

The usefulness of TikTok voice-over challenges as ESL speaking activities: A case study on Malaysian undergraduates

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Abstract

TikTok is a popular video-sharing social media platform that encourages its users to upload bite-sized content for entertainment purposes. In recent years, the platform is filled with videos meant for micro-learning, ranging from tutorials to meaningful challenges. Among those videos are voice-over challenges where users need to virtually duet with another user and perform a voice-over based on given texts. This article reports a case study that aimed to identify the usefulness of TikTok voice-over challenges in helping English as a Second Language (ESL) students to learn speaking skills. The study included 60 undergraduates who participated in twelve voice-over challenges within two months. Upon completing the challenges, they had to fill in an online questionnaire that gathered their views on the usefulness of the tasks and the problems they faced. The results revealed that students regarded the TikTok challenges as useful since they could improve their pronunciation and intonation, partake in turn-taking as well as motivate them to speak English more frequently. Several notable problems with its implementation are also shared in this article. Despite the small sample size, this study has shown promising outcomes on the use of TikTok voice-over challenges as speaking tasks for ESL learners.

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1 Introduction

The impact of social media on today's learners can be seen in how they respond to teaching and learning activities delivered in an online mode. Researchers have highlighted how current learners (particularly Gen-Z) prefer concise content with interactive and engaging elements such as videos, animations, and memes (Lee & Azman, 2021; Zakhro, 2021). They also value opportunities to create their own content in the learning process (Al-Qaysi et al., 2020; Reinhardt, 2019) while being part of a global community that promotes multicultural interactions (Christensen, 2020). In line with this development, there is a growing trend among educators to adopt multimodal approaches in teaching and learning as 21st-century learners are more inclined to use technology and respond to multimedia (Perry, 2020).

Studies have shown that, if integrated appropriately, social media can be an effective platform to promote active learning (Dahdal, 2020), collaborative learning (Ansari & Khan, 2020), and students' communication skills (Lambton-Howard et al., 2020). It has been linked to higher student engagement as students are more willing to participate in activities surrounding social media (Adams et al., 2021). As such, social media platforms are no longer confined to social interaction purposes but are increasingly popular as learning channels. This development is intensified through the advent of mobile learning as learners can access social media content directly via their mobile devices (Shen et al., 2017). In the areas of ESL teaching and learning, social media provide opportunities for learners to learn the target language in an authentic environment with other speakers of English while gaining access to a plethora of language-learning content (Barrot, 2021; Reinhardt 2022). One platform that is stealing the spotlight in recent years is TikTok (Lee, 2022).

TikTok, the video-sharing social network operated by ByteDance Ltd. has become one of the leading social media in the last five years. As stipulated by Anderson (2020), its bite-sized video creation (from 30 seconds up to 5 minutes) and sharing features have made it convenient for users to share their video content without the need for complicated editing tools. This feature is in line with the trend of micro-learning in which learning content is created and distributed in smaller chunks with a specific focus (Nikou & Economides, 2018). In addition, as a social network, TikTok also allows created content to be shared by using hashtags or through the personal page where followers can watch each piece of content (Kaye et al., 2021). Interestingly, users can add music and special effect filters to their videos and “duet” with other users in a way that they can appear side-by-side with other videos, creating a simulated situation of collaborative video creation. Unlike the use of chatbots for language learning, this feature is more natural as it involves the facial expressions of real humans (Chuah & Kabilan, 2021).

Though TikTok is frequently perceived as a “dance showcase” platform without educational values, it has grown into a repository of beneficial micro-learning content (Kaye et al., 2021; Lee, 2022), which includes voice-over challenges. It is a type of content where users can perform a voice-over on a given text provided by another user who functions as a role model for them. These challenges can range from voice-over for advertisements to conversational role plays. They have the potential to be used as an authentic task for ESL speaking activities (Aranego, 2020) as most ESL learners tend to view speaking as a challenging skill to learn (Kusuma, 2021). In addition, issues pertaining to the challenges faced by ESL learners in learning proper pronunciation and intonation remain prevalent as they lack the opportunity to speak to different speakers of English. As highlighted by Phuong (2021), students tend to favour teachers who can speak the language clearly and help them with their pronunciation even if the teachers are non-native speakers of English. TikTok, thus, provides a suitable environment as the users are from diverse backgrounds and predominantly use English on the platform.

However, in teaching speaking to ESL learners, the integration of suitable theory and pedagogical approaches is pivotal. Despite having more exposure to the English language in formal settings as compared to their counterparts in foreign language settings, previous studies (Akasha, 2013; Chuah & Kabilan, 2022; Fan, 2019) have shown ESL learners still struggle in speaking. Based on the social view of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), the teaching of language skills should be contextualised and prioritize social interactions (Ellis, 1994). Savignon (2005) also reiterated that second language learners do not rely on the traditional structural way of learning how to speak (for example, memorizing sentences or expressions or completing speech drills). In fact, they would develop communicative competence when they are taught within the sociocultural contexts of language use. This study adopted the views mentioned above as its theoretical basis in exploring the usefulness of TikTok voice-over challenges as means to provide contextualised learning opportunities for ESL learners to practise speaking skills. However, previous studies on the use of TikTok for language learning were mainly on general usage and were not involving tasks designed based on specific theoretical principles. Factoring in these gaps, this study aimed to answer the following research questions: