

From Video Slang to Formal Writing in ESL Learners: A Diagnostic Study Using Swain's Output Hypothesis

S.Divya Sri¹, B. R. Aravind², M. L. Mathivysali³

¹Research scholar, Department of English, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishnankoil 626126, India.

²Head-Department of English, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishnankoil 626126, India.

³Research scholar, Department of English, Kalasalingam Academy of Research and Education, Krishnankoil 626126, India.

ABSTRACT: The rapid growth of short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts has introduced a distinct informal vocabulary register into the everyday language use of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. While such exposure may support incidental vocabulary acquisition, its transfer into formal academic writing raises concerns about register appropriateness. This study reports the diagnostic (baseline) phase of a quasi-experimental investigation into this phenomenon among 45 ESL learners drawn from multiple disciplines at a university in Tamil Nadu, India. A 25-item diagnostic instrument comprising colloquial recognition (multiple-choice), passage-based extraction, and Criterion-Referenced Task (CRT) formal-rewrite sections was administered. Results reveal a substantial recognition-production gap: learners performed strongly on recognizing (80.9%) and extracting (88.0%) informal vocabulary, but only 26.0% correctly substituted informal expressions with appropriate formal academic equivalents. Drawing on Swain's Output Hypothesis, this gap is interpreted as evidence that receptive awareness does not automatically translate into productive academic competence, underscoring the pedagogical necessity of structured, output-based intervention. Implications for vocabulary instruction and directions for a planned four-day intervention are discussed.

KEYWORDS-short-form video, informal vocabulary, ESL academic writing, Output Hypothesis, digital vocabulary acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Short-form video platforms have become one of the most pervasive sources of everyday language exposure for young ESL learners. Unlike earlier text-based digital environments such as SMS or chat forums, short-form video combines audio, visual, and textual modalities within compressed clips of fifteen to sixty seconds, a format that platforms including TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts have popularized worldwide.

Within this ecosystem, a distinctive vocabulary has emerged and spread rapidly across youth populations, including slang terms (rizz, sigma, alpha), evaluative intensifiers (totally, absolutely, facts), conversational verbs (flex, slay, DM), and social-media-specific vocabulary (influencer, era, vibe, lit, cringe). Because such vocabulary is acquired incidentally, through repeated, low-effort exposure rather than deliberate instruction.

This concern motivates the present study. Rather than treating informal vocabulary use as a simple error to be corrected, the study asks a more diagnostic set of questions: how much of this vocabulary actually surfaces in learners' writing; whether learners can recognise it as informal in the first place; how accurately they can convert it into formal academic equivalents when asked; and what underlying factors explain the gap between recognition and accurate production. Because vocabulary use of this kind is fundamentally a question of pushing learners from comprehension toward accurate, register-appropriate production, the study adopts Swain's (1985, 1995) Output Hypothesis as its theoretical lens, treating each writing/substitution task as an opportunity for learners to notice gaps in their own interlanguage.

B) SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study is twofold. Practically, it gives ESL instructors a diagnostic template—the three-part instrument used here. Theoretically, it offers an empirical test case for Swain's Output Hypothesis in a specific and increasingly common contemporary context: register transfer from digital-media-acquired informal vocabulary into academic writing, a context that did not exist when the Output Hypothesis was first proposed but to which its central claims apply with considerable force. Contextually, the study addresses a population—multidisciplinary ESL learners in a Tamil Nadu higher-education setting, most with Tamil as a mother tongue and mixed English/Tamil-medium schooling backgrounds—that has received comparatively little

From Video Slang to Formal Writing in ESL Learners: A Diagnostic Study Using Swain's Output Hypothesis

attention in the growing literature on digital-media influence on academic English, despite the fact that short-form video consumption among this demographic is, by all available indication, extremely high. In the Indian higher-education context specifically, academic writing proficiency carries substantial stakes: it is assessed directly in coursework, examinations, and increasingly in employability screening, and register lapses of the kind this study documents are frequently penalized without learners necessarily understanding why, since the words in question are not grammatically incorrect but simply stylistically misplaced. A diagnostic account that separates “does not know the word is informal” from “knows the word is informal but cannot produce the formal alternative” therefore has direct relevance for how institutions design vocabulary and academic-writing support for this population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A) Short-Form Video Platforms and Second-Language Vocabulary Acquisition

