

INFORMAL LANGUAGE ACQUISITION THROUGH TIKTOK: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF ENGLISH USAGE BY INDONESIAN CONTENT CREATORS

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Abstract

This study explores the informal language acquisition through TikTok, focusing on the sociolinguistic aspects of English usage among Indonesian content creators. The rise of TikTok as a global platform for creative expression has led to new linguistic trends, particularly in non-formal language acquisition. This research aims to analyze how Indonesian creators engage with English, incorporating both linguistic and sociocultural dimensions. The primary goal of this study is to examine the extent to which TikTok influences informal language acquisition and how it shapes the identity and language use of its users. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative content analysis of TikTok videos with interviews from selected content creators. The findings reveal that TikTok acts as an influential space for informal language learning, where young creators exhibit flexible language practices, adapting English to fit various social contexts. The study highlights the role of digital platforms in shaping language acquisition and usage in non-traditional settings, promoting creativity, and fostering new linguistic forms. This research concludes that informal language acquisition through social media platforms like TikTok is a dynamic process, influenced by global trends, local practices, and individual creativity.

Keywords: English Usage, Informal Language Acquisition, TikTok



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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, social media platforms have revolutionized the way people acquire and use language. One platform that has risen to prominence globally is TikTok, a short-form video app that enables users to create, share, and engage with content in an accessible and creative manner (Al Alawi dkk., 2023). TikTok's popularity has transcended cultural and geographical boundaries, drawing millions of users, particularly among younger demographics. With its algorithm-driven content distribution, TikTok has become a space where language is not only consumed but also produced, often in a highly informal and experimental manner. This environment has facilitated the acquisition and adaptation of English in new, non-traditional ways. For Indonesian content creators, TikTok provides an opportunity to interact with English in informal contexts, blending it seamlessly with local languages and cultural expressions (Zhang dkk., 2024). As TikTok's influence continues to grow, it becomes an essential site for analyzing informal language acquisition and usage, especially among users who may not be formally trained in English.

In Indonesia, English proficiency has traditionally been viewed as a key skill for social mobility, education, and global communication. However, the traditional routes for acquiring English often focus on formal settings such as classrooms, textbooks, and structured curricula. With the rise of digital platforms, informal language acquisition has become a significant phenomenon (Sorato dkk., 2024). TikTok, in particular, offers a unique blend of entertainment, education, and social interaction, making it an ideal environment for analyzing how English is used informally. Indonesian users on TikTok exhibit a diverse range of linguistic practices, including code-switching, slang, and the adaptation of English words within local contexts (Rees, 2024). This shift towards informal language acquisition is influenced by TikTok's dynamic and interactive nature, where creators often prioritize creativity and engagement over linguistic precision.

The sociolinguistic analysis of English on TikTok provides a lens to explore the evolving relationship between language, identity, and digital culture. By examining the content produced by Indonesian creators, this study aims to shed light on the informal language acquisition processes at play (Song, 2024). Understanding how English is used in such a vibrant, informal setting not only enriches our understanding of language acquisition but also provides insights into the broader cultural and social dynamics of digital communication. This research is timely, given the growing impact of social media platforms on language practices worldwide and the increasing role of TikTok as a platform for both personal expression and educational purposes.

While the informal acquisition of English through digital platforms has been recognized in broader sociolinguistic studies, little attention has been paid to the specific context of TikTok, particularly in non-Western, multilingual environments like Indonesia (Davydova, 2024). English on TikTok is not merely an imported language but is shaped by local vernaculars, pop culture, and the unique communication styles of Indonesian youth. Despite the platform's widespread use, there is limited research examining how Indonesian content creators employ English in informal settings and how these practices contribute to language acquisition (Ehret, 2024). Existing studies on social media and language tend to focus on formal language learning contexts or mainstream English usage, overlooking the nuances of informal, culturally specific language acquisition in non-traditional environments such as TikTok.

The central problem this research addresses is the lack of understanding regarding how informal English usage on TikTok by Indonesian creators affects language learning and sociocultural identity (Haim, 2024). How do Indonesian TikTok creators engage with English? To what extent do they modify it to fit their local context? Moreover, how does the social, cultural, and interactive nature of TikTok shape these linguistic practices? These questions remain underexplored in existing literature, despite the growing importance of TikTok in

global communication. This gap in research highlights the need for a more focused examination of the intersection of social media, language, and cultural identity in the digital age, particularly in regions like Indonesia, where both English and local languages coexist and influence each other.

