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TIKTOK AS AN EDUCATIONAL PLATFORM TO ENHANCE ESL LEARNERS' AUTONOMY AND MOTIVATION

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Abstract:

The integration of social media into English as a Second Language (ESL) education has received growing scholarly attention due to its potential to promote learner-centered and autonomy-supportive learning environments. Among emerging platforms, TikTok has gained prominence; however, limited qualitative research has examined learners lived experiences of TikTok integration in higher education ESL contexts. Grounded in Learner Autonomy Theory and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this exploratory qualitative study investigates ESL learners' perceptions of TikTok-based activities in fostering autonomy and intrinsic motivation. The study was conducted over a 14-week semester in a Malaysian higher education institution, where structured TikTok-based speaking and content-creation tasks were systematically integrated into classroom instruction. Data were collected through written reflective responses to four open-ended questions and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Findings indicate that TikTok-based content creation provided a supportive and low-anxiety learning environment, enhanced speaking fluency through iterative practice and self-reflection, and strengthened learners' sense of autonomy through content choice and ownership. The study contributes qualitative insights into technology-mediated language learning and provides pedagogical implications for fostering autonomous and intrinsically motivated ESL learners.

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Keywords:

TikTok in ESL Education; Learner Autonomy; Self-Determination Theory; Motivation; Qualitative Study



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Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has profoundly impacted the development of educational practices, especially in second language learning environments. The incorporation of technological devices in the development of education is vital, especially in terms of societal development and national growth. (Hsieh, 2020; Lytras et al., 2020). The incorporation of technology not only seems inevitable but also redefines traditional learning methodologies. (Singh, 2021). Moreover, social media is becoming an essential part of our lives, and its development is still in full swing. The incorporation of social media in learning environments is a major trend, redefining traditional learning boundaries as it is being recognized for its potential to enhance learning experiences. (Abad-Segura et al., 2020). This paradigm shift in learning environments has resulted in innovative learning methodologies, interactive learning environments, and new avenues of learning through collaborations. (Tomczyk, 2021). Social media, which was initially considered a source of entertainment and interaction, is being increasingly integrated into learning environments for language learning. (Dizon, 2022; Kessler, 2023). Among various digital technologies, TikTok, a short video-making application, is becoming a widely used medium of communication and expression. (Abdullah et al., 2023). For English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, these platforms offer opportunities for authentic language exposure, multimodal input, and learner-centered engagement, all of which are crucial for developing communicative competence in the 21st century.

However, ESL learners still face challenges in terms of low motivation and lack of learner independency, even after the reform of the curriculum and innovative approaches in teaching and learning. The term “learner independency” is also used as a synonym for “learner autonomy,” which is “the ability of learners to take responsibility for their own learning through self-regulation, decisions, and reflective practice” (Little, 2007; Benson, 2013). Moreover, motivation is a key factor in facilitating learners' persistence, engagement, and achievement in learning a language (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Without motivation and opportunities for independency, ESL learners become passive receivers of knowledge rather than active actors of their learning path.

In recent times, TikTok has become one of the most popular short video platforms across the globe, especially for young learners. Its distinctive feature is short, engaging, and highly visual content, through which users can produce, access, and interact with content that contains audio, text, and visual media. From a learning perspective, Tik-Tok is seen as a constructivist approach to language learning, as it facilitates learners to produce content, interact with others, and contextualize language, as supported by social constructivist and multimedia theories of language learning (Mayer, 2021). ESL educators are now considering Tik-Tok as a micro-

learning tool, through which learners can access language content, practice speaking, learn vocabulary and grammar, and engage in communicative activities outside regular class hours.

Although the use of TikTok is prevalent among the youth population globally, it has also been noted that there is a major deficiency of thorough research that has investigated its efficiency as an effective tool for educational purposes, especially with regard to the teaching of the English language (Hu & Du, 2022). In addition to this, emerging research has indicated that the use of Tik-Tok has the ability to enhance the independency of ESL learners through the creation of a low-anxiety condition that promotes enjoyment and the willingness of the learners to engage in the learning process (Zhang & Cassany, 2023). Moreover, the use of the algorithm-based personalization and the various interactive features of the platform, such as the use of comments, duets, and the ability to share information with other users, also enhance the independency of the learners. Although the existing research has mostly focused on the engagement and independency of the learners, the existing research on the role of Tik-Tok with regard to the independency of ESL learners is limited and underexplored.

