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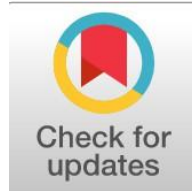

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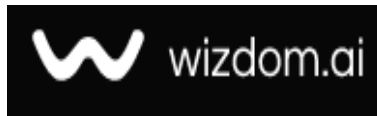Complete list of indexing services for this journal (link)

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Students' Experiences Using TikTok for Developing English Listening Skills

Pengalaman Mahasiswa Menggunakan TikTok untuk Pengembangan Keterampilan Mendengarkan Bahasa Inggris

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Abstract

Background: Listening is a core component of second language development, yet students in English as a Foreign Language settings often struggle with fast speech, accent variation, and limited exposure to authentic English. **Specific background:** ocial media, especially TikTok, has become a popular platform where learners encounter natural language use through short, engaging videos. **Knowledge gap:** However, little is known about how university students experience TikTok as a self-directed space for English listening development. **Aims:** This study explores students' lived experiences using TikTok to support English listening skills. **Results:** Findings show that frequent exposure to authentic speech, short video formats, and interactive features such as duets and live sessions contribute to students' listening development. Challenges arise from speech rate, accent diversity, slang, and algorithm-driven distractions. Students responded with self-regulated strategies, including curating content, replaying difficult segments, activating captions, and verifying information through external sources. **Novelty:** This study highlights students' internal reflections and the role of algorithmic personalization as a source of individualized linguistic input. **Implications:** Results suggest that TikTok can serve as an informal listening environment that complements formal instruction and supports listening awareness, learning autonomy, and confidence among EFL university students.

Highlights

- Students describe TikTok as a consistent source of authentic English input.

- Learners use self-regulation strategies to manage challenges and curate content.

- TikTok functions as an informal space that supports listening development and confidence.

Keywords

TikTok, English Listening Skills, Autonomous Learning, Phenomenological Study, Digital Learning

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I. Introduction

Listening is a foundational skill in second language acquisition and academic learning because it enables learners to process input, negotiate meaning, and participate in spoken interaction in real time [1], [2]. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, listening is often perceived as the most difficult skill because learners must cope with fast speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, accent variation, reductions, fillers, and informal phrasing that are not always represented in textbook audio [3], [4]. These challenges are especially visible at the university level, where learners are expected to understand lectures, presentations, and peer discussion in English even if they have limited real-life exposure to naturally occurring English speech [5].

In parallel with these challenges, social media platforms have shifted from purely informal entertainment spaces to informal, self-directed language-learning environments [6], [7], [8]. TikTok is particularly relevant because of this short form, high engagement videos, algorithmic personalization, and interactive features such as stitching, duets, and live sessions [9], [10]. These feaures allow learners to encounter authentic pronunciation, stress, rhythm, discourse markers, and pragmatic features of everyday English in an accessible, repeated, low meaningful and motivating contexts has long been argued to facilitate acquisition, especially in listening [11], [12], [13].

Existing studies have documented the motivational and affective value of short video platforms; learners report that TikTok reduces anxiety, increases willingness to imitate pronunciation, and sustains attention because the videos are brief and feel "non academic" [14], [15], [16], [17]. However, there are still gaps. Much of the current work is quantitative)e.g. measuring improvement scores after "TikTok based teaching"), focuses on teenagers rather than university students, or treats TikTok as a teaching aid controlled by the instructor rather than a platform that sudents themselves use autonomously in daily life [8], [18], [19]. There is comparatively less phenomenological worh that centres students own lived experience: how thet perceive listening gains, which platform features actually help, and which problem they still face [20], [21].

This study addresses that gap by exploring the lived experience of Mulawarman University students who use TikTok to improve their English listening skills. Specifically, it examines how TikTok is perceived to support English listening development, and how students apply TikTok as a self-regulated learning tool. By doing so, the study aims to clarify TikTok's pedagogical value for higher education EFL learners and to identify practical strategies that may be useful for language instructors who wish to acknowledge, guide, or integrate this informal learning channel into formal instruction [8], [22], [23].

