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Understanding TikTok Use by Arabic Language Education Students for Informal Learning: A Phenomenological Uses and Gratifications Study

فهم استخدام تيك توك لدى طلبة تعليم اللغة العربية في التعلّم غير الرسمي: دراسة ظاهراتية في ضوء نظرية الاستخدامات والإشباعات

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how Arabic Language Education students experience TikTok as an informal learning ecology and how these experiences satisfy cognitive, affective, personal-integrative, and social-integrative needs. Using an interpretive phenomenological design, the study involved twelve Arabic Language Education students at Universitas Sains Al-Qur'an (UNSIQ) Jawa Tengah di Wonosobo and drew on semi-structured interviews conducted in July 2026. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to construct patterns of shared meaning, while Uses and Gratifications (U&G) served as a sensitizing theoretical lens rather than a fixed coding framework. Findings reveal two interconnected modes of use: intentional searches driven by assignments, microteaching, vocabulary, pronunciation, and difficult course content, and serendipitous exposure through the For You Page. All twelve participants reported academic use, enjoyment, increased confidence, perceived oral-language benefits, support for recall or understanding, and distraction or time loss; eleven described sharing or collaboration, ten emphasized concise delivery and verification practices, and seven reported limited engagement with colloquial Arabic. The study's novelty is an algorithmic microlearning cycle linking learning triggers, platform affordances, gratifications, perceived outcomes, follow-up actions, and constraining conditions. Theoretically, the model extends U&G by showing that gratification is recursively co-produced by user agency and algorithmic recommendation and does not automatically become learning. Practically, the findings support guided curation, credibility checking, dialect labeling, purposeful reuse, and attention-regulation activities in Arabic teacher education.

Keywords: TikTok; informal learning; Arabic language education; uses and gratifications; phenomenology; microlearning.

مستخلص البحث

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تفسير خبرات طلبة تعليم اللغة العربية في استخدام تيك توك بوصفه بيئة للتعلّم غير الرسمي، وكيف تسهم هذه الخبرات في إشباع الحاجات المعرفية والوجدانية والتكامل الشخصي والاجتماعي. اعتمدت الدراسة تصميماً ظاهراتياً تفسيرياً، وشاركت فيها اثنا عشر طالباً من برنامج تعليم اللغة العربية في جامعة علوم القرآن (UNSIQ) بونوسوبو، وجُمعت البيانات من خلال مقابلات شبه منظّمة أُجريت في يوليو ٢٠٢٦. واستُخدم التحليل الموضوعاتي التأملي لبناء أنماط المعنى المشتركة، بينما استُخدمت نظرية الاستخدامات والإشباعات بوصفها عدسة نظرية حساسة لا إطار ترميز مغلقاً. كشفت النتائج عن نمطين مترابطين للاستخدام: البحث المقصود بدافع الواجبات والتدريس المصغر والمفردات والنطق والموضوعات الصعبة، والتعرّض العرضي للمحتوى عبر صفحة «لك». أفاد جميع المشاركين بالاستخدام الأكاديمي والمتعة وزيادة الثقة والفائدة المدركة للمهارات الشفوية والمساعدة على التذكّر أو الفهم، إلى جانب التشتت أو فقدان الوقت؛ وذكر أحد عشر مشاركاً المشاركة أو التعاون، وأكد عشرة قيمة الإيجاز وممارسات التحقق، وأشار سبعة إلى محدودية التعرّض للعامية. وتتمثل جدة الدراسة في نموذج «دورة التعلّم المصغر الخوارزمية» الذي يربط محفزات التعلّم وخصائص المنصة والإشباعات والنتائج المدركة والإجراءات اللاحقة والظروف المقيّدة. ونظرياً، يوسّع النموذج نظرية الاستخدامات والإشباعات بإظهار التفاعل التكراري بين فاعلية المستخدم والتوصيات الخوارزمية، وأن الإشباع لا يتحول

تلقائياً إلى تعلم. وعملياً، تدعم النتائج الانتقاء الموجّه، والتحقق من المصداقية، ووسم التنوع اللهجي، وإعادة الاستخدام الهادف، وتنظيم الانتباه في إعداد معلمي اللغة العربية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تيك توك؛ التعلّم غير الرسمي؛ تعليم اللغة العربية؛ الاستخدامات والإشباعات؛ الظاهراتية؛ التعلّم المصغر.

INTRODUCTION

The development of short-video platforms has reshaped the boundaries among entertainment, communication, and learning. Students increasingly build personal learning pathways through social-media search, sharing, discussion, and peer exchange beyond formal learning management systems (Chawinga, 2017; Cooke, 2017; Manca & Ranieri, 2016; Smith, 2016, 2017). TikTok is central to this shift because it combines short duration, easy replay, strong audiovisual presentation, cultural trends, and a personalized For You Page (FYP). In higher education, these affordances can lower the entry barrier to learning concepts, stimulate curiosity, and broaden access to examples of practice. However, the same design can redirect attention from academic goals toward prolonged consumption and fragmented engagement with information. The highly condensed and fragmented nature of short-form video content may also contribute to an "illusion of understanding," whereby learners may perceive that they have understood information while their actual understanding remains partial or superficial. This concern is particularly relevant in second-language vocabulary learning, where repeated exposure to short-form content may support vocabulary acquisition but does not necessarily ensure structured or comprehensive learning. Alharthy (2025), for instance, highlights both the potential benefits of TikTok for second-language vocabulary acquisition and challenges related to distraction, content accuracy, informal language use, and the lack of structured learning. TikTok should therefore be understood not merely as a supporting tool, but as a media environment that structures what users see, when they stop, and how they assess content usefulness (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Conde-Caballero et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2025).

Recent scholarship shows that TikTok has been used in diverse higher-education contexts for microlearning, active learning, professional connection, science communication, and informal learning. Short videos can make explanations concise and replayable, while music, on-screen text, demonstrations, and peer examples can increase engagement. Studies also report benefits for motivation, participation, understanding, and digital skills, although outcomes depend on task design, clarity of purpose, source

quality, and self-regulation (Al-Azawei & Alowayr, 2025; Conde-Caballero et al., 2024; Deng & Yu, 2023; Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021; López-Carril et al., 2026; Nguyen & Diederich, 2023; Radin & Light, 2022; Rahimullah et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2025). However, the fragmented and highly condensed nature of short-form video content may also create an "illusion of understanding," whereby learners may perceive that they have understood information while their actual understanding remains partial or superficial. This risk is particularly relevant to foreign-language vocabulary learning, where repeated exposure to short-form content may facilitate vocabulary acquisition but does not necessarily ensure structured or comprehensive learning. Alharthy (2025), for example, highlights both the potential benefits of TikTok for second-language vocabulary acquisition and challenges related to distraction, content accuracy, informal language use, and the lack of structured learning. Thus, the engagement and accessibility offered by short-form videos should not necessarily be equated with deep learning, particularly when learners are not guided to contextualize, reflect on, and actively apply the information presented. This literature shifts the question from whether TikTok can be used for learning to how users transform an entertainment platform into a learning resource and under what conditions that transformation produces educational value.

In language learning, social media expands opportunities to hear language forms, imitate pronunciation, acquire vocabulary, observe contexts of use, and participate beyond the classroom. In Arabic digital spaces, these opportunities also expose learners to the sociolinguistic dynamics between fuṣḥā (Modern Standard Arabic) and ʿāmmiyyah (dialectal Arabic), as digital communication may involve different varieties of Arabic depending on the context and users (Damanhouri, 2025). This potential is particularly relevant to Arabic Language Education students because they are both learners and prospective teachers. They need to master language skills (mahārah) while also seeking models for presenting material, icebreakers, songs, dialogues, and enjoyable classroom practices. Research on technology-supported Arabic learning has documented opportunities for innovation and variation in instruction (Bustam et al., 2024), while Indonesian studies show that TikTok and digital video can support vocabulary, listening, interest, and learning variation (Amzaludin et al., 2023; Ilmiani & Miolo, 2021; Saputra et al., 2023; Umroh et al., 2024). Short-video work in foreign-language learning similarly suggests value for oral practice (Pérez-Sabater et al., 2023). Content analysis of Arabic TikTok also indicates strengths in basic receptive and productive activities, although

interaction, mediation, grammatical accuracy, and material sequencing are not always adequate (Dewi et al., 2025).

Although research on TikTok and Arabic has grown, most studies focus on media effectiveness, account analysis, video development, or the formal integration of TikTok into instruction. Knowledge of students' lived experiences when using TikTok independently remains limited. Few studies explain how academic needs, boredom, assignment pressure, identity as a future teacher, the FYP algorithm, and sharing practices interact within informal learning experiences. This gap matters because actual use does not always follow instructors' designs. Students may open TikTok with a specific purpose, be drawn into other content, encounter an educational video by chance, save an idea for microteaching, and then verify its content through a dictionary, an instructor, or another source. In other words, learning benefits arise from negotiation between user agency and platform architecture, not merely from the presence of educational content.

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory provides an appropriate framework for examining this negotiation. It views users as relatively active actors who select media to satisfy particular needs, such as obtaining information, seeking entertainment, reinforcing identity, building social relationships, and relieving tension (Katz et al., 1973; Ruggiero, 2000). In digital environments, user choice is shaped by affordances, interactivity, mobility, personalization, and algorithms. Ruggiero (2000) further emphasizes interactivity and asynchronicity as important dimensions of U&G in contemporary media environments. On TikTok, asynchronous access allows students to encounter, replay, save, and return to learning content according to their own time and needs, while algorithmic recommendations can continuously expose them to related content beyond their initial learning intention. This process can facilitate incidental learning, in which learning occurs as a by-product of activities not initially undertaken with an explicit learning purpose (Ghosh & Figueroa, 2023). Sundar and Limperos (2013) argue that technological features can generate new gratifications, while TikTok studies identify motivations such as browsing, enjoyment, community, self-expression, and practical purposes (Deng et al., 2024; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2025). Through U&G, TikTok use for Arabic learning can therefore be analyzed as a relationship among students'

needs, platform features, asynchronous and algorithmic consumption practices, incidental learning, and perceived outcomes.

A phenomenological approach complements U&G by focusing on the meaning of experience from participants' perspectives. Rather than measuring attitudes through standardized scales, it explores when TikTok is considered useful, which content feels understandable or relevant, how confidence emerges, and when learning turns into distraction. Phenomenological analysis also accommodates ambivalence: the same platform may be enjoyable and exhausting, support recall yet remain superficial, or broaden inspiration without guaranteeing accuracy. Such ambivalence is treated as a feature of informal learning in commercial and algorithmic spaces rather than as inconsistency in the data (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The novelty of this study lies in three areas. First, it positions Arabic Language Education students as both learners and prospective teachers, so the gratifications they seek relate not only to language competence but also to professional identity and pedagogical repertoire. Second, it identifies two modes of use: searching driven by needs and serendipitous exposure through the FYP. Third, it develops an "algorithmic microlearning cycle" that connects usage triggers, TikTok affordances, gratifications, learning outcomes, and constraining conditions. The model explains why the same video may become a meaningful learning resource in one situation but function only as entertainment or distraction in another.

Against this background, the study addresses three questions: (1) how do Arabic Language Education students experience and interpret TikTok use for informal learning; (2) what gratifications do they obtain from this use; and (3) what factors strengthen or limit TikTok's benefits for Arabic learning and their development as prospective teachers? The aim is to produce a detailed contextual explanation while offering practical implications for instructors, students, and creators of educational content for Arabic.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used an interpretive phenomenological design as its methodological orientation, with participants narrated lived experience as the primary object of inquiry rather than causal effects or population prevalence (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was used as the analytic method for developing patterns of shared meaning across cases (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Uses and

Gratifications (U&G) functioned as a sensitizing theoretical lens: cognitive, affective, personal-integrative, social-integrative, and tension-release concepts guided attention to the data without operating as a closed or deterministic coding frame (Ruggiero, 2000). This hierarchy clearly separates the phenomenological research design, the thematic analytic procedure, and the theoretical lens, while allowing inductive patterns related to TikTok affordances, Arabic-language learning, credibility, and attention regulation to emerge from participants' accounts.

The study was conducted in the Arabic Language Education Program at Universitas Sains Al-Qur'an (UNSIQ) Jawa Tengah di Wonosobo, Wonosobo, Central Java, Indonesia. Data collection took place in July 2026. Twelve Arabic Language Education students were included through criterion-based purposive sampling. Eligible participants were active students who used TikTok and had experience searching for, encountering, or using Arabic-language or Arabic-teaching content outside formal classroom instruction. Recruitment was conducted through direct invitations within the student academic network, and participation was voluntary. The twelve participants were anonymized as P1-P12. Their accounts represented varied patterns of use, ranging from occasional task-driven searching to several hours of daily TikTok engagement.

Before each interview, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the use of anonymized quotations, and the confidential handling of their responses. Informed consent was obtained before the interview proceeded. Participants' personal names were removed from the analytic dataset and replaced with participant codes. The study involved non-invasive educational interviews and did not collect clinical or sensitive health information. Ethical safeguards therefore centered on respect for participants, voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, minimization of identification risks, and secure handling of anonymized transcripts. The study did not obtain a formal institutional ethics approval before data collection; therefore, no approval number is reported. The procedures were nevertheless conducted in accordance with established principles of respect for persons, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and protection of participant privacy.

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews covering participants' histories of TikTok use, viewing habits, routes for finding Arabic content, reasons for

selecting the platform, emotional experiences, confidence, relationships with fuṣḥā and ʿāmmiyyah, sharing practices, memorable moments of understanding, perceived skill development, credibility assessment, constraints, and the overall meaning of the platform. The interview guide also elicited concrete examples involving assignments, microteaching, teaching practice, balāghah, naḥw, mufradāt, conversations, songs, vlogs, podcasts, and group tasks. Interviews were conducted individually in a conversational format so that common prompts could be followed by probes when participants introduced relevant experiences. Transcripts were treated as accounts of lived experience; statements about improvement were interpreted as perceived outcomes rather than as tested gains in proficiency.

Analysis followed the six recursive phases of reflexive thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, initial coding, development of candidate patterns, review of themes, theme definition and naming, and interpretive writing (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Coding combined U&G-informed sensitizing concepts with inductive labels derived from participants' accounts, including 'searching according to need,' 'FYP after searching,' 'short and replayable video,' 'teaching reference,' 'recall,' 'kalām/istimāʿ,' 'source checking,' 'dominant fuṣḥā,' and 'losing track of time.' The researchers treated interpretation as a reflexive process in which their familiarity with Arabic language education and digital learning contexts could shape attention to particular meanings. Rather than treating this background as a source of neutrality, the researchers used reflexive discussion and repeated comparison between codes, participant accounts, and emerging themes to examine how their assumptions influenced interpretation. Codes were compared across all twelve cases, divergent instances were retained, and broader themes were refined. P9, for example, described TikTok as 'ordinary' but highly useful when ideas ran out; retaining such cases prevented an artificially uniform enthusiasm narrative.

Selected codes were counted only to make their distribution across the twelve cases transparent. A participant was counted once for a code even when the same pattern appeared repeatedly; percentages therefore indicate case presence rather than intensity, effect size, or population prevalence. No intercoder-reliability coefficient was calculated because the analysis was reflexive rather than reliability-oriented. Analytic quality was supported through an audit trail of coding decisions, explicit links between themes and quotations, examination of divergent cases, and consistency checks among participant

profiles, the code-distribution table, and thematic interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The final interpretation integrated three analytically distinct layers: phenomenological accounts of experience, U&G sensitizing concepts, and TikTok-specific affordances.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Summary Profile of TikTok Use among the Twelve Participants

Participant	Dominant pathway	Main content	Perceived benefits	Limits/risks
P1	FYP + microteaching	Vocabulary, vlogs, icebreakers	Listening, speaking, motivation	Time loss; limited ʿāmmiyyah exposure
P2	Search by need	Conversations, songs, balāghah	Listening, speaking, teaching ideas	Diverted to other content
P3	Assignments + FYP after searching	Conversations, methods, vocabulary songs	Speaking, understanding	Signal issues; weak verification
P4	Search for microteaching	Icebreakers, songs, teacher models	Speaking, teaching readiness	Task delay; accuracy concerns
P5	Search + multiple platforms	Conversations, oral content	Speaking, recall	Distraction; more ʿāmmiyyah on Instagram
P6	Tutorial needs	Vlogs, fuṣḥā, methods	Motivation, language practice	Shift to entertainment
P7	FYP and search	Vlogs, naḥw, methods for children	Speaking, teaching ideas	Drifting away from the search
P8	Teaching practice	Vocabulary, pronunciation, speaking	Confidence, recall	Scrolling until losing track of time
P9	Assignments, ideas, and FYP	Visual balāghah, songs, films	Speaking, inspiration	Boredom; variable accuracy
P10	Assignments + FYP after searching	Conversations, vocabulary, songs, teacher models	Listening, speaking, expressions in context	Distraction; explanations too brief
P11	Material search	Naḥw, ṣarf,	Reading,	Illusion of

Participant	Dominant pathway	Main content	Perceived benefits	Limits/risks
	and review	balāghah, iʿrāb	grammar, confidence	understanding; inconsistent terminology
P12	Search + spontaneous exposure	Vlogs, ḥiwār, fuṣḥā and ʿāmmiyyah	Listening, speaking, authentic context	Distraction; dialect variation

Source: Analysis of twelve interview transcripts.

Table 2. Descriptive Distribution of Main Codes (n = 12)

Code	Cases	Percentage	Operational indicator
Intentional academic use	12/12	100.0%	Searching for assignments, microteaching, teaching practice, or language material
Affective enjoyment/engagement	12/12	100.0%	Content is considered engaging, relaxed, entertaining, or not boring
Confidence/future teacher identity	12/12	100.0%	Feeling more prepared or motivated, or gaining teacher models
Benefits for oral skills	12/12	100.0%	Kalām and/or istimāʿ are reported as improved or supported
Recalling or understanding material	12/12	100.0%	Content supports recall or clarifies material
Sharing/collaboration	11/12	91.7%	Sending, discussing, or using videos for collaborative assignments
Concise/direct format	10/12	83.3%	Brief duration, replayability, and direct explanation
Verification practices	10/12	83.3%	Comparing with dictionaries, instructors, experts, other sources, or creator profiles
Distraction/time loss	12/12	100.0%	Scrolling, delay, shifts in attention, or boredom
Limited ʿāmmiyyah exposure	7/12	58.3%	Content is dominated by fuṣḥā or does not sufficiently connect with ʿāmmiyyah

Note: Percentages indicate the presence of a code in each case, not inferential statistics or measures of intensity.

