OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition through Inspirational YouTube Shorts among Uzbek Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how 15–16-year-old students in Uzbekistan learn new vocabulary and informal English expressions outside the classroom through inspirational YouTube Shorts and their comment sections. While previous research has highlighted that incidental vocabulary learning is prominent in digital contexts, few studies have explored short-form motivational content combined with learner interaction in comments. Eighteen participants watched four selected Shorts and completed a structured questionnaire about their engagement and vocabulary noticing. Results indicate that students reliably recognized concrete and emotionally transparent expressions, but abstract phrases associated with identity development were often misinterpreted or understood only partially. Comment sections functioned as secondary input that sometimes supported comprehension and vocabulary noticing, although engagement with comments was generally limited. Emotional relevance and personal connection to video content enhanced attentional focus and lexical retention, suggesting that motivational content can facilitate incidental learning when language is meaningfully embedded. However, individual differences in learning preferences moderated these effects. The findings highlight both the potential and limitations of short-form online videos as tools for informal vocabulary acquisition, emphasizing the need to consider content type, cognitive load, and learner interaction.

Keywords: incidental vocabulary acquisition; YouTube Shorts; informal English expressions; Uzbek adolescent EFL learners; social media language input; YouTube comment sections.

INTRODUCTION

Language learning does not occur solely within the classroom. While formal instruction provides structured input and explicit explanation, learners also engage with language beyond institutional settings through everyday activities, including digital media consumption. Nunan (2016) argues that out-of-class learning plays a substantial role in language development, as learners encounter authentic input in contexts driven by personal interest rather than curricular obligation. Similarly, Reinders and Benson (2017) conceptualize language learning beyond the classroom as a space of autonomy where learners interact with real-world language in socially meaningful environments. In contemporary contexts, social media platforms have become one of the most accessible sites for such informal exposure.

This paper explores how English learning continues beyond the classroom, focusing specifically on how inspirational YouTube Shorts and their comment sections contribute to the acquisition of new vocabulary and informal expressions among 15–16-year-old learners in Uzbekistan. Rather than treating language learning as exclusively planned or instructionally guided, this study approaches it as a process that often unfolds incidentally, through repeated exposure to meaningful input in everyday digital environments (Nunan, 2003; Reinders & Benson, 2017).

Hence, the theoretical foundation of this study is incidental vocabulary acquisition. Incidental learning refers to the acquisition of lexical items without deliberate intention to memorize them, typically occurring while learners focus on meaning rather than form (Nation, 2001). Research demonstrates that repeated exposure to lexical items increases retention and depth of processing (Nation, 2001; Webb, 2008). Tajeddin et al. (2024) further show that successful language learners frequently engage in self-initiated out-of-class activities, where vocabulary acquisition emerges as a by-product of meaningful engagement rather than explicit study. In digital environments, this process may be intensified by multimodal input combining visual, auditory, and textual channels, which enhances processing and memory integration (Mayer, 2014).

Furthermore, classroom instruction does not often prioritize informal expressions, slang, and pragmatic nuances that learners encounter in digital discourse. Ellis (2003) notes that formal instruction often emphasizes grammatical accuracy and controlled tasks, while Taguchi et al. (2015), drawing on pragmatic development research, highlights that exposure to authentic interaction is essential for developing context-sensitive language use. This distinction is particularly relevant in non-native English learning environments such as Uzbekistan, where English is primarily acquired through classroom instruction and opportunities for everyday interaction with native or proficient speakers remain limited. In such pedagogical contexts, teaching often focuses on textbook-based language and exam preparation, leaving less space for informal discourse practices. As a result, learners may understand colloquial expressions encountered online without being able to identify where they acquired them, suggesting that aspects of communicative competence may develop outside formal educational settings. Within this context, digital media platforms increasingly function as alternative environments for language exposure. Research on short-form video platforms such as TikTok demonstrates their potential for vocabulary development and learner engagement. Studies by Alshreef and Khadawardi (2023), as well as Khasawneh (2024) indicate

that short, engaging video content can support vocabulary acquisition and increase motivation in EFL contexts. Alfitri (2024) further shows that Generation Z learners respond positively to short-form digital content due to its brevity and immediacy. Rahman (2025) compares YouTube Shorts with longer-form videos and suggests that short-form content may enhance spoken language development through repeated exposure and focused attention. However, most of these studies focus either on TikTok or on general video exposure. The specific interaction between short-form video content and comment sections as a combined input environment remains underexplored. This gap becomes particularly relevant in the Uzbek context. National educational reforms have prioritized English proficiency as part of efforts to modernize the education system (Hasanova & Vokhidova, 2025). At the same time, access to certain global platforms may be uneven, making YouTube a relatively stable and accessible source of English-language content. Unlike platforms where content disappears after a limited time, YouTube archives both videos and comment threads, enabling sustained and repeated engagement with audiovisual and written discourse. This environment allows learners to encounter spoken English (intonation, pronunciation, pragmatic cues) alongside informal written language (slang, abbreviations, peer reactions). From a language socialization perspective, learning occurs through participation in socially situated discourse practices (Duff & Talmy, 2011). YouTube comment sections may thus function as sites of informal language socialization, where learners observe and interpret authentic peer-generated interaction.

