

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

Kee Man Chuah

(kmchuah@unimas.my)

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia

Looi-Chin Ch'ng

(chnl026@uitm.edu.my)

Universiti Teknologi Mara, Malaysia

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.

Share and cite

Chuah, K.M., & Ch'ng, L.C. (2023). The usefulness of TikTok voice-over challenges as ESL speaking activities: A case study on Malaysian undergraduates. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching [e-FLT]*, 20(1), 37–49. <https://doi.org/10.56040/10.56040/kmlc2013>

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:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of ESL learners on the usefulness of TikTok voice-over challenges as speaking activities?

RQ2: What are the problems faced by ESL learners when completing the voice-over challenges?

2 Review of related studies

2.1 *Teaching Speaking to ESL Learners*

While there is a general assumption that ESL learners have more opportunities to use the English language in their daily life, the challenges in enhancing their communicative competence still persist. In the ESL context, the teaching of productive skills such as speaking often requires greater efforts from instructors. Researchers have discovered several reasons that lead to the situation. Krashen (1982), for example, highlighted the importance of addressing the affective state of learners, especially with regards to anxiety that may impede students' language acquisition. MacIntyre et al. (1997) studied the same problem and noted how learners tend to be biased in their self-rating when performing a language task due to the effect of anxiety. Unlike writing in which learners have the opportunity to perform corrective measures by reviewing what they have written, speaking tends to cause greater anxiety as the output is instantaneous. The level of anxiety is elevated when teachers are present as learners are worried over the teacher's reactions (Hanifa, 2018). Hence, there is an apparent need to create a friendlier environment to allow ESL learners to practise speaking without the fear of making mistakes.

Apart from addressing the issue of anxiety, instructional strategies in teaching speaking should be re-examined. Instead of teaching learners to memorise conversational patterns, priorities should be given to methods that allow authentic use of the language. Richards (2008) suggested the teaching of talk as interaction, in which learners are provided with sufficient opportunities to engage in "naturalistic dialogs that model features such as opening and closing conversations, making small talk, recounting personal incidents and experiences, and reacting to what others say" (p. 29). Such a strategy would be able to boost learners' confidence in using the target language more frequently. However, due to time constraints and a limited chance for teachers to be a model for learners during class time, alternative strategies for out-of-class speaking activities are needed. One strategy is by incorporating social media platforms or tools, as learners tend to view them as friendly and engaging (Namaziandost & Nasri, 2018). These platforms also contain functions that could simulate life-like interactions among different people. Considering the potential of social media tools in simulating various contexts for authentic language use, this study focuses on exploring how TikTok can be used in designing suitable tasks for ESL learners.

2.2 *TikTok in language learning*

Previous studies on the use of TikTok in language learning were centred on increasing student motivation to learn and increasing engagement during lessons. Aranego (2020) conducted a study on twenty first-year students at a university in the Philippines with the goal of increasing their motivation to learn English. They had to go through a five-day intervention in which the teacher used TikTok video challenge as part of the language learning activities. Pre- and post-tests were conducted using items that were constructed based on the affective filter hypothesis as proposed by Krashen (1982). The results from Aranego's study showed that exposure to TikTok challenges has allowed students to reduce their fear and hesitation in speaking in the target language. However, the study was done within a short duration (i.e., less than a week) and may not be conclusive in terms of how the TikTok challenge has helped the students in improving their speaking skills. There is a need to allocate more time for students to experience the learning process via TikTok challenges. Furthermore, the study by Aranego (2020) was mainly to investigate students' anxiety levels in speaking and not their perceived usefulness of the intervention done via TikTok.

In another study, Pratiwi et al. (2021) investigated the use of TikTok specifically to improve the

pronunciation skill of students in Indonesia. Their qualitative study was conducted on eight students. They were required to find TikTok videos that were tagged with #PronunciationChallenge and use the duet feature to repeat the lines mentioned by the original speaker. After several attempts, the respondents were required to answer ten open-ended questions, which gathered their feedback on the benefits of TikTok video challenges in assisting them in learning proper pronunciation. The results showed that all respondents reported minimal improvement in their pronunciation skills, but they were aware of its potential to make them aware of their own mistakes. Similar to the study by Aranego (2020), this study is very limited to a small sample, and the respondents were not given enough time to experience the TikTok challenges. However, it does highlight a gap in the implementation of the TikTok challenges as speaking tasks since students were confined to videos from only one specific tag (#PronunciationChallenge), which might limit the contextualised use of the language.

Yang (2020), on the other hand, examined the use of TikTok among students in secondary schools. By using a quantitative survey, the study gathered responses from 187 students. The results revealed that students perceived the TikTok application as applicable to learning listening and speaking skills as well as vocabulary. As TikTok videos are short and concise, the respondents indicated that they were able to practise specific usage of words and expressions by imitating the speakers. Interestingly, Yang's research also asked the respondents to compare the use of TikTok videos with English textbooks. The respondents noted the textbooks to be more structured and contained verified content from experts. Although the content on TikTok may not be thoroughly checked for accuracy, the respondents still regard the medium to be engaging and motivating. This finding highlighted the methodological gap in which TikTok videos should be reviewed by the instructors for their accuracy before they are presented to the students for selection.

It is noteworthy that studies on the use of TikTok for language learning are increasing in the past two years, perhaps due to the increase in screen time and the rising popularity of the platform during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kale, 2020). As a result of the closure of schools and universities, learners were spending more time online, browsing through various content and creating their own. TikTok also launched its own programme known as #LearnOnTikTok through a curated list of educational videos in assisting learning during the COVID-19 lockdown. Fiallos et al. (2021) examined the videos posted in this programme and found 15 key knowledge areas preferred by users, ranging from healthcare to environmental topics. Through this initiative, users can engage in a diversity of topics with a global perspective, an advantage that can be capitalised by ESL learners. To date, however, studies that specifically examine the pedagogical design of language learning tasks via TikTok remain scarce. More attention was given to the general view of TikTok, usually within a short period of time.

Besides that, Literat (2021) studied youth experiences of online learning during COVID-19 by analysing TikTok videos posted by students and found that they are seeking various support to stay motivated in learning. This finding points to the fact that teachers have to be creative in adopting new tools or strategies to assist learners while acknowledging that social media such as TikTok contain rich information about learners. Therefore, in the context of ESL classrooms, it is pivotal to explore how these social media tools could be integrated into the teaching and learning process, particularly by taking into consideration pertinent pedagogical principles.

2.3 Pedagogical principles in teaching ESL speaking

The pedagogical principles proposed by Newton and Nation (2020) were considered in guiding the design of speaking tasks for this study. In their book, they have covered extensively SLA theories that shape practices for the effective teaching of language skills, specifically for listening and speaking. They repeated the call made by Ellis (2005) in which language instructors must ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning apart from language forms. Newton and Nation (2020) suggested ten pedagogical principles but the three most relevant to speaking were adopted in this study:

- i. Boost learning through comprehensible input by adding a deliberate element.
- ii. Provide opportunities for cooperative interaction.
- iii. Help learners deliberately learn language items and patterns, including sounds, spelling, vocabulary, multi-word units, grammar, and discourse.

In the first principle of boosting learning through comprehensible input, Newton and Nation (2020) suggested that consciousness-raising activities should be done before communicative tasks. The deliberate element can either be done by the learner or the instructor, which essentially triggers them to learn the target language using meaning-focused input. The second principle prioritises the need for interaction between learners. The typical activity that fulfils this principle is the opinion or information gap, in which learners need to cooperate to complete a task. The third principle requires explicit highlighting of language items and patterns so that learners are aware of what they were learning in the contextualised setting. These principles were chosen as they were relevant to the scope of this study, in which learners are given the time to learn speaking skills through TikTok voice-over challenges.

3 Method

This study adopted a case study research design with the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods in analysing its gathered data. It focuses on the perceived usefulness of TikTok within the scope of ESL speaking and a group of target learners at the university level. It involved 60 first-year university students (27 male and 33 female) from different disciplines at a public university in Malaysia who participated in the study voluntarily. Most of the participants have an average proficiency in English mostly obtaining Band 2 and Band 3 in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). As the updated MUET is aligned with The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) descriptions, they are within the levels of B1 and B2 (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2019). All respondents are active users of TikTok, and the average reported time spent on the platform is approximately 30 minutes per day. Thus, they have no issues understanding how TikTok works or the features available in the application.