Findings Framework 1. Usage Pathways and Learning Responses

TRIGGERS Assignments, microteaching, difficult material, or leisure time	→	**TIKTOK PRACTICES** Search, FYP, replay, save, and share	→	**LEARNING RESPONSES** Recall, oral skills, confidence, and teaching ideas

Findings Framework 2. Uses and Gratifications Mapping

COGNITIVE — 12/12 **Information, repetition, recall, vocabulary, and problem solving**	**AFFECTIVE — 12/12** **Engaging, relaxed, entertaining, and reducing the sense that learning is burdensome**
PERSONAL INTEGRATION — 12/12 Confidence, motivation, and future teacher identity	SOCIAL INTEGRATION — 11/12 Link sharing, discussion, negotiation, and adaptation of group assignments

Findings Framework 3. Supporting and Inhibiting Factors

SUPPORTING FACTORS • Concise/direct format: 10/12 (83.3%) • Audio, subtitles, visuals, and replay • Alignment with assignments and teaching practice • Support from peers, instructors, dictionaries, and other sources	INHIBITING FACTORS • Distraction/time loss: 12/12 (100.0%) • Verification remains necessary: 10/12 (83.3%) • Limited ʿāmmiyyah exposure: 7/12 (58.3%) • Concise material may create an illusion of understanding

Source: Thematic synthesis of twelve interview transcripts.

Usage Profiles and the Two Modes of Use

The twelve participants used TikTok through a combination of two pathways. The first was intentional searching when they faced an assignment, microteaching, teaching practice, a need to review balāghah or naḥw, or a desire to find vocabulary and dialogues. The second was algorithmic exposure when Arabic-language content appeared on the FYP, often after previous searches. P2 summarized this connection by explaining that searching first was followed by similar content appearing on the FYP. P9 likewise distinguished deliberate use because of an assignment from unplanned encounters with interesting videos. P10 described a similar sequence in which intentional searching for microteaching material was followed by related FYP recommendations; P11 used TikTok more selectively for grammar and review; and P12 moved between deliberate searches and spontaneous exposure to vlogs and dialogues. This pattern shows that agency and algorithms do not operate as opposites: searching creates a preference trail, the algorithm extends exposure, and new exposure can generate subsequent needs.

All participants provided evidence of intentional academic use. Their purposes, however, were highly practical and situational. TikTok was opened not as a substitute for a complete curriculum, but as a rapid resource when a problem needed to be solved: how to begin a lesson in Arabic, create an icebreaker, pronounce an expression, prepare a muḥādathah video, remember the Hijri months, or understand divisions within balāghah. P4 described TikTok as "a preparation reference" before microteaching, while P8 used it before teaching practice. This use reflects the characteristics of informal digital learning: it is driven by needs, fragmented, flexible, and integrated into daily activity rather than organized as a sequence of formal courses.

The code-distribution table shows that intentional academic use, enjoyment, increased confidence, perceived benefits for oral skills, support for recall or understanding, and distraction appeared in all twelve cases. Eleven participants described sharing or collaboration; ten explicitly emphasized the concise or direct format; ten described some form of verification; and seven reported limited exposure to ʿāmmiyyah. This limited exposure may reflect the sociolinguistic dynamics of Arabic in digital spaces, where users' language choices are shaped by context, audience, and prevailing digital communication practices (Damanhouri, 2025). In TikTok's algorithmic environment, repeated viewing, searching, and interaction may also reinforce particular types of content, potentially making learners more likely to encounter the language variety represented in their existing viewing patterns. Thus, the limited exposure to ʿāmmiyyah may not simply reflect learners' preferences but may also be related to the interaction between their search behavior, content availability, and algorithmic recommendations. Uniformity in several codes does not imply identical experiences. P1 often encountered content by chance, whereas P2 relied more heavily on searching; P9 did not regard TikTok as a priority but used it when 'stuck'; P11 was more selective and used short videos primarily for review; and P12 valued spontaneous exposure to contextual language while remaining aware of dialect variation. These differences reinforce the interpretation of TikTok as an opportunistic resource whose value changes with context.

Cognitive Gratifications: Microlearning, Recall, and Teaching Repertoires

Cognitive gratifications were most evident in information seeking and problem solving. Participants used videos to acquire mufradāt, improve pronunciation, listen to

conversations, review naḥw and balāghah, and observe how teachers teach. P2 liked videos that were "short, so they can be replayed," while P4 considered TikTok explanations "straight to the point" and not overly complex in language. This concise format helped participants isolate a single unit of knowledge, replay it, and apply it immediately. The finding is consistent with microlearning, which emphasizes small units, timely access, and repeated processing, but it also shows that the value of microlearning comes from the fit between content size and the user's task rather than from short duration alone (Conde-Caballero et al., 2024; De Gagne et al., 2019). Rather than constituting an entirely new form of learning, this pattern can be understood as an extension of informal learning that combines self-directed and incidental learning. The proposed "Algorithmic Microlearning Cycle" therefore conceptualizes how learners' intentional searches can intersect with algorithmically recommended content, creating opportunities for both deliberate and incidental learning through short, replayable units.

All participants described TikTok as a cue for recall or understanding. Examples included previously difficult balāghah material, easily forgotten naḥw, songs naming the Hijri months, and vocabulary needed for teaching. P9 explained that visual illustrations made balāghah material that had not been understood in class easier to comprehend, while P1 said the content made things easier to remember. These experiences suggest that music, images, demonstrations, and short sentences can serve as retrieval cues for previously learned knowledge. However, the ease of accessing and recalling information does not necessarily indicate deep understanding. The fragmented presentation of short-form content may create an "illusion of understanding," in which information feels clear or familiar while its underlying meaning remains only partially understood. Thus, TikTok presents a tension between ease of access and cognitive cost: short and accessible content may facilitate recall, but may also limit opportunities for sustained processing and deeper learning. However, the study did not measure retention or skill improvement through testing; 'benefit' therefore refers to outcomes perceived by participants rather than evidence of causal effectiveness.

For Arabic Language Education students, cognitive gratifications extended beyond language content to pedagogical knowledge. Participants watched ways of greeting a class, variations of icebreakers, mufradāt songs, teacher expressions, and strategies for maintaining children's attention. P1 was impressed by an expressive teacher and

concluded that an engaging Arabic teacher should use more varied icebreakers. P7 connected TikTok content with experience teaching children at an Islamic elementary school and gained song ideas for maintaining attention. TikTok thus functioned as a gallery of practice that presented possible actions, not only definitions. Related studies likewise suggest that TikTok can connect learning with professional practice and creativity when examples are evaluated against clear pedagogical objectives (López-Carril et al., 2026; Saputra et al., 2023).

Affective Gratifications and Personal Integration

Enjoyment was not an additional element but part of the reason content was processed. All participants said that videos that were interesting, relaxed, edited, set to music, or presented as vlogs were easier to watch. P3 liked vocabulary presented through songs, while P4 contrasted TikTok's simple and entertaining format with lengthy YouTube videos. Affective gratification reduced the impression that Arabic was always formal or intimidating. P7 said TikTok made Arabic feel more interesting, and P1 hoped similar experiences could help students who disliked Arabic lessons. These findings support studies that identify humor, music, visuals, and participation as drivers of engagement, while also showing that entertainment functions as a selection mechanism: participants quickly skipped videos that were not engaging even when they might have been accurate (Escamilla-Fajardo et al., 2021; Vaterlaus & Winter, 2025).

Personal integration was reflected in confidence and identity as a future teacher. All participants described some positive influence, although its degree varied. After watching a confident teacher, P1 said, 'If other people can do it, I should be able to as well.' P4 felt better prepared to open and explain a lesson before microteaching. P8, who reported low confidence in class, felt more comfortable learning and practicing material independently through TikTok. Content provided performance models, enabled private repetition, and reduced the risk of embarrassment. Within U&G, these experiences satisfied the need to strengthen competence and self-perception. Confidence, however, is productive only when accompanied by accuracy checks; certainty built from incorrect or incomplete examples may reinforce errors and contribute to an “illusion of understanding,” in which learners feel confident about material without fully grasping it (Alharthy, 2025).

> *"If other people can do it, I should be able to as well."*
>
> *– P1*

Professional identity was also shaped through pedagogical aspirations. Participants asked not only "what does this word mean?" but also "what kind of teacher do I want to become?" Videos of expressive teachers, enjoyable Arabic learning activities, and examples of instruction for children became sources of positive social comparison. TikTok offered representations of teachers beyond formal lecturers and expanded participants' professional imagination. These representations, however, were selected by algorithms and the logic of popularity. Viral content may highlight performance designed to appeal on camera rather than the full scope of planning, assessment, differentiation, or classroom management. Using TikTok for identity development therefore requires reflection: which elements can be adapted, for what purpose, and what evidence of learning is expected?

Social Gratifications: Sharing, Negotiation, and Collaboration

Eleven of the twelve participants described sharing content or discussing it with friends. Sharing was usually connected to group assignments, the production of muḥādathah videos, podcasts, cooking themes, conversation practice, or the search for teaching ideas. P3 described group members searching for and sending content to one another; P9 sent a video as an example of a concept while noting that the final content would be changed; and P12 described sending dialogue videos that could be adapted for practice. These practices show that TikTok was not always consumed individually. Video links became shared objects for negotiating relevance, adapting ideas, and designing new products. However, the sharing described by participants was primarily oriented toward practical usefulness and idea development rather than systematic evaluation of pedagogical validity. Although shared videos could provide a common reference for discussion and adaptation, sharing itself did not necessarily involve verifying the accuracy, completeness, or suitability of the content for learning. This distinction is important because the accessibility and familiarity of short-form content may contribute to an "illusion of understanding" when learners perceive information as sufficient without critically evaluating it (Alharthy, 2025). Social gratification therefore involved not only connection but also coordination and the creation of a shared reference

point, but such coordination should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of deep learning.

Nevertheless, the reported interaction occurred more often outside TikTok's public features through link sharing and group discussion than through comments, duets, or communication with creators. Participants rarely corrected errors publicly. P1 chose to skip inaccurate content, while P9 used errors as a benchmark for personal ability. This differs from the image of TikTok as a fully participatory community. In this context, the platform mainly supplied artifacts that were later processed within existing friendship networks. A pedagogical implication is that instructors can build on these established practices by asking students to bring, critique, and modify videos without making public posting compulsory.

Benefits for Oral Skills and the Relationship between Fuṣḥā and ʿĀmmiyyah

All participants mentioned perceived benefits for oral skills, especially kalām and istimāʿ, although some also referred to mufradāt. The audiovisual format enabled them to hear pronunciation, observe context, read text or translations, and imitate repeatedly. P8 described a progression from seeing mufradāt to practicing mahārah kalām and checking how words were pronounced and articulated. P7 felt that videos helped reveal pronunciation closer to that of Arabic speakers, while P4 searched for ways to greet and explain material as a teacher. This pattern is consistent with research emphasizing multimodal input, repetition, and short-video speaking practice, although input quality remains decisive (Golonka et al., 2014; Jannah et al., 2022; Pérez-Sabater et al., 2023).

Perceived improvement did not necessarily mean that spontaneous language production increased. Much of the use was receptive and imitative: watching, repeating, and then applying an expression to a specific assignment. Short content can reinforce language chunks and pronunciation, but it rarely provides sustained interaction practice, corrective feedback, or progression in difficulty. Recent research on short-form video and language learning similarly suggests that social-media platforms can support vocabulary, pronunciation, engagement, and opportunities for language exposure, while remaining limited in providing sustained interaction, systematic feedback, and structured progression (Al-Azawei & Alowayr, 2025; Dewi et al., 2025; Pérez-Sabater et al., 2023). An analysis based on the CEFR of Arabic TikTok content likewise identified strengths in vocabulary, phonology, reception, and basic production, while interaction

and mediation remained underdeveloped (Dewi et al., 2025). The present findings are consistent with that pattern: students gained examples and confidence, but the platform did not automatically provide a comprehensive curriculum.

Seven participants explicitly stated that the content they encountered was dominated by fuṣḥā or did not connect them sufficiently with ʿāmmiyyah. P1 said ʿāmmiyyah content remained limited, P4 linked the dominance of fuṣḥā to university instruction, P5 said ʿāmmiyyah appeared more often on Instagram, and P6 also encountered more fuṣḥā. Other participants recognized colloquial expressions through vlogs or situational dialogue but did not always feel confident distinguishing regional varieties. This imbalance matters in Arabic education: without labels for variety, region, and context, students may mix structures or assume that one form is universally applicable. Variety literacy should therefore form part of content verification.

Verification, Distraction, and the Limits of Learning

Verification practices appeared in ten of the twelve cases, although their depth varied. Stronger strategies included comparison with dictionaries, course materials, ChatGPT, instructors, experts, knowledgeable peers, and multiple content sources; weaker strategies involved judging a creator's profile and assuming that an account that frequently posted Arabic content was likely correct. P9 had encountered inaccurate diacritics or meanings and then asked an instructor. P4 checked content through dictionaries, other sources, and instructor correction. P10 compared content with course notes, dictionaries, peers, and instructors, while P12 stressed comparison across more than one source when dialect or pronunciation differed. By contrast, some participants acknowledged limited ability to evaluate content independently. This variation shows that awareness of credibility issues did not always translate into a systematic evaluation protocol.

Content accuracy was a major constraining condition because short formats encourage simplification. Errors may occur in diacritics, translation, pronunciation, or the mixing of language varieties. The fragmented presentation of information may also create an “illusion of understanding,” in which learners perceive content as clear or sufficient despite having only partial understanding of the underlying language concepts (Alharthy, 2025). This cognitive risk means that the apparent accessibility of short-form content may come with a cost when learners do not engage in deeper

processing or verification. Popularity, editing quality, and posting frequency are not equivalent to academic authority. Algorithms optimize engagement, not validity. Source literacy for TikTok should therefore include, at minimum, the creator's identity and competence, consistency with dictionaries or references, contextual examples, explanations of language variety, and triangulation with an instructor. TikTok can serve as a starting point for inquiry, but claims used in assignments or teaching should undergo a second stage of verification. This finding extends U&G: the satisfaction of information needs must be evaluated together with information quality, not merely user satisfaction.

All twelve participants reported distraction, time loss, shifts in attention, or boredom as negative aspects. P1 summarized the experience most concisely: 'I planned to spend five minutes, but it became twenty.' P4 described assignments being delayed by continuous scrolling, P8 lost track of time until late afternoon, and P9 became bored with educational content and switched to something else. P10 and P12 also described attention moving from intended learning content toward entertainment or unrelated recommendations. Notably, distraction was not external to the learning experience; it emerged from the same mechanisms that facilitated discovery. The FYP extended the pathway after a search while relevant videos appeared alongside entertainment. Personalization affordances therefore created both opportunities and attention costs.

> *"I planned to spend five minutes, but it became twenty."*
>
> *– P1*

The risk of distraction requires self-regulation tailored to the platform. General advice to "use it wisely" is too abstract. This need for self-regulation is also supported by research on short-video platforms, where mechanisms such as infinite scrolling may encourage continued consumption and reduce opportunities for sustained analytical thinking (Ma & Jiang, 2024). Students can search with clear keywords, define an intended output before opening the application, save only a limited number of videos, disable autoplay or notifications where possible, use a timer, and then move to another workspace to summarize and practice. Instructors can require evidence of transformation, such as vocabulary notes, error analyses, activity plans, or practice recordings, rather than merely asking for links. These strategies can help reduce cognitive overload and interrupt continuous consumption, allowing students to shift

from passive viewing toward deliberate processing and application of information. These steps interrupt the consumption cycle and turn videos into learning artifacts that can be examined.

Negative Cases and Variation in the Intensity of Experience

Analysis of negative cases showed that meaningfulness was not always identical to frequency or enthusiasm. P9 described TikTok as "ordinary" and not a priority, yet still acknowledged that the platform was highly useful when ideas ran out. P2 used Instagram more often for scrolling but opened TikTok instrumentally for teaching innovation and conversation examples. P6 could even avoid the application entirely when busy. These variations suggest that participants did not simply follow the platform's algorithmic flow but exercised different degrees of agency in deciding when, why, and how to engage with TikTok. This pattern can be understood as a form of algorithmic resilience, in which learners negotiate platform affordances and recommendations while maintaining goals that shape their media use (Code, 2025). These data prevent the simple conclusion that more time spent on TikTok produces greater benefit. The relevance of the goal and the quality of actions taken after viewing appeared more important than the duration of exposure.

Variation was also evident in the relationship between the FYP and searching. For some participants, the FYP functioned as an unplanned entry point; for others, it was a consequence of previous searches. This difference is methodologically important because the question "did the content appear, or was it searched for?" does not always have a binary answer. Algorithmic exposure retains a history of action, so a discovery that feels accidental may be rooted in an earlier intention. Studies of educational media use should record this temporal sequence to avoid overstating either user agency or algorithmic determinism.

Differences in confidence when evaluating content also reflected participants' initial levels of competence. Those who could recognize incorrect diacritics or meanings used errors as opportunities for evaluation of their own ability. Participants who considered themselves beginners tended to rely on an account's image or on instructor corrections after an assignment. TikTok can therefore both widen and reduce gaps. Learners with a strong foundation can obtain examples more quickly, whereas weaker learners risk

accepting incorrect information. Verification scaffolding should consequently be differentiated according to proficiency level.

Informal Learning Ecology and Critical Literacy

The findings show that the learning site was not only the application, but an ecology connecting TikTok, classrooms, friends, instructors, dictionaries, YouTube, Instagram, and other digital tools. Participants moved among sources according to the type of need. TikTok was useful for finding rapid and engaging examples; YouTube was used when longer explanations were needed; instructors and dictionaries served as validation sources; and peer groups became spaces for adaptation. P5 even described relatively balanced use across platforms, although TikTok was opened most frequently. This movement across resources is particularly important because short-form videos may present information in fragmented and highly condensed forms, which can create an "illusion of understanding" when exposure is mistaken for comprehensive learning (Alharthy, 2025). Integrating TikTok with longer explanations, reference materials, instructor guidance, and practice can therefore help learners contextualize and verify information rather than relying on isolated video content. TikTok's effectiveness should therefore not be evaluated in isolation. Its benefits emerged when the platform functioned as an initial node that directed learners toward other activities: asking questions, comparing, practicing, and designing.

