions throughout the research process. Confirmability was addressed through researcher reflexivity, in which the researcher remained aware of personal assumptions and minimized subjective bias during interpretation. The use of participant codes (P1, P2, P3) ensured anonymity and confidentiality.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the school, and informed consent was secured from both participants and their class guardians, as the participants were minors. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Personal identities were protected through anonymization.

Finally, theory triangulation was applied during the interpretation stage by using multiple theoretical perspectives as interpretive lenses after themes had emerged, rather than as predetermined coding frameworks. These included Krashen's incidental vocabulary acquisition theory (as cited in (Sinyashina & Balteiro Fernández, 2023:21), Bozan's concept of extensive listening (Ni'amah & Kristanti, 2022:62), and Rahman et al., (2024:864) framework on self-directed learning through songs. Employing these perspectives strengthened conceptual interpretation while ensuring that the findings remained grounded in empirical data.

Results

This section presents the findings derived from the interview data. The results are organized according to recurring themes that emerged from the analysis, addressing students' experiences and perceptions of learning vocabulary through English TikTok songs.

Students Experiences with English TikTok Songs

Exposure to English TikTok Songs (Extensive Listening)

All participants reported frequent exposure to English songs on their TikTok for You Page (FYP) This exposure occurred repeatedly as similar songs reappeared due to TikTok's algorithm. Although the specific genres differed, participants shared similar listening patterns characterized by repeated playback.

Participant 1 preferred hip-hop and rap songs that felt calming and relaxing

P.1.2 : *"Mungkin karena awalnya aku juga sama Hip Hop, suka rap. Terus habis itu ada juga beberapa lagunya yang bikin tenang juga kan. Bikin rileks, bikin chill. Jadi, lebih enak didenger"*

("Maybe it's because I started with Hip Hop too, I like rap. And then there are also some of the songs that feels calming, you know. They make me relaxed, make me feel chill. So, they're nicer to listen to")

Participant 2 mentioned emotional pop and ballad songs that resonated with personal experiences.

P.2.2 : *"Pernah berada di posisi seperti yang diceritakan sama yang dilagunya sih."*

("I've been in the kind of situation that the song talks about")

Participant 3 listened to similar English songs almost daily because they repeatedly appeared on her FYP.

P.3.2 : *"... suka aja sama lagunya ya terus bikin candu gitu bikin aku jadi kayak, kan kayak aku ulang-ulang terus gitu kan lagunya mungkin jadi ya di FYP tuh sering lewat terus gitu gitu ke ulang-ulang terus sih."*

("... I just like the song, and it kind of become addictive. It makes me, like I just keep replaying it over and over, you know? So maybe that's why it keeps showing up on my FYP, and I just end up repeating it again and again")

This shows a natural cycle of extensive listening, where enjoyable content is replayed through algorithm-driven exposure on TikTok. This picture below include TikTok screenshot showed English TikTok songs on students' FYP, confirming that track like mockingbird, To the Bone, and Golden Hour repeatedly appeared and supported the interview data.

Figure 1 Exposure to English TikTok songs

These accounts indicate that students were consistently exposed to English songs through TikTok's algorithm, creating repeated listening experiences characteristic of extensive listening

Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition

Participants reported acquiring new vocabulary unintentionally while listening to English TikTok songs. The type and amount of vocabulary varied across participants.

Participant 1 recalled specific words from rap songs.

P.1.3 : *"Pernah, banyak. Apa ya? Pokok ada mockingbird. .....Sama dat stick, ya? Oh, iya."*

("Yes, many. What was it...? There's Mockingbird... and Dat Stick, right? Oh, yeah.")

Participant 2 mainly acquired slang expressions and swear words.

P.2.3 : *"Holy cow. Iya, karena pada masanya waktu saya SMP itu lagi booming bomingnya rapper-rapper gitu. .....kata yang gampang ya kata umpatan, sih."*

("Holy cow. Yeah, because back when I was in the middle school, rapper stuff was

really booming... the easiest words to pick up were basically curse words")

Participant 3 initially stated that she "rarely" learned vocabulary intentionally.