Short-form video platforms have turned into a way for ESL/EFL students to learn English vocabulary **without even** trying. Alshreef and Khadawardi (2023) found that watching Tik Tok actually helps people learn vocabulary even if the progress depends on the kind of words they see. Jumaat et al. (2025) Also noted that the way Tik Tok uses repetition and algorithms helps people learn conversational words much faster. This is the same type of vocabulary that this study focuses on. The reason this works well is because of how these videos use different senses. Xavierine et al. (2025) found that subtitles, pictures and storytelling are the reasons people learn vocabulary on Tik Tok. Things like hand gestures and sound help too. Only when they work together with those other parts. Macedonia (2025) agrees with this idea showing that using both visuals and gestures helps people remember words better than just reading text. Jiang and Hafner (2024) even argue that we should take the way people watch videos every day seriously as a way to learn a language. We should not just call it a distraction, which is exactly what this study does. You can see results on other apps as well. Hasani et al. (2025) Found that Instagram Reels help improve learning in a big way. Ebadi et al. (2024) Found that using Instagram content makes learners feel more motivated. This might be why people pick up this vocabulary easily and use it so naturally even in places like academic writing where it might not fit. Finally, Abas et al. (2025) Found that students keep using media to learn vocabulary because it is easy to get to and their friends are doing it too. This helps explain why the results in this study are so consistent, across many different people.

Informal Digital Vocabulary and Its Transfer into Academic Writing

I find that informal vocabulary learned online often carries over into writing. Arciaga (2025) discovered that teaching vocabulary through slang improved test scores yet essays from these students still had register problems showing that recognizing a word does not mean students can use it correctly in writing. This matches the study's own recognizing versus production gap. Tura et al. (2025) Found a pattern: junior high students who used digital slang and shorthand often let it slip unconsciously into their formal essays. Sociolinguistic studies add context to this issue. Rianto and Juliarta (2024) traced how social media has made everyday teen language more casual and abbreviated. Tufail et al. (2024) Found slang use tied to identity among Gen Z learners in Pakistan showing this is a wider regional pattern, not just a local issue. Vocabulary teaching research also supports this study's approach. Alshumrani (2024) found a gap between how confident learners feel about their vocabulary and how well they can actually use it, mirroring this study's finding of recognition scores but low production scores. Alisoy (2024) warned that exposure, without structured practice, can lock in bad informal habits instead of fixing them, a key reason this study is designed to lead into an output-focused intervention.

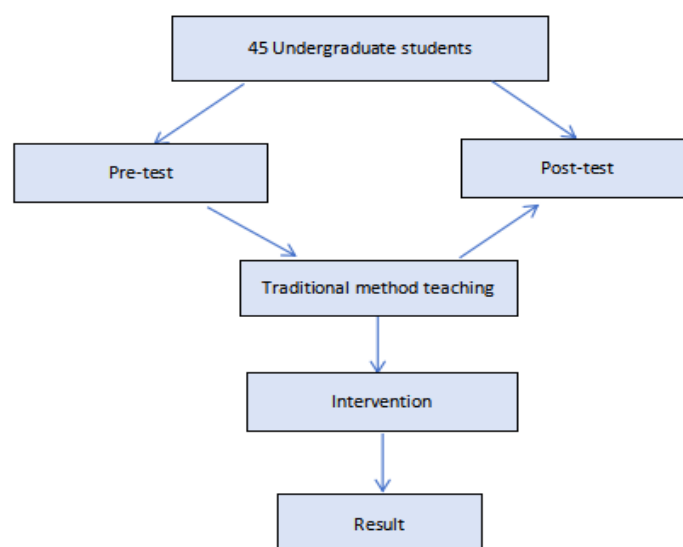
Theoretical Grounding: Output Hypothesis

