

# Harnessing TikTok for English Learning: Exploring Digital Literacy Gaps Among Indonesian High School Students

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the widespread use of social media among Indonesian youth, digital literacy and English language proficiency remain unevenly developed. This study explores how TikTok, as a popular short-form video platform, can serve as a medium for English language learning and digital literacy enhancement among Indonesian high school students. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research involved digital diaries, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions with students from two public senior high schools. The findings indicate that students engage with TikTok daily, frequently encountering English language content such as vocabulary tips, dialogue-based skits, lyric challenges, and storytelling videos. This exposure supports incidental learning and fosters motivation; however, most students engage passively with the content and show limited ability to critically assess or reflect on the material, a pattern that directly undermines the development of critical digital literacy, as passive consumption without evaluative engagement leaves students vulnerable to misinformation and uncritical adoption of unverified language forms. While TikTok offers authentic and engaging opportunities for language input, it does not inherently promote deeper digital literacy without pedagogical scaffolding. The study emphasizes the importance of guided educational strategies that incorporate popular digital platforms like TikTok to support both language acquisition and critical digital literacy. It also calls for curricular reforms to better align with students' digital practices and suggests further research into structured integrations of social media in formal language instruction.

**Keywords:** *TikTok, English language learning, digital literacy, Indonesian high school students, social media-based learning, EFL, informal learning environments.*

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media has profoundly influenced how young people interact, communicate, and learn. In Indonesia, the rapid proliferation of mobile devices and affordable internet access has fueled a surge in social media usage, especially among high school students. Platforms like TikTok, with its short-form, visually engaging content, have become central to youth culture, enabling users to create, remix, and share videos that are both personal and performative. According to We Are Social and DataReportal (2024), TikTok is among

the top three most-used platforms by Indonesians aged 13–24, with daily engagement times often exceeding one hour. Despite this high usage, recent studies (Kurniawati & Nurcahyo, 2023; Pratama, 2022) show that many Indonesian students still struggle with basic aspects of digital literacy, such as evaluating the credibility of online content, understanding digital footprints, and using platforms ethically and responsibly.

This paradox high digital engagement but low digital literacy represents a pressing educational challenge. On the one hand, students are immersed in digital spaces rich with potential for learning; on the other, they often lack the critical skills to navigate these environments effectively. Simultaneously, English remains a crucial subject in Indonesia's national curriculum, yet English language proficiency, particularly in speaking and listening, remains relatively low among high school students (EF EPI, 2023). As such, there is an urgent need for creative and relevant strategies that not only enhance English learning outcomes but also promote critical digital competencies.

While numerous studies have examined the use of social media in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts (Almurashi, 2022; Lin & Karim, 2023), the majority focus on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, or Instagram. Few have explored TikTok's potential as a dual-purpose educational tool enhancing both language acquisition and digital literacy development. Moreover, existing literature often overlooks the cultural specificity of digital media use in Southeast Asian contexts, particularly in relation to how young people engage with content for informal learning. This gap highlights the need for contextually grounded, empirical research that examines TikTok not merely as a distraction or entertainment medium, but as a platform with pedagogical value.

Given TikTok's popularity and user-friendly features such as text overlays, audio dubbing, and algorithm-driven content discovery it offers unique affordances for English learning. Learners can watch or create English-language content, engage in participatory practices such as commenting and duets, and mimic authentic pronunciation and intonation from native speakers. Simultaneously, producing TikTok videos can cultivate digital literacies including content curation, ethical sharing, basic video editing, and awareness of digital audiences. Thus, TikTok stands at the intersection of language learning and digital competence a space that has yet to be fully explored in the Indonesian high school context.

This study is particularly significant for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to modernize teaching practices in line with students' digital realities. It aims to provide evidence on how integrating a familiar and engaging platform like TikTok into English learning can simultaneously build essential 21st-century skills. Critically, the focus on Indonesian high school students is not incidental: this population occupies a unique position where national curriculum demands for English proficiency intersect with extraordinarily high social media engagement, yet formal classroom instruction has largely failed to bridge these two realities. Unlike university students who exercise greater autonomy over their learning tools, high school students in Indonesia are bound by centralized curricula (Merdeka Belajar) that are only beginning to acknowledge digital platforms. Understanding how TikTok functions for this specific age group, within this specific policy context, is therefore essential to translating findings into actionable classroom practice.

#### Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Examine Indonesian high school students' perceptions of TikTok as a platform for English language learning.
2. Explore how TikTok activities may contribute to the development of students' digital literacy skills.
3. Identify challenges and pedagogical opportunities in utilizing TikTok for educational purposes within the Indonesian EFL context.

By addressing these objectives, the research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on social media-based learning and inform strategies for more relevant and engaging digital education in Indonesia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the use of social media in English language learning (ELL) has received considerable scholarly attention due to its potential to enhance engagement, motivation, and language practice beyond traditional classroom settings. Various platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook have been explored for their affordances in vocabulary development, listening comprehension, pronunciation, and authentic communication opportunities. Almurashi (2022) emphasizes that YouTube, for instance, can support informal language acquisition through access to real-life conversations and native speaker models. However, it is worth noting that Almurashi's study was conducted in a Saudi Arabian university context, raising questions about the extent to which its findings translate to the informal, algorithm-driven learning behaviors of Indonesian high school adolescents. Lin and Karim (2023) further note that the social and interactive nature of these platforms creates low-pressure environments where learners can engage with content at their own pace and participate in language communities worldwide. However, despite these advantages, much of the existing literature focuses on well-established platforms and tends to overlook emerging platforms like TikTok that are more popular among younger learners, especially in Southeast Asian contexts. TikTok has recently gained attention in educational research due to its widespread popularity among Generation Z and its unique structure of short-form video content. Its features such as filters, music overlays, text editing, and duets encourage not only content consumption but also production, making it a potentially powerful tool for language learning. Studies by Wang and Lee (2023) demonstrate that integrating TikTok into English language classrooms improves students' speaking fluency, listening comprehension, and confidence in using English in creative ways. Basith et al. (2023), examining the perspectives of Indonesian EFL learners, found that TikTok helped students learn informal and idiomatic English expressions through trend-based content and imitation. While Basith et al.'s work offers a valuable foundation, it is primarily focused on higher education learners' perceptions of speaking skill enhancement and does not examine the critical digital literacy dimension. The present study extends this line of inquiry by (1) focusing specifically on senior high school students rather than university learners, (2) using a multi-instrument approach that includes digital diaries to capture real-time behavioral evidence rather than relying solely on self-reported perceptions, and (3) explicitly investigating the intersection of language learning and digital literacy, a dual focus that remains underexplored in the Indonesian secondary school context. Additionally, the participatory culture of TikTok allows learners to feel part of a wider community, which in turn fosters collaborative learning and increased exposure to authentic language use (Khan & Arif, 2022).

Beyond language acquisition, TikTok also holds potential for enhancing digital literacy a skillset that is increasingly vital in today's information-rich world. Digital literacy encompasses the ability to access, evaluate, create, and communicate information using digital tools. Despite Indonesian students' high daily engagement with digital platforms, several studies report a consistent gap in their critical digital skills. For example, Pratama (2022) revealed that a significant number of high school students in urban Indonesia struggle to identify trustworthy sources and verify the accuracy of online information. Likewise, Kurniawati and Nurcahyo (2023) observed that Indonesian learners tend to consume content passively and often lack awareness of digital ethics, safety, and content responsibility. These findings are especially concerning in the context of the Ministry of Education's "Merdeka Belajar" (Freedom to Learn) initiative, which promotes the integration of digital competencies into everyday learning practices (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). However, there remains a gap between digital literacy as a policy objective and the actual tools and platforms being used in the classroom.

Although the potential of social media in language learning is well documented, there is limited research that specifically examines TikTok's dual role as both a language learning and digital literacy tool. Most existing studies focus either on higher education contexts or general

social media usage without a clear focus on Indonesian high school students. Moreover, there is a lack of empirical research on how educators can scaffold students' use of platforms like TikTok to promote not only language learning but also critical digital practices. This study seeks to address these gaps by exploring how TikTok can be effectively leveraged to enhance both English learning and digital literacy development among Indonesian high school students bridging their informal digital engagement with formal educational goals.