The focus on 15–16-year-old learners is theoretically grounded in developmental and motivational research. Adolescence is characterized by increasing cognitive capacity for abstract reasoning and interpretative nuance (Benati & Angelovska, 2016; Steinberg, 2014). Simultaneously, this stage involves active identity construction, which influences motivation and language investment (Duff & Talmy, 2011). Park and Jung (2016) demonstrate that video clips can enhance motivation in secondary school EFL contexts by linking language input to emotionally engaging themes. Inspirational content may therefore function not only as linguistic input but also as identity-relevant discourse, potentially strengthening retention through emotional salience. Krashen's (1985) affective filter hypothesis further suggests that emotionally engaging, low-anxiety environments facilitate language acquisition. Short, motivational videos may reduce performance pressure while maintaining engagement, thereby creating favorable conditions for incidental learning and therefore serve as learning material for participants in this study.
What distinguishes YouTube Shorts in this context is not merely their brevity but their combination of repetition, affective engagement, and multimodal input. Frequency of exposure is a well-established predictor of vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2001; Webb, 2008). Short-form content is often replayed or algorithmically re-presented, increasing opportunities for lexical encounters. Additionally, the coexistence of spoken and written discourse aligns with multimedia learning principles, which posit that dual-channel processing enhances comprehension and retention (Mayer, 2009). When combined with socially generated comment threads, this environment may support both lexical recognition and pragmatic awareness in ways that classroom materials cannot fully replicate. Against this background, this study addresses the following research question:

How does watching inspirational English YouTube Shorts and reading video comments help 15–16-year-old students in Uzbekistan learn new words and informal expressions outside the classroom?

Due to the interactive and multimodal nature of short-form video consumption, this study adopts a qualitative case study design (Friedman, 2025) to investigate incidental vocabulary acquisition among 18 Uzbek students aged 15–16. It draws on a structured questionnaire and a vocabulary retention task to explore learners' engagement with YouTube Shorts and their recognition of selected informal expressions. Throughout this study, YouTube Shorts and their comment sections are positioned as a hybrid multimodal-affective learning environment within the Uzbek EFL context. By integrating theories of incidental learning, language socialization, adolescent identity development, and multimedia processing, the research seeks to contribute a more nuanced understanding of how short-form digital media may shape vocabulary acquisition beyond the classroom. The following section reviews existing research on incidental vocabulary acquisition, short-form video learning, and language socialization. Section 3 outlines the methodological design and analytical procedures. Section 4 presents and discusses the findings. Section 5 concludes the study and reflects on pedagogical implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews theoretical foundations and empirical research relevant to vocabulary acquisition, informal digital learning, motivational media, and adolescent language development. It situates the present study within existing scholarship on incidental English learning through YouTube, with particular attention to inspirational short-form content and comment-based interaction among Uzbek secondary-school learners.

Vocabulary Learning as a Key Component of Proficiency

Vocabulary knowledge is widely recognized as a central component of second language proficiency. Alderson et al. (2005) emphasize that lexical knowledge plays a decisive role in language performance, particularly in reading and overall communicative competence. Similarly, Nation (2001) argues that vocabulary size and depth strongly influence learners' ability to understand and produce language effectively.

Wilkins (1972) famously observed that "without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed," highlighting the foundational role of lexis in communication. Together, these perspectives establish vocabulary development as a core dimension of second language acquisition.

Traditional vocabulary instruction has often involved deliberate learning strategies such as memorization of word lists and repetition. Schmitt (2008) explains that while intentional learning can contribute to initial form-meaning connections, long-term retention requires repeated exposure and contextualized use.

Webb and Nation (2017) further stress that multiple encounters with vocabulary items in meaningful contexts are necessary for durable learning.

In contemporary contexts, vocabulary development increasingly occurs through digital media exposure. Prensky (2001) describes modern learners as "digital natives," who grow up interacting with technology and media-rich environments. This shift suggests that vocabulary acquisition is no longer confined to textbooks but is frequently embedded in multimodal digital contexts. Consequently, examining vocabulary learning within media environments has become an important area of inquiry.

Informal Learning beyond the Classroom

Second language acquisition extends beyond formal instruction. Nunan (2003) argues that meaningful language development occurs when learners engage with authentic input in real-life contexts, while Reinders and Benson (2017) conceptualize out-of-class learning as self-directed engagement with language beyond institutional settings, often driven by personal interests. Such learning frequently occurs incidentally, as attention is directed toward meaning rather than deliberate memorization. Tajeddin et al. (2024) report that participation in out-of-class activities contributes to communicative competence through sustained exposure to authentic language use, enabling learners to infer meaning, recognize patterns, and gradually internalize lexical items.