Moreover, there is a remarkable absence of literature on the role of Tik-Tok in the simultaneous development of learner independency and motivation, two aspects of ESL learning. In fact, most of the existing literature examines these factors individually without adequately addressing the potential of social media-based learning environments to promote the development of learner independency and motivation simultaneously. Therefore, there is a need to explore TikTok not only as a supplementary tool for ESL learning but also as a potential platform for the development of independent and motivated ESL learners.

This study is theoretically grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which posits that intrinsic motivation is fostered when learners experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness. TikTok-based content creation may support autonomy through topic choice, competence through iterative self-recording, and relatedness through peer interaction features. Additionally, Learner Autonomy Theory (Benson, 2013; Little, 2007) frames autonomy as a socially mediated capacity involving decision-making, reflection, and self-regulation. TikTok is conceptualized as a mediating digital environment that may facilitate these autonomy-supportive processes.

Furthermore, TikTok, a short-form video platform emphasizing user-generated multimodal content, presents new opportunities for constructivist and autonomy-supportive learning. Its interactive features such as editing tools, comments, and duets may promote reflection, repeated practice, and peer interaction. However, despite the growing use of TikTok in education, limited qualitative research has examined learners lived experiences in higher education ESL contexts, particularly regarding the simultaneous development of learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation over sustained instructional periods.

Addressing this gap, the present study explores how structured TikTok-based activities influence ESL learners' autonomy and motivation within a Malaysian tertiary setting. Specifically, the study investigates the potential of TikTok as an ESL educational tool for promoting learner autonomy by examining students' perspectives on engaging in TikTok-based learning activities over a sustained instructional period. By exploring how such practices shape learners' motivation, confidence, and independent learning behaviours, this study contributes to the growing body of research on technology-enhanced language learning and offers

pedagogical insights for ESL educators seeking to cultivate more autonomous and intrinsically motivated learners.

Problem Statement

Although the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025) emphasizes the development of independent, lifelong learners, ESL instruction remains predominantly teacher-directed. As a result, learners often rely heavily on instructors and demonstrate low confidence in English communication.

While digital tools are widely available, their use is typically confined to learning management systems and presentation software. Popular platforms such as TikTok, which are frequently used by Malaysian youths, are underutilized for structured pedagogical purposes.

Existing Malaysian studies have primarily examined YouTube, Instagram, or WhatsApp. Empirical research investigating TikTok as a structured ESL instructional tool remains scarce, particularly qualitative studies exploring how it simultaneously fosters learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

Research Objectives (ROs)

RO1:

To explore ESL learners' perceptions of how creating TikTok content videos influences their motivation to learn and practise English.

RO2:

To examine ESL learners' experiences of using TikTok to improve their speaking fluency in English.

RO3:

To investigate how TikTok-based ESL learning contributes to learners' confidence and learner independency.

RO4:

To explore how learners' freedom to select TikTok content affects their sense of control over the English learning process.

Research Questions (RQs)

RQ1:

How do ESL learners perceive the influence of creating TikTok content videos on their motivation to learn and practise the English language?

RQ2:

How do ESL learners describe the role of TikTok in improving their speaking fluency in English?

RQ3:

How do ESL learners experience changes in confidence and learner independency through the use of TikTok for English language learning?

RQ4:

How does the freedom to choose TikTok content shape ESL learners' sense of control over their English learning process?

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that synthesizes Learner Autonomy Theory (Benson, 2013; Little, 2007), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and Social Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). Rather than treating autonomy and motivation as isolated constructs, the study conceptualizes them as dynamically interrelated psychological processes mediated by digital learning environments.

Learner Autonomy Theory positions autonomy as learners' capacity to exercise control over content, cognitive processes, and learning management (Benson, 2013). However, autonomy is not an inherent trait, but a context-dependent capacity shaped by pedagogical conditions. In examination-oriented and teacher-centered systems, opportunities for meaningful decision-making are often constrained, limiting the development of self-regulated learning behaviours. Thus, autonomy must be understood as environmentally scaffolded rather than individually possessed.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a motivational explanation for how autonomy-supportive environments function. According to SDT, intrinsic motivation emerges when the psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Importantly, autonomy in SDT refers not merely to independence but to volitional engagement. Therefore, digital tasks that allow topic choice, iterative rehearsal, and peer interaction may foster motivational internalization rather than compliance-driven participation.

