

TikTok and The Distracted Classroom: Exploring University Students' Attention Experience in English Classes

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ABSTRACT

The increasing use of TikTok among students has raised concerns about students' ability to maintain their attention during English classes. Most previous studies have used quantitative approaches and did not capture the complexity of students' personal experiences, particularly the paradox between full awareness of TikTok's negative effects and a lack of ability to address them. This qualitative descriptive study, informed by a phenomenological perspective, explored how Indonesian EFL university students experience attention in English classes in the short-form video era, what disrupts or supports their attention, and how they manage their TikTok use. Five female students from the English Language Education Program at Mulawarman University were selected through purposive sampling and interviewed online using semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The results revealed five main themes: (1) students often have difficulty maintaining attention during English classes; (2) interactive activities and understanding the material help students stay focused; (3) TikTok and short videos are the main sources of distraction in the classroom; (4) intensive use of TikTok appears to affect students' attention patterns; and (5) students use simple strategies to maintain attention, but these strategies are not always effective. Across these themes, participants described an awareness-control paradox: they recognized that TikTok disrupted their learning but could not regulate their use on their own, particularly during long, listening-based explanations. These results suggest that EFL lecturers should design more interactive and varied learning activities and that institutions should support students in developing self-regulation strategies.

Keywords: TikTok; Attention; EFL; Short-Form Videos; Self-Regulation; Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has transformed the way students interact with information and engage in their daily learning activities. The rise in popularity of short-form video platforms, especially TikTok, has been one of the biggest developments in recent years. These platforms are now an essential part of learners' lives worldwide. Users can experience satisfaction in a matter of seconds because of TikTok's fast-paced, engaging, and highly personalized content (Lin et al., 2024). This consumption pattern has shaped new habits that raise serious concerns about learners' cognitive abilities, particularly their ability to maintain attention in the classroom.

Attention is not just about sitting silently and staring at the whiteboard. Attention is a cognitive resource that supports nearly every aspect of learning, including processing new information, understanding the lecturer's explanation, and actively participating in class discussions. Because learners must focus on complex and varied activities like speaking, listening to spoken language, reading academic texts, and working in a group, this becomes even more crucial when learning English. The learning process becomes difficult when students are easily distracted, regardless of how well lecturer prepares a lesson. From a second language acquisition perspective, attention is a prerequisite for noticing linguistic features in the input, which is necessary for input to become intake (Robinson, 2003; Schmidt, 1990).

Studies have shown that the consumption of short videos has been related to a decrease in students' attention. High TikTok use has been linked to changes in cognitive patterns in information processing, increased distractibility, and decreased sustained attention (Yan et al., 2024; Ye et al., 2025). Research in Indonesia has shown that TikTok is the most popular platform among students for watching short videos and that its use is associated with shorter attention spans (Alfatih et al., 2024; Dhillon et al., 2025).

Experimental and neurophysiological studies point in the same direction. Short-form video viewing has been found to reduce sustained attention and the ability to retain intentions (Chiossi et al., 2023; Lin et al., 2024), and short-form video addiction has been associated with weaker attention among users (Chen et al., 2023). Systematic reviews further indicate that problematic short-video use is related to poorer cognitive functioning in adolescents and young adults (Mona et al., 2026) and that digital distractions from social media and notifications reduce students' engagement and concentration in higher education (Martin et al., 2025). Earlier classroom research likewise showed that mobile phone use during lectures impairs note-taking and learning (Kuznekoff & Titsworth, 2013) and that heavy media multitaskers show weaker cognitive control (Ophir et al., 2009; Uncapher & Wagner, 2018).

In EFL and Indonesian higher education contexts, the evidence is still limited. Haliti-Sylaj and Sadiku (2024) examined the impact of short reels on the attention span and academic performance of undergraduate students, and Indonesian studies reported that TikTok use is associated with shorter attention spans and weaker study habits (Alfatih et al., 2024; Dhillon et al., 2025). Notably, almost all of these studies used surveys, correlational designs, experiments, or EEG measurements (Alfatih et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2023; Dhillon et al., 2025; Haliti-Sylaj & Sadiku, 2024; Yan et al., 2024; Ye et al., 2025). Qualitative studies on students' off-task technology use exist (Aagaard, 2015; Flanigan & Babchuk, 2022), but they focus on laptops and general digital distraction rather than short-form video platforms, and they were not conducted with EFL learners, for whom sustained attention to spoken and written input is essential.

