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YouTube's impact on students' self-directed language learning (SDLL): A comprehensive evaluation based on the knowledge-skills-attitude trio

iD Tran Thanh Nhan
thanhantn81@ulis.vnu.edu.vn

iD Pham Thi Ngoc Anh
nganh610@gmail.com

iD Nguyen Quynh Chi
chinguyenquynh2000@gmail.com

iD Ta Huong Giang
tagiang1312@gmail.com

iD Chu Thu Trang
trangchu188@gmail.com

VNU, University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam

YouTube has undeniably become a ubiquitous and influential multimodal media for recreational and educational purposes among Generation Z students. These “digital natives” have acquired increasingly more self-efficacy to lead their learning via this virtual immersion. Their self-directed language learning (SDLL) is hailed as a game changer in cultivating learners’ ability to activate their language acquisition device when encountering comprehensible input (Chomsky, 1965; Krashen, 1982). Therefore, the current study aims to identify the effects of YouTube on students’ SDLL and propose solutions to optimize this self-regulated process. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a survey with 361 participants from a high-ranking language-major university. The data was analyzed descriptively and inferentially via Microsoft Excel Analytical Pack with the analysis of variance (ANOVA). The results indicate a significant relationship

between learning time on YouTube and overall study results. YouTube has a considerable impact on their autonomous learning ($M = 3.60$) regarding eight aspects: vocabulary ($M = 3.73$), grammar ($M = 3.18$), pronunciation ($M = 4.12$), listening ($M = 3.44$), reading ($M = 3.27$), speaking ($M = 3.24$), writing ($M = 4.06$), and their attitudes ($M = 4.10$). The study also reports student-raised suggestions to maximize the effectiveness of their SDLL.

Keywords: YouTube impact, self-directed language learning (SDLL), second language acquisition

Introduction

Pervasive globalization and digitalization have effectively engendered an engaging, seamless-border virtual language environment for enthusiastic learners (Li & Hawkins, 2021). Besides conventional classrooms, students are constantly exposed to various learning media, namely Google Classroom, Coursera, edX, blogs, and e-learning sites, among which YouTube is cited as one of the largest archives of human knowledge and sources of entertainment with abundant, diverse video channels. It also differentiates itself from other recreational social media platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, or Instagram, in its capacity to offer language learners their preferred knowledge from its boundless resources and convenient accessibility (Qomariyah et al., 2021). This video-sharing platform has constantly been evolving as a universal content provider, and its educational value is of proliferating significance (Bakar et al., 2019; Chen, 2020). It provides digital entertainment and a highly effective learning environment for users (Srinivasacharlu, 2020; York, 2011), especially those who crave authentic English immersion.

Even though regarded as a bazaar of mostly informal, home-grown resources, YouTube's paramount expansion is a relief for the insufficient language environment commonly found in developing countries. Access to its authentic resources has motivated students to study English beyond the confines of their classroom (Ate et al., 2025; Qomariyah et al., 2021). Watching movies, music videos, vlogs, or shows on YouTube has become an indispensable means of providing vivid, authentic, mostly comprehensible input, facilitating the natural uptake of the foreign language (Rogers & Medley Jr., 1988).

In the same vein, ample reliable YouTube video channels have been introduced and incorporated into the language training programs of the University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University, Hanoi, either officially in the course programs or as supplementary materials for many other content subjects. For instance, the course "Social English" was designed based on the coursebook "Keynote", published by National Geographic Learning and Cengage Learning, a collection of influential TED talks. The students also actively engage in the expansive learning process by following the instructors' guidelines and navigating the online materials independently.

This social network provides numerous useful features for learners to exploit the content instantly and enjoy the multimodal media simultaneously.

Several of its language enforcement functionalities may involve: (i) watching trending videos from all around the world; (ii) using subtitles (standard, bilingual, and reverse) while watching videos (Dominique & Lavaur, 2011; d'Ydewalle & Gielen, 1992; d'Ydewalle & Van de Poel, 1999); (iii) commenting on, and posting videos for free (Chen, 2020; Hasan et al., 2018); (iv) streaming live videos online and live chat; and (v) creating and managing playlists. These functions have incidentally activated learners' autonomy in utilizing available digital resources to study English. They are assumed to impact students' self-regulated learning on language mastery, skill enhancement, and learning motivation (Aprianto, 2020; Ate et al., 2025; York, 2011). If practical and appropriate measures are proposed, students will possibly maximize their potential in language learning (Blake, 2011; Kusuma, 2022).

There have been numerous studies about YouTube's impact on students' learning. Most noticeably, Nguyen and Boers's (2019) empirical study ($N = 32$) concluded that watching TED talk videos accompanied by summarizing tasks may significantly improve word-meaning recall. Wang and Chen (2020)'s qualitative research ($N = 20$) highlighted the promising attitudinal impact of this informal learning. However, previous studies address its impact on specific language domains rather than providing a panoramic view. This research, therefore, aims to expand the scope of examination of YouTube's impact on various aspects of students' SDLL, taking into account out-of-classroom contexts, with a focus on learners' autonomy. The major objective is to identify the influence scale on foundational components of language learning and propose solutions to enhance the effectiveness of this mediated learning activity. More specifically, it attempts to address four research questions formulated as follows:

1. Is there a significant relationship between the English learning time on YouTube and the overall study results?
2. How do the students use YouTube in their SDLL?
3. How do they evaluate its effects on different aspects of their SDLL?
4. What can be done to raise the effectiveness of YouTube-mediated SDLL activities?

Amid controversies regarding the educational values of social media content in intentional or unintentional language acquisition (Chen, 2020), this comprehensive evaluation of YouTube's impact may offer educators and learners practical solutions to promoting SDLL via social media platforms. It may also provide insights into policy reform for language strategists to enhance learners' autonomy and intercultural competence through virtual networks.

Literature review

Self-directed language learning

Self-directed learning (SDL) emerged in the 1970s in adult education and is usually practiced outside the traditional school environment. It is defined as

a process in which learners take the initiative, even without instructors' support, to identify learning needs, set learning goals, choose human and material resources, conduct suitable strategies to attain their goals, and finally, evaluate their learning outcomes (Knowles, 1975; Saks & Leijen, 2014). In SDL, learners have the freedom to design and foster their learning, while course instructors may facilitate their autonomy by providing trustworthy resources.