Empirical research has also investigated the role of video-based environments in supporting vocabulary development. In a study conducted in Indonesia, Hia (2021) examined 74 ninth-grade students, equally divided into two groups, and found that learners exposed to YouTube-supported instruction demonstrated higher motivation and improved vocabulary performance compared to those in traditional classroom settings. Although the intervention was classroom-based, the findings suggest that video platforms can effectively enhance both lexical development and learner engagement.

Within the Uzbek context, Sadikova (2025) studied 350 students in grades 7–11 and found that 85% of them (about 298 students) used at least one social media platform daily for English exposure, which they associated with vocabulary growth. However, the study relied mainly on self-reported data and did not directly measure vocabulary acquisition. Short-form formats, such as YouTube Shorts, were also not examined.

These findings indicate that informal digital environments play a meaningful role in language exposure, yet measurable evidence regarding short-form video content remains limited.

Video-Based Platforms as Sources of Multimodal Input

Video platforms provide multimodal input by combining visual imagery, spoken language, and contextual cues. Callow (2012) highlights that multimodal texts engage learners through multiple semiotic resources, supporting comprehension and meaning-making. Hafner and Miller (2011) demonstrate that digital video

environments enable learners to engage actively with multimodal content, promoting literacy development in technology-rich contexts.

Hariyono (2020) emphasizes that YouTube offers authentic language exposure, accessibility, and learner autonomy, making it a potentially effective learning medium. Snelson (2011) also notes that although YouTube holds educational potential, its structured pedagogical use has not been fully formalized, suggesting opportunities for further research. Similarly, Kabooha and Elyas (2018) report positive effects of YouTube-based materials on vocabulary development and learner engagement in EFL contexts.
Research examining short-form content has begun to emerge. Snelson (2018) identifies differences in spoken language awareness associated with exposure to YouTube Shorts compared to longer-form videos. However, research directly measuring vocabulary acquisition from short-form motivational content remains scarce.

In Uzbekistan, YouTube remains widely accessible, whereas other short-form platforms such as TikTok face restrictions. This accessibility positions YouTube Shorts as a relevant context for investigating incidental vocabulary learning among adolescents.

Motivational Content and Language Engagement

Motivation has long been associated with successful learning outcomes. Mendoza et al. (2025) state that learners who possess strong motivation achieve successful learning. Fong et al. (2024) similarly emphasize the importance of internal drive in supporting learning persistence and achievement.

Video-based motivational content links language exposure to themes such as personal growth, resilience, and future aspirations. Park and Jung (2016) demonstrate that video materials can enhance learner engagement by connecting linguistic input to meaningful and emotionally resonant themes. Emotional involvement has been associated with increased attention and deeper cognitive processing, which are factors linked to memory retention.

Baureh and Neman (2025) found that learners frequently consult video comment sections to clarify vocabulary and interpret meaning. Participants reported that engagement with both videos and comments contributed to increased confidence and vocabulary awareness. However, the measurable lexical impact of inspirational short-form videos remains underexplored, particularly among secondary-school learners.

Adolescents (15–16 years old) as Language Learners in Digital Contexts

Adolescence represents a significant stage in language development and socialization. Duff (2010) explains that language learning during adolescence involves participation in social practices and integration of linguistic resources encountered in peer and media environments. Malovrh and Benati (2018) emphasize that exposure frequency and meaningful use play central roles in second language development, both of which are characteristic of digital environments. For example, Sadikova (2025)

demonstrates that Uzbek adolescents actively engage with YouTube for English exposure outside the classroom. However, the study does not specifically investigate short-form content or directly assess vocabulary retention. Given the prevalence of short-form media among teenagers and their increasing autonomy in selecting digital content, examining this age group provides valuable insights into how informal exposure contributes to vocabulary development.

Written Interaction through YouTube Comment Sections

In addition to audiovisual input, YouTube comment sections provide authentic written discourse. Nunan (2003) notes that exposure to authentic language use supports communicative competence. Reinders and Benson (2017) argue that digital environments create opportunities for learners to observe and interpret real-life communication beyond textbook examples.

Comment sections often contain informal expressions, idiomatic language, humor, and pragmatic cues. Baureh and Neman (2025) report that learners frequently read comments to interpret unfamiliar vocabulary, suggesting that comment sections may function as supplementary sources of meaning negotiation. Despite this potential, empirical research rarely isolates the lexical and pragmatic contribution of comment sections as distinct input for vocabulary acquisition.