The novelty of this study in its focus on the authentic experiences of students using TikTok independently to develop listening skills in informal learning contexts outside the classroom. Unlike previous research focused on TikTok based teaching experiments, this study highlights students internalization and reflection on the content they consume, as well as how TikTok's algorithmic interaction such as interest based recommendations can serve as a from of personalized linguistic input. Thus, this study provides a new perspective on how social media functions not only as an entertainment tool but also as an autonomous and contextual language learning ecosystem for EFL students.

II. Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to capture students' lived experiences using TikTok for English listening improvement. Phenomenology is appropriate when the goal is to understand how individuals experience, interpret, and assign meaning to a phenomenon in their own terms rather than to test predetermined variables [20], [24], [25]. The focus here is not on measuring gains numerically, but on understanding how TikTok is situated in learners' everyday listening practices and perceived progress.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they had direct and relevant experience with the phenomenon under study [26]. Three Mulawarman University students were recruited who met the following criteria: (1) they actively consumed English-language TikTok content; (2) they self-reported perceived improvement in English listening; and (3) they were able to reflect verbally on their listening challenges and strategies. All participants were familiar with TikTok features such as algorithmically generated For You Page (FYP) feeds, duets, pronunciation explanation clips, and live sessions [9], [10].

Participants are referred to using pseudonyms (Ms. A, Ms. D, and Mr. W) to maintain confidentiality and to protect personal identities in line with qualitative research ethics [21], [24].

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Semi-structured interviewing enables the researcher to follow a guiding set of questions (e.g. frequency of TikTok use, perceived listening gains, difficulties such as accent or speed, strategies to manage distraction), while also allowing probing and clarification when participants raise unexpected but relevant points [25], [26]. Each interview lasted approximately 20-30 minutes, was audio recorded with consent, and took place in a quiet university setting.

The interview questions addressed, among other things: how often participants encountered English speech on TikTok, whoch types of videos felt most helpful, which aspects of listening improved (e.g. pronunciation recognition, speech rate tracking, accent familiarity), and what problems remained (e.g. slang, misinformation, inconsistent speed). Questions also explored how participants tried to regulate their own learning — for example, by saving "useful" videos, replaying difficult clips, or following certain creators while muting others [6], [8], [16].

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase model: familiarisation, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report [27]. Thematic analysis was chosen because it is compatible with phenomenological work and allows patterns of meaning across participants to be identified while staying close to participants' own words [20], [27].

Coding began with descriptive codes such as "repeated exposure to English," "fasy accents are hard," " TikTok distracts me," "checking pronunciation with another source,: and :I feel more confident seapking now." These codes were then grouped into higher order themes such as "TikTok as informal listening practice," "algorithmic support and distraction," and "self refulation and verification." Throughout analyss, the researcher aimed to respect participants' perspectives as primary data, consistent with phenomenological traditions that foreground lived meaning [20], [21], [24].

III. Result and Discussion

Research Result

How does TikTok contribute to students' English listening skills?

Participants described being repeatedly exposed to English on TikTok on a daily or near-daily basis. They reported frequently encountering short clips that focused on pronunciation, everyday phrases, and fragments of spontaneous conversation. They also mentioned videos where speakers slowed down English words or contrasted similar-sounding words.This repeated exposure made English speech feel more familiar and less intimidating over time. Participants highlighted not only vocabulary gains, but also improved recognition of pronunciation, tress, and rhythm in natural speech.

Participants akso stated that the short video format helped sustain focus. Because each video lasts only a few seconds to a few minutes, they could replay the same clip multiple times without feeling bored or embarrassed. One participant explained that she sometimes "accidentally studied" listening for 30-45 minutes just by scrolling her for you page and saving videos that explained pronunciation or clarified phrases from movies.