P.3.3 : *"Jarang"*

("Rarely")

However, further responses showed that she still encountered vocabulary incidentally, such as vibe, scroll, backburner, and gaslighting, indicating occasional learning through repeated exposure rather than deliberate study. When encountering unfamiliar words, students used self-initiated strategies such as asking family members, watching lyric videos, or using Google Translate.
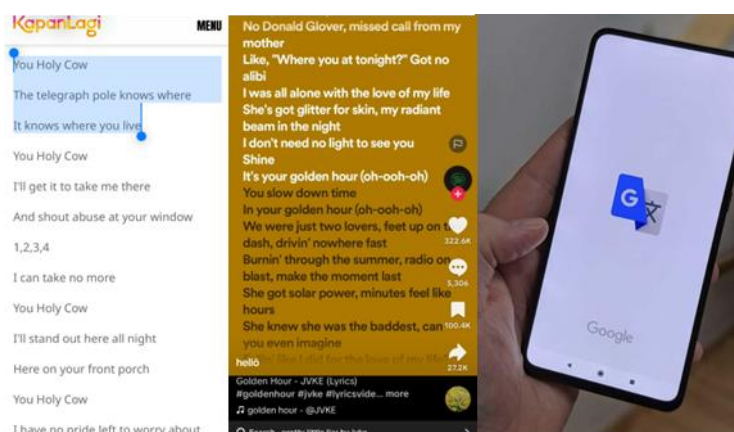

Figure 2 Incidental and strategies in Incidental Learning

Vocabulary acquisition occurred incidentally through repeated listening, with students engaging in meaning seeking strategies driven by curiosity.

Motivation Triggered by TikTok Songs

All participants described increased motivation to understand English lyrics, mainly due to emotional connection, interest in artists, or curiosity about song meanings

P.1.5 : *"Sangat, sangat termotivasi. Karena dari lagu – lagu itu kan ada yang suka. Otomatis kan lama – lama jadi suka sama artisnya juga, ya? Jadi kayak pengen aja ketemu sama mereka gitu – gitu."*

(Very, very motivated. Because from those songs, when you like the songs, you eventually end up liking the artist too, right? So, it makes me want to meet them and stuff like that")

P.3.5 : *"Jadi kayak, kadang-kadang sering kayak, ini di rap yang ini di lirik yang ini tuh*

artinya apa sih? Kadang-kadang kan gitu, jadi kayak cari tahu. bener makna-makna lagu itu sering cari, sering banget, gitu."

("So, like, sometimes I'm often like, 'what does this part of the rap or this lyric mean?'. Sometimes, it's like that, so I try to find out. I look up the meanings of songs a lot, really often")

Students' motivation emerged naturally from enjoyment and emotional engagement with songs rather than academic obligation

Understanding Real-life English (Pronunciation, Accent, Slang)

Participants reported improved familiarity with pronunciation, accent, and everyday expressions through repeated listening.

P.1.6 : *"Ya, karena sering diulangi itu. Jadi kayak lebih nyantol dan gampang buat diucapin juga. Karena kita pasti secara gak langsung pasti hafal juga lagunya... jadi tau aksen dan slang."*

   ("Yeah, because I repeated it a lot. So, it sticks more and become easier to say too. Since we'll eventually memorize the song without realizing it... we end up knowing the accent and the slang")

P.2.6 : *"Iya, karena dulu aku nggak bisa Bahasa Inggris sama sekali. Sekarang bisa Bahasa Inggris karena aku mengartikan lagu, film, seperti itu. Jadi metode belajarnya seperti itu."*

   ("Yes, because I couldn't speak English at all before. Now I can because I translated songs, movies, things like that. So, that became my learning method")

Repeated exposure helped students become more familiar with authentic spoken English features.

External, Environmental and Social Distractions While using TikTok

Participants experienced different levels of distraction. Participants 1 and 2 reported minimal distraction due to consistent use of "*Do Not Disturb*" mode, while participant 3 experienced interruptions from notifications and environmental noise. Environmental conditions affected focus differently: participant 1 was distracted by social interaction, participant 2 avoided noisy settings, and participant 3 found noise reduced concentration and memory.

P.1.8 : *"Klo lingkungannya rame nggak begitu ngaruh, pokok masih kedengeran aku masih bisa enjoy the vibes."*

   ("If the place is noisy, it doesn't really affect me. As long as I can still hear it, I can still enjoy the vibes")

P.2.8 : *"Kebetulan kalau ditempat rame nggak pernah dengarin music, walaupun sendirian, gitu, ya. Nggak pernah."*

   ("I actually never listen to music in crowded places, even if I'm alone. I just don't")

P.3.8 : *"Iya, soalnya kan jadinya nggak bisa focus ke lagunya itu, jadinya bingung. ……Iya, lupa."*

("Yeah, because then I can't focus on song, so I get confused… Yeah, I forget")

Overall, distraction levels varied depending on phone-use habits and learning environments.

