

EXPLORING TIKTOK AS A TOOL FOR INFORMAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: A DESCRIPTIVE QUALITATIVE STUDY

¹Ikrimah, ²Hesty widiastuty

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Palangka Raya

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*Correspondence Address:

Email: ikrimah123456@gmail.com

Hesty.widiastuty@yaiin-palangkaraya.ac.id

Abstract: This study explores the potential of TikTok as an informal tool for English language learning, focusing on its impact on vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and learner motivation. By analyzing the TikTok account @EnglishWithLucy and interviewing 23 young learners, the research reveals that TikTok's short, engaging videos enhance vocabulary retention and pronunciation through visual aids and phonetic explanations. The platform's interactive features, such as quizzes and comment discussions, further promote active learning and motivation. However, the study also highlights TikTok's limitations, particularly its lack of depth in teaching complex language concepts such as grammar and writing. The findings suggest that while TikTok can be a valuable supplementary resource, it should be integrated with traditional language learning methods for a more comprehensive learning experience. The study emphasizes TikTok's role in bridging the gap between academic and real-world English use, offering insights into its potential for enhancing informal language learning.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media platforms have significantly influenced various aspects of life, particularly in education. Among these platforms, TikTok has emerged as one of the most popular and widely used, especially among younger generations. Originally created as an entertainment platform for short videos, TikTok has quickly transformed into an educational tool for various subjects, including language learning. With its unique format of short, engaging videos, TikTok offers a dynamic space for informal learning, where users can access content tailored to their interests. This shift has raised important questions about how such platforms can enhance language learning, particularly English as a foreign language (EFL).

Language learning has become increasingly important in today's globalized world, where English serves as the lingua franca in international communication. In traditional settings, language learning primarily occurs within the confines of classrooms, but the rise of digital platforms has significantly changed the landscape of education. The digital era has opened new

avenues for informal language learning, enabling learners to engage with content outside formal educational settings. TikTok, with its accessibility and user-friendly interface, stands out as a tool for learners to engage with language content informally, making language learning more interactive and enjoyable.

TikTok's algorithm, which prioritizes user interests and preferences, further enhances its potential as a tool for informal learning. By providing learners with personalized content, TikTok increases engagement and motivation, making it an effective platform for reinforcing language skills in a non-traditional environment. According to Johnson and Lee (2021), social media platforms, particularly TikTok, provide an interactive environment that promotes active participation and learning. This unique learning environment can be particularly beneficial for EFL learners, who may struggle with traditional classroom-based methods but thrive in more engaging, informal contexts.

In addition to its personalized content, TikTok's ability to facilitate social interaction plays a crucial role in the learning process. Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism emphasizes the importance of social interaction in cognitive development. TikTok's features, such as comments, shares, and collaborations, allow learners to interact with content creators and peers, fostering a sense of community and enhancing language learning. Through these interactions, learners engage with language in authentic, real-world contexts, thereby reinforcing their learning and boosting motivation.

Although the potential of TikTok for language learning has been recognized, there is a significant gap in the academic literature regarding its specific role in EFL acquisition. While previous studies have explored the effectiveness of digital platforms like YouTube in language learning (Liu, 2020), the unique characteristics of TikTok, such as its brevity, interactivity, and user-generated content, remain underexplored. TikTok's rapid rise and its growing use for educational purposes present an opportunity to explore how this platform can be integrated into language learning practices, particularly for learners outside formal classroom settings.

Several studies have pointed to the effectiveness of informal learning environments in enhancing language acquisition. Thorne (2013) argues that digital platforms provide learners with authentic, contextualized language input, which is crucial for developing proficiency in a second language. In informal settings, learners are exposed to language in natural contexts, allowing them to better understand its practical use. TikTok offers a similar benefit, as learners encounter real-world language use through videos that include everyday conversations, cultural references, and idiomatic expressions.