At the same time, students acknowledged several difficulties that appeared when trying to understand English on TikTok. They struggled with fast speech, unfanmiliar accents, slang, and informal reductions that did not match textbook listening material. Some participants said that certain speakers talked "too fast like native speakers talking to each other" which made it hard to catch the meaning in real time. Parricipants also mentioned the risk of distraction: while looking for English material, the algorithm could quickly switch to unrelated entertainment content. Overall, in relation to Reseacrh Question 1, participants perceived that TikTok contributed to their English listening skills mainly by providing requent and accessible exposure to authentic spoken English. They also noted, however, that this benefit came with challenges such as speech rate, accent variation, and distraction.

How do students apply TikTok as a learning tool for English listening?

Participants reported that they did not simply watch whatever TikTok showed them. Instead, they described a set of deliberate strategies. First, they said that they "trained" the algorithm by liking, saving, or following English-learning creators so that similar content would keep appearing. Second, they mentioned using platform features such as replaying a difficult tine many times, slowing down a video, and turning on caoptions or subtitles. Third, they said they sometimes verified pronunciation or vocabulary in other sources (for example, looking it up again after seeing it on TikTok.

Students also described selective attention. Thet stated that they learned to identify which creators were "trustworthy" and which ones were "just guessing," and they actively ignored or muted creators they considered onaccurate. In other words, thet filtered TikTok content in order to keep only what they perceived as useful for listening.

Finally, participants connected this self directed use of TikTok with increased confidence. They felt more prepared to follow natural speed English, and some said they were less afraid to respond in English after understanding what was said in a video or a live session. In their view, being able to understand spontaneous spoken English made them feel closer to "real conversation," not just classroom drills.

In relation to Research Question 2, the findings suggest that students positioned TikTok as an informal listening practice space that they could manage and personalise. They actively controlled what to watch, how to watch it, and how to confirm whether it was accurate.

Discussion

The findings for Research Question 1 indicate that students experienced TikTok as a constant source of authentic English audio input in short, repeatable segments. Prior work has argued that frequent exposure to comprehensible input supports listening development by helping learners attune to pronunciation, connected speech, and prosody in context [11], [13]. The students' reports that English speech began to feel "more familiar" and "less scary" over time are consistent with the idea that repeated natural input can reduce anxiety and increase tolerance of fast, native-like speech [14], [15], [28]. The short-form format of TikTok also matches what has been described as micro-learning, where brief bursts of content can hold attention and improve retention in technology-mediated language learning [8], [23].

At the same time, participants in this study also described the main limitations of relying on TikTok for listening practice: accent variation, rapid delivery, slang, and the distraction effect of the algorithm. These concerns reflect broader critiques of platform-driven learning. TikTok's recommendation system is optimised for engagement, not for pedagogical quality, so learners are exposed to both useful models of pronunciation and potentially inaccurate or misleading explanations [9], [10], [29]. From a listening-perspective, exposure to multiple accents and natural rapid speech can be valuable because it reflects real-world communication, but it can also overload less experienced listeners, especially at the university level where processing demands are already high [2]-[4], [19].

More critically, TikTok's algorithm plays a dual role in the learning process: on the one hand, it enhances motivation through personalized content, but on the other, it creates an echo chamber that limits the linguistic diversity users experience. If a student only interacts with videos from creators with a particular accent or popular style of language, the algorithm will consistently display similar content and ignore broader variations. As a result, opportunities for exposure to different accents and language registers are limited. Furthermore, the engagement-based logic causes in-depth educational content to lose out to more entertaining videos, potentially marginalizing the learning process. This requires an active role for educators and learners to balance motivation and academic validity when using TikTok as a learning resource.