Impact of Distractions on Vocabulary Retention

Distractions influenced attention and recall for some participants as can be stated below,

P.1.9 : *"Lumayan ngaruh, Jadi ntar kalau misalnya mau nyanyi lagi, kayak gini lo ntar dengerin baru nyanyi lagi gitu. ………Iya, jadi lupa."*

(It affects me quite a bit. So, if I want to sing again later, I have to listen to it first and then sing again… Yeah, I end up forgetting")

P.3.9 : *"Iya, kadang kayak apa namanya ditanyain gitu, jadi kayak nge-pause dulu, ini – itu jadinya. Kadang udah keburu nggak mood, jadi ya udah nggak buka lagi."*

("Yeah, sometimes when someone asks me something, I pause it and do this and that. Sometimes, I lose the mood, so, I just don't open it again")

Participant 2 reported little impact because he listened only in quiet settings. In conclusion, distractions reduced focus and continuity of listening for some students, affecting recall.

Students' Perceptions of TikTok Songs for Vocabulary Learning

Participants generally perceived English TikTok songs as helpful for vocabulary exposure.

P.1.10 : *"Efektif banget… jadi tau artinya sendiri."*
("Very effective… I end up understanding the meaning myself.")
P.3.10 : *"….lebih gampang, jadi lebih hafal, mudah dihafal, terus lebih gampang diinget…Iya, soalnya kan sambil nyanyi gitu."*
("…it's easier, so it becomes more memorable, easier to remember, and easier to memorize… Yeah, because you're singing along")
P.2.10 : *"….Jadi, menurutku, film jauh lebih bagus kalau untuk bicara vocab."*
("…So, in my opinion, movies are much better when it becomes to learning vocabulary")

Students viewed TikTok songs as effective for vocabulary exposure, though not as a replacement for structured learning.

Discussion

Students' Experience with TikTok English Songs

The findings of this study indicate that students' engagement with English songs on TikTok reflects key characteristics of extensive listening and incidental vocabulary acquisition within informal digital environments. Repeated exposure to the same songs through the *For You Page (FYP)* enabled learners to encounter English input naturally and effortlessly, without instructional pressure. This pattern aligns with Bozan's notion of extensive listening as sustained, meaningful exposure to language input that occurs voluntarily and repeatedly. In this study, repetition was not planned by learners but was shaped by Tik Tok's algorithm, which continuously resurfaced similar content based on users' interaction history. This highlights a distinctive contribution of TikTok: algorithm-driven repetition replaces traditional teacher-selected materials as the primary source of listening input.

Consistent with Krashen's theory of incidental vocabulary acquisition, students reported learning new vocabulary unintentionally while engaging with songs they enjoyed. Words such as mockingbird, holy cow, and slang expressions like vibe, scroll, and gaslighting were recalled spontaneously, indicating that vocabulary learning occurred as a by-product of exposure rather than deliberate study. These findings support previous research demonstrating that music facilitates vocabulary growth through enjoyable and repeated auditory input (Alharthi, 2024; Damayanti & Mauriyat, 2025; Fitri et al., 2024). However, this study extends existing literature by showing that, in the TikTok context, repetition is intensified and sustained through short-form, viral, and personalized content rather than through long listening sessions.

Beyond exposure, students demonstrated self-directed learning behaviors when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. They actively searched for lyric meanings, used Google Translate, or asked family members for clarification. These behaviors indicate that learners were not merely passive consumers of content but engaged cognitively with language input. This finding aligns with Rahman et al., (2024), who emphasize curiosity and enjoyment as key drivers of voluntary language exploration in digital learning environments. Additionally, students reported increased awareness of pronunciation, accent, and everyday expressions, suggesting that TikTok songs contribute not only to lexical development but also to phonological and sociolinguistic awareness. This supports prior findings on TikTok-based listening input (Herwanto, 2022; Setiawan et al., 2024), while situating such learning within students' everyday digital routines rather than classroom-based activities.