Social Constructivism further extends this argument by emphasizing that learning is socially mediated and co-constructed through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978). Digital platforms such as TikTok expand the zone of proximal development beyond classroom boundaries by enabling multimodal expression, audience awareness, and dialogic feedback. In this sense, technology is not neutral; it restructures the ecology of participation.

By integrating these perspectives, this study conceptualizes TikTok as a mediating pedagogical ecology that potentially reshapes learner agency. The platform's affordances content creation, replayability, algorithmic personalization, and interactive feedback may function as structural conditions that enable psychological need satisfaction, thereby supporting the co-development of autonomy and intrinsic motivation over time. Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework.

Unveiling the Dimensions of Learner Autonomy

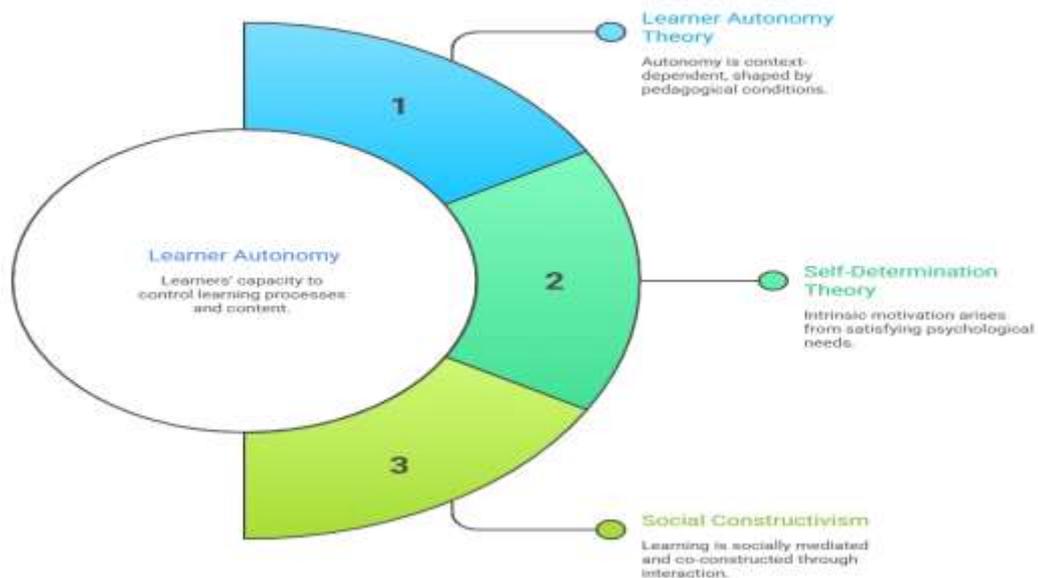


Figure 1 – Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this study positions TikTok-based instructional activities as a mediating digital environment that influences ESL learners' psychological and behavioural development. Drawing upon Learner Autonomy Theory and Self-Determination Theory, the framework proposes that structured TikTok integration provides autonomy-supportive

conditions through content choice, self-directed rehearsal, and reflective self-evaluation. These conditions may facilitate the satisfaction of learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which in turn enhance intrinsic motivation and foster self-regulated learning behaviours. Within a social constructivist perspective, TikTok functions as a participatory space where knowledge is constructed through multimodal interaction and audience engagement. Consequently, learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation are conceptualized as interdependent outcomes emerging from sustained engagement within this digital ecology. Figure 2 illustrates the theoretical relationships underpinning the study.