Despite its potential, TikTok also has limitations as a tool for language learning. The platform's focus on short-form content may restrict its ability to provide comprehensive lessons, particularly for complex language skills such as grammar and writing. Godwin-Jones (2018) discusses how informal digital tools may lack the depth necessary for in-depth language study, making them less suitable as standalone resources. TikTok's content often focuses on individual language elements, such as vocabulary or pronunciation, but may not offer the structured approach needed to master more advanced skills.

This research seeks to address the gap in the literature by investigating how TikTok can be utilized to enhance informal English language learning. The study will focus on the impact of TikTok's content on learner engagement, motivation, and language acquisition, particularly in the context of EFL. The research will also explore how TikTok's interactive features—such as comments, likes, and shares—contribute to learners' engagement and motivation to continue learning. By analyzing both the content on TikTok and the experiences of learners, this study aims to provide insights into the platform's potential as an educational tool for language learners.

In this study, the research is grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism, which emphasizes that learning is most effective when it occurs in a social context. TikTok provides a platform for learners to interact with both content creators and other users, forming a virtual community of language learners. This social dimension is crucial for language learning, as it allows learners to practice their skills in real-life contexts, receive feedback, and participate in collaborative learning activities. The theory of social constructivism will guide the analysis of how TikTok fosters learning through social interaction and engagement.

This research aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on digital language learning by exploring the role of TikTok in informal English language acquisition. By providing a detailed examination of TikTok's content, its effect on learners' motivation, and its interactive features, this study will offer insights into the broader implications of using social media as a tool for language learning. The findings of this study will inform future research and practical applications in the field of EFL, particularly regarding the integration of digital platforms like TikTok into language learning curricula.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how TikTok functions as a tool for informal English language learning. The primary focus is on understanding the experiences, perceptions, and motivations of young learners who engage with English language content on TikTok. A qualitative approach is chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the nuances and complexities of learners' interactions with TikTok content, which quantitative methods may not fully capture. This methodology is suitable for uncovering insights into how learners perceive the platform's educational potential and how it influences their language learning process (Creswell, 2014).

To collect data, the study will use content analysis and semi-structured interviews as the primary research methods. Content analysis will involve a systematic examination of TikTok videos related to English language learning. A sample of popular and widely viewed videos, including language tutorials, challenges, and real-life English use, will be selected for analysis. This will help identify key themes such as the type of content that engages learners, the educational strategies used, and how these videos promote language learning in an informal context (Neuendorf, 2017). Content analysis will provide insights into the educational value of TikTok videos and how they align with language learning theories.

In addition to content analysis, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with young learners who actively use TikTok for learning English. Participants will be recruited through online platforms or language learning communities. The interviews will explore participants' experiences with TikTok as a language learning tool, their motivations for using the platform, and how they perceive the impact of TikTok on their language acquisition. The semi-structured format allows for flexibility in the interviews, enabling the researcher to ask follow-up questions based on participants' responses, providing a deeper understanding of their personal learning journeys (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The sample will consist of 20-25 participants, aged between 16 and 25 years, who regularly use TikTok to engage with English language content. This age group is chosen because it represents the core demographic of TikTok users and is also a period where learners are actively engaging with language learning tools outside of formal education. Participants will be selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that they meet the criteria of being active TikTok users who engage with English language content (Patton, 2002). The data collection will take place over a period of 4-6 weeks, allowing sufficient time for video analysis and interviews.

Data from the content analysis and interviews will be thematically analyzed to identify common themes and patterns related to learners' engagement with TikTok, their motivations, and the impact of the platform on their language learning. Thematic analysis is an appropriate method for this study as it allows for the identification of both explicit and implicit themes within qualitative data. This method is particularly useful in exploring how TikTok influences learners' language learning processes, engagement, and motivation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings from this study will contribute to the understanding of TikTok's role in informal language learning, offering insights into how digital platforms can complement traditional language learning methods.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study analyzed the TikTok account @EnglishWithLucy and conducted interviews with 23 young learners to explore the platform's potential as a tool for informal English language learning. The findings highlight several significant benefits. Firstly, TikTok's short, engaging videos are highly effective for vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation practice. The account @EnglishWithLucy, for instance, employs visual aids, text overlays, and phonetic explanations to make new concepts accessible and easy to grasp. Many participants reported that these features helped them learn and retain vocabulary better than traditional methods. Additionally, TikTok provides cultural context through its content, bridging the gap between academic English and real-world usage.