Within the context of this study, YouTube plays a significant role in SDL as an influential mediator. The multimodal nature apparently makes videos more enticing to learners' intrinsic motivation than conventional coursebooks and even PowerPoint slides, which may naturally activate their grasp of authentic language via multiple senses. Furthermore, the audiovisuals make YouTube a more viable and less cognitively demanding resource to be tailored to various learning styles, namely aural, visual, reading, and kinesthetic (York, 2011). In other words, through this social platform, learners can listen to various genres, watch moving images to guess the meaning of vocabulary in context, read subtitles, write comments, repeat what they hear using shadowing techniques, and even create and upload new content. Thus, multiple language skills can be enhanced via social network immersion, as various senses are engaged simultaneously when students are empowered to take charge and become active agents in their studies.

In light of Krashen's (1982) second language acquisition theory, SDLL via YouTube can be categorized as direct acquisition in which learners acquire knowledge through direct interaction with English videos. Learners' exposure to comprehensible input may, presumably, lead to their subconscious storage of linguistic data. This learning type is more natural and straightforward than indirect acquisition, which involves learners acquiring knowledge of a language normally in a conventional classroom setting; for example, memorizing vocabulary lists, conjugations, formulas of tenses, and grammatical structures. In the online immersive environment, though linguistic features are interwoven, lexis, syntax, and phonology are blended in a meaningful, authentic context supported by audiovisual elements that facilitate natural language absorption and fluency (York, 2011). Moreover, the affective filter (Krashen, 1982) is normally mitigated on social media platforms, enabling a low-stress psychological state for language acquisition. To put it simply, language uptake occurs implicitly rather than explicitly.

Previous studies on YouTube's impact and SDLL

YouTube has been credited with making a significant contribution to the development of language competencies, evidenced by various studies in Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and the Arab world (Chien et al., 2020; Hasan et al., 2018; Kabooha & Elyas, 2018; Qomariyah et al., 2021; Shariff & Shah, 2019; Watkins & Wilkins, 2011). According to Chien et al. (2020), using YouTube in the classroom can enhance listening comprehension and vocabulary retention among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) college students. Furthermore, university students who frequent YouTube during reading activities might gain

higher scores and probably have richer vocabulary ranges (Kabooha & Elyas, 2018).

Watching YouTube videos with subtitles might also support learners to follow English stories more easily and grasp some pronunciation (Aronin & Singleton, 2012). Meinawati et al.'s (2020) research in an Indonesian high school also indicated that this platform would liven the classroom atmosphere, increase learners' involvement, and arouse their interests in speaking English. Apart from language enhancement, another great benefit of this media stems from the diverse video posts, from which learners may gain a deeper insight into multiple dialects and world cultures, which might evasively reflect their prospective social encounters (Jalaluddin, 2016). More broadly speaking, Watkins and Wilkins (2011) and Riswandi (2018) claimed that students exploiting this video-sharing platform could broaden their knowledge of English content, grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency. Hasan et al.'s (2018) study in Bangladesh ($N = 30$) and Shariff and Shah's (2019) study in Malaysia ($N = 50$) also resonated with the tremendous impact of English YouTube videos on language skill development in general.

Regarding SDLL, Trang's (2020) study ($N = 272$) reported various types of technology and their effects on non-English-major students in their SDLL. The research showed that self-study using technology is widely employed among students, thanks to its advantages in terms of time, space, and unlimited access to learning materials. Likewise, Tuyền (2018) emphasized that communication tools and technologies are significant contributors to the effectiveness of SDLL, though they have not been fully exploited.

This critical analysis of previous studies lays a concrete foundation for our study design. While most of the reviewed YouTube impact studies emphasize a single aspect of language learning with small-scale sample sizes, this questionnaire research ($N = 361$) is purported to pursue a more holistic and systematic approach to address YouTube's impact on all the domains of language competence: language components, language skills, and attitudes. The study elucidates YouTube's impact on students' SDLL rather than the influence of incorporating videos in classroom activities on their language competence. It also differs from other studies on SDLL with a sharper focus on YouTube rather than any social networking site. In short, this study is characterized by a holistic approach to examine YouTube's impact on eight aspects of learners' SDLL (three language components, four language skills, and attitudes) with a substantially large sample size.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were 361 students from the University of Languages and International Studies, VNUH (a leading language-major university of Vietnam). The respondents were born between 1999 and 2002. They typically represent Generation Z students with functional language proficiency

ranging from B1 to C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), sufficient digital literacy, and emerging self-efficacy to learn autonomously. A random sampling technique was adopted for the study when an online questionnaire was generated using Google Forms and distributed via Facebook groups and class monitors' emails, inviting all university students to participate voluntarily. The actual sample accounted for 15.7% of the target population of 2304 members, attaining a 95% confidence level. The cohort encompasses four batches of students of four academic years: QH2017, QH2018, QH2019, and QH2020, accounting for 12.7%, 21.1%, 26%, and 40.2%, respectively, with roughly two-thirds being freshmen and sophomores.

Questionnaire design

The study was based on an online survey administered via Google Forms. This compact survey questionnaire was designed with numerous checkboxes and a short answer to gather participants' opinions and compensate for the infeasibility of conducting direct interviews. Overall, the survey encompasses 38 questions that are divided into 6 sections: (i) background information; (ii) self-assessment questions; (iii) YouTube routines; (iv) YouTube common practice; (v) its impact on various aspects of the SDLL; and (vi) challenges and solutions. The questionnaire items were engendered and structured based on the works of Trang (2020) (3 items), Zaidi et al. (2018) (5 items), and Tuyền (2018) (3 items). A more detailed description of the quantitative and qualitative data collected is presented in Table 1.

At the core of the questionnaire are 18 impact questions designed based on the KSA trio of three elements: Knowledge, Skills, and Attitude. They are concretized into eight aspects of the SDLL: vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation (knowledge of the language), listening, reading, speaking, writing (language skills), and attitudes. The accompanying can-do statements clarify students' perceptions of YouTube's impact and its actual manifestation. Participants are requested to evaluate the influence by selecting the most appropriate option on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The survey's open-ended questions allow them to detail their favorite channels and voice their suggestions to regenerate this SDLL activity.

Table 1. An overview of the questionnaire design

Criteria	Number	Question types
Quantitative data:		
(i) Students' self-assessment of their language competencies	4	5-point Likert scale
(ii) The frequency of their YouTube access	1	5-point Likert scale
(iii) The significance of YouTube in language development	1	5-point Likert scale
(iv) The impact of YouTube on their overall study results	1	5-point Likert scale
(v) The average time spent on YouTube daily	1	MCQ
(vi) The average time spent learning English on YouTube	1	MCQ
(vii) Their experience with commenting and uploading videos	2	Yes-No questions
(viii) The habit of using subtitle functions	1	Checkboxes
(ix) Their evaluation of YouTube's impact on various aspects of the SDLL	18	Multiple-choice grid (5-point Likert scale)
Qualitative data:		
(i) Background information	3	2 Gap-fills and 1 MCQ
(ii) Their favorite genres	1	Checkboxes + open option
(iii) The most frequently visited channels	1	Checkboxes + open option
(iv) The challenges they may encounter with YouTube-mediated SDLL	1	Checkboxes + open option
(v) Their raised suggestions to improve the practice	2	1 Checkboxes & 1 short answer
Total	38	

Procedure

The questionnaire was designed using Google Forms in the first language and revised by the research students and their supervisor after a substantial study of the relevant literature. Ethical considerations regarding the research purpose, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were meticulously detailed in the form. Subsequently, the online survey was delivered to students in January 2021 when they returned to the university campus after a lengthy online semester in 2020. It was initially launched through the students' Facebook groups of each academic year and promoted by the class monitors via email lists offered by the faculty. The form remained open for just over a week. Subsequently, the data were downloaded, and duplicate responses were removed. Consequently, 361 valid respondents were selected to form the sample.

Data analysis

To examine the effects of YouTube on students' SDLL, we collected quantitative and qualitative data in the survey. Besides background information



regarding name, course, and class, the questionnaire focused on examining students' YouTube routines and their assessment of its influence on their self-regulated language learning. The quantitative data were analyzed descriptively using percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations, and inferentially using Microsoft Excel Analytical Pack with analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine whether there is a relationship between students' YouTube learning time and their study outcomes. Additionally, qualitative data derived from responses to open-ended questions were thematically analyzed.

Results

The findings are structured into four parts: (1) the relationship between the learning time on YouTube and the overall study results, (2) their YouTube routines, (3) the YouTube impact on their SDLL, and (4) their proposed suggestions for better practice.

The relationship between learning time on YouTube and the overall study results

Educators, parents, and policymakers may ponder whether the time spent on YouTube is worthwhile or whether this practice should be discouraged. To address this question, it is necessary to examine the relationship between study time on YouTube and the learning outcomes. The students were required to self-assess their language proficiency and roughly estimate the time spent on YouTube for educational purposes.

Table 2. Students' self-assessment of their language proficiency

Criteria	Sub-set	Mean	SD
Self-assessment	Listening	3.30	0.83
	Speaking	3.11	0.82
	Reading	3.53	0.73
	Writing	2.96	0.79
YouTube access frequency		3.58	0.99
The significance of YouTube in language development		4.16	0.79
The impact of YouTube on overall study results		3.60	0.89

The participants' self-assessment indicates an intermediate level of their language proficiency, with means ranging from 2.96 to 3.53 (see Table 2). Of the four language skills, the most highly gauged is reading ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.73$), followed by listening ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 0.83$), speaking ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.82$), and writing ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.79$). Notably, the standard deviations stand quite high because of heterogeneous sample size, including nearly two-thirds of freshmen and sophomores.

Accessing YouTube appears common among these Generation Z students,

with frequency averaging at 3.58 with $SD = 0.99$, which may vary substantially, owing to their internet access habits or possibly the available data package. Nevertheless, the collected data indicate that a majority of the surveyed participants are aware that YouTube plays an indispensable role in their language development ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.79$). It provides them with ample opportunities to acquire the language, cultivate their English skills, and widen their academic and social knowledge. Therefore, it is generally acknowledged as an effective platform that enables natural online language learning as a social practice (Barton & Potts, 2013). The surveyed students demonstrated a substantial impact on their overall study results ($M = 3.60$, $SD = 0.89$). Regarding the average amount of time the students spend on YouTube for educational purposes, the results can be summarized as follows (see Table 3):

Table 3. Average time on YouTube and average time to learn English on YouTube

Criteria	Sub-sets	N	Percentage
Average time on YouTube per day	Less than 30 minutes	55	15.2%
	30 minutes – 1 hour	123	34.1%
	1 hour – 2 hours	89	24.7%
	More than 2 hours	94	26%
Average time to learn English on YouTube per day	Less than 30 minutes	196	54.3%
	30 minutes – 1 hour	123	34.1%
	1 hour – 2 hours	25	6.9%
	More than 2 hours	17	4.7%

As shown in Table 3, the durations reported vary significantly among respondents, with nearly half spending less than an hour per day and the remaining over an hour on this platform. Regarding the daily English learning duration on YouTube, the majority (54.3%) spend less than 30 minutes per day, while 34.1% presumably spend 30 minutes to 1 hour. Surprisingly, not many surveyed students (11.6%) routinely invest more than 1 hour learning English on YouTube, with 6.9% spending 1 hour to 2 hours, and only 4.7% spending more than 2 hours, as they may regard this activity as unintentional rather than purposeful learning.

Table 4. The relationship between learning time on YouTube and the overall study results

Anova: Single factor
SUMMARY

Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance
Overall results	361	1299	3.60	0.79
Time to learn English via YouTube channels	361	584	1.62	0.66

ANOVA

Source of variation	SS	Df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between groups	708.07	1	708.07	976.63	3.81E-136	3.85
Within groups	522.01	720	0.73			
Total	1230.07	721				

The time students spent learning English on this platform was coded as a numeric variable, and a one-factor ANOVA was conducted. The result shown in Table 4 demonstrates a significant relationship between the time spent learning English on YouTube channels and their self-assessed overall study results, $p\text{-value} = 3.81\text{E-}136 < 0.01$. It can be inferred that the time spent intentionally learning English via this social networking site (SNS) can significantly contribute to their academic outcomes.

The scales of YouTube’s impact on various aspects of students’ SDLL based on their self-evaluation are summarized in Table 5. Students may watch YouTube videos in English unintentionally, yet their habitual interaction with the digital content inevitably leads to their absorption of lexical, phonological, and grammatical knowledge, which may subsequently foster their language skills (cognitive development) and retain their interest and motivation to study (motivational, affective aspects) (York, 2011).

Table 5. A summary of the YouTube impact on various aspects of the student's SDLL

Anova: Single factor

SUMMARY

Groups	Count	Sum	Average	Variance
Vocabulary	361	1347.50	3.73	0.62
Grammar	361	1148.00	3.18	1.07
Pronunciation	361	1486.00	4.12	0.64
Listening	361	1243.33	3.44	0.50
Speaking	361	1170.00	3.24	0.66
Reading	361	1179.00	3.27	0.51
Writing	361	1466.50	4.06	0.58
Attitudes	361	1479.67	4.10	0.56
Overall results	361	1299.00	3.60	0.79
Time to learn English via YouTube channels	361	584.00	1.62	0.66

ANOVA

Source of variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Between groups	1749.94	9	194.44	295.54	0	1.88
Within groups	2368.49	3600	0.66			
Total	4118.424	3609				

As can be seen from Table 5, the most noticeable impacts were found in pronunciation ($M = 4.12$), attitude ($M = 4.10$), and writing ($M = 4.06$). The expanding, borderless, authentic English environment on YouTube has provided ample opportunities for students to grasp natural intonation and accents. Moreover, this stress-free, multimodal, and self-regulated mediation empowers them to pursue their individual interests, thus enhancing their intrinsic motivation. Consequently, this vast knowledge reservoir has exponentially broadened the students' background knowledge, enabling them to initiate ideas and arguments in their self-expression.

The second most remarkable impacts were found in vocabulary ($M = 3.73$) and listening ($M = 3.44$). Understandably, new lexis can be picked up when watching videos, especially with subtitles. Listening can be directly enhanced; however, its improvement is difficult to recognize and may take time to become noticeable, which may plausibly explain its not-so-impressive mean score as compared to vocabulary.

The least discernible impact group names reading ($M = 3.27$), speaking ($M = 3.25$), and grammar ($M = 3.18$). Normally, the students watch the videos silently. Reading the subtitles can be viewed as a by-product of listening comprehension, not to mention that their primary attention is placed on the audiovisuals rather than the textual inputs. Grammar, the backbone of the language, does

not stand out in this process of language acquisition, as the students must have acquired an intermediate level of grammar to be admitted to the university.

As mentioned above, though the students highly appreciate the role of YouTube in language enhancement ($M = 4.16$), their evaluation of its actual impact on their overall academic results averaged 3.60, which is approximately equal to the average sum of all the mean scores combined at 3.64. This finding indicates that the respondents were serious about their evaluation, and the impact has strong reliability and validity.

Students' SDLL on YouTube

Table 6. Common SDLL activities on YouTube

Criteria	Sub-sets	N	Percentage
Write comments	Experienced	227	62.9%
	Not experienced	134	37.1%
Upload videos	Experienced	109	30.2%
	Not experienced	252	69.8%
Watch videos with subtitles	No subtitles	145	40.2%
	English videos with English subtitles	284	78.7%
	English videos with first-language subtitles	167	46.3%
	First-language videos with English subtitles	82	22.7%

On the YouTube platform, students are confident in interacting with posted content, with 62.9% having experience commenting on videos. Leaving comments or chatting in livestreaming sessions enables them to connect with the worldwide community and enhance their interpersonal skills. Meanwhile, only 30.2% of participants reported having experienced uploading videos. Though this activity may significantly boost their confidence, fluency, and social image, and can be an optional requirement of their group assignments, shooting a video is a demanding process that involves scripting, rehearsing, recording multiple times, and editing with various software, not to mention dominant barriers regarding bandwidth requirements and copyright issues.

Another common practice to be surveyed is watching videos with subtitles, a supporting textual channel. Intralingual English subtitles are the most prevalently adopted by 78.7% of respondents. English subtitles are effective when the speaking pace is high, and new vocabulary may hinder understanding. Meanwhile, 46.3% watched videos with standard interlingual first-language subtitles, as they provide quite proper translation, though back-and-forth code-switching may impede information-processing speed. Besides, 40.2% deliberately listened without subtitles, as they may hinder highly fluent learners from grasping the information (Dominique & Lavaur, 2011; d'Ydewalle & Gielen, 1992; d'Ydewalle & Van de Poel, 1999). The least common practice is to watch

videos with reverse subtitles, which was adopted by only 22.7%, probably due to their limited availability.

Table 7. Most watched genres and channels to learn English

Criteria	Sub-sets	N	Percentage
Most watched genres	Music videos	287	79.5%
	Talk shows/ Reality shows	249	69%
	Movies	249	69%
	Vlogs	217	60.1%
	Speeches	165	45.7%
	Lectures	100	27.7%
	Others: News, documentaries, games, reviews, tutorials, live streaming, ...	96	22.6%
Most frequently visited channels to learn English	Educational content TED Talk, TED-Ed, In a Nutshell, Vox, The School of Life, Crashcourse, Psych2go, English Speeches, Kurzgesagt, Oversimplified	328	37.1%
	News-based BBC/VOA Learning English, BBC News, CNN News, Insider, Asian Boss	242	27.3%
	Formal English British Cou IELTS face-off, the IELTS workshop, 5 minutes about IELTS, Hana’s lexis ncil, Oxford online English,	123	13.9%
	General English Rachel’s English, Let’s Talk, Learn English with EnglishClass101.com, mmmEnglish, English with Lucy, Mr. Duncan in England, Learn English with TV Series.	136	15.4%
	Entertainment – The Ellen Show, James Corden, Jimmy Kimmel, College Humor, – Friends, Movie Analytical Channel, Film Theory, Canadian Lad, Alex Meyers, Anitubers, Under the Scope, cartoons, – MasterChef US, Food Theory, Jolly, culinary blogs, – Brent Rivera, Team Coco, Meichan, PewDiePie, – Vogue, Glamour, Hynam, Mixed Makeup, Bestdressed, – Twosetviolin, HITC Sport, Game Theory, etc.	56	6.3%

Music videos were selected by 287 students (79.5% of the respondents) as their top-ranking YouTube video genre. Because it activates so many parts of the brain, enjoying music as an English learning activity can engender a happy, interactive, and intellectually stimulating atmosphere for language uptake from lyrics and rhymes (Lems, 2001). Talk shows, reality shows, and movies, mostly of extended duration, were selected by 69% to be the second most favorite genres, which resonates with the finding that English movies with aided audio-visual technologies may foster English learners’ proficiency (Rao, 2019). Thirdly, 60.1% favored YouTube vlogs as proliferating vloggers are more attentive to viewers’ common needs. Serious or educational content, such as

speeches or lectures, received more modest appreciation of 45.7% and 27.7% respectively, even though they are valuable information sources. Other types of videos, such as news, documentaries, games, reviews, tutorials, and live streaming, are mentioned by 22.6% of the surveyed. It can be inferred that YouTube videos are mainly viewed for recreational rather than serious purposes, yet natural language absorption may occur during routine immersion in this SNS.

In the hybrid question with checkboxes and an open option about the most frequently visited channels to learn English, an astounding total of 885 responses was collected. 37.1% referred to educational channels, namely *TED Talk*, *TED-Ed*, *In a Nutshell*, *Vox*, *The School of Life*, *Crashcourse*, *Psych2go*, *English Speeches*, *Kurzgesagt*, and *Oversimplified*, of which *TED Talk* is the most influential, as it is incorporated into the university's institutional discourse. The second most visited category is broadcasting news agencies (*BBC/VOA Learning English*, *BBC News*, *CNN News*, *Insider*, *Asian Boss*), which account for 27.3% of responses. These channels may provide accompanying websites with listening tasks and social knowledge in Standard English that may support students in developing ideas and completing their assignments. Besides, YouTube is mentioned as an effective tool to boost their language proficiency and exam preparation skills with resources from prestigious international institutions (*British Council*, *Oxford Online English*), IELTS trainers, or Vietabroaders (*IELTS Face-off*, *the IELTS Workshop*, *5 Minutes about IELTS*, *Hana's lexis*), with 13.9% of the total responses. They are considered the students' companions in their SDLL and preparation for standardized language examinations.

In addition, channels providing General English, namely *Rachel's English*, *Let's Talk*, *Learn English with EnglishClass101.com*, *mmmEnglish*, *English with Lucy*, *Mr. Duncan in England*, and *Learn English with TV Series*, were mentioned 136 times (15.4%). Lastly, entertainment channels were mentioned 56 times (6.3%) specifically or generally. They can be clustered into reality humorous shows (*The Ellen Show*, *James Corden*, *Jimmy Kimmel*, *College Humor*); movies and animés (*Friends*, *Movie Analytical Channel*, *Film Theory*, *Canadian Lad*, *Alex Meyers*, *Anitubers*, *Under the Scope*, cartoons); culinary channels (*MasterChef US*, *Food Theory*, *Jolly*, culinary blogs); vlogs (*Brent Rivera*, *Team Coco*, *Meichan*, *PewDiePie*); fashion, make-up, skincare (*Vogue*, *Glamour*, *Hynam*, *Mixed Makeup*, *Bestdressed*); and music, sports, games (*Twosetviolin*, *HITC Sport*, *Game Theory*, etc.). These popular channels arouse their interests and intrinsic motivation to absorb the language automatically in a stress-free, comfortable state of mind.

To recapitulate, students' SDLL experience on YouTube varies significantly. Their most common activities encompass writing comments, watching English videos with English subtitles, and watching recreational content, including songs, movies, talk shows, reality shows, and vlogs. When it comes to resources for learning English, educational and news-based channels are more preferable than language-focused ones, be it academic or general English. It can be inferred that YouTube videos are primarily used for entertaining purposes; however, they can be ideal for natural, long-term language uptake thanks to

the reduced cognitive load and the multimodal engagement with the media (Swaffar & Vlatten, 1997, as cited in York, 2011).

YouTube’s impact on various domains of the SDLL

This central question addresses YouTube’s impact on students’ SDLL based on their evaluation of 18 can-do statements, categorized into language components (vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation), language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and attitudes.

Table 8. YouTube’s impact on various domains of the SDLL

Domain	Can-do statement	Mean	SD
Language components			
Vocabulary	I can accumulate more vocabulary.	3.68	0.99
	I can put the vocabulary into use.	3.77	0.88
Grammar	I can complete grammar exercises autonomously.	3.18	1.04
Pronunciation	I can imitate the native-like pronunciation of words.	4.03	0.92
	I can acquire native-like intonation and accent.	4.18	0.84
Language skills			
Listening	I can improve my listening skills autonomously.	3.64	0.94
	I can comprehend most of the English content without subtitles.	3.18	0.98
	I can understand the in-class lectures better.	3.50	0.90
Speaking	I can speak English autonomously.	3.20	0.96
	I can speak confidently with lengthy utterances.	3.27	0.95
Reading	I can improve my reading skills autonomously.	3.12	0.99
	I can read and understand the subtitles without using a dictionary.	2.93	1.02
	I can grasp the course materials more efficiently.	3.73	0.93
Writing	I can expand my social knowledge.	4.21	0.81
	I can develop more ideas for my writing assignments.	3.90	0.90
Attitudes			
Interest	I feel interested and comfortable searching YouTube.	4.08	0.85
Motivation	I have more motivation to learn English via the YouTube platform.	4.03	0.90
Stress-free state	I do not feel under time or knowledge pressure to study with YouTube.	4.16	0.91

Language components

Table 8 indicates that the majority can acquire new vocabulary by repeated exposure to the words while watching English videos in multiple fields. Whether using standard, bilingual, reverse subtitles, or no subtitles, the participants gave positive ratings for YouTube’s impact on *enriching and expanding their vocabulary* ($M = 3.68$, $SD = 0.99$), and their *efficacy in using the acquired*

vocabulary ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 0.88$). However, its impact on *the acquisition of grammatical knowledge needed to complete exercises* is limited ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 1.04$). A closer analysis reveals that 34.6% of the surveyed gave a neutral answer, and 26.6% were inclined to view YouTube as ineffective in fostering autonomous grammar learning. However, 38.8% still valued its effectiveness in their grammar study (as shown in Figure 1). The discrete language proficiencies among student batches may explain these variations. Meanwhile, 41.2% of the surveyed rated YouTube as the most effective for learning English accents. Through watching English videos, students can *imitate the native-like pronunciation of words* ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.92$) and acquire *native-like intonation and accent* ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.84$) to gradually refine their pronunciation.

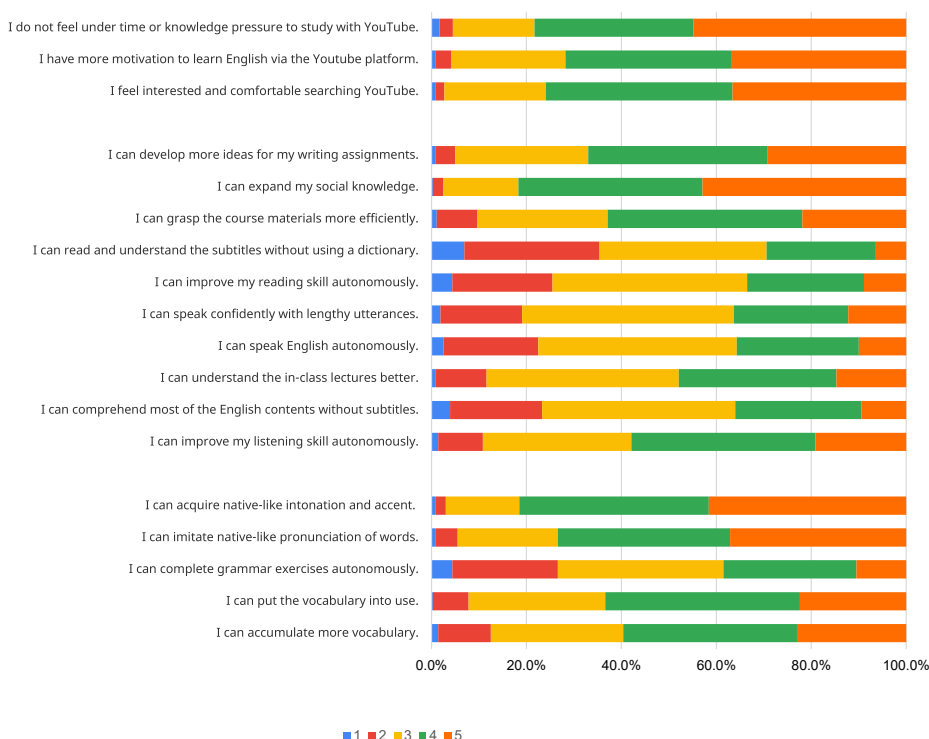


Figure 1. Students' evaluation of YouTube's impact on their SDL

Language skills

Surprisingly, YouTube's impact on writing is ranked the highest among the four language skills. Though the direct bond between watching videos and writing can merely be observed via composing comments, the far-reaching effects on *expanding the social knowledge base* ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.81$) and *developing ideas for writing assignments* ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.90$) are indisputable. The immersive global community of YouTubers enables the students to share their opinions, express their thoughts, extend their relationships, and learn from their international peers to shape their perspectives, ways of life, and self-expression.

YouTube's impact on listening skills is ranked the second highest. This skill can be reasonably elevated via regular immersion in authentic English. In two

statements: “I can improve my listening skill autonomously” ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.94$) and “I can understand the in-class lectures better” ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.90$), the disagreement proportions are both below 20%. However, diverse dialects and themes may substantially challenge *their understanding of the English content without subtitles* ($M = 3.18$, $SD = 0.98$), as only highly proficient learners (36%) can comprehend uploaded videos without subtitles.

Even though being ranked first in the language proficiency self-assessment ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 0.73$) (see Table 2), reading is not much affected by YouTube, with the mean score just above average ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.95$) (see Table 5). The students are quite neutral with the statement “I can improve my reading skill autonomously” ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.99$), possibly because YouTube does not have a direct linkage with this skill, as it does with listening. Most notably, the statement “I can read and understand the subtitles without using a dictionary” has the lowest mean score of 2.93 ($SD = 1.02$), which implies that the vast vocabulary range, including slang, local languages, idiomatic expressions, context-specific words, and terminologies, may pose as obstacles to their comprehension in SDLL. The impact on reading is more discernible in their in-class study. More than 60% of the surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I can grasp the course materials more efficiently” ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 0.93$). YouTube resources may elaborate on the course materials of general or specialized subjects, providing a simplified or more expansive understanding of the lessons. It can be inferred that when exploited for conventional studying in combination with the course materials, specific tasks, and instructions, its effectiveness is more recognizable.

The survey also indicates that YouTube moderately influences the students’ speaking skills. On average, most of them contended that they *can speak English autonomously* ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.96$) and *confidently with lengthy utterances* ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.95$). 35.7% agreed or strongly agreed with their autonomous speaking ability, and 36.3% with their confident, lengthy utterance production. While YouTube may enhance conversational skills, lexical varieties, natural pronunciation, and idea development, the online spoken genres may differ from the institutional discourse and inherently be attributed to issues regarding incorrect use of grammar, wording, and styles.

Attitudes

The research results show that 75.9% of the surveyed students acknowledged that *searching YouTube makes them feel excited and comfortable* ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.85$), as it provides an accessible platform, numerous functions, and infinite sources of creativity. The surveyed enjoy their self-study time on YouTube. Moreover, this self-regulated activity motivates them to explore new realms of knowledge, actively interact with their international peers, and form a sense of taste or lifestyle, which is contended by a large majority of the surveyed (71.8%). Its impact on *evoking and promoting students’ motivation in English self-regulated learning* is remarkable ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 0.90$). 62.9% of the participants having experienced commenting on YouTube (see Table 3) can be

evidence of their intrinsic motivation to interact online with more relaxation and fewer face-threatening acts with their virtual identities. This high level of engagement may guarantee more lasting motivation for the students to remain subscribed to this platform. In sharp contrast with the stressful learning environment on campus, this social networking site *creates a stress-free learning environment for students regarding time and knowledge* ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 0.91$). YouTube being non-finite in time and space may enable the students to pace and personalize their learning according to their preferences and alleviate time or knowledge pressures from the conventional learning environment, giving them more freedom and options to regulate their learning.

Student-raised suggestions

Table 9. Students' suggestions

Criteria	Sub-sets	N	Percentage
Challenges when self-studying via YouTube	No appropriate methods	186	51.5%
	Being distracted by advertisements	207	57.3%
	Lack of self-studying time	118	32.7%
	Being distracted by other entertainment videos	280	77.6%
	Slow network connection	62	17.2%
	Do not know trustworthy channels	136	37.7%
	Others:	7	1.9%
Suggestion options	Watch qualified channels and videos	289	80.1%
	Ask the lecturers for video suggestions	221	61.2%
	Join the YouTube watching community	216	59.8%
	Subscribe to the English channels of celebrities and watch videos of personal preference	280	77.6%
Suggestions raised by students	How	129	43.9%
	What	128	43.5%
	When and where	37	12.6%

In the final section of the survey, the participants reflected on some challenges when learning English autonomously via YouTube and proposed ample solutions to address these issues. As can be seen from Table 9, the most concerning issue is distraction from entertainment videos. 77.6% of the surveyed students admitted that they cannot fully concentrate on studying due to numerous temptations, such as trending films, music videos, and vlogs that may pop up in the watching list. Another major source of inherent distraction is advertisements embedded in the watched content, which is mentioned by 57.3% of the students. Besides, around half of them (51.5%) claimed that they do not have an appropriate method to learn English on YouTube. The issues of being unable to find trustworthy sources and insufficient self-study time were selected by 37.7% and 32.7%, respectively. Surprisingly, only 17.2% addressed the issue of slow internet connection. 1.9% also raised other challenges like being unable to find

videos suitable for their English level or reliable channels to follow, having low motivation, having no suitable space to learn, wasting time pausing videos and searching for new words, or viewing intelligible content.

To enhance the effectiveness of SDLL via YouTube, the surveyed participants propose multiple measures. Of the four provided options, watching reliable, trustworthy videos and following English channels of renowned celebrities rank at the top with responses accounting for 80.1% and 77.6% of the surveyed students. Consulting the lecturers for recommendations or joining the YouTube community also received high response rates of 61.2% and 59.8%, respectively. Of the 222 valid entries for the final open-ended question, the participants have provided insightful recommendations based on their hands-on experience, which can be coded into three major themes of how, what, and when and where, with minor overlaps among them.

Table 10. Suggestions regarding how to exploit YouTube resources

Themes	Sub-themes	Extracts
How	Stay focused	- Be self-disciplined, persistent, focused, and well-organized, - Turn off notifications or use self-study apps to avoid being distracted, and - Upgrade to YouTube Premium to avoid commercial advertisements.
	Set goals	- Have a clear purpose and volition to self-study, - Have specific schedules and learning strategies, - Create a to-do list, - Set up a long-term habit, and - Balance between studying and recreational activity.
	While-listening	- Listen attentively, - Watch a video repeatedly, - Peer-watch to learn together and have discussions, - Watch and imitate the speaker's speech to practice speaking (shadowing technique), and - Take notes of new words and do mind-mapping.
	Subtitles	- Listen without subtitles first, - Follow both English and first-language subtitles simultaneously, - Make use of the playback speed and subtitle functions, and - Use the eJOY extension or other dictionary apps to translate from English to your first language.

Several prominent sub-themes about exploiting YouTube resources to maximize the learning outcomes have been listed: (1) staying focused, (2) setting goals, (3) while-listening activities, and (4) making use of subtitles. As with any other learning activity, staying focused, self-disciplined, persistent, and well-organized is key to success. Turning off notifications, using self-study apps, or upgrading to YouTube Premium can be concrete solutions to the core issue of social media distraction. To be more effective, students should also strategize their learning with explicit planning and attainable goal-setting. There should be a combination of long-term and short-term goals, and a balance between studying and recreational activities. While listening, they should watch the

video repeatedly to grasp the meaning of words in context: note down new words, slang, idiomatic expressions; do mind-mapping; peer-watch to learn together and discuss; and watch and imitate the speaker's speech to practice speaking (shadowing technique). Regarding subtitles, suggestions offered are using the playback speed and subtitle functions to understand the video fully; watching and following bilingual subtitles simultaneously; listening without subtitles at least for the first time; and (8) using eJOY extension or dictionary apps to attain interlingual/ bilingual subtitles.

Table 11. Suggestions regarding what, when, and where to exploit YouTube resources

Themes	Sub-themes	Extracts
What	Variety	- The more the better, - Favor natural-occurring rather than scripted language, - Listen to podcasts, audiobooks, stories, and speeches, - Watch favorite videos to maintain interest and motivation.
	Reliable content	- Watch more educational content - Link YouTube videos with the course materials, - Be elective, - Select relevant and applicable themes, - Ask senior people for more recommendations, - Subscribe to reliable, high-quality channels in English, - Select channels with accurate subtitles, - Unsubscribe from toxic channels, and - Avoid distractors and overindulgence.
	Others	- Generate vlogs to upload, - Do subtitles for renowned channels, etc.
When and where	When	- Be aware of the time spent, - Listen regularly for an hour, - Set a time limit and a goal for listening (e.g., 5 new words a day), - Relax, no haste, etc.
	Where	- Listen passively (while on a bus, doing the cleaning, or before sleep), - Find a cozy, quiet place to listen

In terms of what to watch, opinions are intuitively in favor of diverse videos of interest to maintain intrinsic motivation and volition to study autonomously. However, another strain of geeks (Barton & Potts, 2013) appreciated high-quality educational channels with a varied theme range, like TED Talk, or news channels in Standard English, more than those in naturally occurring language. YouTube viewers should be discerning, selecting content that is suitable for real-life situations or relevant to the course materials. Many students recommended combining formal learning with entertaining videos to create a stress-free environment that facilitates natural language acquisition. They also emphasized the significance of seeking advice from lecturers and other predecessors, subscribing to high-quality channels with accurate subtitles, unsubscribing from toxic channels, and avoiding overindulgence. Several students even recommended generating and uploading videos or producing subtitles as useful strategies for language development. Notably, the fact that

about one-third of the students uploaded videos demonstrates their potential to contribute actively to YouTube's vast ecosystem as content creators.

To address the contextual questions of when and where, the participants' opinions centered around time management skills and a relaxing ambiance. The former involves being self-aware of the time spent on YouTube, scheduling this SDLL activity at a relatively stable time frame, setting a limit, practicing regularly for roughly an hour per day, and forming a relaxing, sustainable learning routine to observe gradual accumulation of improvement. The latter is depicted as listening passively while on a bus or before sleep and finding a cozy, quiet place to study, which may mitigate stress, pressure, or haste.

Overall, distraction is identified as the most counterproductive for YouTube viewers, followed by inappropriate SDLL methods and insufficient access to reliable sources. Coping strategies may include greater concentration, more strategic use of SDLL, subscription, consultation with the lecturers, time management, and a supportive environment to balance study pressure with the recreational value of this SNS.

Discussion and conclusion

The study addresses the four research questions regarding YouTube' impact on students' SDLL by elaborating on (1) the relationship between learning time on YouTube and the students' overall study results, (2) their YouTube routines, (3) its impacts on their SDLL in three domains: knowledge, skills, and attitude, and (4) their recommendations for more effective practice.

The answer for RQ1 is a definite "yes." There is a significant relationship between time spent learning English on YouTube and overall study outcomes, provided that it is well managed and intentionally devoted to English study. This finding statistically corroborates the positive appraisals of social media benefits in general language development, as proposed by Barrot (2022), Hasan et al. (2018), Shariff and Shah (2019), Riswandi (2018), and Watkins and Wilkins (2011). Thus, students should be permitted to access YouTube resources to enhance their language proficiency. However, the overall impact is categorized as moderate ($M = 3.60$), which is almost identical to the average of eight SDLL aspects ($M = 3.64$). This finding is consistent with Wang and Chen's (2020) conclusion that YouTube can be less effective for academic purposes. Thus, more strategic planning and implementation are required to optimize its educational impact.

Taking a pragmatic approach to answering RQ2, we have demonstrated vividly how the students exploited this video-sharing platform: the time they spent, their common practice of commenting, uploading videos, using subtitles, their favorite genres, and their most frequently visited channels. The surveyed students took an active role in the engagement with online resources during their SDLL. Though mainly accessing YouTube for recreational content such as songs, movies, and game shows, university students prefer educational and news channels to those designed to teach formal or general English to improve their language proficiency. Additionally, more sophisticated tasks such as generating

new content and watching videos without subtitles are less frequently experienced. This result corroborates Chen (2020) in the notion that active participation in the digital world as content creators to develop multimedia literacy is associated with apparent technological and linguistic affordances.

Regarding RQ3, the descriptive statistics depict the scales of YouTube's impact on eight aspects of the students' SDLL. YouTube has been found to strongly influence their pronunciation, attitudes, and writing via authentic immersion into a vast range of interests that may evoke their intrinsic motivation and broaden their worldviews, which resonates with Aronin and Singleton (2012), Wang and Chen (2020), and Jalaluddin's (2016) results, respectively. Vocabulary and listening also witness noticeable direct impact thanks to their YouTube watching routines, which aligns with other researchers' findings (Ate et al., 2025; Chien et al., 2020; Kaboocha & Elyas, 2018; Nguyen & Boers, 2019). Meanwhile, reading, speaking, and grammar may experience the least discernible effect, probably due to their less prominent relation to social media content in SDLL. This slight impact on speaking may dissonate with Riswandi's (2018) assertion of YouTube's influence on fluency, as the focus of this study is SDLL rather than classroom-based activities.

The final research question provides a constructive space for the students to propose thoughtful suggestions raised from their regular digital immersion. Their hands-on experience sharing on how to study the language, what to watch, and contextual issues of when and where can serve as remedies to ameliorate the current unintentional viewing towards more structured, thus, more accomplished practice. Despite the inherent drawbacks of distractions, as noted by Ate et al. (2025), and inappropriate SDLL methods, students would strongly support using YouTube as a self-regulated learning tool. Recommendations from their "learning in the wild" (Peng et al., 2022, p. 2149) illuminate the significance of concentration, goal-setting, note-taking strategies, shadowing techniques, use of subtitles, varied and reliable sources, time management, and a proper study environment. Therefore, this study advocates a blended approach of bridging from classroom learning style to more independent online study via mediated social platforms as proposed by Byrne (2010) and Read and Martín-Monje (2021), transitioning from a text-based approach to multimodal immersion (Haugsbakken & Langseth, 2014), yet with guidance from the lecturers.

This research was conducted by novice researchers during the COVID-19 pandemic with attempts of both the research students and the supervisor. There may be errors when cleansing repeated entries, coding overlapping ideas, or when participants consider videos shared on other social platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, or other official websites. Yet, the non-negligible impact of YouTube on students' SDLLs has proposed several exploratory avenues for language educators, researchers, and course developers to reconceptualize language acquisition, linguistics, and course materials design to facilitate more structured SDLL via social media platforms, introducing reliable resources, and providing practical guidance to maximize its educational impact. It may also inform policymakers and language strategists about measures to incorporate these ubiquitous social media into study programs more effectively.

Around six decades ago, Chomsky (1965) proposed the theory of the language acquisition device that enables automatic language uptake beyond our consciousness. Around four decades ago, Krashen (1982) highlighted the significance of comprehensible input that may activate the language acquisition mechanism. Around two decades ago, Crystal (2003) initiated crucial questions regarding the evolution of World Englishes and an “English family of languages”. Recently, the immobility engendered by COVID-19 has accidentally pushed learners beyond the physical borders of their countries to practice “transnational communication” (Li & Hawkins, 2021) via social platforms. The swift advancement of digital mobile technologies has inevitably posed an ontological question regarding the purposes of English language teaching and learning and the roles of the language teachers in this digital world, having in mind that it is not language but what people do with it that has become different and changes (Barton & Lee, 2013). Barton and Potts (2013) suggested that more practical research may provide new insights for language educators to support their learners in accessing increasingly crucial digital realms to cherish a “participatory culture” (Jenkins, 2006, as cited in Chen, 2020, p. 52). Therefore, further studies may examine the impact of various multimodal aspects of SNSs on language learning and acquisition or the intercultural competence that this media may engender.

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