TikTok-Mediated ESL Learning Framework

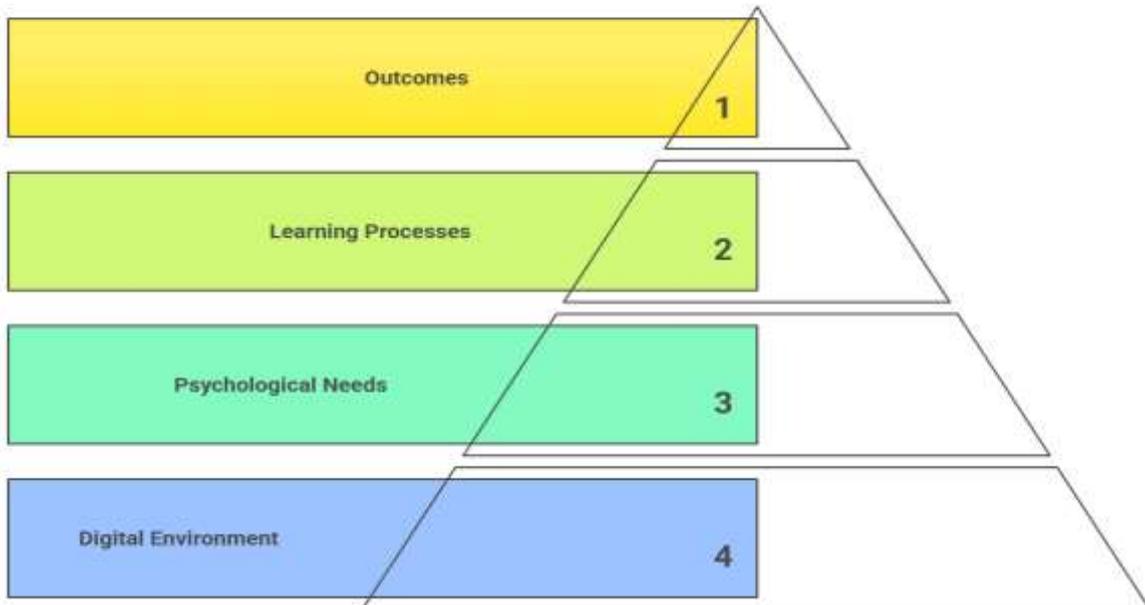


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework

Literature Review

Learner autonomy is conceptualized as the capacity to regulate one's learning through reflection, decision-making, and strategic control (Benson, 2013; Little, 2007). Self-Determination Theory posits that intrinsic motivation develops when autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs are satisfied (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Digital platforms such as TikTok provide multimodal affordances that may support these psychological needs through repeated practice and content personalization.

Learner Autonomy and Motivation in ESL Contexts

Learner autonomy has been widely conceptualized as the capacity of learners to take responsibility for their own learning through goal setting, decision-making, and reflection (Benson, 2013; Little, 2007). However, autonomy in ESL contexts is not merely an individual cognitive ability; it is socially situated and shaped by learning environments, institutional culture, and pedagogical practices. In many Asian contexts, including Malaysia, teacher-centered traditions often limit opportunities for learners to exercise agency, thereby reinforcing dependency (Singh, 2021).

Closely intertwined with autonomy is motivation. From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), learners are more intrinsically motivated when three psychological needs are fulfilled: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In ESL learning, Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) argue that motivation is dynamic and heavily influenced by emotional experiences and perceived classroom climate. Thus, autonomy and motivation should not be examined as isolated constructs; rather, autonomy-supportive environments tend

to foster intrinsic motivation, while controlling environments may suppress both agency and engagement.

The relationship between autonomy and motivation becomes particularly significant in contexts where learners experience language anxiety and fear of negative evaluation. Research consistently shows that rigid instructional practices and examination-oriented systems undermine learners' willingness to communicate (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Therefore, environments that reduce evaluation pressure and encourage self-expression may simultaneously enhance autonomy and intrinsic motivation.

Digital Environments as Mediators of Autonomy and Motivation

Recent scholarship suggests that digital environments may function as mediating spaces that reshape learner agency. Unlike traditional classrooms, digital platforms allow learners to access resources independently, regulate their pace, and engage in self-directed exploration (Abad-Segura et al., 2020). From a social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), learning occurs through interaction and meaning making; digital tools expand opportunities for such interaction beyond physical classrooms.

Importantly, digital learning spaces blur the boundary between formal and informal learning (Dizon, 2022). This hybridity may reduce performance anxiety and promote authentic engagement. Mayer's (2021) multimedia learning theory further suggests that multimodal input enhances cognitive processing, potentially supporting language acquisition through integrated visual, auditory, and textual stimuli.

However, not all digital engagement automatically leads to autonomy. Learners' perceptions of technology play a critical role. If social media is viewed purely as entertainment, its pedagogical potential may be limited. Thus, the effectiveness of digital platforms depends on how learners experience and interpret them within structured learning contexts.

Social Media and Informal ESL Learning

Social media platforms have increasingly been recognized as informal learning spaces that encourage participation, creativity, and experiential learning. Studies indicate that social media facilitates observational learning, peer interaction, and community-based meaning construction (Dizon, 2022). These features align with constructivist learning principles, where knowledge is co-constructed rather than transmitted.