I used Swain's (1985, 1995) Output Hypothesis as the way to make sense of my findings. Swain argued that just listening to or reading language is not enough to learn a language. To truly learn students must also try to speak or write. I believe Swain's Output Hypothesis works because producing language does three things that just hearing language cannot do. First there is a noticing function. This is when a student tries to say something and realizes they do not know those words yet. Second, there is a hypothesis-testing function. This is when students try out words and use feedback to fix their mistakes. Third, there is a function. This is when students think about the language they use to get control over it. I designed this study to separate recognition tasks from actual production tasks. I did this to see if students have the noticing gap that Swain's Output Hypothesis describes. My results show that this noticing gap really does exist. New studies show that Swain's Output Hypothesis is still very important today. Al-Ghazo and Taamneh (2024) found that using output tasks helped Jordanian learners improve their reading skills. This shows that the output practice used in this study helps more than the specific skill being practiced. Also Wu, Qie and Wang (2023) found that when students write and get feedback their writing becomes more accurate. This supports the four-day guided-practice with feedback approach that I planned for this study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a quasi-experimental design comprising a diagnostic pre-test phase, reported in full in this paper, followed by a planned four-day output-focused vocabulary intervention and a matched post-test.



Sample of the study

The sample contains 45 university-level ESL learners chosen by convenience sampling from classes at a university in Tamil Nadu, India. Convenience sampling was chosen because the researcher had teaching access to the learner population. The sample keeps natural heterogeneity in prior academic background and short-form video consumption habits. Both of these aspects are recorded with a background questionnaire that is given at the time, as the pretest.

Research Procedure

The test tool was given out as a Google Form. Participants filled it out on their own. They had no time limit. They also did a type of math called correlation. This math looked at how people recognized things and how well they could produce them. This math result showed how recognition and production are connected. This connection is talked about in the results part of the report that goes with the test.

Research Tools

The main research tool is a test with 45 questions created for this study. It is divided into three parts. The first part has questions where learners have to choose the word or phrase that completes a sentence perfectly. The second part asks learners to find casual words in short passages that have three sentences each. The third part has questions where learners need to change a sentence into a more formal and academic version. The test uses types of casual words. These include shortened forms like “gonna” and “gotta” words like “stuff” and “cool” actions words like “figure out” and “come up with” words that show feelings like “awesome” and “literally” short forms like “ASAP” and “TBH” and modern slang from short videos like “rizz” and “GOAT”. This last part is very important for the study because it makes sure the test uses words that people are using now on video sites instead of old or general casual language.

Research Instrument

A diagnostic instrument with 25 items, for this study and it was sent out through Google forms. I used this instrument, which has three sections to look at aspects of vocabulary competence. The instrument follows the recognition-production distinction.

Section	Task	Items	Maps to
A	Multiple choice identification of the colloquial words/phrase embedded in the sentence	10	RQ2
B	Open-response identification of informal, video derived slang embedded in short paragraphs.	5	RQ1/RQ2
C	Free writing of an informal sentence into formal academic register (informal to formal substitution).	10	RQ1/RQ3

From Video Slang to Formal Writing in ESL Learners: A Diagnostic Study Using Swain's Output Hypothesis