This study draws on three complementary theoretical lenses. First, Kahneman's (1973) capacity model of attention holds that attention is a limited resource that must be allocated among competing demands, and that salient or arousing stimuli tend to capture the available capacity. In this study, the model is used to interpret how TikTok competes with classroom input for students' limited attention. Second, cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1988; Sweller et al., 2019) proposes that working memory has a limited capacity and that learning is hindered when this capacity is consumed by extraneous cognitive load, that is, processing that does not contribute to learning. Thoughts about TikTok, notifications, or the urge to check the phone can be regarded as sources of extraneous load that reduce the capacity available for the lesson (Ward et al., 2017). However, neither theory explains why students continue to use TikTok in class even though they know its negative effects. Therefore, a self-regulation lens is added. The dual-systems model of self-control (Hofmann et al., 2009) explains how impulsive, habit-driven responses can override reflective goals, and research on smartphone habits shows that brief checking behaviors become automatic and are triggered by situational cues such as boredom (Oulasvirta et al., 2012; Wood & R nger, 2016). Boredom itself is an achievement emotion that arises when a learning activity is perceived as low in value or control and that promotes off-task behavior (Eastwood et al., 2012; Pekrun, 2006). Together, these lenses explain both how TikTok competes for students' attention and why students struggle to regulate it.

Although quantitative evidence continues to grow, one fundamental question remains unanswered: why do learners who realize that TikTok disrupts their attention still use it during class? Previous studies have shown that TikTok affects attention. However, they have not examined the real-life situations in which learners consciously open TikTok to pass the time when they are bored in class, even though they are aware of the consequences. Correlations cannot capture this paradox between awareness and limited self-control. To the best of our knowledge, no study has explored how EFL university students themselves experience and make sense of this awareness-control paradox in English classes. This study addresses this gap by examining not just what happens but also how learners understand and manage this challenge daily in the classroom.

This study addresses three research questions: (1) How do students describe their attention experiences during English classes in the era of short videos? (2) What factors do students perceive as disrupting or supporting their attention in class? (3) What strategies do students use to manage their TikTok use and maintain their attention, and how do they make sense of the gap between their awareness of TikTok's impact and their ability to control it? This study is expected to contribute to a deeper qualitative understanding of the complicated attention experiences of EFL students, particularly the paradox between their awareness of TikTok's impact and their ability to manage it. Additionally, this study will provide practical recommendations for lecturers on how to adapt their teaching to better suit students' attention patterns in the digital age. Therefore, this study aims to explore Indonesian EFL university students' lived experiences of attention in English classes in the short-form video era, the factors that disrupt or support their attention, and the strategies they use to regulate their TikTok use and attention.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative descriptive design (Sandelowski, 2000) informed by a phenomenological perspective. Instead of statistically measuring or correlating variables, this study aims to explore and understand students' personal experiences related to their attention and TikTok use during English class. A phenomenological orientation was adopted because it directs attention to participants' real-life experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, because the data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis rather than a phenomenological analysis procedure such as IPA or Colaizzi's method, the design is described as qualitative descriptive to ensure consistency between the design and the analysis. Because attention is a subjective and contextual phenomenon that cannot be fully represented through numerical data, a qualitative approach is considered more appropriate. The purpose of this study is not to develop a new theory but to describe the participants' lived experiences.

The participants in this study were five students from the English Language Education Program at Mulawarman University. All participants were female. Two participants were enrolled in their third semester, and three were enrolled in their sixth semester (Table 1). Using purposive sampling, participants were selected based on the following criteria: (1) actively enrolled in an English class; (2) using TikTok as their main short-form video platform; (3) using TikTok every day, with self-reported daily use ranging from about one to three hours to almost continuous use; (4) self-reporting difficulty maintaining attention in English classes; and (5) willing to participate in interviews and share their experiences with others. Criterion (4) was deliberately applied to recruit information-rich cases who had experienced the phenomenon under study; however, we acknowledge that it may bias the findings toward negative experiences, and this is discussed as a limitation. Before the interviews, a screening form was shared via Google Forms to make sure that candidate participants fulfilled the requirements. Since the goal of this study is to collect rich and in-depth data rather than a large sample, a sample of three to ten participants is considered adequate for studies of lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition, the narrow aim of the study and the specific characteristics shared by the participants provided adequate information power (Malterud et al., 2016). Nevertheless, we do not claim data saturation, and the small, female-only sample is acknowledged as a limitation.