Unlike traditional learning management systems, social media environments are personally meaningful and socially relevant. This personal relevance may enhance intrinsic motivation, particularly when learners engage voluntarily rather than under compulsory assessment. Furthermore, informal environments may reduce language anxiety by removing the fear of immediate correction or grading.

Nevertheless, existing research often focuses on engagement or vocabulary gains rather than deeper psychological constructs such as autonomy and motivation operating simultaneously. This indicates a need for more integrative research examining how social media environments shape learners' internal motivational processes alongside behavioural engagement.

TikTok as a Multimodal and Participatory Learning Environment

TikTok represents a distinctive form of social media characterized by short-form, multimodal video content. Its microlearning format supports repeated exposure and manageable cognitive load, which may enhance comprehension and retention (Mayer, 2021). Studies have shown that TikTok can increase learner engagement and vocabulary acquisition (Hu & Du, 2022; Abdullah et al., 2023).

More importantly, TikTok emphasizes content creation rather than passive consumption. The process of scripting, rehearsing, recording, editing, and sharing videos involves planning, reflection, and self-monitoring which are the core components of learner autonomy (Benson, 2013). Additionally, interactive features such as commenting and duetting foster social connection, addressing the relatedness dimension of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Qualitative findings suggest that TikTok's informal and entertaining nature reduces speaking anxiety and enhances confidence (Zhang & Cassany, 2023). However, most studies have examined short-term interventions or focused on single constructs such as engagement. There remains limited qualitative evidence exploring how sustained TikTok integration influences both learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation over time.

Empirical Studies on TikTok, Learner Independency, and Motivation

Previous empirical studies on the use of TikTok in ESL learning have mostly concentrated on the following areas: learners' engagement, vocabulary learning, and learners' confidence in speaking. Though the studies have depicted learners' positive perceptions of the app, very little research has been conducted on the aspect of learners' independency using a qualitative approach. Additionally, the concept of motivation has rarely been discussed as a primary construct and has been mostly portrayed as a by-product of using the app.

Qualitative studies on the use of TikTok in the context of learners' motivation have demonstrated that the app has the potential to boost learners' intrinsic motivation by making the learning experience enjoyable and relevant to the learners' personal experiences. Nevertheless, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative studies that have explored learners' perceptions of the app after being exposed to it for a long period of time.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Taken together, the literature suggests that:

- Autonomy and motivation are theoretically interconnected (Benson, 2013; Deci & Ryan, 2000).
- Digital environments may mediate learner agency by expanding opportunities for self-regulation and interaction (Abad-Segura et al., 2020; Vygotsky, 1978).
- Social media platforms can reduce anxiety and enhance engagement, but their impact on deeper psychological constructs remains underexplored (Dizon, 2022; Hu & Du, 2022).

Despite the expanding body of scholarship on TikTok in language education, much of the existing research has relied on short-term quantitative designs that prioritize measurable

outcomes such as engagement levels or vocabulary acquisition. While these studies highlight the platform's motivational potential (Dizon, 2022; Zhang & Cassany, 2023), they tend to conceptualize motivation as a surface-level outcome rather than as a psychologically grounded process shaped by autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Moreover, limited qualitative research has examined learners' sustained lived experiences of TikTok-mediated instruction within higher education ESL contexts. In particular, the simultaneous development of learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation within social media environments remains underexplored. This conceptual and methodological gap underscores the need for an in-depth qualitative investigation into how TikTok may function as an autonomy-supportive pedagogical ecology rather than merely an engagement-driven instructional tool.

In particular, qualitative explorations of learners' lived experiences remain underrepresented. Most empirical studies rely on experimental or survey-based designs, offering limited insight into how autonomy, competence, and relatedness are enacted through digital content production over extended instructional periods. Furthermore, research seldom interrogates whether social media platforms function merely as engagement tools or as transformative pedagogical ecologies capable of restructuring learner agency.

This gap is especially salient in hierarchical ESL contexts, where instructional practices often constrain decision-making opportunities and self-regulated learning behaviors. Consequently, there is a need for sustained qualitative investigation into how TikTok-based pedagogical integration influences intrinsic motivation and autonomy development in higher education settings. Addressing this gap, the present study examines TikTok not simply as a technological tool but as an autonomy-supportive digital environment that may reshape learners' motivational trajectories and speaking fluency development.

