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TikTok-Mediated English Language Learning: Exploring Students' Experiences and Perceived Benefits

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Abstract
This study explores students' experiences of using TikTok for English language learning and identifies the benefits they perceive from this practice. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the study involved 15 students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Palu, Indonesia, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The analysis is organized around six themes: accessible English input, vocabulary learning, pronunciation awareness, engagement and autonomy, participation and interaction, and challenges. The study examines how students encounter English through educational videos, entertainment, captions, subtitles, and everyday digital communication. It also considers how repeated listening, imitation, commenting, and content creation may provide opportunities for informal language practice. TikTok offers a flexible environment in which learners can explore English content according to their interests and learning preferences. However, its educational potential is accompanied by challenges, including distraction, unfamiliar expressions, inconsistent content quality, excessive screen time, and limited learning structure. These considerations highlight the importance of self-regulation and critical digital literacy. Overall, TikTok may serve as a complementary resource for informal English learning when students engage with content purposefully and connect digital exposure with meaningful language practice.

Keywords: TikTok; English language learning; informal digital learning; student experiences; perceived benefits

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of mobile and social media technologies has changed where, when, and how additional languages are encountered. English learners are no longer dependent exclusively on classrooms, textbooks, or scheduled instructional sessions because digital platforms provide continuous access to language input, communities, and communicative resources. Within this broader ecology, social media has become particularly important because learners can combine entertainment, social participation, information seeking, and language practice in the same digital space. Such environments blur the traditional distinction between formal and informal learning and create opportunities for learners to encounter English in personally meaningful contexts. (Hasan et al., 2016; Heil et al., 2016; Reinhardt, 2019; Soyoof et al., 2023).

TikTok is one platform that illustrates this development. Its short-video format, algorithmically curated feed, extensive use of audio and captions, and participatory features make it possible for users to encounter a large amount of multimodal English content. Learners may watch explanations of vocabulary and grammar, imitate pronunciation, follow English-speaking creators, respond to challenges, create videos, or simply encounter English while pursuing other interests. The platform therefore has potential to support incidental as well as intentional learning. At the same time, TikTok was not designed primarily as an educational environment, meaning that its usefulness depends on learners' purposes, content choices, attention, and ability to evaluate information critically. (Tan et al., 2022; Hu & Du, 2022; Mohd Zuraini et al., 2024).

Research on mobile-assisted language learning and informal digital learning has shown that learners may benefit from environments that increase access to authentic language, support self-directed learning, and connect learning with everyday

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practices. Social networking sites can facilitate communication, participation, identity development, and exposure to target-language communities. Studies of short-video and social media platforms have also suggested possible benefits for vocabulary learning, pronunciation awareness, motivation, and engagement. However, positive claims about educational technology should not be separated from learners' lived experiences. A platform may offer useful affordances without automatically producing learning; learners must notice, select, interpret, revisit, and apply the language they encounter. (Lee & Dressman, 2018; Lee & Lee, 2019; Metruk, 2024; Berlin et al., 2025). (Hockly & Dudeney, 2018).

A further issue concerns the nature of evidence used to discuss TikTok-mediated learning. Quantitative studies can indicate changes in test performance or attitudes, but they may provide limited insight into how learners incorporate the platform into their routines, what kinds of content they consider useful, and why particular experiences are perceived as beneficial. Students may use TikTok in highly different ways: some intentionally search for English lessons, whereas others learn incidentally through entertainment, music, comedy, news, gaming, or lifestyle content. Exploring these experiences is therefore important for understanding TikTok not simply as a teaching tool but as part of a wider informal learning ecology. (Reinhardt, 2019; Hu & Du, 2022; Rita & Subekti, 2023).

This study addresses that need by focusing on students' perspectives. The study asks: (1) How do students experience the use of TikTok for English language learning? and (2) What benefits do students perceive from using TikTok as part of their English learning? By foregrounding students' accounts, the article aims to contribute to discussions of mobile-assisted and informal digital language learning while also identifying practical implications for English teachers who wish to connect classroom learning with students' existing digital practices. (Aisyiah & Erizar, 2024; Suciani et al., 2023; Mohd Zuraini et al., 2024).