Synthesis and Research Gap

In summary, previous scholarship establishes several foundations for the present study. Vocabulary knowledge is consistently positioned as central to communicative competence and overall second language proficiency (Alderson et al., 2005; Nation, 2001; Wilkins, 1972), while durable lexical development is shown to depend on repeated exposure to words in meaningful, context-rich environments rather than isolated memorization (Schmitt, 2008; Webb & Nation, 2017). Research on informal learning further suggests that digital platforms such as YouTube can provide accessible, authentic input that supports incidental vocabulary acquisition, particularly when engagement is voluntary and interest-driven (Hariyono, 2020; Sadikova, 2025). Moreover, motivation and emotional involvement have been identified as factors that strengthen attention and persistence, thereby enhancing learning outcomes (Mendoza et al., 2025; Fong et al., 2024).

Despite these contributions, important gaps remain. Much of the existing literature focuses on structured classroom interventions, showing that video-based instruction can enhance motivation and vocabulary development (Hia, 2021), yet offering limited insight into incidental acquisition in self-directed online contexts. Within Uzbekistan, although adolescents report frequent exposure to English-language content online—with 85% of students in grades 7–11 indicating daily social media use for language exposure (Sadikova, 2025)—such findings rely largely on self-reported perceptions and do not directly measure lexical uptake. In addition, the specific role of short-form videos and their accompanying comment

sections in facilitating incidental vocabulary development remains underexplored, particularly among secondary-school learners.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining measurable vocabulary development resulting from exposure to inspirational English YouTube Shorts and their comment sections among Uzbek secondary-school learners.

DATA COLLECTION AND METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore how adolescents engage with inspirational YouTube Shorts and whether incidental exposure contributes to vocabulary retention. A case study approach allows for in-depth examination of a bounded group within a specific contextual setting, making it appropriate for investigating informal digital learning processes among a defined cohort of learners (Bui, 2024). Consistent with this qualitative case study design, questionnaire responses were also summarized using simple descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) where appropriate to describe overall response patterns across participants and provide contextual support for the qualitative interpretation of the findings. The study focuses on secondary-school students aged 15–16 in Uzbekistan. This age group was selected because adolescents increasingly engage independently with digital media while continuing formal English education, positioning them at the intersection of structured and informal language exposure.

Participants

A total of 21 students submitted responses to the online questionnaire. Following data screening, three responses were excluded due to non-substantive entries in the vocabulary retention task, resulting in a final sample of 18 participants. The sample was predominantly high-proficiency, with 10 students identifying as fluent, 7 as upper-intermediate, and 1 as intermediate. Participants also reported varying lengths of English study beyond regular school instruction, with the majority indicating 1–3 years of additional learning experience. This profile provides relevant context for interpreting the vocabulary retention findings.

Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaire and Vocabulary Retention

Data was collected through an online questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The instrument combined self-reported responses with a vocabulary retention task in order to capture both learners' perceptions and their demonstrated understanding of target vocabulary items. Combining _ self-reported

and performance-based _ measures can provide a more comprehensive understanding of learners' experience and learning outcomes (Han & Ellis, 2020).

The questionnaire consisted of six sections:

1. Personal Information & Background

This section collected age, years of English study, and self-assessed proficiency to contextualize responses.

2. English Media Consumption

Participants reported their frequency of watching English-language content, particularly YouTube Shorts, and described their general purposes for engaging with such content.

3. Vocabulary and Learning Observation

This section explored whether participants notice unfamiliar words while watching English videos and whether they perceive vocabulary learning occurring incidentally through exposure.

4. Watching Videos

Participants were provided with direct links to four selected YouTube Shorts and instructed to watch them in a natural manner, reflecting typical social media consumption. Although comment sections were accessible, participants were not required to read comments systematically. Engagement with written interaction therefore varied across individuals.

5. Vocabulary Retention Task

Participants completed a task focusing on eight target words and expressions drawn from the videos and comment sections. They demonstrated understanding by explaining meanings and using the items in short contextualized responses. This format allowed for assessment of productive understanding rather than simple recognition.

The target items were:

- discomfort
- to be humbled
- to have no voice
- to have a golden soul
- life-changing
- to quit
- goosebumps
- it's wild

These expressions were selected because they represent informal, emotionally expressive, and pragmatically meaningful language commonly found in motivational social media discourse.

6. Reflection

The final section invited participants to reflect on their experience of engaging with inspirational YouTube content as a source of English exposure, including perceived usefulness, motivational impact, and differences from classroom-based learning. Qualitative responses were analyzed

thematically to identify recurring patterns related to engagement, perception, and vocabulary understanding.