The design of the tasks for this study was guided by the three main principles proposed by Newton and Nation (2020) as explained in the previous section. Based on the principles, the participants were required to participate in twelve voice-over challenges within two months in their own free time. The voice-over challenges must involve a “duet” (deliberate element) with other speakers of English (for cooperative interactions), and they were explicitly told to focus on clarity and meaning-making effort. They were also allowed to reattempt the challenges as the intention was also to encourage self-regulated learning and reduce the fear of making mistakes. This flexibility is part of the deliberate process to help learners “teach themselves” without the presence of the instructors. However, the participants were not allowed to use voice manipulation tools in TikTok so that their original voices would be heard clearly. To ensure the participants selected TikTok videos that met the criteria, a review of their selected videos was done by the researchers. In this case, the participants had to submit the link to the video to the researchers for approval before the challenge could be attempted. This review process was done progressively as they completed each challenge. Some students who had problems finding suitable videos were assisted by the researchers.

Upon completing the twelve challenges, the participants were required to upload their videos to a designated virtual storage for the researchers to validate that they had completed all challenges. Subsequently, the participants had to complete an online questionnaire. During the briefing, the participants were requested to provide their consent for the use of their videos or corresponding still images from the videos, with privacy ensured in terms of their identity and responses given in the survey. The written consent also included ethical considerations as to how their recordings would be used in the research. Figure 1 shows screenshots of videos submitted by two participants. They are always on the left of the screen while the speaker whom they duet with during the voice-over challenge is on the right.



Fig. 1. Screenshots of the submitted videos from two students (permission acquired)

The questionnaire was developed based on the learning goals of ESL listening and speaking by Newton and Nation (2020), which cover pronunciation, vocabulary, grammatical constructions, fluency, and conversational discourse. It contained 15 items with a 6-point Likert scale of 1 being strongly disagreed and 6 strongly agree. The Likert items were meant to find out the participants' perceived usefulness of the TikTok voice-over challenges. Two open-ended questions were also included to gauge the participants' overall views about TikTok usage for speaking activities. The first question asked for the main strengths of TikTok for learning to speak, while the second question is on the problems that they faced. The questionnaire was piloted twice to check for errors and ensure the items would not lead to misunderstanding. The items were also reviewed by two appointed experts in English language teaching with more than ten years of experience in teaching. The reliability index for the instrument yielded a Cronbach alpha value of 0.91, which is considered very high (Brown, 2022). It means that the instrument is 91% reliable and provided a good estimate of the internal consistency.

In terms of data analysis procedures, the Likert-scale items were analysed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and frequency counts), while the open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) by focusing on emerging themes. The responses to the open-ended questions were read line by line, coded, and cross-checked by the researchers to ensure that the classification of the theme was done appropriately. The findings are then tabulated for ease of interpretation and further analysis based on the research questions.

4 Results

In this case study, all 60 participants completed the required challenges and the online questionnaire fully. Table 1 shows the results gathered from the online questionnaire, which seeks to answer investigate the participants' perception of the usefulness of the voice-over challenges on TikTok (RQ1). The items are arranged in descending order according to the mean values. As the maximum value is 6.0 (strongly agree), items with a mean value higher than 3.50 show participants' high level of agreement.

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation (SD) values of each item (N=60)

No	Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	The challenges help improve my pronunciation.	4.96	0.78
2	I enjoy the experience of participating in the challenges.	4.75	0.65
3	The challenges make learning how to speak interesting and fun.	4.61	0.92
4	The challenges allow me to learn from other speakers of English.	4.58	0.88
5	The challenges increase my opportunities to practise speaking.	4.45	0.79
6	I look forward to practising speaking skills through other TikTok challenges.	4.38	0.77
7	The challenges help improve my intonation.	4.30	0.82
8	The challenges allow me to practise without fear.	4.23	0.94
9	The challenges allow me to learn new words.	4.16	0.69
10	The challenges increase my confidence in using English expressions.	4.10	0.86
11	The challenges help improve my fluency.	4.05	0.85
12	The challenges make learning speaking clearer.	3.83	0.82
13	The challenges make me feel calm when recording my own voice.	3.75	0.89
14	The challenges increase my chances to speak different types of texts.	2.97	0.81
15	The challenges help me learn facial expressions when speaking.	2.88	0.71

Note: The challenges refer to the voice-over challenges

In terms of assisting them in learning the necessary components of speaking, the participants agreed that the voice-over challenges helped them the most in terms of pronunciation (mean=4.96, SD=0.78), intonation (mean=4.30, SD=0.82), vocabulary (mean=4.16, SD=0.69) and fluency (mean=4.05, SD=0.85). They also agreed that the voice-over challenges increase their confidence in using English expressions (mean=4.10, SD=0.86). However, they did not believe that the challenges helped them improve their facial expressions (mean=2.88, SD=0.71). Furthermore, the participants did not agree that the voice-over challenges provided them opportunities to speak other forms of text types as most of the challenges seem to follow the same conversational patterns (mean=2.97, SD=0.81).