## **METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how Indonesian high school students perceive and utilize TikTok for English language learning and digital literacy development. The qualitative approach was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences, perspectives, and engagement with the platform in a naturalistic setting. A case study methodology was deemed appropriate because it allows the researcher to explore contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts particularly relevant in investigating how informal digital practices can intersect with formal educational goals.

The study involved 12 purposively selected high school students (ages 15–17) from two public senior high schools in Bandar Lampung, Indonesia. Participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) active TikTok users (posting or interacting at least 3 times per week), (2) currently enrolled in English as a core subject, and (3) willing to participate in interviews and digital activity tracking. This purposive sampling ensured that the participants could provide rich insights relevant to the research objectives.

Data were gathered using two primary instruments: semi-structured interviews and digital diaries. The semi-structured interviews allowed for flexible yet focused conversations with participants, covering topics such as their motivations for using TikTok, types of English content they engage with, learning experiences through the app, and awareness of digital literacy issues (e.g., evaluating content accuracy, ethical sharing). Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in either Bahasa Indonesia or English, depending on the comfort of the participant. Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed for analysis.

In addition to interviews, participants were asked to maintain a digital diary over a 7 day period, in which they documented their daily TikTok activities related to English learning. This included screenshots, short reflections, and descriptions of videos they watched or created. The digital diary method provided a real-time, reflective lens into the participants' habits and digital behaviors that might not be fully captured through interviews alone.

For data analysis, the collected qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The process began with familiarization of the data through repeated reading of transcripts and diary entries, followed by initial coding based on recurring patterns. Codes were then categorized into broader themes that aligned with the study's objectives particularly in relation to language learning affordances, digital literacy awareness, and challenges in educational integration. To ensure trustworthiness, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with a few participants for feedback and validation. Additionally, triangulation of interview and diary data strengthened the credibility and depth of the analysis.

Overall, this methodological approach enabled a nuanced exploration of how TikTok is used by Indonesian high school students for English learning, while simultaneously revealing the platform's potential to address gaps in digital literacy education.

## **RESULTS**

The study revealed three dominant themes from the semi-structured interviews and digital diaries: (1) students' engagement with TikTok for English learning, (2) their digital literacy practices and gaps, and (3) constraints in integrating TikTok into formal education. Each theme is supported by direct participant responses and patterns observed in their digital behavior over a 7-day diary period.

## 1. TikTok as a Source of Informal English Learning

All twelve participants described TikTok as part of their daily routine, with most engaging for entertainment but also encountering educational English content incidentally or intentionally. Ten participants followed English-language creators or influencers who produced short grammar lessons, vocabulary explanations, or English conversations.

“I follow this guy who teaches English with funny expressions. It makes learning feel like a joke, but I remember the phrases.” – *Participant 1*

“Sometimes I’m just scrolling for fun, but then I get English tips. It doesn’t feel like studying, but I learn a lot.” – *Participant 5*

Students noted that they retained informal vocabulary, pronunciation habits, and idiomatic expressions through repetition and exposure. For example, one participant recalled learning the difference between "gonna," "wanna," and "gotta" from a short 30-second clip.

Interestingly, only two students reported regularly watching videos that used academic or formal English. The rest preferred casual, conversational content, often related to pop culture or daily life situations. None of the participants reported using TikTok for grammar drills or structured learning, but some recognized the app’s role in reinforcing language seen in class.

## 2. Engagement with English Through Production and Interaction

Despite strong content consumption habits, only three participants had ever produced TikTok content in English. Barriers to content creation included lack of confidence in pronunciation, fear of ridicule, and unfamiliarity with editing tools.

“I tried once to speak English in a video but deleted it. I felt awkward with my accent.” – *Participant 7*

“Making content is hard. I don’t know what to say, and I’m afraid my friends will laugh.” – *Participant 4*

However, most participants engaged in *passive interaction*, such as liking, commenting with emojis or short phrases (often in Indonesian), and sharing English videos with friends via WhatsApp or Instagram. Only two students mentioned writing comments in English as a form of practice.

## 3. Digital Literacy Skills: Basic Use vs Critical Awareness

All students showed competency in basic digital navigationscrolling feeds, saving videos, reposting, and using hashtags. However, only four demonstrated critical digital literacy, such as verifying information or checking creators’ credentials.