This ecology also explains why informal learning is not the same as learning without structure. Structure remained present, but it was often built by users around assignment deadlines, teaching needs, preferences, and algorithmic recommendations. When students had clear goals, short videos functioned as timely scaffolding. When goals were vague, algorithmic structure took over and encouraged consumption. A shift between these two conditions could occur within a single session. This shift reflects the distinction between self-directed and incidental learning described by Ghosh and Figueroa (2023): goal-oriented searches represent more self-directed activity, whereas learning that emerges unexpectedly from algorithmic recommendations can be understood as incidental or serendipitous learning. The proposed "Algorithmic Microlearning Cycle" can therefore be viewed as an extension of these established forms of informal learning, describing how intentional and incidental learning may alternate within the same

platform environment. The ability to set goals, select evidence, and stop using the platform is therefore part of learning competence, not merely a technical habit.

Critical literacy is required at three levels. The first is language literacy: checking form, diacritics, meaning, pronunciation, register, and context. The second is pedagogical literacy: assessing whether an activity is appropriate for the objective, age group, proficiency level, and assessment. The third is algorithmic literacy: understanding that the FYP results from computational selection based on user behavior and the platform's interest in engagement. The three levels are interconnected. Students who can identify language errors but do not understand algorithmic reinforcement may still become trapped in homogeneous sources; conversely, algorithmic awareness without language competence is insufficient for evaluating content validity.

In the education of future teachers, critical literacy can be developed through reasoned curation assignments. Students can be asked to select one video, state its learning objective, check each language element, identify whether the content uses fuṣḥā or ʿāmmiyyah, evaluate whether the variety is appropriate for the intended learners and pedagogical context, evaluate its audiovisual strengths, and design improvements (Damanhouri, 2025). The next stage is to test the microcontent with peers and reflect on whether the short format preserves accuracy and whether the selected language variety remains appropriate for the intended learning objective. This process transforms students from consumers into pedagogical editors. The shift is important because future teachers must not only find content but also take responsibility for the consequences of bringing it into the classroom.

Research Limitations

This study has several limitations. The corpus comprised twelve interviews with Arabic Language Education students from a single institutional setting at Universitas Sains Al-Qur'an (UNSIQ) Jawa Tengah di Wonosobo. The participant records did not provide a sufficiently systematic demographic profile of semester, educational background, gender, boarding-school experience, or Arabic proficiency to support subgroup analysis. The data were self-reports, and several interview prompts explicitly asked about confidence, benefits, or time loss; responses may therefore have been affected by question wording, social desirability, and memory. This reliance on perceived understanding also creates a limitation when considering the possibility of an

"illusion of understanding," in which learners may feel confident that they understand information without having developed a deeper or sufficiently complete understanding (Alharthy, 2025). Because the present study did not independently test participants' comprehension or retention, reported increases in confidence cannot be assumed to reflect corresponding gains in actual learning. No usage logs, screen recordings, actual viewed videos, or language tests were used to examine claims of improvement. The findings should therefore be interpreted as a phenomenological account of perceived learning value rather than evidence of measured proficiency gains.

A further limitation concerns transcript quality and the scope of the evidence. Several Arabic terms were distorted in automatic transcription and were normalized only when the surrounding context made the intended term clear. Code percentages indicate the presence of a pattern across cases and are sensitive to differences in how fully a topic was discussed in each interview. The study also focused on participants' accounts rather than direct observation of platform behavior. Future research should verify transcripts against audio, combine interviews with usage observation or diaries, analyze the actual videos participants rely on, and include performance tasks or longitudinal assessment to examine how perceived gratifications are converted into demonstrable learning.

Theoretical Synthesis and Implications

Across the themes, the study proposes an algorithmic microlearning cycle model. The cycle begins with an academic trigger or leisure time. Users then interact with TikTok affordances: short videos, replay, search, the FYP, music, text, and peer examples. These interactions generate cognitive and affective gratifications, as well as gratifications related to personal and social integration. The gratifications are associated with perceived outcomes involving recall, vocabulary, oral skills, teaching ideas, and confidence. Outcomes generate new needs that lead users to search again. Throughout the cycle, source verification, balance among language varieties, content depth, and attention regulation moderate the quality of outcomes. In relation to existing frameworks of informal learning, this model extends the distinction between self-directed and incidental learning described by Ghosh and Figueroa (2023). While self-directed learning is reflected in users' intentional searches for specific academic needs, incidental learning emerges when algorithmic recommendations expose users to unplanned but potentially

relevant content. The distinctive contribution of the present model lies in describing how these two forms of informal learning may alternate within a recurring, algorithmically mediated microlearning process, in which user intentions, platform affordances, perceived gratifications, and subsequent learning needs continuously interact.

The model extends U&G in two directions. First, media choice is iterative and jointly produced with the algorithm: users make choices, but those choices also shape recommendations that influence subsequent choices. This dynamic can also be understood through the perspective of platformization, in which platform architectures and algorithmic systems actively organize how content is selected, circulated, and encountered by users (Poell et al., 2019). Thus, TikTok does not merely facilitate users' media choices; its recommendation system and commercial architecture also shape the range and sequence of content to which learners are exposed. Second, educational gratification is not singular. Enjoyment can increase exposure, personal integration can encourage practice, and social gratification can transform a video into a collaborative project. Immediate satisfaction, however, is not identical to deep learning. Analyses of educational platforms should therefore distinguish perceived gratification, the learning actions actually undertaken, and demonstrable evidence of competence.