The results from the questionnaire also showed that the participants were able to learn from other speakers of English (mean=4.58, SD=0.88) and practise without fear (mean=4.23, SD=0.94). As the challenges were not real-time, they were able to improve through multiple attempts. Such an environment in TikTok also made learning fun and interesting (mean=4.61, SD=0.92) and more visible in highlighting the speaking skills that they should be focused on (mean=3.83, SD=0.82). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that students were comfortable recording their own voices (mean=3.75, SD=0.81) despite the concerns that the researchers had during the initial stage of the study as to whether the participants would be able to perform the required tasks.

In general, the participants enjoyed the learning experience (mean=4.75, SD=0.65) as they acknowledged the increased opportunities to practise speaking in English (mean=4.45, SD=0.79). They also indicated their optimism in practising speaking skills through other TikTok challenges in the future (mean=4.38, SD=0.77). As a user-friendly application, TikTok has indeed increased the excitement among the participants to engage in ESL speaking activities without much persuasion from the researchers.

In answering RQ1, the participants' responses from the first open-ended question (What is your overall view on the strengths of using TikTok as speaking tasks/activities?) in the questionnaire also revealed their positive views about the use of TikTok in learning speaking skills. Table 2 shows the major themes derived from the participants' responses. The frequency count of responses that were coded for the same themes is given in parentheses in the column for themes.

Table 2. Emerging themes on the strengths of using TikTok as speaking tasks.

Themes	Excerpts of Responses from Participants
Strength - Friendly environment (n=29)	<i>TikTok is nice to be used because it is <u>very easy and friendly</u>. (P4)</i> <i>Actually, TikTok is <u>simple and straightforward</u> you see. So this makes you feel <u>more comfortable than other platforms</u>. (P30)</i> <i>I've been using TikTok for a while now and we can agree that it is useful app since we <u>don't need to learn complicated technical skills</u>. (P21)</i>
Strength - Engaging content (n=17)	<i>I spent quite some time learning speaking here, <u>it makes me feel fun and no fear to try</u>. (P13)</i> <i>I thought TikTok haha is only for dancing, but when I know there are videos like this, <u>it is very interesting</u>. (P45)</i> <i><u>Fun and engaging!</u> There are many <u>interesting</u> videos that help me learn. (P58)</i>
Strength – Motivating (n=11)	<i>Very <u>motivating!</u> I <u>don't have to be worried</u> to learn from my mistakes. (P9)</i> <i>It feels like I am having a tutor that <u>keeps motivating me</u> to say it right. (P25)</i> <i>Of course, this is <u>better than learning through the dialogues</u> in referenced books. I <u>feel more motivated to learn</u> to speak. (P1)</i>
Strength – Others (n=3)	<i>I <u>like the music</u> in TikTok, learning with music helps. (P8)</i> <i>TikTok is useful <u>when our friends also like our videos</u>. (P41)</i> <i>The <u>filters within TikTok have language games</u> that I can play too, like guessing the words. (P52)</i>

*P=participant

The themes related to the strength of TikTok for ESL speaking tasks or activities matched the findings from the Likert-scale items in which the participants find TikTok to be user-friendly (n=29), contain engaging content (n=17) and motivate them to learn (n=11). Their responses indicated that TikTok has the potential to be used as a tool to encourage ESL learners to practise related speaking skills without fear of making errors. The friendly environment within TikTok seems to be the main factor that motivates learners to complete the voice-over challenges. Since the participants were active users of TikTok, they did not report any technical problems in using the applications. Three participants also pointed out other features in TikTok that can be useful, such as musical content, friends' reactions (like), and video filters.

To answer RQ2, which is on the problems faced by the participants when completing the voice-over challenges, several major themes were derived from the participants' responses as shown in Table 3. The frequency count of responses that were coded for the same themes is given in parentheses.

Table 3. Emerging themes on problems faced by the participants.