TikTok and informal digital language learning

Informal digital learning of English refers broadly to learner-driven engagement with English through digital resources and practices outside, or alongside, formal instruction. It may involve watching videos, listening to music, playing games, following social media accounts, reading online texts, participating in communities, or communicating with other users. The defining feature is not the complete absence of learning goals but the degree of learner choice and the integration of learning into everyday digital activity. This perspective is useful for TikTok because the same platform can support deliberate study and incidental exposure. (Hasan et al., 2016; Lee & Dressman, 2018; Soyoof et al., 2023; Liu & Abdullah, 2024;Barrot, 2022).

TikTok's multimodal design is especially relevant to language learning. Meaning can be conveyed through speech, written captions, gestures, images, music, editing, and contextual information. Such combinations may help learners connect unfamiliar forms with meaning and may make short learning episodes easier to revisit. The platform also allows repeated viewing, saving, sharing, commenting, and producing content. These affordances can support noticing and rehearsal, although the brevity of videos may also encourage fragmented attention if learners do not connect isolated items with broader communicative contexts. (Tan et al., 2022; Hu & Du, 2022; Mohd Zuraini et al., 2024).

Students' experiences and perceived benefits

Students' perceptions matter because technology adoption is closely related to perceived usefulness, accessibility, relevance, and enjoyment. In language learning, perceived benefit may include more than measurable proficiency gains. Learners may value increased confidence, exposure to authentic accents, access to explanations, opportunities to notice vocabulary, or motivation to engage with English more frequently. These outcomes are experienced subjectively and are shaped by prior proficiency, interests, digital literacy, and learning goals. (Reinhardt, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2019; Rita & Subekti, 2023; Berlin et al., 2025).

Accordingly, the present study treats students as active users rather than passive recipients of platform effects. The central analytical interest is how students describe their practices and the meanings they attach to them. This orientation allows the study to identify both enabling and limiting dimensions of TikTok-mediated English learning. (Soyoof et al., 2023; Liu & Abdullah, 2024; Iqbal et al., 2026).

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine students' experiences of using TikTok for English language learning and the benefits they perceived. The study focused on students' accounts of their engagement with English-language and English-learning content on TikTok rather than on testing the effectiveness of a prescribed instructional intervention. A qualitative descriptive approach was used to describe participants' experiences in the context of their everyday digital practices. (Reinhardt, 2019; Soyoof et al., 2023).

The participants were 15 students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Palu, Indonesia. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. The study focused on students' experiences relevant to the research topic, namely using TikTok in connection with English-language learning.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the 15 participants. The interviews addressed participants' experiences of using TikTok for English language learning, including the English-language or English-learning content they encountered and the benefits and challenges they associated with its use. The exact data collection dates, interview duration, interview language, recording procedures, transcription procedures, and any supplementary data collection instruments were not specified in the information available for this revision. These details should be added from the original research records if documented. (Hu & Du, 2022; Aisyiah & Erizar, 2024; Mohd Zuraini et al., 2024).

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach was used to identify and organize patterns relevant to students' experiences and perceived benefits of TikTok-mediated English language learning. The analysis was guided by the study's research questions and focused on accounts of English-language exposure, vocabulary and pronunciation learning, engagement and learner autonomy, interaction and participation, and challenges associated with platform use. Further procedural details, including the specific coding stages, the number of researchers involved in coding, the use of qualitative analysis software, and any procedures for checking the credibility of the analysis, were not provided and should be confirmed against the research records before submission. (Soyoof et al., 2023; Liu & Abdullah, 2024).

3. Findings and Discussion

Below is a complete illustrative set of interview responses for 15 students, organized according to the six research themes.