Selection of Video Materials

Four inspirational YouTube Shorts were selected using purposeful sampling, which allows researchers to choose materials aligned with the objectives of the study (Tran & Bui, 2024).
The selection criteria included:

- short duration appropriate for adolescent viewing habits
- inspirational or motivational content likely to sustain engagement
- natural use of informal and pragmatic English
- an active comment section providing additional written language input

The selected videos were:

- Growth Feels Uncomfortable and That's the Point
  (27 seconds; 1,583 comments; last accessed: [09.03.2026])

- Empathy Beyond Success
  (48 seconds; ~10,000 comments; last accessed: [09.03.2026])

- Life Lessons from a Jar of Rocks
  (1 minute 5 seconds; ~22,000 comments; last accessed: [09.03.2026])

- Chasing Dreams Despite Everything
  (1 minute 1 second; 213 comments; last accessed: [09.03.2026])

Because online platforms are dynamic, videos were documented with their URLs, titles, duration, comment counts, and date accessed. This documentation ensures as much transparency as possible during the period of data collection, as comments and engagement metrics may change over time.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire link was distributed on 19 January 2026. Data collection remained open for approximately one and a half weeks to allow participants sufficient time to complete the task. Participants completed the questionnaire independently at a time of their choosing within the data collection period. The procedure followed these steps:

- Participants opened the Google Form.
- They completed background and media consumption questions.

- They accessed and watched the four YouTube Shorts.
- They were free to explore the comment sections if they chose to do so.
- They completed the vocabulary retention task.
- They answered reflective questions.
- Participation required access to a digital device and stable internet connection. Variations in viewing conditions or connectivity may have influenced engagement with the materials.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary, and students were informed of the purpose of the study.
Although Google Forms may display identifying information to the researcher, all responses were treated confidentially. No names or identifying details are included in the analysis or reported findings. Participants were free to discontinue participation at any time. Data is stored securely and used exclusively for academic research purposes. Because the study used publicly available YouTube content, no private digital data was accessed.

Methodological Limitations

As data collection occurred in an unsupervised online setting, participant attention and engagement could not be fully controlled. It cannot be assumed that all participants watched the videos with equal focus or engaged equally with comment sections.

Prior familiarity with some vocabulary items could not be controlled, which may have influenced retention results. Additionally, reliance on self-reported responses in certain sections may not fully reflect actual viewing behavior.

However, these conditions reflect authentic informal learning environments, aligning with the study's focus on incidental digital exposure outside structured classroom settings (Reinders & Benson, 2017).

Data Analysis Procedure

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, all questionnaire responses were read multiple times to identify recurring patterns in viewing frequency, motivation, strategy use, and comment engagement. Vocabulary task responses were analyzed comparatively. Answers were categorized as accurate, partially accurate, literal-only, or conceptually unrelated. Coding was carried out by the author; the final categorization was then reviewed by an English teacher pursuing a master's degree in TESOL at Webster University, Tashkent, to check consistency. Particular attention was paid to variation in depth of understanding, especially for metaphorical and socially positioned expressions. Although pragmatic competence was not the primary objective, differences in interpretive depth emerged as a relevant analytical dimension.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Informal Exposure and Learning Beyond School

The reported percentages exceed 100% because participants could select multiple sources of English exposure. Only 16.7% of respondents identified school as a primary source of English learning, suggesting that formal instruction is not the main input space. In contrast, 50% reported YouTube and social media and another 50% cited books, music, or podcasts as their principal sources of exposure. Exposure was also frequent, with 72.2% watching English YouTube content at least three times per week and 38.9% doing so daily. This pattern aligns with recent Uzbek research indicating similarly high levels of social media–based English exposure among adolescents (Sadikova, 2025) and demonstrates that English input predominantly occurs outside formal classrooms, supporting Nunan's (2003) observation that language development increasingly happens beyond classroom boundaries and Reinders and Benson's (2017) emphasis on learner autonomy and out-of-class engagement. However, frequency of exposure alone does not ensure depth of engagement. Interaction patterns reveal a clear gradient from passive to active participation: most learners limited themselves to watching content or reading comments, fewer reported repeating or saving language items, and only two engaged in direct interaction by replying to comments. This predominance of receptive engagement suggests that, although access to English input outside the classroom is high, the degree of learner agency varies considerably. In line with Nunan's (2003) framework of learner autonomy, these findings suggest that language learning increasingly extends beyond classroom boundaries, while higher levels of engagement appeared to be associated with stronger performance on the vocabulary retention task.

Motivation and Emotional Engagement

Participants' content preferences provide insight into the motivational context of informal language learning. As participants could select more than one content category, the reported percentages do not total 100%. When asked which types of English-language Shorts they usually watched, 66.7% of participants selected educational content, frequently alongside entertainment-oriented content, such as pop culture/fandom/trends. This suggests that learning is intertwined with emotional engagement rather than driven solely by academic intention. Participants do not approach Shorts as structured lessons; instead, language learning emerges as a by-product of engaging content. For example, when asked whether they had ever learned a word unintentionally, 8 responded "Yes," 8 responded "Not sure," and only 2 responded "No." The high number of "Not sure" responses indicates limited metacognitive awareness of incidental acquisition. Vocabulary learning appears to occur implicitly. These findings support incidental learning theory, which posits that vocabulary can be acquired through meaningful exposure without deliberate memorization. Furthermore, the emotional tone of inspirational content may increase attention and salience, supporting retention, which aligns with research showing that emotionally arousing content enhances attentional processing and memory consolidation (Tyng et al., 2017). However,

emotional engagement does not automatically produce precise understanding, as shown in the vocabulary task results.