Themes	Excerpts of Responses from Participants
Problem – Speakers' accent (n=32)	<i>Honestly, I have to listen many times to certain videos because <u>I don't get the slang (accents)</u>. (P20)</i> <i>I find it hard to understand <u>some "slang"</u> (accents). I had to ask my friends sometimes or listen many times (P34)</i> <i>The <u>Australian accent is thick</u>, so I try my best to listen. (P57)</i>

Problem – Speakers’ speed (n=16)	<i>Some of the speakers <u>speak so fast</u>, I need to stop a few times. (P16)</i> <i><u>The speed!</u> OMG some of them just keep going on and on. (P51)</i>
Problem – self-consciousness (n=8)	<i>I still <u>feel shy when recording myself</u>. Took me a few times to record one. Not easy to record yourself because it’s okay after a while. (P7)</i> <i>To record, I practise facing the mirror first, then I record. If not, <u>I will laugh at myself</u> hahaha. (P19)</i>
Problem – Duet selection (n=4)	<i>I <u>don’t know how to search properly</u> at first, but after my friend helped me then I know how to find the challenge and duet with the right one. (P42)</i> <i>We <u>need to search the voice-over challenges</u> on TikTok. I found some that were not suitable for speaking. Like very few lines for me to speak (P39)</i>

*P=participant

From the responses given by the participants, four major problems were noted. The most commonly mentioned problem is the speakers’ accents (n=32). The participants had difficulty following those with a thick accent. Though the participants mentioned “slang”, they were referring to accents since it is typical for Malaysians to call accents “slang” due to fossilised usage. Interestingly, despite having difficulty with the speakers’ accents, the participants were still willing to complete the required number of challenges.

The second notable problem is the speaker’s speed (n=16). Since most of the chosen speakers are from English-speaking countries, they tend to be fast in uttering their lines. Though this seems like a problem, it is in fact a good practice for the participants to be familiar with authentic language use. In addition, some voice-over challenges have a time limit, making the whole duet process to be rapid, and participants were not able to follow the pace.

The third problem faced by the participants is pertaining to self-consciousness when recording videos of themselves. While most of the participants were comfortable recording videos for the voice-over challenges, some still found it awkward. However, only eight participants mentioned this as a problem, which implies that most of the participants were comfortable completing the voice-over challenges. This finding is in line with the responses to the open-ended question on the strength of TikTok, as they regarded the platform to be user-friendly.

The fourth problem mentioned by the participants is regarding the duet selection. Four participants stated that they had to search multiple times for the right speakers to complete the voice-over challenge as some of the challenges contain very limited lines for them to speak. Although they were familiar with the use of hashtags for searching, participants still preferred to manually search for the voice-over challenges as they would want to ensure they can understand the speakers well and fulfil the criteria set by the researcher. The minimum number of participants (n=4) who stated this as a problem is also due to the assistance provided by the researchers in helping them to find suitable videos or challenges.

5 Discussion

In answering RQ1, the findings showed positive outcomes in three main areas. Firstly, the participants acknowledged the usefulness of TikTok voice-over challenges in helping them to learn speaking skills, particularly in the aspects of pronunciation, intonation, and fluency. This finding is in line with the study by Pratiwi et al. (2021) in terms of participants’ willingness to practise speaking skills through TikTok challenges. It also supported studies that have shown how videos can be used as a model for ESL learners to improve their pronunciation and intonation (Encalada & Sarmiento, 2019; Kaur et al., 2014). In relation to the principle by Newton and Nation (2020), the use

of TikTok challenges has also boosted the participant's learning through the use of authentic comprehensible input since they were given the opportunity to find videos that they like within the criteria set by the researchers instead of learning speaking through scripts or activities provided in textbooks.

Secondly, the participants indicated that they were more motivated and willing to complete the speaking tasks. This corresponds to what Aranego (2020) mentioned as reducing the affective filters among ESL learners. The user-friendliness of the TikTok platform and the availability of fun and engaging content seem to contribute to this positive acceptance. Also, similar to the findings by Fiallos et al. (2021), participants cited the content to be interesting as it covers wide-ranging topics, not confined to the ones they found in English language learning textbooks. It gives them a sense of being global citizens as well since they were able to engage with people from different parts of the world.

Thirdly, the participants were able to increase their opportunity to learn especially with various speakers of English. This behaviour is akin to the modelling strategies that language learners often use in learning speaking skills (Newton & Nation, 2020). These observed findings seem to point to the fact that virtual practice of speaking skills is feasible for less proficient students to practise in an authentic environment, in line with what was found by Rashid et al. (2017) through their virtual speaking buddy programme. Another contributing factor would be the lack of opportunity to practise speaking at home (Othman & Chuah, 2021, Yang, 2020), and they consider the speakers in the TikTok voice-over challenge as their reliable sources of reference for continuous deliberate practice.