“I usually just believe the English video. If it looks good, I think it’s correct.” – *Participant 11*

When asked about copyright, source credibility, or the spread of misinformation, most participants admitted that they rarely thought about these aspects. One student reported learning an incorrect expression but only realized it was wrong when her teacher corrected her in class.

Only three participants showed any awareness of privacy settings, while the rest either had public profiles by default or were unsure about video ownership and safety.

#### **4. TikTok as a Disruptive or Supportive Learning Tool**

Opinions were split regarding TikTok's potential as an educational tool. Half the participants expressed optimism about TikTok being used in school, especially when it involved fun challenges or short presentations. Others expressed concern that the platform is too distracting or prone to misuse.

“I think TikTok can be used by teachers to make learning interesting, but if students just scroll, it won't help.” – *Participant 6*

“For me, TikTok is for entertainment. If it's for school, it might lose the fun.” – *Participant 12*

Some students shared that they would be more motivated if teachers created TikTok-based tasks, such as duet challenges, English memes, or content reviews. However, they emphasized the need for clear guidance and examples from educators to avoid confusion and embarrassment.

#### **5. Observations from the Digital Diaries**

The digital diaries confirmed that TikTok was used heavily by participants, with daily screen time ranging from approximately 1.5 to 3 hours per student. Within this period, English-related content accounted for about 20–30% of their total viewing history. This exposure was typically shaped by prior engagement with similar educational or language-based videos, suggesting that the TikTok algorithm reinforced their interest in English content over time. The types of English-language material consumed varied. Most commonly, students watched English vocabulary tips, with nine participants reporting frequent exposure to short videos introducing new words or expressions. Eight students regularly viewed skits that featured English dialogues or conversational phrases. Five participants engaged with English song lyric challenges, which encouraged them to match lyrics with pronunciation or meaning. Additionally, four students reported watching “POV” (point of view) or story time-style videos delivered entirely in English, often depicting daily life, emotional narratives, or humorous scenarios. No student reported watching English news or academic content on TikTok during the observation week. However, four participants bookmarked English videos with the intention of reviewing them again later.

### **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that Indonesian high school students are extensively engaging with TikTok in their daily lives, and a significant portion of that engagement includes English-related content. This confirms the platform's potential as a site for informal language learning,

especially in developing listening skills, vocabulary acquisition, and pronunciation awareness. However, while students are immersed in this digital ecosystem, their critical digital literacy remains underdeveloped, echoing the concerns raised by Ting et al. (2022) and Ng (2021) about the gap between social media familiarity and critical consumption skills among youth. Students in this study frequently watched English videos that were entertaining, context-rich, and culturally embedded, supporting findings by Henderson (2020) and Lestari & Wahyuni (2023), who noted that learners benefit from the contextualized, real-world language exposure that platforms like TikTok offer. These microlearning moments align with Krashen's Input Hypothesis, suggesting that language acquisition improves when learners are exposed to comprehensible and engaging input without pressure to perform. However, unlike in structured classrooms, TikTok lacks a feedback mechanism, which may explain why students rarely report improvements in grammar or writing skills.

An important theme emerging from the study is the disconnect between passive consumption and active production. While students enjoy watching English content, they are reluctant to create or interact in English due to fear of judgment or low confidence issues similarly noted by Alsamadani (2022) in the context of EFL students using Instagram and TikTok. This raises important pedagogical implications: although TikTok offers affordances for autonomous learning, teachers and institutions are not yet systematically leveraging it as a tool for participation or performance-based practice.

Moreover, students' limited awareness of source credibility, copyright issues, and data privacy reflects broader concerns in the literature regarding digital literacy in developing countries. According to Chai et al. (2022) and Rizki & Wulandari (2023), many Indonesian students are digitally active but digitally uncritical, particularly when using platforms for entertainment. This study reinforces their findings, as most participants admitted to accepting information at face value and reposting content without attribution.

Another notable point is the role of peer influence and the absence of teacher involvement. While friends often encouraged sharing and mimicking English content, very few students reported any formal use of TikTok in their learning environment. This echoes Liu et al. (2023), who observed that social media-based learning in EFL contexts tends to be learner-driven rather than teacher-initiated. If teachers were better equipped to curate or co-create TikTok-based assignments, learners might be more empowered to move from consumers to producers of English.