Methodology

This study adopted an exploratory qualitative design to examine learners' subjective experiences of TikTok-integrated ESL instruction. Thirty-two undergraduate ESL learners participated in a 14-week intervention in which TikTok-based speaking tasks and reflective content creation were embedded into the curriculum. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis, moving from initial semantic coding to latent theme development. An audit trail and peer debriefing were employed to enhance credibility and confirmability.

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using four open-ended questions, administered at the end of the 14-week semester. The open-ended format allowed learners to express their thoughts, experiences, and reflections freely without restriction. Figure 3 shows the open-ended format.

Unveiling the Multifaceted Impact of TikTok on English Learning

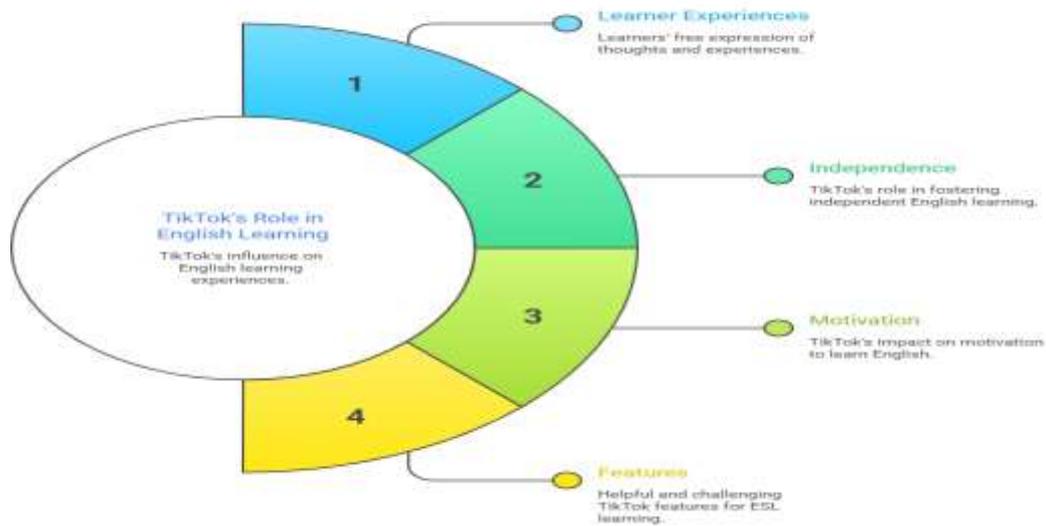


Figure 3 – Open Ended Format.

Sample Open-Ended Questions:

- Describe your experience of using TikTok for learning English throughout the semester.
- In what ways, if any, has TikTok helped you become more independent in learning English?
- How has using TikTok influenced your motivation to learn English?
- What features of TikTok do you find most helpful or challenging for ESL learning?

Data Collection Procedure

At the end of the semester, participants were invited to respond to the open-ended questions through an online platform. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Learners were given sufficient time to reflect on their experiences before submitting their responses.

The open-ended questions were designed to elicit learners' reflective experiences related to motivation, speaking development, confidence, and learner independency, consistent with the principles of Self-Determination Theory and Learner Autonomy Theory.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006):

Familiarization with the data

- Initial coding
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining and naming themes
- Producing the report

The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns related to learner independency, motivation, and perceived affordances of TikTok in ESL learning.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure rigor, the study employed the following strategies:

- Credibility: Prolonged engagement over 14 weeks
- Dependability: Clear documentation of procedures
- Confirmability: Use of verbatim excerpts from participants' responses
- Transferability: Thick description of context and participants
- Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained prior to the study. Participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Findings

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Four main themes emerged from the learners' reflections, corresponding to the four research questions. Each theme is supported by subthemes and illustrative excerpts from participants' responses. Pseudonyms (e.g., P1, P2) are used to ensure anonymity.

Theme 1: Enhanced Motivation through Enjoyable and Low-Anxiety Learning (Related to Q1)

Learners consistently reported that creating TikTok content positively influenced their motivation to learn and practise English. The platform transformed English learning into an enjoyable and less stressful experience.

Subtheme 1.1: Learning through Enjoyment and Fun

Many learners described TikTok-based activities as fun, engaging, and different from traditional classroom tasks, which increased their willingness to practise English.