As for the second research question, the main problems mentioned were related to speakers' accents, speakers' speed of utterances, self-consciousness in recording, and duet selection. The problems with accent and speed are somewhat expected since the TikTok voice-over challenges were mostly posed by speakers in English-speaking countries and ESL learners often prefer accents that they are familiar with (Kong & Kang, 2020). However, as reiterated by Newton and Nation (2020), the inclusion of such learning materials would be able to raise the ESL learners' awareness of the correct usage of the target language. In this case, they would be able to pay closer attention to how certain words are pronounced and used in a complete sentence. The participants in this study were cautious in learning pronunciation as it is regarded as an important indicator of their confidence in speaking. This is similar to what was found by Tsunemoto and McDonough (2020) in which confidence in pronunciation was correlated with second language learners' perception of one's accent. Although the participants in this study mentioned the difficulty in following certain accents, they were enthusiastic about the exposure to different speakers of English.

In terms of being self-conscious about recording themselves, the participants reported how they would re-attempt some challenges. Indirectly, this has made the learners engage in more practices of correct pronunciation, which is the foundation of speaking ability (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010). The duet selection problem is partly caused by the design of this study as the participants were allowed to choose their own voice-over challenges based on the criteria set by the researcher. As the intention of the researchers was to provide more flexibility to learners, they were given the autonomy to select whom they wanted to duet with as long as the selected challenge or video met the requirements. However, it is worth noting that the majority of the participants had no problems with the selection process as the researchers were also providing assistance throughout the duration of the study.

All in all, results from both qualitative and quantitative data have revealed the same pattern on the perceived usefulness of TikTok voice-over challenges in encouraging ESL learners to practise speaking. Despite the problems mentioned by the participants, they were still able to complete the challenges within the given duration. The design of the speaking tasks involving TikTok voice-over challenges has also provided valuable feedback to the researchers with regard to the use of the pedagogical principles in teaching speaking as proposed by Newton and Nation (2020).

6 Conclusion and recommendations

This case study has shed light on the usefulness of TikTok in English language learning among ESL learners. The results have indicated students' positive views about the voice-over challenges in encouraging them to improve their speaking ability, specifically in pronunciation, intonation, and fluency, as found in other studies (Aranego, 2020; Pratiwi et al., 2021). The outcomes of this study provide pedagogical implications on the use of TikTok content in teaching speaking skills among ESL learners. Specifically, instructors are encouraged to conduct pre-screening or review of the TikTok content or challenges before assigning them to the learners. As done in this study, this recommendation is to make sure that the accuracy of the content can be verified and prevent learners from learning the incorrect usage. Pre-screening can also filter out inappropriate content.

In addition, in this study, the TikTok voice-over challenges were used as additional learning activities. It is recommended that instructors embed these challenges as part of existing learning content or activities based on the task-based learning approach in which each task is linked, and learners can learn each topic or sub-skill incrementally rather than in isolation. Apart from using the voice-over challenges, TikTok could be used as a medium to create useful bite-sized language learning content. Instructors could design tasks for learners to share their content via TikTok without being restricted to the usual document-based submissions. Micro-learning contents and assessments, as stipulated by Nikou and Economides (2018), are advantageous in motivating the current crop of learners as they are seeking various cues to stay focused on their learning.

Nevertheless, owing to its exploratory intention, this study is limited to the context being studied (i.e., 60 first-year university students in Malaysia) and does not utilise the quasi-experimental method in checking the effectiveness of TikTok's voice-over challenges on students' speaking performance. Future research can consider using the method while adding other variables, such as gender, attitudes, time spent on TikTok, and proficiency in other language skills. These variables would provide a clearer understanding of factors that influence learners' performance. Furthermore, it would be valuable to examine its use over an extended period of time (for example, a semester) as longer exposure would probably yield different results, especially in investigating whether ESL learners can sustain their motivation to learn. It would also allow more data to be collected for cross-comparison and inform the instructors on necessary design interventions to be made in utilising TikTok as language learning activities in ESL classrooms.

In some contexts, TikTok is often perceived by many educators as a time-wasting tool. However, this study has proven otherwise by revealing its potential in language learning and how it makes ESL learners "tick" to "talk" more. It has increased students' willingness to attempt speaking activities on their own without being limited to classroom settings. It has also introduced the emergence of meaningful challenges within TikTok that could motivate ESL learners to increase their use of the target language.