Table 1. Participant profile

Participant	Gender	Semester	Self-reported daily TikTok use
P1	Female	[3rd/6th]	About 12 hours
P2	Female	[3rd/6th]	About 3–4 hours
P3	Female	[3rd/6th]	About 1–3 hours
P4	Female	[3rd/6th]	About 1–3 hours
P5	Female	[3rd/6th]	Almost continuous

Note. Two participants were in the third semester and three in the sixth semester.

The main instrument was a semi-structured interview guide developed based on three research questions. These questions are based on Kahneman's (1973) theory of attention, Sweller's (1988) theory of cognitive load, and previous studies on the use of short videos and attention (Chiossi et al., 2023; Dhillon et al., 2025; Haliti-Sylaj & Sadiku, 2024; Lin et al., 2024; Mona et al., 2026; Yan et al., 2024; Ye et al., 2025). The adaptation was conducted in three stages: identifying the key constructs from the theory and previous studies, rewriting the questions to suit the English language classroom context and the research objectives, and consulting with the lecturer to make sure the questions were clear and relevant. The final interview guide consisted of fifteen open-ended questions related to four topics: participants' general experiences in English language classes, experiences with attention, TikTok use and its impact on attention, and techniques for maintaining focus. Each question was linked to one or more research questions.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online via Google Meet between [month] and [month] [year]. Each interview was conducted in English and took between 12 and 20 minutes. English was chosen because the participants were English Language Education students who were accustomed to using English in academic settings. We acknowledge that the relatively short duration and the use of the participants' second language may have limited the depth of some accounts; to reduce this limitation, probing questions were used during the interviews, and member checking gave participants the opportunity to clarify or add to their accounts. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim using TurboScribe and checked by the researcher against the recordings for analysis with the participants' consent. The researcher

used probing questions such as “Can you tell me more about that?”, “How did you feel at that moment?”, and “Can you give me an example?” to encourage participants to share their experiences during the interviews.

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This method was chosen because it is systematic, flexible, and well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning across participants’ experiences. A combined inductive–deductive approach was adopted: codes were generated inductively from participants’ accounts, whereas the research questions and theoretical lenses were used deductively to organize and interpret the themes. The analysis process consisted of six stages: familiarization, in which the researcher read and reviewed the transcripts to gain a better understanding of the data; generating initial codes, in which the researcher systematically identified initial codes from the overall data; searching for themes, in which the identified codes were grouped into key themes; reviewing themes, in which these themes were reviewed and refined based on the coded extracts and the whole data set; defining and naming themes, in which each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect the research questions; and producing the report, in which themes were described and supported by direct quotes from participants. Coding was carried out manually by the first author and reviewed by the co-authors; disagreements about codes and themes were discussed until consensus was reached. Table 2 illustrates the coding process from raw data to themes.

Table 2. Example of the coding process

Raw data extract	Initial code	Sub-theme	Theme
“I can focus at the beginning, but after a while, I usually get distracted.” (P1)	Focus declines over time	Time-related decline of attention	Theme 1
“I was very focused when we had a group discussion at an activity.” (P4)	Discussion sustains focus	Active participation	Theme 2
“Without thinking too much, I opened TikTok.” (P5)	Automatic app opening	Habitual checking	Theme 3
“After just a few minutes of listening, I already feel restless.” (P5)	Low tolerance for long listening	Perceived shorter attention span	Theme 4
“I usually try to keep my phone inside my bag, so I’m not tempted to open it.” (P5)	Phone out of reach	Environmental strategy	Theme 5

The trustworthiness of the findings was established using Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria. Credibility was addressed through member checking, in which participants reviewed the researchers’ interpretation of their interview data to ensure that it accurately represented their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and through peer debriefing among the authors. Transferability was supported by thick description, including participant characteristics (Table 1) and direct quotations supporting each theme. Dependability and confirmability were supported by an audit trail consisting of the recordings, verified transcripts, coding records, and successive versions of the themes, which allowed analytic decisions to be traced back to the data.

This study received ethical approval/permission from [name of committee or institution] (reference number: [number]). Before collecting data, the researchers asked for informed consent from all participants. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, participation was voluntary, and participants had freedom to decide not to participate at any time. Their personal data were kept confidential; to ensure the privacy of the participants, all names were replaced with pseudonyms (P1–P5). Interview transcripts and recordings were safely stored and used only for research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing the interview data from the five participants, the researchers identified five main themes related to the three research questions, together with a cross-cutting awareness–control paradox. Each theme was discussed in relation to previous research, as well as Kahneman’s (1973) theory of attention, Sweller’s (1988) theory of cognitive load, and the self-regulation literature. Table 3 summarizes the themes, the research questions they address, and the participants whose accounts supported each theme. Quotations are presented verbatim, including grammatical errors, to preserve participants’ voices.

Table 3. Summary of themes, research questions, and supporting participants

Theme	RQ	Supporting participants
1. Students frequently experience difficulty maintaining their attention during English class	RQ1	5/5 (P1–P5)
2. Interactive activities and understanding the material help students stay focused	RQ2	5/5 (P1–P5)
3. TikTok and short videos are a major source of distraction in the classroom	RQ2	3/5 (P1, P4, P5); daily use reported by 5/5
4. Students' attention patterns appear to be affected by frequent TikTok use	RQ1, RQ2	4/5 (P1, P3, P4, P5)
5. Students use simple strategies to maintain their attention, but these are not always effective	RQ3	4/5 (P1, P3, P4, P5)
Cross-cutting: the awareness–control paradox	RQ3	3/5 (P1, P4, P5)

Students Frequently Experience Difficulty Maintaining Their Attention During English Class

Each participant reported that they often have trouble staying focused during English classes. This problem did not always happen from the beginning, but it usually becomes more obvious as the lesson goes on. This is shown by the following statements:

“I can focus at the beginning, but after a while, I usually get distracted.” (P1)

“My focus is okay from the beginning, but it slowly decreases when it comes to the end of the lesson.” (P2)

“Sometimes I can focus well, but other times I get distracted easily.” (P3)

“I can stay focused at the beginning of the class. But after some time, my concentration is distracted. I can't focus when it's in the middle of the lesson.” (P4)

“My ability for focus is so weak because I cannot focus. There are many moments when I struggle to stay focused, especially when the lesson goes for a long time.” (P5)

This finding can be interpreted through Kahneman's (1973) capacity model, which views attention as a limited resource whose allocation depends on the demands of the task and the salience of competing stimuli. It should be noted, however, that participants' accounts of declining focus in this theme did not refer to TikTok directly. A gradual decline of attention during long lectures is a well-documented pattern that occurs regardless of social media use (Bradbury, 2016; Wilson & Korn, 2007) and may also reflect lesson length, the pace of instruction, or fatigue. Participants' accounts in Themes 3 and 4 suggest that their TikTok habits may intensify this decline, but the present data do not allow a causal link to be established.

These findings are also consistent with Chen et al. (2023), who showed that short-video users have difficulty sustaining attention. Furthermore, Mona et al. (2026) found that excessive use of short videos is associated with poorer attention and self-control. Participants' accounts therefore suggest that difficulty in maintaining attention may not be only a matter of self-motivation but may also be related to habitual exposure to rapid digital content; this interpretation should be treated as tentative.