A critical dimension of students' experiences concerns external distractions. While two participants managed interruptions effectively by activating *"Do Not Disturb" mode*, others experienced disruptions from noise, social interactions, or notifications. These interruptions often caused learners to lose focus, forget lyrics, or stop listening altogether, interrupting the continuity required for incidental learning. This finding supports Adhani & Remijn (2023:178), explanation that environmental

and digital distractions can hinder cognitive processing during learning. Importantly, this study reveals that TikTok's effectiveness for vocabulary acquisition is conditional rather than absolute; it depends on learners' ability to regulate their learning environment. This nuance is often overlooked in studies that portray digital platforms as inherently beneficial.

Students' Perceptions of TikTok English Songs for Vocabulary Learning

Students generally perceived TikTok English songs as a useful and enjoyable medium for vocabulary learning, particularly for exposure to authentic language, slang, and pronunciation. However, perceptions were not uniform. While some students viewed TikTok as highly effective for vocabulary exposure, one participant explicitly preferred films due to their richer narrative context. This contradiction is significant, as it suggests that TikTok songs may be more effective for lexical exposure and memorability, whereas other media may better support deeper contextual understanding. Rather than undermining TikTok's value, this finding reinforces its role as a complementary resource rather than a replacement for other learning materials.

Compared with previous studies on music and TikTok-based vocabulary learning (De Matta et al., 2023; Irawansyah et al., 2025; Susanti, 2024), this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how platform design shapes learning processes. Specifically, TikTok's short-form format, algorithmic personalization, and viral repetition modify traditional assumptions of extensive listening, which typically emphasize long-duration input. In this context, extensive listening emerges through frequent, fragmented, yet emotionally engaging exposure. This represents a conceptual extension of extensive listening theory within contemporary digital ecosystems.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that Tik Tok can be strategically integrated as a supplementary learning resource. Teachers and schools may encourage students to engage in lyric-noticing activities, maintain vocabulary journals based on songs encountered on TikTok, practice shadowing for pronunciation, or reflect on newly noticed expressions. At the same time, explicit guidance on managing distractions such as setting focused listening times or using Do Not Disturb mode can help learners maximize incidental learning outcomes. These strategies align with prior research emphasizing guided digital engagement rather than unrestricted media use (Kamil, 2024; Sitompul et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, this study has limitations that must be acknowledged. The small sample size, single-school context, and reliance on self-reported learning experiences limit generalizability. Additionally, participants were already familiar with and favorable toward TikTok, which may introduce positive bias. Vocabulary gains were not formally tested, and learning was inferred from participants' reflections rather than measured outcomes. Therefore, claims about effectiveness should be interpreted within the scope of this phenomenological inquiry. Future

research could involve larger and more diverse samples, include objective vocabulary assessments, and explore long-term retention to further validate TikTok's role in vocabulary learning.

In sum, this study contributes to the growing body of research on informal digital language learning by demonstrating how algorithm-driven repetition, emotional engagement, and environmental regulation collectively shape incidental vocabulary acquisition among Indonesian EFL learners. TikTok does not replace formal instruction but offers a distinctive, youth-centered space where language learning emerges naturally through everyday digital practices.

Conclusion

This study concludes that English songs encountered on TikTok can meaningfully support EFL learners' vocabulary development through repeated exposure, contextualized input, and incidental learning processes. The findings show that algorithm-driven repetition and short-form music content allow students to become familiar with new vocabulary, pronunciation, slang, and authentic expressions in an enjoyable and motivating way. Through extensive listening embedded in everyday digital routines, learners engage with English naturally, often without conscious intention to learn, which aligns with theories of incidental vocabulary acquisition.

At the same time, this study highlights important limitations of TikTok as a learning medium. External distractions, such as notifications, environmental noise, and divided attention, can interrupt listening continuity and reduce vocabulary retention. Moreover, the informal and entertainment-oriented nature of TikTok limits its suitability as a primary instructional tool. Therefore, TikTok English songs are best positioned as a complementary resource that supports formal instruction rather than replacing structured classroom learning.

This research is limited by its small sample size, single-school context, and reliance on self-reported learning experiences, which restrict the generalizability of the findings. The participants were adolescent learners who were already familiar with TikTok, which may also influence positive perceptions of its learning value. Future studies are encouraged to involve larger and more diverse participant groups, investigate pedagogical strategies for minimizing digital distractions, and examine long-term vocabulary retention through social media-based extensive listening. Further research may also incorporate quantitative measures to assess vocabulary gains more systematically and explore how informal digital learning can be sustainably integrated into EFL curricula.

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