References

- Adams, D., Chuah, K. M., Mohamed, A., Sumintono, B., Moosa, V., & Shareefa, M. (2021). Bricks to clicks: Students' engagement in e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Asia Pacific Journal of Educators and Education, 36* (2), 99–117. <https://doi.org/10.21315/apjee2021.36.2.6>
- Akasha, O. (2013). Exploring the challenges facing Arabic-speaking ESL students & teachers in middle school. *Journal of ELT and Applied Linguistics (JELTAL), 1*(1), 12–31.
- Aranego, R. B. Jr. (2020). Reducing students' affective filter in spoken English through exposure to TikTok challenge. *Psychology and Education Journal, 57*(9), 6444–6449. <https://doi.org/10.17762/pae.v57i9.3055>
- Al-Qaysi, N., Mohamad-Nordin, N., & Al-Emran, M. (2020). What leads to social learning? Students' attitudes towards using social media applications in Omani higher education. *Education and Information Technology, 25* (3), 2157–2174. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-019-10074-6>
- Anderson, K. E. (2020). Getting acquainted with social networks and apps: it is time to talk about TikTok. *Library Hi Tech News, 10*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LHTN-01-2020-0001>
- Ansari, J. A. N., & Khan, N. A. (2020). Exploring the role of social media in collaborative learning the new domain of learning. *Smart Learning Environments, 7* (1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-020-00118-7>

- Barrot, J. S. (2021). Social media as a language learning environment: a systematic review of the literature (2008-2019). *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 1–29.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>
- Brown, J. D. (2002). The Cronbach alpha reliability estimate. *JALT Testing & Evaluation SIG Newsletter*, 6 (1).
- Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M., Goodwin, J. M. (2010). *Teaching pronunciation: A Course book and reference guide* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Christensen, M. I. (2020). What happens beyond the classroom: Scaffolding at a social network site. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 17(1), 117–134.
- Chuah, K. M., & Kabilan, M. K. (2021). Teachers' views on the use of Chatbots to Support English Language Teaching in a Mobile Environment. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning*, 16 (20). <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v16i20.24917>
- Chuah, K. M., & Kabilan, M. K. (2022). The development of mobile applications for language learning: A systematic review of theoretical frameworks. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 21(8), 253–270.
- Dahdal, S. (2020). Using the WhatsApp social media application for active learning. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 49 (2), 239–249. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0047239520928307>
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford University.
- Ellis, R. (2005). Measuring implicit and explicit knowledge of a second language: A psychometric study. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 27(2), 141–172.
- Encalada, M. A. R., & Sarmiento, S. M. A. (2019). Perceptions about self-recording videos to develop EFL speaking skills in two Ecuadorian universities. *Journal of Language Teaching & Research*, 10(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1001.07>
- Fan, J. (2019). Chinese ESL Learners' Perceptions of English Language Teaching and Learning in Australia. *English Language Teaching*, 12(7), 139–152.
- Fiallos, A., Fiallos, C., & Figueroa, S. (2021, July). Tiktok and education: Discovering knowledge through learning videos. In *2021 Eighth International Conference on eDemocracy & eGovernment (ICEDEG)* (pp. 172–176). IEEE. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICEDEG52154.2021.9530988>
- Hanifa, R. (2018). Factors generating anxiety when learning EFL speaking skills. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 5(2), 230–239.
- Kaur, D., Yong, E., Zin, N. M., & DeWitt, D. (2014). The use of videos as a cognitive stimulator and instructional tool in tertiary ESL classroom. *Malaysian Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 2 (3), 32–41.
- Kale, S. (2020, April 26). How coronavirus helped Tik Tok find its voice. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/26/how-coronavirus-helped-tiktok-find-its-voice>
- Kusuma, I. (2021). Speaking issues faced by Indonesian students during classroom discussions in the US. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 18(1), 5–17.
- Kaye, D. B. V., Chen, X., & Zeng, J. (2021). The co-evolution of two Chinese mobile short video apps: Parallel platformization of Douyin and TikTok. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 9(2), 229–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2050157920952120>
- Kong, M. L., & Kang, H. I. (2020). Identity and Accents: Do Students Really Want to Speak Like Native Speakers of English? *RELC Journal*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0033688220939246>
- Krashen, S. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Prentice-Hall International.
- Lambton-Howard, D., Kiaer, J., & Kharrufa, A. (2020). 'Social media is their space': student and teacher use and perception of features of social media in language education. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2020.1774653>
- Lee, Y. J. (2022). Language learning affordances of Instagram and TikTok. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17501229.2022.2051517>
- Lee, S. Z., & Azman, H. (2021). Integrating Facebook as a Web 2.0 tool in a responsive pedagogy for multi-modal oral presentation skills. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, 21(3), 103–124. <http://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2021-2103-06>
- Literat, I. (2021). Teachers act like we're robots: TikTok as a window into youth experiences of online learning during COVID-19. *AERA Open*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2332858421995537>
- MacIntyre, P. D., Noels, K. A., & Clément, R. (1997). Biases in self-ratings of second language proficiency: The role of language anxiety. *Language Learning*, 47(2), 265–287.