Interactive Activities and Understanding the Material Help Students Stay Focused

Although each participant said they had difficulty maintaining focus, they also said that certain situations helped them stay focused. Their ability to concentrate has been shown to improve when they engage in interactive activities, such as group discussions and tasks that require active participation. This is illustrated by the following quotations:

“When I feel included in the lesson, I can focus better.” (P1)

“I feel more active and interested because I could share ideas and listen to my friends is makes me more engaged to the class.” (P2)

“I also felt more focused when I understood the topic and participated in the discussion” (P3)

“I was very focused when we had a group discussion at an activity. It made me active and want to participate.” (P4)

"I felt very focused because I was directly involved in the activity. And I know I had to participate." (P5)

Sweller's (1988) cognitive load theory may help explain these findings. When students engage in interactive activities, their focus switches to the task they must complete together. This may reduce extraneous cognitive load and free working memory resources for processing the lesson content (Sweller et al., 2019). This is consistent with the results found by Haliti-Sylaj & Sadiku (2024), who stated that interactive learning methods can be an effective way to reduce the negative impact of short videos that distracts students. Lin et al. (2024) found that the design of learning activities greatly affects students' attention span. This interpretation is also consistent with the ICAP framework, which proposes that interactive engagement produces deeper learning than passive reception (Chi & Wylie, 2014), and with the view that interaction in the target language creates opportunities for learners to attend to input (Long, 1996).

Therefore, students' attention is not permanent. It depends significantly on the design and implementation of the lesson. To keep students focused, English language lecturer must create activities that encourage active participation, understanding of the material, and direct engagement.

TikTok and Short Videos Are a Major Source of Distraction in the Classroom

All participants recognized that TikTok has become part of their daily lives. P1 reported using it for about twelve hours a day, P2 for about three to four hours, P3 and P4 for about one to three hours, and P5 almost nonstop (see Table 1). This pattern of use indicates that TikTok has evolved from occasional entertainment into a daily habit. More importantly, TikTok also disrupts classroom learning. Three participants (P1, P4, and P5) explicitly described opening, or feeling the urge to open, TikTok during class, especially when they were bored. This is illustrated by the following statements (the first and third extracts were taken from different parts of P1's interview):

"I felt bored and curious about what was on TikTok, so I had the urge to open it." (P1)

"Without thinking too much, I opened TikTok." (P5)

"I always to open TikTok during class. I need something more interesting to look at. I wanted a quick escape from boredom situation." (P1)

"I open TikTok when we have a group presentation and my group is not in the presentation that day." (P4)

"Even though I know it can disturb my learning, sometimes the temptation feels so strong, and I can't hold it." (P5)

"When I see the notification that this content creator makes a new video, I have to watch it at that time." (P4)

These findings can be explained by Kahneman's (1973) theory of attention, which describes the use of TikTok in class as an example of competition for a limited resource. TikTok becomes the most engaging source because of its fast-paced and constantly updated content when classroom stimuli are not strong enough to keep students' attention. From the perspective of cognitive load theory (Sweller et al., 2019), thoughts about TikTok may add extraneous cognitive load even before the app is opened, which is consistent with evidence that the mere presence of one's smartphone reduces available cognitive capacity (Ward et al., 2017). P4's account of feeling compelled to watch new content as soon as a notification appears illustrates how such cues can capture attention. Thoughts about TikTok, the desire to view new content, and the need to check notifications end up consuming cognitive resources that should be used for learning.

These findings are consistent with those of Alfatih et al. (2024), who found that Indonesian students acknowledged that their attention was disrupted while studying because of their interaction with TikTok content. Chiossi et al. (2023) showed that quick changes in context while watching TikTok can distract students' ability to concentrate on subsequent tasks. These findings are also consistent with those of Martin et al. (2025), whose systematic review found that digital distractions from social media and device notifications significantly affect student engagement and concentration at institutions of higher education. It is particularly interesting that the distractions from TikTok in this study were not always passive. Some participants deliberately opened TikTok to escape boredom (P1), whereas others described opening it almost automatically

(“Without thinking too much”, P5). This suggests that TikTok use in class involves both deliberate and habitual responses to classroom boredom (Oulasvirta et al., 2012; Pekrun, 2006).