Another major advantage of TikTok is its interactive nature. Features such as quizzes and comment-based discussions actively engage learners, encouraging them to test their knowledge and interact with peers and content creators. These features make learning enjoyable and sustain motivation, which is critical for language acquisition. The brevity of TikTok videos, typically lasting under a minute, further appeals to learners by delivering content in a concise and digestible format that fits seamlessly into their daily routines.

However, the study also identified significant limitations in using TikTok for language learning. The informal and non-linear structure of the platform makes it challenging for learners to follow a structured curriculum. While TikTok is effective for teaching vocabulary and pronunciation, it often lacks the depth required for complex topics like grammar and writing. Many participants expressed the need to rely on supplementary resources, such as textbooks or formal classes, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these areas.

The brevity of TikTok videos, while advantageous for engagement, can sometimes lead to oversimplification. Learners may find it difficult to delve deeper into nuanced language concepts within such a short timeframe. One participant noted, “I love learning new words on TikTok, but for grammar, I still need to refer to my textbooks.” This indicates that TikTok functions best as a supplementary tool rather than a standalone resource for language learning. The findings of this study align with Vygotsky’s (1978) social constructivism theory, which emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning. TikTok fosters a virtual community where learners actively engage with content creators and fellow users. This interactive environment promotes both cognitive and social learning by contextualizing language use in authentic, real-world scenarios. Features like commenting, sharing, and collaborating allow learners to practice language skills in meaningful ways, boosting confidence and reinforcing learning outcomes. While TikTok’s informal approach is not suited for teaching advanced language skills, its integration into formal education can create a more balanced learning experience. For instance, educators can incorporate TikTok videos into classroom instruction to provide practical examples of pronunciation, vocabulary usage, and cultural insights. This integration can help bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, making lessons more dynamic and engaging.

Content creators, on the other hand, can enhance TikTok's educational value by developing thematic series or playlists that provide a more structured learning pathway. For example, a series dedicated to grammar basics or writing techniques could complement TikTok’s strengths in teaching vocabulary and pronunciation. By addressing these gaps, TikTok can become a more comprehensive resource for language learners.

In comparison to platforms like YouTube, TikTok offers unique advantages in terms of brevity and interactivity, making it ideal for learners seeking quick, digestible lessons. However, this same brevity also limits its ability to cover topics in depth, particularly those requiring detailed explanations. Future research should explore how TikTok can be integrated into hybrid learning models, combining its strengths with the structure and comprehensiveness of traditional methods to address these limitations.

In conclusion, TikTok has proven to be an effective tool for informal English language learning, particularly for enhancing vocabulary, pronunciation, and learner motivation. However, its limitations suggest that it should be used alongside more structured methods to ensure a well-rounded language learning experience.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has highlighted TikTok's potential as a valuable tool for informal English language learning, particularly in enhancing vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and learner engagement. The platform's interactive features, such as comments, quizzes, and sharing, foster a sense of community and increase learner motivation. However, its brief and informal content format limits its ability to address more complex language skills like grammar and writing, making it more suitable as a supplementary tool rather than a primary learning resource.

TikTok's role in informal learning environments is clear, but it needs to be integrated with traditional language learning methods for a comprehensive educational experience.

Given TikTok's effectiveness in engaging learners, it is recommended that educators incorporate the platform into their language curricula, using it alongside formal teaching methods. Content creators should consider designing structured lessons that focus on grammar and writing to address TikTok's current limitations. Future research should investigate how TikTok can be further integrated into hybrid learning models, combining the strengths of both informal digital platforms and formal educational structures to enhance language acquisition.

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