This distinction has consequences for measuring U&G in educational contexts. Instruments that ask only about satisfaction or motivation may produce an overly positive picture if they do not examine what users do after obtaining gratification. Future research can separate three stages: gratifications sought before opening TikTok, gratifications obtained during use, and the conversion of gratification into learning outputs. This sequence can be situated within established classifications of informal learning, particularly Schugurensky's distinction between self-directed, incidental, and socialization learning as discussed by Ghosh and Figueroa (2023). In this framework, the proposed "Algorithmic Microlearning Cycle" does not replace existing categories but complements them by explaining how intentional searches, incidental encounters through algorithmic recommendations, and socially mediated sharing may interact within a short-video platform. Conversion can be demonstrated through notes, oral practice, source correction, instructional design, or changes in performance. Separating the stages also helps explain gratification failure: a video may be entertaining but fail to address a need, or provide a quick answer that does not remain in memory. TikTok

evaluation should therefore connect subjective experience with traces of action and competency assessment without removing participants' phenomenological context.

In practical terms, Arabic Language Education programs do not need to choose between banning TikTok and accepting it uncritically. A more productive approach is directed integration: curating creators and hashtags, assigning comparisons of two videos, checking diacritics and translations, identifying fuṣḥā and ʿāmmiyyah, producing referenced microcontent, and reflecting on time use. Prospective teachers can be trained to transform popular inspiration into instructional designs with objectives, stages, and assessment. Content creators should identify sources, language variety, target level, and context of use. Institutions should also treat algorithmic literacy and credibility literacy as components of the competence of language teachers in the digital era.

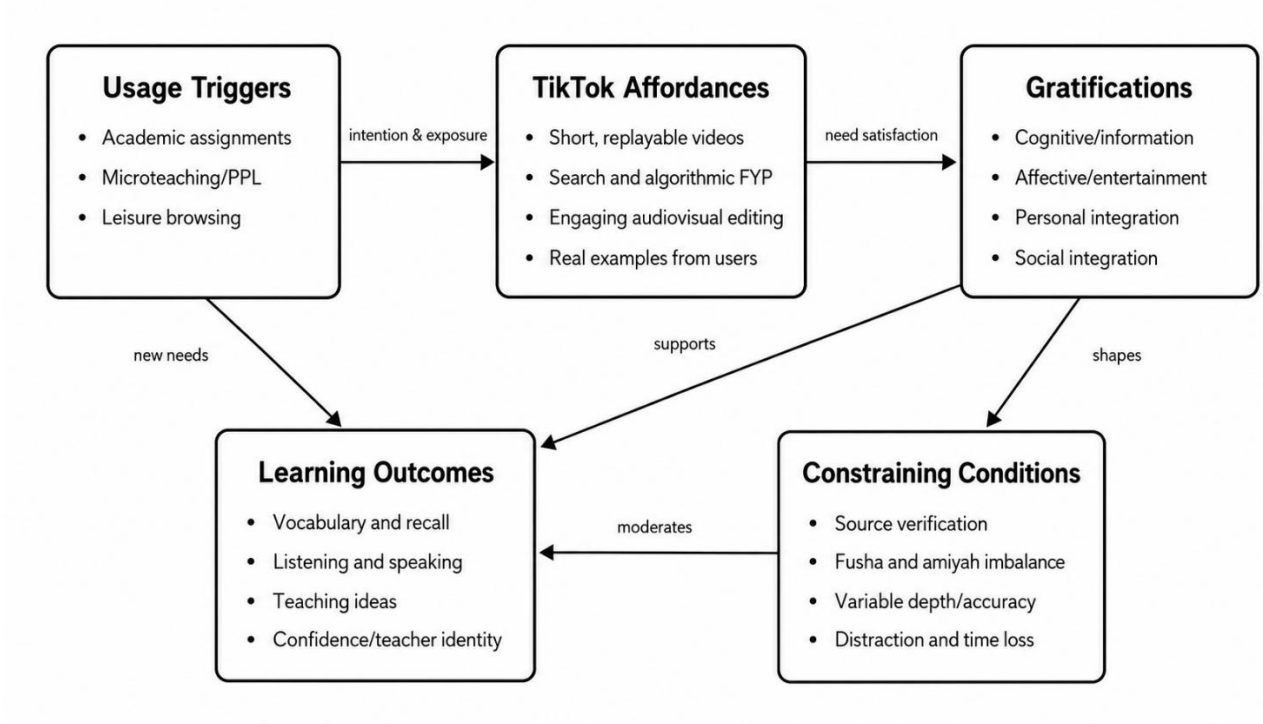


Figure 1. Algorithmic Microlearning Cycle Model in Informal Arabic Language Learning.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Arabic Language Education students experience TikTok as a flexible, rapid, and emotionally engaging informal learning resource. Its value emerges through two connected modes: searches driven by academic needs and serendipitous discovery through the FYP. Within Uses and Gratifications, the platform satisfies cognitive needs through information and repetition, affective needs through entertainment, personal

integration through confidence and prospective-teacher identity, and social integration through sharing and collaboration. The strongest perceived benefits relate to recalling material, acquiring vocabulary and pronunciation models, developing kalām and istimāʿ, and finding microteaching ideas. However, variable accuracy, the dominance of fuṣḥā in some content streams, limited depth, and distraction constrain these benefits.

The study's main contribution is the algorithmic microlearning cycle, which positions learning as an outcome of repeated interactions among user needs, platform affordances, gratifications, perceived outcomes, follow-up actions, and constraining conditions. Rather than proposing a framework separate from established models of informal learning, the algorithmic microlearning cycle extends the self-directed, incidental, and tacit learning categories discussed by Ghosh and Figueroa (2023) based on Schugurensky's framework. Self-directed learning is reflected in students' purposeful searches for academic needs, while incidental learning emerges through unexpected encounters with algorithmically recommended content; tacit learning may also develop through repeated exposure and observation without explicit instructional intention. The contribution of the present model lies in showing how these forms of informal learning can interact recursively with TikTok's algorithmic affordances, user gratifications, and subsequent learning actions. The findings cannot be statistically generalized because they are based on twelve participants from one institutional context and the learning outcomes are perceptual rather than test-based. Theoretically, the model extends U&G by separating gratifications sought and obtained from the learning actions that follow them and by showing that algorithmic recommendations recursively shape subsequent media choices. Practically, the findings support guided video curation, credibility checks, language-variety labeling, purposeful adaptation of short-form content, and attention-regulation tasks in Arabic teacher education. Future research should add usage observation, search-history analysis, skill testing, comparison of fuṣḥā and ʿāmmiyyah content, and longitudinal designs.

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