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Students' Perspectives on the Use of Tiktok as a Medium to Increase Motivation and English Speaking Skills

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Abstract

This study explores students' perspectives on using TikTok as a medium to improve motivation and English-speaking skills in the context of informal learning. Drawing on Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory, Media Wealth Theory, and Keller's ARCS Motivation Model, this study examines how educational content from influencers contributes to the learning process in the digital age. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach through in-depth interviews with students who actively use TikTok to learn English. Data was analyzed using an interactive model that included data reduction, data presentation, and a conclusion drawn. The findings show that students independently choose educational content that increases their learning autonomy and intrinsic motivation. TikTok's multimodal and short-form characteristics have proven effective in improving vocabulary mastery, pronunciation accuracy, and speaking confidence through daily conversation simulations. Additionally, a relaxed digital environment helps lower psychological barriers, such as anxiety when speaking. However, there are challenges, including a lack of real, practical opportunities in a formal classroom environment. Overall, students rate TikTok as a very promising add-on tool for supporting English-speaking proficiency outside the traditional classroom.

Keywords: TikTok; Motivation; Speaking Skills; Digital Learning; Educational Influencers

INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of digital technology in the 21st century has significantly changed the landscape of language acquisition, particularly in mastering English as a global lingua franca. In this era, the ability to communicate orally, i.e., the ability to speak English, has become the main benchmark of language proficiency (Egitim & Harumi, 2025). According to Greenhow & Robelia (2009), social media platforms have evolved into powerful tools for informal learning, allowing students to access linguistic knowledge beyond conventional classroom settings. This digital shift emphasizes that modern language learning is no longer limited to textbooks but is now driven by interactive and communicative engagement (Shao et al., 2025).

One platform that represents this transformation is TikTok, which has gained rapid popularity among younger generations. Although created for entertainment, TikTok is now a potential educational medium. According to Mayer (2009), multimodal learning, which combines text, audio, and visual input, can improve students' ability to absorb information. TikTok supports this through features such as trending voices, visual effects, and interactive functions such as duets and stitches, which are very useful for practicing speaking skills through imitation and repetition. As emphasized by Moreno & Mayer (1999), activating dual processing channels through auditory and visual elements contributes to deeper cognitive learning.

Despite their potential, many students still struggle with low motivation and anxiety when practicing their English speaking skills in a formal setting. Traditional methods often fail to provide the dynamic, real-world context students need to feel confident in verbal communication. There is an urgent need to understand how informal platforms like TikTok, driven by educational influencers, can lower those psychological barriers. As Klug et al. (2023) argue that an informal and relevant influencer approach can foster intrinsic motivation, but the specific impact on how students perceive their speaking progress through this medium is still a crucial question.

Theoretical and empirical evidence show a strong link between digital engagement and language reinforcement. Motivation, as highlighted by Dörnyei (2001), plays an important role in second language acquisition, while the comprehensible input theory from Krashen (1982) argues that language acquisition increases when learners are exposed to meaningful context, something TikTok provides through short, concise dialogue. Recent studies support this claim; for example, Susanto & Suparmi (2024) found that EFL students who interacted with TikTok reported a significant increase in motivation. In addition, Zhang et al. (2022) shows that short-form videos positively contribute to vocabulary development and learning pleasure, which are fundamental components of fluent speaking.

However, most current studies focus more on how TikTok is integrated into structured, teacher-guided classroom settings. There is a lack of research on self-directed engagement, in which students independently follow influencers to improve their speaking performance. The extent to which students consciously use TikTok as a tool to practice English pronunciation, intonation, and conversation in an informal digital environment remains underexplored. This study seeks to fill this gap by focusing on students' perspectives related to autonomous learning. In the context of modern learners who are digital natives, TikTok has become a daily consumption habit. Students are increasingly exposed to English TikTokers who provide short lessons on slang, pronunciation, and everyday conversation. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in environments where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), as students often lack organic opportunities to practice speaking outside of school. Understanding how these students use TikTok independently is essential to bridging the gap between social media entertainment and academic skill-building.

The purpose of this study is to explore students' perspectives and experiences regarding the use of TikTok as a medium to improve their motivation and English speaking skills. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate how students respond to the informal nature of influencer content and whether they felt an increase in their confidence and verbal fluency. By reviewing these perceptions, this study seeks to identify the motivational factors and practical benefits of self-exposure to TikTok. Ultimately, these findings are expected to provide insight into how digital platforms can be effectively leveraged to support English-speaking proficiency beyond traditional classrooms.

METHOD

To reveal students' motivation in using TikTok as a tool for learning English, this study employs a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach is selected because the research focuses on an in-depth exploration of students' experiences, perceptions, and both internal and external drives that consciously motivate them to utilize TikTok as a learning medium (Minichiello & Kottler, 2009). With this approach, the researcher can understand the meaning behind students' actions rather than merely measuring their behavior quantitatively.

The subjects of this study are three university students who actively and intentionally use TikTok to improve their English skills. The research is conducted at IAIN Curup, chosen for considerations of accessibility, institutional relevance, and the context of foreign language learning in the digital era. Data collection is carried out through two main techniques. First, in-depth interviews are conducted to explore students' personal experiences in accessing and using TikTok content as a learning medium. Through these interviews, the researcher investigates their reasons for choosing TikTok, how they absorb material from the platform, and the motivational factors involved in their learning process. Second, documentation data is collected in the form of screenshots, notes, or viewing histories of TikTok content specifically used by the subjects for English learning purposes. This documentation aims to strengthen the interview data and provide concrete examples of content deemed useful by the students.

All collected data are analyzed using the interactive model by Miles & Huberman (1994), which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction stage, the researcher selects and filters data based on its relevance to the research focus. Then, the data are presented in a descriptive narrative and, when necessary, in tables or matrices to organize the information. Finally, the researcher identifies patterns or themes that emerge during the analysis and verifies them by cross-checking data sources.
To ensure data validity, source and method triangulation techniques are employed. Interview results are compared with documentation and indirect observation of students' learning activities. Additionally, member checking is conducted by asking participants to review interview results to confirm that the interpreted data accurately represent their experiences and views. Through this approach and these techniques, the study is expected to provide a holistic understanding of how TikTok contributes to building students' motivation to improve their speaking ability in today's digital era.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This section presents research findings based on in-depth interviews with three respondents regarding their perceptions of using TikTok to improve motivation and English speaking skills. The analysis is carried out through the three stages of the Miles & Huberman (1994) model: data reduction to focus on essential information, presentation of data in narrative form, and a conclusion drawn.

A. Digital Integration and Language Input Frequency

Digital transformation in the language-learning landscape has shifted the paradigm from a formal, classroom-based approach to a more informal, integrated, and technology-based learning experience. In this context, social media, especially TikTok, has emerged as a medium that serves not only as entertainment but also as a significant source of language input. The intensity of user interaction with English-language content on this platform creates opportunities for implicit language acquisition through repeated, contextually rich audiovisual exposure.
Based on the interviews, one of the main themes identified is digital integration and language input frequency. This theme highlights how integrating digital technology into students' daily lives increases the frequency of exposure to English they receive. Data shows that TikTok acts as an informal learning space where English comes naturally through daily content consumption.

The summary of Theme A shows that all respondents have a high level of engagement with English-language content on TikTok. This exposure is not sporadic but rather occurs consistently and repeatedly, thereby forming a linguistic environment rich in authentic input. Within the framework of second language acquisition theory, this condition aligns with the concept of comprehensible input, which emphasizes the importance of language exposure in meaningful, understandable contexts.

As an empirical illustration, one of the respondents stated, *"I use TikTok every day, especially to search for content related to how to speak in English so that I am used to hearing real conversations"* (Respondent 2). This quote confirms that the use of TikTok is not only passive but also goal-oriented, namely, improving the ability to understand authentic English conversations. In addition, other respondents reported regularly watching content from foreign creators, which indirectly enriches their exposure to variations in accent, vocabulary, and language structure.

Thus, this theme indicates that digital integration through TikTok plays an important role in increasing the frequency of English-language input, which, in turn, has the potential to accelerate the natural, unconscious process of language acquisition.

B. Autonomy and Role of Influencers

Analysis of interview data reveals several key themes regarding how students build independent language-learning strategies in the digital era. One of the most prominent themes is learner autonomy, reflected in students' ability to consciously choose learning resources that suit their specific needs, especially in developing speaking skills. Another interrelated theme is the role of educational influencers, which not only serves as a provider of material but also as a motivational agent that influences the affective dimension of learning.

In this theme, students are no longer passive recipients of learning materials but actively curate the content they consume. They chose educational accounts based on their relevance, delivery style, and ability to explain the material in a contextual and applicable way. For example, Respondent 3 explicitly stated that he made the @englishwithlucy account his main reference for improving his speaking skills. Meanwhile, Respondent 1 chose to follow @Zelynafah because the delivery style was considered more attractive and easier to understand.

Furthermore, these findings show that influencers have a significant emotional and inspirational impact. Influencers not only deliver linguistic content but also build psychological closeness with the audience through a communicative, humanist approach. This is reflected in Respondent 2's statement, which affirms: *"I follow these accounts because they inspire me to speak up and give real examples of how to communicate more casually but still truthfully"* (Respondent 2). This quote shows that students are not only seeking technical knowledge but also authentic communication models they can imitate in everyday life.