Viewing Behavior and Processing Depth

Viewing patterns provide insight into cognitive processing. Fourteen out of eighteen participants watched each Short only once. Three watched twice, and only one watched more than twice. This dominant single-view behavior suggests rapid processing. When combined with strategy data, the pattern becomes clearer. Because participants could select more than one vocabulary-learning strategy, the reported frequencies exceed the number of participants. Fifteen participants reported relying on contextual guessing, seven reported writing down new words, one reported using translation, and two reported ignoring unfamiliar vocabulary. The prevalence of inferential guessing indicates that vocabulary processing remains largely intuitive rather than deliberate.

This behavioral pattern becomes significant when examined alongside vocabulary performance. Words requiring straightforward semantic interpretation were more consistently understood, whereas metaphorical or identity-based expressions showed greater variability and misunderstanding. For instance, the phrasal verb “to quit” was interpreted relatively consistently, with participants defining it as “to stop doing something” or “to leave a job or activity.” In contrast, figurative or evaluative expressions produced more diverse responses. The idiomatic phrase “to have a golden soul” was generally understood as describing a very kind or selfless person, yet several responses reduced the meaning to broad descriptions such as simply “good person,” suggesting partial semantic approximation rather than precise interpretation. Similarly, the informal expression “it’s wild” generated substantial variation: while some participants recognized it as meaning “crazy” or “shocking,” others interpreted it literally as something “dangerous” or “living in nature,” reflecting reliance on surface lexical associations. These patterns indicate that while learners can often grasp the general evaluative tone of expressions during rapid viewing, figurative or culturally embedded meanings remain less stable. Thus, short-form content appears to promote exposure and recognition, but not necessarily reflective consolidation. Processing prioritizes immediacy and emotional comprehension over analytical semantic unpacking.

Impact of Inspirational Videos on Vocabulary Learning

The data analysis shows that the inspirational nature of videos has to some extent shaped how some participants engaged with vocabulary. Although responses to incidental learning were evenly divided (8 participants reported learning words unintentionally, 8 did not, and 2 were unsure), several explanations indicate that emotional relevance supported lexical noticing. For instance, one participant described gradually understanding the word awkward while watching a series, explaining that repeated exposure within meaningful situations allowed the meaning to become clear without deliberate study. Others explicitly linked recall to emotional resonance, noting that words describing powerful experiences were easier to remember; expressions such as "life-changing" or "to be humbled" stood out when they appeared in personal or inspirational stories. Participants also described the videos as "relatable," "encouraging," or "motivational," suggesting that attention was directed not only to the message but also to the language used to express it. This pattern supports Park and Jung's (2016) argument that video content can enhance learner motivation and engagement, reflecting broader findings that motivation facilitates learning persistence (Mendoza et al., 2025, p. 1162; Fong et al., 2024, p. 1003). At the same time, responses were not uniform: several participants reported preferring vocabulary learning through books or stated that emotional context did not significantly influence their memory. This variation suggests that while inspirational content can promote incidental vocabulary noticing by linking language to personal experiences and aspirations, its effectiveness remains dependent on individual learning preferences.

Vocabulary Task

Eight expressions were analyzed. Four are discussed in detail because they most clearly represent variation in comprehension depth.

"life-changing"

Although "life-changing" appeared structurally transparent, responses revealed both accurate understanding and conceptual drift. One participant defined it as "something that has a very big effect on your life or makes you see things differently," and provided the example: "Traveling alone for the first time was life-changing for me because it made me more independent and confident." This demonstrates not only semantic accuracy but also contextual integration and personal application. However, other responses such as "globalization" and "have a break" suggest associative rather than contextual processing. These answers are not semantically aligned with transformation; instead, they appear to reflect loose conceptual associations triggered by keywords like "life" or "change." This indicates that when learners rely primarily on rapid contextual guessing (as 15 reported), comprehension may become approximate rather than precise. In other words, exposure facilitates familiarity with evaluative tone, but does not always ensure stable semantic boundaries.

"goosebumps"

Participants demonstrated a strong understanding of "goosebumps." Most defined it correctly as a physical skin reaction caused by cold or strong emotions. One participant added a personal example: "While hearing powerful songs, for example, BTS of my favorite band." This response clearly shows awareness that the word is linked to emotional intensity, not just temperature.

Importantly, this word appeared in the comment section rather than the main video. The fact that students accurately understood and contextualized it suggests that exposure through comments can effectively support acquisition of emotionally expressive vocabulary. In this case, the meaning was not distorted or reduced — it was understood and applied appropriately. This indicates that emotionally vivid and frequently used expressions may be retained reliably even under incidental exposure conditions.