Students' Attention Patterns Appear to be Affected by Frequent TikTok Use

One of the most important findings of this study is that four of the five participants (P1, P3, P4, and P5) reported changes in their attention patterns that seemed to be connected to their TikTok consumption habits. They reported that their attention spans felt shorter, they were more intolerant of long explanations, and they found it harder to stay focused on long explanations compared to before they started using the app frequently. This is expressed in the following statements:

“I feel like my attention span is shorter now. before, I think I could stay focused on other thing for a longer time. But now, I get bored more quickly and I always feel like I needed something new or more interesting.” (P1)

“Before, I could focus more longer. But now, I get distracted more quickly.” (P4)

“After just a few minutes of listening, I already feel restless. It feels harder to stay patient with long explanations than it used to be.” (P5)

“It makes me used to short and fast content. TikTok makes it harder for me to concentrate for a long time.” (P3)

“TikTok gives fast entertainment, so regular classroom learning can feel slower by comparison.” (P5)

These findings can be interpreted through Kahneman's (1973) capacity model. Participants' accounts suggest that, after repeated exposure to fast-paced content, they came to expect a high level of stimulation and that their attention seemed to wane more quickly when classroom activities did not meet this expectation. This is an interpretation of participants' self-perceptions rather than a measured change in attentional capacity. From the perspective of cognitive load theory (Sweller et al., 2019), students accustomed to fast-paced content may experience longer, step-by-step explanations as more effortful, leaving less capacity for processing relevant information.

These findings are consistent with those of Ye et al. (2025), who describe this phenomenon as the “TikTok brain” and relate lower attention control to the intensity of short-form video use. Yan et al. (2024) conducted an EEG study to provide additional neurological evidence. They found that short-form video addiction is correlated negatively with executive control in the prefrontal cortex. Chiossi et al. (2023) state that the quickly changing content on TikTok can affect a person's ability to concentrate on other things, such as studying in class. It is important to note that this study is qualitative and does not aim to measure changes in attention statistically; the changes reported here are participants' retrospective self-perceptions.

Students Use Simple Strategies to Maintain Their Attention, but These Are Not Always Effective

Four participants (P1, P3, P4, and P5) described strategies to stay focused in class. These included environmental strategies (keeping the phone out of reach), cognitive strategies (taking notes), and motivational strategies (encouraging oneself to listen again). This is illustrated by the following statements:

“I usually try to keep my phone inside my bag, so I'm not tempted to open it. I also try to take notes while teacher is explaining, because writing helps me stay engaged.” (P5)

“I try to encourage myself to listen to the lesson again and listen to the lecture again. It doesn't always work.” (P1)

“I try to take notes, avoid using my phone, and actively participate in class.” (P3)

“I try to take notes and try to avoid my phone. I have to put my phone away from me if I want to long-last that focus inside of the lesson.” (P4)

“I think managing screen time is important to improve focus especially during learning.” (P4)

Nevertheless, the participants admitted that this approach is not always successful. This realization reveals something important. The problem they face is not only a matter of motivation or awareness but may also be related to habits formed through heavy TikTok consumption, and these are difficult to change through simple methods.

According to Kahneman's (1973) Theory of attention, the more often a person tries to refocus their attention, the more attention is directed toward that process, which means less time is left for studying the learning material. To help students avoid being overwhelmed by irrelevant thoughts, lecturers should engage them in active and relevant cognitive tasks, according to Sweller's (1988) cognitive load theory. However, the main challenge for students is how much this strategy depends on self-control.

Research on short-video use suggests that excessive use is associated with weaker self-control (Mona et al., 2026), and the dual-systems model explains how impulsive responses can override reflective goals when self-control is weakened (Hofmann et al., 2009). This highlights a paradox, as students need strong self-control to manage their attention, while heavy TikTok use appears to be associated with weaker self-control over time, creating a cycle that is difficult for them to break on their own. This means that students' efforts to manage their attention require support from lecturers and educational institutions.

The Awareness–Control Paradox

Across Themes 3 to 5, participants described a paradox: they were aware that TikTok disrupted their learning, yet they reported being unable to resist it. P5 captured this tension clearly: "Even though I know it can disturb my learning, sometimes the temptation feels so strong, and I can't hold it." Similarly, P4 explained that when a content creator posts a new video, "I have to watch it at that time," and P1 admitted that her attempts to refocus "doesn't always work."