Thus, this theme confirms a paradigm shift in language learning, from being originally centered on formal institutions to being more decentralized, based on individual preferences, with influencers as the main mediators in the process.

C. The Effectiveness of Multimodal Media in Training Fluency

In the contemporary language pedagogy landscape, the integration of multimodal media has become a focus for improving language fluency, particularly in the context of digital-based learning. The interview data analyzed in this study indicated a shift in students' preferences from conventional methods to more interactive, concise, and contextual media. Short video platforms like TikTok are emerging as a medium that is not only visually appealing but also effective at conveying linguistic structure through a combination of audio, text, and nonverbal elements.

Thematic analysis of the data reveals a dominant theme: the effectiveness of multimodal media in facilitating contextual understanding and fluency practices. The theme explores how multimodal characteristics, including the integration of sound, text, and facial expressions, contribute to more natural, easy-to-understand language processing for learners. In addition, the short but dense duration of content is also an important factor in increasing students' cognitive engagement.

These findings are reinforced by respondents' direct statements. Respondent 3 emphasized that the short, clear video format significantly enhances comprehension, especially in capturing the structure of language in a real context. Meanwhile, the preference for practical content is also an important indicator of the media's effectiveness. For example, Respondent 1 stated: *"I most often look for content that has a listening and speaking test. It helps me gauge the extent to which I can respond to conversations spontaneously"* (Respondent 1). This quote shows that multimodal media not only serve as a means of understanding but also as an evaluative tool for learners, helping them measure their spontaneous response abilities.

Furthermore, Respondent 2 expressed an interest in simulating everyday conversations that provided a direct impetus to practice. This confirms that the effectiveness of multimodal media is inseparable from its ability to present authentic communication contexts that are relevant to learners' practical needs. As such, Theme A reflects the close relationship between media design, user engagement, and improved fluency in digital-based language learning.

D. Motivation, Confidence, and Linguistic Mastery

In the digital landscape of language learning, the use of social media as a pedagogical tool is seeing significant developments, especially in the context of learning English as a foreign language. The interview data in this study revealed that students experienced an affective and cognitive transformation through the use of the TikTok platform. In general, the main themes identified include: (1) decreased anxiety levels in speaking English, (2) increased motivation to learn, and (3) direct impact on mastery of technical aspects of language, such as pronunciation and vocabulary.

The next theme that emerged was TikTok's role in enhancing motivation, confidence, and linguistic mastery when speaking English. An informal, flexible, and non-judgmental digital environment creates a safe space for learners to experiment with language. The community's support, as reflected in the comments section, also strengthens their confidence. This is directly reflected in the respondent's statement, which emphasizes the comfort of the learning atmosphere on the platform: *"The relaxing nature of the video made it easier to connect with the learning material"* (Respondent 3). This quote shows that the characteristics of relaxed content play an important role in reducing psychological distress during learning.

This decrease in anxiety further has direct implications for increasing learning motivation. This increased motivation contributes to mastering the technical aspects of language, especially pronunciation and vocabulary. This was explicitly affirmed by Respondent 2, who stated: *"The content on TikTok has helped me a lot to improve my vocabulary and pronunciation. Most importantly, I became more confident in speaking because I often saw examples that were easy to imitate"* (Respondent 2). This verbatim excerpt shows how exposure to authentic, repetitive content enables learners to imitate and internalize language patterns more effectively.

In addition, the improvement in pronunciation was also confirmed by other respondents. Respondent 1 stated directly that: *"TikTok has helped me a lot in improving the way I pronounce English words more accurately"* (Respondent 1). This statement confirms that social media-based learning experiences not only affect affective aspects such as self-confidence but also make a real contribution to improving phonological competence.

Thus, it can be concluded that TikTok not only serves as an entertainment medium but also as an effective pedagogical tool for creating a supportive learning environment, increasing motivation, and comprehensively improving language competence, as evidenced by verbatim quotes from participants in this study.

E. Obstacles to the Implementation and Sustainability of Learning

The final theme identified from the data is the disparity between high motivation to learn and low frequency of real practice, particularly in speaking skills. Although learners show strong enthusiasm and actively access learning materials through social media, they face structural limitations in classroom contexts that hinder the application of these skills.

For example, Respondent 2 reported that opportunities to practice speaking skills in class were very limited due to limited interaction space. This suggests that the formal learning environment has not yet fully supported the active practice required for language mastery.

On the other hand, there is variation in participants' experiences. Respondent 3 demonstrated initiative by seeking to apply material from TikTok to academic assignments. This is reflected in his statement: *"I sometimes try to apply what I get from TikTok when there is a writing assignment or speaking task in class"* (Respondent 3). This quote indicates that there is an individual effort in transferring informal learning to a formal context, although such opportunities are still limited.