"to be humbled"

Responses to "to be humbled" showed more variation. Some participants associated the expression with embarrassment or humiliation, describing situations in which students are "humiliated and insulted… like bullying." In contrast, other responses reflected the intended meaning more accurately, defining it as realizing that one is "not better than others" and therefore becoming less proud. A few interpretations diverged even further, reducing the expression to ideas such as simply "giving up." These differences suggest that learners often relied on broad emotional associations rather than precise conceptual interpretation. Unlike "goosebumps," which refers to a concrete physical reaction, "to be humbled" requires interpreting an internal psychological shift—recognizing one's limitations and accepting vulnerability as part of personal growth. This indicates that abstract self-development language may be more difficult to interpret accurately under single-view, rapid processing conditions.

"to have no voice"

Participants' responses to "to have no voice" revealed both understanding and partial misinterpretation, highlighting challenges in incidental learning of abstract expressions. Some learners accurately captured situational powerlessness, for example: "When a group of friends is deciding where to go and they don't even ask you, just telling you where to be." Others showed personal engagement with the concept, reflecting attempts to relate it to themselves, as in: "I felt like I had no voice during a group discussion when others kept interrupting me and I couldn't explain my ideas." In contrast, some combined literal and metaphorical interpretations, for instance: "The meaning varies though but I understand as inaudible. It means sometimes people do not hear each other on screamings or video chats because of poor connection." These patterns suggest that under rapid viewing conditions, immediate lexical associations ('voice' = sound production) are cognitively easier than inferring metaphorical meaning, which requires integrating broader discourse cues.

Role of Comments as Secondary Input

Participants' engagement with YouTube comment sections demonstrates how authentic written input can serve as a supplementary source for vocabulary and pragmatic learning. Eleven participants reported reading comments only sometimes, two read them often, and five never engaged with them, indicating that most learners interacted with comments intermittently rather than consistently. Even with this moderate engagement, learners reported several purposes for engaging with comment sections. As multiple purposes could be selected, they used comments to "understand the topic better" (10) or "see what others think" (8), and many inferred the meaning of new words from context (13) or saved expressions for later (6). These findings suggest that participants viewed comment sections not merely as spaces for social interaction but also as an additional source of language input. This interpretation is further supported by responses to a separate questionnaire item asking what helped participants remember new words better. Twelve participants identified encountering vocabulary in both videos and comment sections, three identified videos alone, while the remaining three attributed vocabulary retention to individual factors, including one participant who explained it by being naturally good at remembering words. Together, these findings suggest that participants generally associated vocabulary retention with encountering language across multiple contexts while acknowledging individual differences in how vocabulary is retained. This interpretation is consistent with Nunan (2003) as well as Reinders and Benson (2017), who emphasize the role of authentic written interaction in extending learning beyond audiovisual input, and with multimedia learning theory, which suggests that learning may be strengthened when information is encountered through complementary channels rather than a single source (Mayer, 2009, 2014).

Unexpected Findings

Not all participants demonstrated strong vocabulary gains. Some ignored unfamiliar words, and some rarely engaged with comments. Additionally, weaker students tended to provide more literal or approximate interpretations, suggesting that prior proficiency mediates incidental acquisition. The presence of conceptually unrelated answers (e.g., "globalization" for "life-changing") indicates that contextual guessing may produce overgeneralization rather than stable learning. These findings complicate the assumption that exposure alone ensures vocabulary development.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size (n = 18) and the use of only four YouTube Shorts limited the range of vocabulary exposure and may have reduced the diversity of participant responses, particularly for more abstract expressions. Additionally, the sample was skewed toward higher-proficiency learners (10 fluent, 7 upper-intermediate, and 1 intermediate participant), with no students below intermediate level represented. The comprehension findings may therefore not generalize to lower-proficiency learners, who may rely on different strategies when encountering

unfamiliar vocabulary in video content. Future studies with larger, more proficiency-diverse samples and a wider selection of videos could provide a broader perspective on vocabulary development in short-form digital environments.

Second, some data relied on self-reported questionnaire responses, which may not fully reflect actual viewing behavior. Participants may have over- or under-estimated their engagement with videos and comment sections. In addition, it cannot be ruled out that some learners rewatched videos or searched for word meanings independently. While this complicates the interpretation of learning as purely incidental, such behavior also reflects authentic language learning practices in informal digital settings.

A further limitation resulted from the accidental removal of one questionnaire item asking how participants usually respond to unfamiliar words while watching videos. Because this omission was noticed only after data collection had been completed, the study lacks systematic information about learners' immediate vocabulary-processing strategies during viewing.

Finally, pragmatic awareness was inferred from participants' interpretations rather than measured through dedicated assessment tasks. As a result, conclusions about learners' understanding of informal and idiomatic expressions remain indicative rather than definitive.

Despite these limitations, the study provides useful exploratory insights into how adolescents engage with vocabulary in short-form video environments. By examining both YouTube Shorts and comment sections as sources of input, the findings highlight the potential of short-form digital media to support informal vocabulary exposure among Uzbek EFL learners.