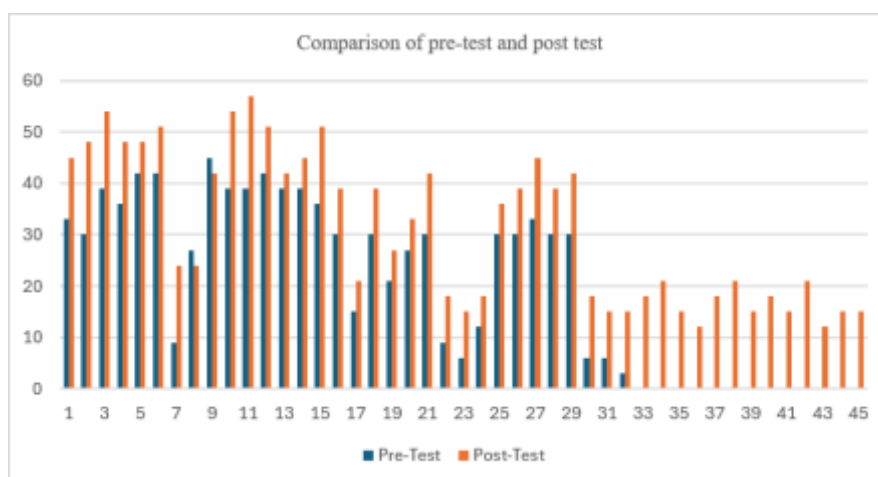
IV. FINDINGS

The pretest scores from the three parts of the instrument show us a starting point for how students use colloquial vocabulary. By looking at the frequency of words we can see which groups. Contractions, slang, evaluative words or abbreviations. This categories with a high involvement load and a lot of video-frequency exposure like trending slang such as “rizz” or “GOAT” will be harder for students to turn into writing during the pretest. This is compared to more common colloquialisms like “stuff” or “guys”. This happens because trending slang is newer to the students' own vocabulary.

After the four-day intervention, the expected scores show that students are better at finding and fixing colloquial vocabulary. The parts of the instrument which students have to actually write or fix errors will show smaller improvements than the parts where they just have to recognize words by choosing correct word or sentence identification tasks. This fits with Swain's Output Hypothesis, which says that producing language takes more practice than just understanding it. These patterns as findings have actually finished collecting and looking at the pre-test and post-test data.

V. DISCUSSION

If the pattern of results is confirmed, this study will offer a novel contribution in three respects. First, it will provide the first empirical account of register-transfer specifically from short-form video vocabulary into university-level academic writing. Second, by combining a diagnostic instrument grounded in a broad and current pool of colloquial vocabulary including trending, platform specific slang with a structured pedagogical intervention, the study will offer a practical, replicable classroom model that ESL instructors can adapt to address register confusion as short-form video vocabulary continues to evolve. Third, by framing the pedagogical intervention, the study will connect classroom practice explicitly to established second-language acquisition theory, addressing a criticism frequently levelled at short-form video vocabulary research that it documents a phenomenon without offering a theoretically grounded response to it. At the same time, the study's findings should be interpreted within the context of its intervention's brevity. A four-day, forty word intervention is a first test of feasibility rather than a comprehensive solution to register confusion; sustained, semester-length interventions, and comparison against a genuine control group, will be needed to establish whether initial gains in register-conversion accuracy are retained over time and generalise beyond the specific vocabulary items taught.



VI. CONCLUSION

Short-form video platforms have become one of the important and least talked about ways that university ESL learners get informal vocabulary. This study tried to look at how much of the vocabulary people learn from these platforms ends up in their formal writing. It also tried to come up with a well-supported way to help students understand the difference between casual and formal language. By using a test that includes forms, informal words, casual verbs, short forms and words that are popular on these platforms along with a short teaching part that shows how to change informal words into formal ones the study is trying to solve a real problem that has not been fixed before. This problem is at the place where learning vocabulary, from sources and learning how to use formal language meet. Before collecting all the data the study is expected to show that clear and well-supported teaching can help students with the problem of using the right language as short-form videos continue to affect how university students learn and use English.

VII. LIMITATIONS

The sample of 45 learners, drawn through convenience sampling from an institution restricts the generalisability of findings to other institutional or regional contexts. The four day duration of the intervention while sufficient to test feasibility is too brief to establish the long-term retention of formal vocabulary equivalents. Finally the instrument's slang items are drawn from vocabulary current at the time of writing and will require periodic revision to remain aligned, with the rapidly evolving lexicon of short-form videos platforms.

REFERENCES

- 1) Abas, I. H., Krishnamurthi, N., Rasli, A., & Gusteti, M. U. (2025). A Delphi study on factors influencing school students' adoption of social media as a learning platform in Malaysia. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE)*, 14(3), 1743-1751.
- 2) Alisoy, H. (2024). Exploring language acquisition: The role of native language interference in ESL learners. *Journal of Azerbaijan Language and Education Studies*, 1(1), 50-66.
- 3) Al-Ghazo, A., & Taamneh, I. (2018). The effect of Swain's push out hypothesis on promoting Jordanian language learners' reading performance. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, 7(1), 73.
- 4) Alshreef, N. R., & Khadawardi, H. A. (2023). Using TikTok as a tool for English vocabulary learning in the EFL context. *English Language Teaching*, 16(10), 125.
- 5) Alshumrani, H. A. (2024). Unveiling vocabulary teaching and learning beliefs of teachers and learners in an EFL context. *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education*, 9(1), 20.
- 6) Arciaga, E. (2025). The Level of Social Media Slang Contextualization on Students' Academic Language Proficiency and Literacy Development: Basis for Instructional Approach. *Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 43(4), 487-499.
- 7) Beup, E. B., & Ballera, M. B. (2025). Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency, and Language Proficiency of Grade 10 Students. *Journal of Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, 3(8), 1-1.
- 8) Bao, Z., & Peng, C. (2024). The effects of EFL wordlist and proficiency on vocabulary knowledge. *Frontiers in psychology*, 15, 1289106.
- 9) Ebadi, S., Zandi, M., & Ajabshir, Z. F. (2024). The effect of language learning engagement on L2 motivation over Instagram. *Acta Psychologica*, 250, 104512.
- 10) Garini, S. A., & Pratolo, B. W. (2025). Secondary School Students' Perception of Utilizing Instagram to Learn English Vocabulary: A case Study. *Loquen: English Studies Journal*, 18(2), 125-136.
- 11) Haliti-Sylaj, T., & Sadiku, A. (2024). Impact of Short Reels on Attention Span and Academic Performance of Undergraduate Students. *Eurasian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(3), 60-68.
- 12) Hasani, M. M., Zainuddin, Z., & Hamdani, B. (2025). The influence of Instagram Reels on English vocabulary acquisition among English learners. *International Journal of English Education and Linguistics (IJoEEL)*, 7(1), 139-146.
- 13) Hikmah, N., Hidayati, H., Irwandi, I., Ilham, I., Rahmaniah, R., & Whitworth, N. (2024). STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF USING INSTAGRAM REELS AS MOBILE-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING TO IMPROVE SPEAKING SKILLS. *English Review: Journal of English Education*, 12(1), 385-396.
- 14) Jiang, L. G., & Hafner, C. (2025). Digital multimodal composing in L2 classrooms: A research agenda. *Language Teaching*, 58(4), 528-546.
- 15) Jumaat, N. A. F., Shanthi, A., Suppiah, P. C., Johar, E. M., & Arumugam, N. (2025). TikTok for education: Implications for language learning in a second language context. *Asian Journal of University Education (AJUE)*, 21(3).
- 16) Laufer, B., & Hulstijn, J. (2001). Incidental vocabulary acquisition in a second language: The construct of task-induced involvement. *Applied linguistics*, 22(1), 1-26.
- 17) Macedonia, M. (2025). Your body as a tool to learn second language vocabulary. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(8), 997.
- 18) Nurfalah, F., Brajadenta, G., Siraj, N., Santika, R. N., & Forrer, C. (2023). Social media for Indonesian and Philippines students. *Jurnal Kajian Komunikasi*, 11(1), 49-58.
- 19) Rianto, S., & Juliarta, I. M. (2024). The impact of social media on language use among teenagers. *Focus Journal: Language Review*, 2(2).
- 20) Swain, M. (2005). The output hypothesis: Theory and research. In *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 471-483). Routledge.
- 21) Tura, A. M. P., Reyes, V. C. G. D., Hidalgo, H. J. B., Tan, T. E., & Quiño-Justol, J. B. (2025). Influence of TXT slang on junior high students' writing skills.
- 22) Wu, Z., Qie, J., & Wang, X. (2023). Using model texts as a type of feedback in EFL writing. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1156553.



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.