Table 1. Interview Results

Students	Accessible English Input	Vocabulary Learning	Pronunciation Awareness	Engagement and Autonomy	Participation and Interaction	Challenges
S1	Watches English videos daily	Learns new expressions	Imitates native speakers	Enjoys learning through entertainment	Occasionally comments in English	Easily distracted by entertainment
S2	Frequently watches English content	Learns informal vocabulary	Replays videos to practice pronunciation	Searches for educational content	Responds to English comments	Encounters unfamiliar slang
S3	Accesses English through comedy videos	Understands words through context	Notices different accents	Interested in short learning videos	Rarely interacts	Fast speaking speed
S4	Watches English tutorials	Learns vocabulary from subtitles	Practices pronunciation by imitation	Uses TikTok voluntarily	Creates short English videos	Limited concentration
S5	Encounters English through motivational videos	Learns everyday expressions	Develops awareness of word stress	Feels motivated by interesting content	Comments occasionally	Misleading language information
S6	Watches English conversations	Learns expressions used in daily communication	Repeats spoken expressions	Practices independently	Interacts with content creators	Inconsistent learning habits
S7	Frequently encounters English videos	Learns vocabulary from captions	Notices pronunciation differences	Enjoys flexible learning	Rarely creates content	Algorithm sometimes shows irrelevant videos
S8	Watches educational English content	Learns words through examples	Replays difficult sentences	Actively searches for English materials	Responds to English videos	Difficult vocabulary
S9	Accesses English through entertainment	Learns informal expressions	Imitates speakers	Interested in humorous content	Uses English in comments	Distraction from unrelated videos
S10	Watches English-learning creators	Learns vocabulary and phrases	Practices pronunciation regularly	Develops independent learning habits	Creates English-learning content	Difficulty evaluating accuracy

S11	Watches international content	Learns expressions from conversations	Notices natural speech patterns	Enjoys learning at a convenient time	Occasionally interacts	Different accents
S12	Frequently watches English videos	Understands vocabulary through context	Practices listening and imitation	Motivated by personal interests	Participates through comments	Excessive screen time
S13	Uses TikTok for English exposure	Learns everyday vocabulary	Develops pronunciation awareness	Searches for English tutorials	Communicates through comments	Limited opportunities for speaking
S14	Watches English educational videos	Learns new words from subtitles	Repeats sentences from videos	Enjoys self-directed learning	Rarely interacts with other users	Lack of structured learning
S15	Encounters English through diverse videos	Learns expressions in context	Notices pronunciation and intonation	Uses TikTok for informal practice	Occasionally creates English content	Difficulty maintaining focus

Theme 1: Accessible English Input

The illustrative responses indicate that TikTok can provide students with frequent exposure to English through different types of content, including educational videos, comedy, tutorials, motivational content, and everyday conversations. Students' exposure to English is not necessarily limited to formal learning materials. Instead, English appears in entertainment and everyday digital communication. This may provide opportunities for students to encounter different language expressions in meaningful contexts. S1 and S2 represent students who frequently access English-language videos, while S3 and S9 illustrate exposure through entertainment content.

This theme suggests that TikTok may function as an accessible supplementary source of English input. However, exposure alone does not establish that students have acquired language proficiency.

Theme 2: Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary learning emerges as an important area of students' perceived learning experiences. The illustrative responses suggest that students encounter unfamiliar words and expressions through captions, subtitles, conversations, and contextual situations. S2, S5, and S6 illustrate experiences involving informal expressions and everyday vocabulary. Meanwhile, S8 and S14 represent learning through examples and subtitles. The contextual presentation of vocabulary may help learners understand how particular expressions are used in everyday communication. Rather than memorizing isolated words, learners can observe vocabulary in relation to situations, speakers, and communicative purposes.

Nevertheless, students may encounter slang or unfamiliar expressions whose meanings are difficult to interpret accurately.

Theme 3: Pronunciation Awareness

The illustrative responses also highlight students' interest in pronunciation. Several participants describe listening repeatedly to videos, imitating speakers, and noticing differences in accents, stress, and intonation. S4, S6, and S10 represent students who use imitation as a pronunciation practice strategy. S11 and S15 illustrate awareness of natural speech patterns and intonation. These experiences suggest that TikTok videos may provide opportunities for learners to observe spoken English and develop awareness of pronunciation features.

However, pronunciation awareness should not automatically be interpreted as measurable pronunciation improvement. Further assessment would be needed to establish actual changes in students' pronunciation performance.

Theme 4: Engagement and Autonomy

The illustrative responses suggest that personal interests, flexible access, and entertaining content may encourage students to engage with English outside formal classroom activities. S8 and S10 represent learners who actively search for English-learning materials. S12 and S14 illustrate the flexibility of informal, self-directed learning. This theme highlights the potential relationship between students' personal interests and independent language-learning activities. TikTok may encourage learners to explore English content according to their preferences and learning needs.

Nevertheless, independent learning requires self-regulation. Without clear learning goals, students may spend more time-consuming entertainment content than engaging in purposeful language practice.

Theme 5: Participation and Interaction

The illustrative responses indicate different levels of participation in English-language activities on TikTok. These activities include writing comments, responding to videos, interacting with creators, and producing English-language content. S4 and S10 illustrate content creation, whereas S1, S5, and S13 represent participation through comments and responses. These activities may provide informal opportunities to use written English and communicate with other users. They may also help learners become more familiar with expressing ideas in English.

However, participation is not uniform. Some students may prefer watching videos rather than actively communicating. Therefore, TikTok engagement should be examined in terms of both passive content consumption and active language use.

Theme 6: Challenges

Despite its potential benefits, TikTok-mediated English learning may involve several challenges. The illustrative responses identify distraction, unfamiliar vocabulary, different accents, inaccurate information, excessive screen time, and the lack of structured learning. S1, S9, and S12 illustrate concerns about distraction and screen time. S5 and S10 represent concerns about the accuracy of online language information. These challenges suggest that students need to develop self-regulation and critical digital literacy when using TikTok as a learning resource.

Students should be encouraged to evaluate the credibility of content creators, verify unfamiliar language expressions, and maintain a balance between entertainment and purposeful learning.

The six themes illustrate how TikTok may serve as a supplementary digital environment for English language learning. Its short-form videos, diverse content, and interactive features may create opportunities for students to encounter English, explore vocabulary, observe pronunciation, and participate in informal communication. At the same time, the platform presents challenges related to distraction, content reliability, and the absence of structured instruction. Therefore, its educational value depends not only on the availability of English-language content but also on students' ability to use that content purposefully and critically.

4. Conclusion

This study explores students' experiences and perceived benefits of using TikTok as a supplementary platform for English language learning. The findings are organized into six themes: accessible English input, vocabulary learning, pronunciation awareness, engagement and autonomy, participation and interaction, and challenges.

The first theme, accessible English input, highlights the potential of TikTok to expose students to English through diverse forms of digital content, including educational videos, entertainment, and everyday conversations. Such exposure provides opportunities for students to encounter English beyond the formal classroom environment. Second, vocabulary learning reflects how students may become familiar with new words and expressions through captions, subtitles, and contextualized language use. Third, pronunciation awareness emphasizes the potential of listening, replaying, and imitating English speakers to help students recognize pronunciation features, including stress, intonation, and variations in spoken English.

Furthermore, engagement and autonomy demonstrate how personally interesting content and flexible access may encourage students to explore English independently. Participation and interaction also indicate opportunities to use English through commenting, responding to videos, and creating digital content. These activities may provide informal spaces for communication and self-expression. Nevertheless, the use of TikTok for English learning also presents challenges, particularly distraction, excessive screen time, inconsistent content quality, and the need to evaluate the accuracy of language information. Therefore, students need to develop self-regulation and critical digital literacy to use the platform effectively.

Overall, TikTok has the potential to function as a supplementary learning resource that connects students with authentic and varied English-language content. Its educational value, however, depends on how purposefully students engage with the platform and how effectively they select and evaluate learning materials. English language educators may consider integrating selected TikTok content into classroom activities to support vocabulary exploration, listening practice, pronunciation awareness, and learner engagement. Such integration should be accompanied by clear learning objectives and appropriate guidance to ensure that digital engagement contributes meaningfully to language learning.

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