The findings suggest several implications. First, educators can play a more active role by recommending reliable English creators, designing TikTok challenges, or creating content themselves. Second, digital literacy training needs to be embedded into language instruction not only for technical skills but also for evaluative and ethical competencies. Finally, educational stakeholders must reconsider the divide between formal and informal learning spaces, especially as social media becomes an increasingly dominant part of students' learning ecosystems.

It is also worth engaging with potential counterarguments to this study's findings. Some educators and scholars may argue that TikTok's design—optimized for endless scrolling and dopamine-driven engagement—is fundamentally at odds with the sustained attention and metacognitive reflection that meaningful learning requires. From this perspective, the incidental vocabulary and pronunciation gains observed in this study may be trivial compared to the attentional costs of habitual TikTok use. Our findings, however, suggest a more nuanced picture: students themselves recognized that TikTok alone is insufficient for structured learning and explicitly called for teacher guidance. This indicates that the platform's limitations are not invisible to learners and that, with proper scaffolding, its affordances can be channeled productively rather than left to algorithmic chance.

#### Ethical Considerations and Limitations

An important ethical dimension that warrants explicit attention is the implication of encouraging teachers to participate in or design tasks around students' informal digital spaces. TikTok functions, for many students, as a personal social arena distinct from academic life.

Teacher presence in this space whether through assigning TikTok-based tasks, monitoring student content, or creating institutional accounts raises legitimate concerns about surveillance, coercion, and the erosion of the boundary between private and educational life. Students may feel compelled to perform in an environment they previously experienced as autonomous and low-stakes, potentially reducing the very motivation and authenticity that makes TikTok valuable as an informal learning space. Future pedagogical interventions in this domain should include explicit discussions with students about consent, voluntary participation, and the boundaries of teacher involvement in digital social spaces.

This study is not without limitations. The sample size is small (12 participants) and localized to two public schools in Bandar Lampung, which limits the generalizability of findings to other regions, school types, or socioeconomic contexts within Indonesia. The purposive sampling criteria requiring active TikTok users also means that the experiences of students who are less digitally engaged are not represented. Moreover, while digital diaries and semi-structured interviews offer rich qualitative insight, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of recall bias and social desirability effects. Triangulating with objective behavioral data, such as screen recordings, digital usage logs, or direct observation, would strengthen the credibility of behavioral claims. Future research should consider longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to examine how sustained, scaffolded engagement with TikTok affects measurable language outcomes and critical digital literacy over time.

## CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore how TikTok can be harnessed to support English language learning among Indonesian high school students while also addressing their digital literacy gaps. The findings revealed that although students are highly active on TikTok and are regularly exposed to English-language content—particularly related to vocabulary and listening comprehension—their engagement remains largely passive. Most students benefit from incidental language learning through entertaining and contextualized content, but they rarely move toward productive language use or critical evaluation of digital materials.

The study also uncovered a significant digital literacy concern. While students possess basic navigational and operational skills on social media, their critical literacy—such as verifying content accuracy, understanding digital ethics, and managing online privacy—remains limited. This mirrors findings from previous studies indicating that Indonesian youth are digitally present but not always digitally prepared.

One of the central implications of the research is the untapped potential of TikTok as a bridge between informal learning and formal education. Teachers, with proper digital training, could integrate TikTok into classroom practices through content curation, creative tasks, or collaborative challenges. By doing so, they can not only foster English language development but also guide students in developing critical digital literacy skills.

The study is not without limitations. The sample size was small and region-specific, which limits the generalizability of the results. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported data such as digital diaries and interviews means some findings may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability. Future research is encouraged to explore TikTok-based learning with larger and more diverse populations, incorporate experimental or longitudinal designs, and investigate the impact of teacher-led TikTok integration on student outcomes in language learning.

In conclusion, TikTok is already functioning as a meaningful, though informal, language learning space for Indonesian students. If strategically supported by educators and coupled with digital literacy education, this popular platform holds real potential to transform passive consumption into active, reflective, and engaging English learning experiences.

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