- Malaysian Examinations Council. (2019). *Malaysian University English Test*. Malaysian Examinations Council.
- Namaziandost, E., & Nasri, M. (2019). The impact of social media on EFL learners' speaking skill: a survey study involving EFL teachers and students. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research*, 6(3), 199–215.
- Newton, J. M., & Nation, I. S. P. (2020). *Teaching ESL/EFL listening and speaking*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429203114>
- Nikou, S. A., & Economides, A. A. (2018). Mobile-based micro-learning and assessment: Impact on learning performance and motivation of high school students. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 34(3), 269–278. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12240>
- Othman, N. R., & Chuah, K. M. (2021). The relationship between English language fluency and learning engagement: A case study among first-year undergraduates. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 10(2), 150–162.
- Perry, M. S. (2020). Multimodal engagement through a transmedia storytelling project for undergraduate students. *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*, 20(3). <http://doi.org/10.17576/gema-2020-2003-02>
- Phuong, T. T. H. (2021). Who should teach English pronunciation?: Voices of Vietnamese EFL learners and teachers. *The Journal of AsiaTEFL*, 18(1), 125–141. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2021.18.1.8.125>
- Pratiwi, A. E., Ufairah, N. N., & Sopiah, R. S. (2021, March). Utilising TikTok application as media for learning English pronunciation. In *International Conference on Education of Suryakencana*. <https://doi.org/10.35194/cp.v0i0.1374>
- Rashid, R. A., Mohamed, S. B., Rahman, M. F. A., & Shamsuddin, S. N. W. (2017). Developing speaking skills using virtual speaking buddy. *International Journal of Emerging Technologies in Learning (iJET)*, 12(05), 195–201. <https://doi.org/10.3991/ijet.v12i05.6955>
- Reinhardt, J. (2019). Social media in second and foreign language teaching and learning: Blogs, wikis, and social networking. *Language Teaching*, 52(1), 1–39. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444818000356>
- Reinhardt, J. (2022). Everyday technology-mediated language learning: New opportunities and challenges. In C. Lütge (Ed.), *Foreign language learning in the digital age* (pp. 67–78). Routledge.
- Richards, J. C. (2008). *Teaching listening and speaking*. Cambridge University Press.
- Savignon, S. J. (2005). Communicative language teaching: Strategies and goals. In *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 659–676). Routledge.
- Shen, C. W., Kuo, C. J., & Minh Ly, P. T. (2017). Analysis of social media influencers and trends on online and mobile learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 18(1), 208–224.
- Tsunemoto, A., & McDonough, K. (2021). Exploring Japanese EFL learners' attitudes toward English pronunciation and its relationship to perceived accentedness. *Language and Speech*, 64(1), 24–34.
- Yang, H. (2020). Secondary-school students' perspectives of utilizing Tik Tok for English learning in and beyond the EFL classroom. In *2020 3rd International Conference on Education Technology and Social Science (ETSS 2020)* (pp. 163–183).
- Zakhro, U. (2021). Media Resources: The Requirement of the Modern Generation of Learners. *Journal Educational Verkenning*, 2(1), 8–12.

About the Author(s)

Kee-Man Chuah (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7499-5889>) is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Language and Communication, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. He has vast experience and expertise in the fields of educational technology, computational linguistics, learning sciences and instructional design.

Looi-Chin Ch'ng (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5280-1393>) is a senior lecturer at the Academic of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi Mara Sarawak Campus. Her research interest is in the area of innovative pedagogies in English language teaching and language assessments.