The dual-systems model of self-control (Hofmann et al., 2009) offers a useful explanation. In this model, behavior results from the interaction between a reflective system, which holds long-term goals such as learning English, and an impulsive system, which responds quickly to rewarding cues. Participants' awareness reflects the reflective system, whereas the urge to open TikTok reflects the impulsive system. When classroom activities are perceived as boring, the value of the lesson decreases and off-task behavior becomes more likely (Eastwood et al., 2012; Pekrun, 2006), which may tip the balance toward the impulse. Moreover, repeated checking can become a habit that is triggered automatically by cues such as boredom or notifications (Oulasvirta et al., 2012; Wood & R nger, 2016), as reflected in P5's statement that she opened TikTok "without thinking too much." Because habits are cue-driven rather than intention-driven, awareness alone is unlikely to change them. This may explain why participants described strategies that rely mainly on willpower, such as encouraging oneself to listen again (P1), as less reliable than strategies that change the situation, such as keeping the phone in a bag or away from oneself (P4, P5) (Duckworth et al., 2016).

This paradox is the main contribution of the present study. Whereas previous quantitative studies have shown associations between short-video use and attention (Chen et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2025), the present findings illuminate how students themselves experience the tension between knowing and doing and why individual awareness is insufficient to resolve it.

Attention Across EFL Classroom Activities

Participants' accounts also indicate that attention difficulties were not evenly distributed across English classroom activities. Difficulties were most often associated with extended, lecturer-centered explanations that required sustained listening: P5 reported feeling restless "after just a few minutes of listening" and found it "harder to stay patient with long explanations," while P1 described having to "listen to the lesson again and listen to the lecture again." In contrast, activities that required learners to speak and exchange ideas in English, such as group discussions, were described as the most engaging (P2, P3, P4, P5). Receptive phases of interactive activities also created opportunities for distraction: P4 opened TikTok when her group was not presenting, that is, when she was only expected to listen to other groups' presentations. For EFL learners, this pattern matters because second language listening places high demands on working memory and attention (Goh & Vandergrift, 2022), and learners must notice linguistic features in the input for learning to occur (Schmidt, 1990). Lapses of attention during listening-based activities may therefore reduce opportunities for language uptake. Because the interview guide did not ask separately about each language skill, however, these skill-specific patterns should be regarded as preliminary.

Implications

Pedagogically, the findings suggest that EFL lecturers can support students' attention by dividing extended explanations and listening input into shorter segments followed by brief interactive tasks, using structured group discussions in which every student has a defined role, including during other groups' presentations, and integrating short comprehension checks. Because awareness alone does not change habitual

checking, lecturers and institutions may also help students develop situational self-regulation strategies, such as agreed phone-free periods or keeping phones out of reach during class, rather than relying only on appeals to willpower (Duckworth et al., 2016; Zimmerman, 2002).

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, the sample consisted of five female students from a single study program, which limits the transferability of the findings. Second, participants were selected partly because they reported attention difficulties, which may have biased the data toward negative experiences. Third, the interviews were relatively short and conducted in English, the participants' second language, which may have limited the depth of some accounts. Fourth, the data were based on self-reports, including retrospective perceptions of changes in attention and self-estimated TikTok use. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, including male students and students from other programs, combine interviews with classroom observation or objective screen-time data, and use mixed-methods or longitudinal designs to examine how short-form video habits and attention in EFL classes develop over time.

CONCLUSION

This study explored Indonesian EFL university students' experiences of attention in English classes in the short-form video era. Regarding the first research question, participants described attention that was adequate at the beginning of lessons but declined as lessons progressed, and most perceived their attention spans as shorter than before their frequent TikTok use. Regarding the second research question, long, listening-based explanations and boredom disrupted their attention, and TikTok was the main source of in-class distraction, whereas interactive activities and understanding of the material supported their focus. Regarding the third research question, students relied on simple strategies such as keeping their phones away and taking notes, but these were not always effective. The main contribution of this study is the identification of an awareness–control paradox: students recognized TikTok's negative impact but could not regulate their use on their own, suggesting that attention problems cannot be addressed by students' initiative alone. EFL lecturers and institutions should therefore design more interactive and varied learning activities and support students' self-regulation. Given the small, female-only sample and self-reported data, future research should use larger samples and mixed-methods designs.

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