The findings for Research Question 2 show that students were not passive recipients. Instead, they behaved as self regulated larner: they curated their feeds, replayed difficult segments, slowed speech down, turned on captions, and verified pronunciation after watching. Self regulation and strategic repetition are known to be important for successful language learning, because learners must monitor comphrehension, identify gaps, and seek claraficitaion [13], [16], [26]. In this sense, "using Tik-Tok" for them did not mean casual scrooling; it meant pueposeful control over ehat input they received and how they processed it.This matches recent descriptions of digital learning where learners co-construct their own study environment, including which voices to trust and which to ignore [6], [8], [28].

Finally, students linked these strategies to confidence. They reported that understanding spontaneous speech on TikTok made them feel more comfortable answering in English. This perception aligns with theories that connect comprehensible input, affective factors, and willingness to produce spoken language [11], [12], [17]. It also supports claims that interactive, creator-driven platforms can simulate conversational rehearsal and normalise English as part of everyday life, rather than limiting it to formal classroom tasks [7], [9].

Taken together, the discussion suggests that TikTok functions as an informal listening laboratory that can complement — but not replace — formal classroom instruction. Lecturers can draw on curated TikTok clips to expose students to authentic pronunciation and natural speech rates, but they should also explicitly teach students how to evaluate source credibility, slow and replay content, and manage distraction so that the platform's weaknesses (misinformation, off-topic content) do not undermine its strengths (authenticity, frequency, motivation) [8], [16], [22], [23].

IV. Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored how Mulawarman University students perceive TikTok as contributing to their English listening development. The analysis showed four recurring themes. First, learners experienced TikTok as a source of frequent, repeated exposure to authentic English speech, which helped familiarise them with pronunciation, rhythm, and connected speech. Second, they identified clear challenges, including fast speech, slang, accent variability, distraction, and misinformation. Third, they demonstrated self regulated strategies such as algorithm training, selective following, verification thorough external sources, and repeated replay of difficult segments. Fonally, they perceived gains not only in listening comprehension but also in confidence to speak, suggesting that informal digital exposure can complement formal classroom learning by lowering affective barriers.

Overall, TikTok functioned as an informal listening laboratory that students could access on demand. Rather than replacing structured instruction, it supplemented classroom practice with authentic, real time English ina format that felt natural and personally relevant.

This study aimed to understand how students interpret the use of TikTok in developing their English listening skills, as well as to identify the platform's role in slef regulated learning. The results indicate that TikTok functions not only as as entertainment medium but also as an effective autonomous learning tool in enriching linguistic exposure, increasing phonological awareness, and strengthening students' confidence in understanding English speech. Thus, the research objectives have been achieved through findings that clarify the relationship between social media usage practices and improved listening competence among EFL learners.

For educators, these findings imply that TikTok content can be integrated into English listening practice to expose students to authentic pronunciation, pragmatic language use, and natural speech rates. However, because TikTok's algorithm prioritises engagemenr rather than linguistic accuracy, lectures should also teach students how to evaluate source credibility, slow and

replay content, compare pronunciations across sources, and become aware of accent diversity. In other worda, part of listening instruction in an EFL university context may now include platform literacy. Practically, lectures can design project based listening assignments, such as asking students to analyze an English language TikTok video relevant to the lecture topic and then present their understanding in class. Lecturers can lso create a list of recommended educational accounts to ensure students' exposure remains focused and high quality. Furthermore, implementing an assessment rubric that includes aspects of comprehension accuracy, pronunciation imitation ability, and reflection on content can help control TikTok use and maintain an academic focus.

For learners, the study highlights the importance of active engagement rather than passive scrolling. The most successful learners in this study selected and revisited content, rather than consuming it once and moving on. Such metacognitive control aligns with broder views of autonomous language learning and strategic skill development in adult learners.

For future research, this study suggests two directions. First, larger samples could investigate whether the self regulatory behaviors identified here generalize across different faculties or levels of proficiency. Second, classroom based intervention studies could examine how guided TikTok listening activities compare to conventional listening labs in terms of comprehension gains, confidence, and sustained engagement.

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