“I feel more motivated because making TikTok videos is fun. I don’t feel like I am studying, but I am actually learning English.” (P3)

“When learning is fun, I don’t feel forced. I practise English more without realising it.” (P7)

Subtheme 1.2: Reduced Anxiety and Fear of Mistakes

Learners highlighted that TikTok’s informal environment reduced their fear of making mistakes, which often hinders participation in formal classroom settings.

“I’m not afraid of making mistakes on TikTok because it doesn’t feel like an exam or presentation.” (P1)

“I feel more relaxed speaking English on TikTok compared to speaking in front of the class.” (P10)

Theme 2: Development of Speaking Fluency through Repeated and Reflective Practice (Related to Q2)

Learners perceived TikTok as a practical platform for improving speaking fluency through repeated practice and self-observation.

Subtheme 2.1: Repetition and Practice at One’s Own Pace

Learners valued the ability to record multiple times before posting, which allowed them to practise pronunciation and fluency independently.

“I can record many times until I’m satisfied. This really helps my fluency.” (P4)

“Repeating the recording makes my speaking smoother and more confident.” (P8)

Subtheme 2.2: Increased Awareness of Pronunciation and Language Use

Watching their own videos helped learners become more aware of pronunciation, intonation, and language accuracy.

“When I watch my video, I notice my pronunciation mistakes and try to correct them.” (P6)

“I become more careful with how I pronounce words because I can hear myself clearly.” (P12)

Theme 3: Growth in Confidence and Learner Independency (Related to Q3)

Learners reported increased confidence and a stronger sense of independence as they took responsibility for planning, creating, and evaluating their own content.

Subtheme 3.1: Increased Confidence in Using English

Learners described feeling more confident using English after consistently creating TikTok content.

“After using TikTok for English, I feel more confident speaking because I practise regularly.” (P5)

“I am not shy anymore because I am used to speaking English in my videos.” (P9)

Subtheme 3.2: Emergence of Independent Learning Behaviours

Learners demonstrated independent learning behaviours such as searching for vocabulary, scripting content, and self-evaluating performance.

“I search for words and ideas by myself before making the video.” (P2)

“TikTok makes me more independent because I decide what and how to learn.” (P11)

Theme 4: Autonomy through Choice and Ownership of Learning (Related to Q4)

Learners strongly associated their sense of control over learning with the freedom to choose their own TikTok content.

Subtheme 4.1: Sense of Control and Decision-Making

The freedom to choose topics enhanced learners' sense of autonomy and ownership over their learning process.

“I feel in control because I can choose topics that I like.” (P6)

“Choosing my own content makes me more responsible for my learning.” (P3)

Subtheme 4.2: Ownership and Personal Relevance

Learners felt that personalising content made learning more meaningful and relevant to their interests.

“When the topic is related to my interest, I enjoy learning English more.” (P8)

“It feels like my learning, not the teacher's learning.” (P10)

Discussion

This study explored ESL learners' experiences of using TikTok as a platform to enhance learner autonomy and motivation. The findings align closely with Learner Autonomy Theory (Benson, 2013; Little, 2007), Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), and social constructivist perspectives on digital learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Mayer, 2021).

TikTok and Learner Autonomy

The findings indicate that TikTok promoted learner autonomy by enabling students to make decisions about content creation, self-monitor their performance, and reflect on their learning. This supports Benson's (2013) conceptualization of autonomy as learners' capacity to take control over content, cognitive processes, and learning management. Similarly, Little (2007) emphasized that autonomy develops through reflection and self-regulation, both of which were evident in learners' repeated video recording and self-evaluation practices.

The freedom to choose topics strengthened learners' sense of ownership, consistent with the argument that autonomy flourishes in environments where learners exercise meaningful choice (Benson, 2013). In Malaysian ESL contexts, where teacher-centered approaches are prevalent, such autonomy-supportive environments may counteract learner dependency (Singh, 2021).