Overall, this theme emphasizes that the success of learning is not only determined by intrinsic motivation and access to digital learning resources, but also by the availability of adequate practice spaces in a formal learning environment.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm that integrating digital platforms, especially TikTok, significantly increases the frequency of language input, strengthens motivation, and develops confidence in English-speaking skills. Key findings suggest that learning is no longer centered on formal institutions but is moving towards a decentralized model based on individual autonomy, where learners actively curate learning resources tailored to their needs.

Substantively, there are three key messages. First, the high frequency of language exposure through authentic content speeds up the process of implicit language acquisition. Second, TikTok's multimodal characters strengthen cognitive processing and enhance fluency by integrating visual, auditory, and textual elements. Third, the affective dimension, especially motivation and self-confidence, has increased significantly due to a more flexible and non-judgmental learning environment.

Implicitly, language learning in the digital age needs to accommodate a hybrid approach that integrates informal learning resources with structured formal practices. Without a bridge between the two, the potential of digital learning will not be maximized, as seen in the gap between high motivation and low real practice. These findings align with Greenhow & Robelia (2009) view that social media is a powerful informal learning space. In addition, this study's results confirm the comprehensible input theory proposed by Krashen (1982), which holds that repeated exposure to language in the context of meaning increases language acquisition. From a multimodality perspective, these findings are consistent with the theories of Mayer (2009) and Moreno & Mayer (1999), which asserts that combining visual and auditory channels strengthens understanding. However, the novelty of this research lies in its emphasis on the role of influencers as both pedagogical mediators and motivational agents. This expands on Klug et al. (2023) findings by showing that influencers not only increase motivation but also provide authentic communication models that learners can imitate directly.

In addition, this study offers a new contribution by identifying a structural gap between digital-based informal learning and practice in formal contexts. This aspect has not been explored in depth in previous studies, which tend to focus on the benefits of technology without highlighting its implementation barriers (Chen et al., 2026).
The main strength of this research lies in its qualitative approach, which allows for an in-depth exploration of students' subjective experiences. The use of direct excerpts from interviews provides strong internal validity and enriches the interpretation of the findings. However, there are some methodological limitations. The limited number of participants (three respondents) limited the generalization of the findings. In addition, the potential for self-report bias needs to be considered, as the data are based on respondents' subjective perceptions. The absence of data triangulation (e.g., through direct observation or linguistic performance analysis) is also a weakness in measuring the actual impact on speech skills.

Mechanistically, this study successfully explains how TikTok functions as a rich source of linguistic input, which is processed through mechanisms of imitation, repetition, and contextual exposure. The combination of high-frequency exposure and multimodal inputs creates optimal conditions for unconscious language acquisition (Bisson et al., 2014). In addition, the affective dimension plays an important role. A relaxed and non-judgmental learning environment lowers the affective filter, allowing language input to be processed more effectively. However, the aspect that remains unresolved is how to translate informal learning outcomes into performative competencies in a real context. This gap underscores the need for a more systematic integration of digital learning into classroom practice.

In a pedagogical context (which can be analogized to clinical interpretation in education), these findings are highly relevant to teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). TikTok can be used as a supplementary tool to increase students' language exposure, motivation, and confidence (Conde-Caballero et al., 2024). However, the use of this platform must be balanced with instructional strategies that encourage active practice, task-based learning, conversation simulations, and collaborative classroom activities. Without such interventions, learning tends to stop at the receptive stage and not develop into productive skills (Aisyah, 2025).

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that, from students' perspectives, TikTok is an effective medium for increasing motivation and English-speaking skills through multimodal, interactive content. The integration of audio, visual, and text elements on this platform facilitates a more natural contextual understanding, where high exposure to authentic content speeds up the process of implicit language acquisition. Independent use of TikTok has been proven to increase learners' autonomy, enrich vocabulary, improve pronunciation accuracy, and build student confidence by providing real communication models from educational influencers that are easy to imitate. In addition, a relaxed, non-judgmental digital learning environment plays an important role in reducing affective barriers, such as anxiety, when speaking. However, there is a structural challenge: a gap between high self-learning motivation and the limited speaking practice available in a formal classroom setting.

Based on the study's findings, it is recommended that English educators begin integrating informal learning resources, such as TikTok, into classroom instruction as complementary tools to increase students' language exposure and enthusiasm. Teachers need to design activities that bridge students' receptive abilities from social media into productive skills, for example,

through conversational simulation tasks, role-play, or interactive task-based learning. For educational institutions, policies that support the hybrid learning ecosystem are needed to channel students' digital-native potential academically. Finally, for future researchers, it is recommended to conduct experimental studies with a larger number of participants and use data triangulation techniques, such as direct observation, to measure the objective impact of TikTok use on students' linguistic performance in more depth.

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