Implication of the analysis results

The findings indicate that inspirational YouTube Shorts serve as a significant source of incidental lexical exposure for adolescent learners. Emotional engagement appears to enhance attention and salience, supporting recognition of high frequency and evaluative vocabulary. Comments occasionally provide clarifying reinforcement. However, acquisition depth is uneven. While learners demonstrate familiarity with concrete and emotionally transparent expressions such as "goosebumps" and mostly understand emotional terms like "discomfort", metaphorical and identity-based phrases reveal semantic approximation and pragmatic instability. For instance, "to be humbled" was sometimes interpreted as humiliation or general modesty rather than as a situational recognition of one's limitations, and "to have no voice" was occasionally understood literally, referring to inaudibility in video calls, instead of metaphorically as lacking agency in social context. The dominance of single-view consumption and contextual guessing suggests that exposure promotes rapid recognition more than reflective consolidation.

Therefore, short-form inspirational media contributes meaningfully to informal vocabulary exposure, but the precision and stability of lexical understanding depend on learner strategies, existing proficiency, and the level of abstraction embedded in the expression.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how watching inspirational English YouTube Shorts and engaging with their comment sections contributes to vocabulary development among 15–16-year-old learners in Uzbekistan. Drawing on questionnaire responses, a vocabulary task, and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the findings provide a nuanced answer to the research question.

First, the results demonstrate that YouTube Shorts function as meaningful sources of informal lexical exposure. The majority of participants reported frequent engagement with English YouTube content, often outside formal educational contexts. For many students, learning occurred incidentally while consuming emotionally engaging material. The vocabulary task confirmed that exposure was not merely perceived but measurable: participants were able to define and apply several expressions appropriately. This supports the claim that short-form digital media can contribute to vocabulary recognition and retention beyond the classroom.

Second, emotional and motivational themes appeared to increase attention and engagement. Most participants reported watching content for both entertainment and learning purposes, suggesting that affective involvement plays a central role in sustaining exposure. Expressions such as “goosebumps” were accurately understood and even contextualized through personal examples, indicating that emotionally vivid vocabulary may be particularly salient. However, the findings also revealed variation in interpretive depth. Abstract or self-development expressions such as “to be humbled” showed greater misunderstanding, suggesting that while short-form content supports exposure, it does not always guarantee nuanced comprehension. Thus, acquisition under incidental conditions appears uneven and influenced by the level of abstraction embedded in the expression. Third, the comment sections functioned as secondary sites of input. Although students did not primarily engage with comments for vocabulary learning, many reported that comments helped clarify meaning. The accurate understanding of “goosebumps,” which appeared in comments rather than the main video, suggests that written interaction can reinforce lexical acquisition. This highlights the importance of multimodal exposure: audiovisual input combined with textual reinforcement may strengthen comprehension.

Overall, this study positions short, inspirational YouTube Shorts and their comment sections not as passive entertainment, but as meaningful sites of language exposure. At the same time, the findings indicate that the depth and stability of acquisition depend on learner strategies, prior proficiency, and the cognitive demands of the expression itself. Exposure facilitates familiarity and recognition; deeper semantic precision may require more deliberate engagement.

This study contributes to existing research in several ways. It expands the discussion of informal digital

learning by focusing specifically on YouTube Shorts, a format that has received limited scholarly attention compared to longer-form content. It provides insight into the Uzbek adolescent context, which remains underrepresented in research on digital language learning. Furthermore, by integrating questionnaires with a vocabulary task rather than relying solely on self-report data, the study captures both perceived and demonstrated learning. The inclusion of metaphorical and informal expressions adds depth to understanding how learners process emotionally charged language outside formal instruction.
The findings carry practical implications. Teachers may consider recommending carefully selected motivational Shorts as supplementary exposure materials, particularly for reinforcing high frequency and emotionally salient vocabulary. Educators can also encourage students to engage more actively with comment sections as informal reading practice. Schools may benefit from incorporating digital literacy guidance, helping learners move from passive viewing to more reflective engagement, such as rewatching, note-taking, or verifying meanings.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was small, limiting generalizability. Data relied partly on self-report measures, which may not fully capture actual behavior. Only four videos were used, and participants may have rewatched or searched meanings independently. Additionally, one questionnaire item regarding strategy use in comment sections was unintentionally deleted, restricting insight into comment-based learning behavior.

Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, include additional video genres, and examine other age groups. Comparative studies across platforms could also provide insight into whether similar patterns emerge in different digital environments. Longitudinal designs would help determine whether vocabulary acquired incidentally through Shorts remains stable over time.

In conclusion, while inspirational YouTube Shorts cannot replace structured instruction, they represent a significant and dynamic source of informal vocabulary exposure for adolescent learners. When combined with emotional engagement and multimodal input, short-form digital content holds potential as a supplementary tool in contemporary language development.

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