Motivation through Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness

The results also strongly align with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Learners reported increased motivation due to enjoyment and reduced anxiety, reflecting intrinsic motivation fostered in autonomy-supportive environments. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) argue that motivation in language learning is dynamic and influenced by emotional experiences. The informal and low-pressure nature of TikTok reduced fear of negative evaluation, which has been identified as a major barrier in ESL classrooms (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

Learners' improved fluency through repeated practice reflects the competence component of SDT. The ability to rehearse and refine recordings enhanced perceived self-efficacy, which Bandura (1997) identifies as crucial for confidence development. Furthermore, interactive features such as comments and duets promoted relatedness, satisfying learners' need for social connection (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Social Media as Informal Learning Spaces

The findings support prior studies that position social media as informal, experiential learning environments (Abad-Segura et al., 2020; Dizon, 2022). Unlike traditional classroom tools, TikTok blurred the boundary between formal and informal learning, enabling learners to practise English in personally meaningful contexts. This aligns with social constructivist perspectives, where learning occurs through interaction and meaning making (Vygotsky, 1978).

Previous research has shown that digital platforms can reduce language anxiety and enhance willingness to communicate (Hu & Du, 2022; Zhang & Cassany, 2023). The present findings extend this understanding by demonstrating that sustained exposure over 14 weeks contributed not only to engagement but also to deeper autonomy development.

Confidence and Independent Learning Behaviours

Learners demonstrated independent behaviours such as vocabulary searching, scripting, and self-editing. These behaviours reflect cognitive and metacognitive engagement central to autonomous learning (Benson, 2013). The simultaneous growth of confidence and independence supports the notion that autonomy and self-efficacy are interconnected (Bandura, 1997).

Consistent with Mayer's (2021) multimedia learning theory, TikTok's multimodal features may enhance cognitive processing by combining visual, auditory, and textual input, thereby supporting language acquisition.

Addressing the Research Gap

While previous empirical studies have focused primarily on engagement and vocabulary learning (Abdullah et al., 2023; Hu & Du, 2022), few have qualitatively explored the simultaneous development of learner autonomy and motivation over an extended period. This study contributes to the literature by providing in-depth insights into learners lived experiences in a Malaysian higher education context, addressing the gap identified in earlier research.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest that TikTok can serve as an effective pedagogical platform for fostering independent and motivated ESL learners when used intentionally. ESL educators may consider integrating TikTok-based activities that emphasise learner choice, reflection, and content creation to support autonomy-oriented learning.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore ESL learners' experiences of using TikTok as an educational platform to support learner autonomy and motivation within a Malaysian higher education context. Drawing on learners' reflections after a 14-week TikTok-integrated ESL learning experience, the findings demonstrate that TikTok has the potential to transform English learning into a more engaging, learner-centered, and autonomy-supportive process.

The findings indicate that TikTok-based content creation enhanced learners' motivation by making English learning enjoyable, informal, and less anxiety-inducing. Learners' willingness to practise English increased as they perceived learning activities as meaningful and relevant to their personal interests. Additionally, the opportunity to record, review, and refine videos contributed to the development of speaking fluency and pronunciation awareness, reinforcing learners' sense of competence.

Importantly, the study reveals that learner confidence and independency developed concurrently. As learners gained confidence in using English, they became more willing to take responsibility for their learning by planning content, selecting topics, and self-evaluating their performance. The freedom to choose TikTok content emerged as a critical factor in fostering autonomy, control, and ownership over the learning process.

Overall, the findings highlight TikTok's potential as more than a supplementary tool; rather, it can serve as a meaningful educational platform that supports independent and motivated ESL learning when integrated with clear pedagogical intent.

Recommendations

Pedagogical Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is encouraged that ESL teachers include TikTok-based learning activities that allow for student choice, creativity, and reflection. By allowing the student to choose the topic of the content they create based on their interests, the student can develop more autonomy and intrinsic motivation. The teacher can also include learning activities that allow the student to practice their speaking skills or create content for reflection to develop fluency skills in the student.

In addition, learning activities based on TikTok can be used in a non-assessment manner to ensure a low anxiety learning environment. The student can also be taught to use TikTok in a responsible manner.

Recommendations for Institutions and Policy

Higher education institutions may consider recognising social media platforms as legitimate informal learning spaces that complement formal ESL instruction. Professional development programmes can be introduced to equip educators with the pedagogical skills needed to integrate social media tools effectively while maintaining academic rigor.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research can be further extended in the future through the application of longitudinal or mixed-method research to explore the progression of learner independency and motivation. Other research can also compare the findings of this research at different levels of education or social media sites to gain more in-depth understanding of the role of digital environments in facilitating ELS. Moreover, gaining insight into educators' views about the incorporation of TikTok can further enhance the understanding of its potential.

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