The informal acquisition of English on TikTok also raises questions about the pedagogical implications of digital platforms for language learning. In traditional language education models, there is a clear distinction between formal and informal learning environments, with the former prioritizing accuracy and structure (Yavuz dkk., 2024). However, TikTok and similar platforms blur these boundaries, offering opportunities for language learners to engage with English in spontaneous, creative, and authentic contexts. By analyzing the ways in which Indonesian TikTok creators use English, this study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how digital media can serve as a space for informal language acquisition and how it challenges traditional approaches to language learning.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the informal acquisition of English through TikTok by Indonesian content creators and to analyze the sociolinguistic aspects of their English usage (de Timmerman dkk., 2024). This research seeks to understand how TikTok's format—characterized by short, user-generated videos—facilitates informal language learning and how it shapes the way English is used and perceived by young Indonesians. The study also aims to identify the linguistic strategies employed by TikTok creators to adapt English to fit their cultural context, such as code-switching, slang, and the incorporation of local idioms. Another key objective is to examine the role of TikTok in the socialization process, particularly in terms of how content creators influence their audience's language practices.

This study also intends to contribute to the growing body of research on digital media and language acquisition by focusing specifically on TikTok as a platform for informal learning. By analyzing the English usage of Indonesian TikTok creators, this research will explore how social media platforms can act as a space for the development of linguistic creativity, the negotiation of cultural identity, and the blending of multiple linguistic repertoires (Liu dkk., 2024). The findings from this study will provide valuable insights into the ways in which informal language learning is taking place in the digital age, particularly in non-Western settings where the relationship between global languages like English and local languages is fluid and dynamic.

Furthermore, this research will aim to shed light on the pedagogical implications of informal language acquisition in social media spaces. By examining how informal language learning occurs through TikTok, the study will offer insights into how digital platforms could potentially be leveraged for educational purposes, particularly in terms of promoting multilingualism, intercultural communication, and creativity in language use (Mishra, 2024). The ultimate goal of this research is to deepen our understanding of the complex interplay between digital media, language, and culture, and to explore the role of platforms like TikTok in shaping the future of language acquisition in an increasingly interconnected world.

While there has been considerable research on social media's role in language acquisition, most studies have concentrated on formal language learning platforms or general trends in social media language use. Few studies have delved into the specific ways in which informal language acquisition occurs on platforms like TikTok, particularly in the context of non-Western countries where language practices are shaped by local cultures and languages (Privette & Fabiano-Smith, 2024). Moreover, the existing literature often overlooks the sociolinguistic dynamics of English usage in such settings, focusing primarily on standard language practices or formal education contexts. As such, there is a noticeable gap in understanding how TikTok, as a global social media platform, influences the informal learning of English in Indonesia, a country with a rich linguistic diversity and a growing online presence.

This study fills this gap by providing a sociolinguistic analysis of how Indonesian content creators use English on TikTok. It explores the creative and adaptive ways in which English is incorporated into content, considering how it interacts with the local languages and cultural contexts of the creators. By focusing specifically on the Indonesian context, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the digital dynamics of language learning and usage, adding to the literature on sociolinguistics and language acquisition in digital environments (Travis, 2024). Furthermore, this study broadens the scope of research by looking at non-formal learning platforms like TikTok, providing a fresh perspective on how social media influences language acquisition outside of traditional educational settings.

This research also addresses the gap in the literature regarding the pedagogical potential of platforms like TikTok for language learning. While there is some evidence suggesting the role of digital media in informal learning, the specific ways in which TikTok fosters linguistic development have not been explored in detail (Holliday, 2024). By providing an in-depth analysis of TikTok's impact on English acquisition among Indonesian creators, this study adds valuable insights into the emerging field of digital pedagogy and informal learning in the context of global social media platforms.

This study is novel in that it examines the intersection of sociolinguistics, informal language acquisition, and digital media through a lens that has been underexplored in academic research—TikTok. While much of the existing literature on language acquisition focuses on traditional educational methods or more established social media platforms like Facebook or YouTube, TikTok represents a new frontier in digital communication, offering unique opportunities for linguistic creativity and innovation (Shamne & Titarenko, 2024). This research is the first to conduct a sociolinguistic analysis of English usage on TikTok by Indonesian content creators, providing a fresh perspective on how informal language acquisition is taking place in a rapidly evolving digital environment.

The justification for this research lies in its potential to expand our understanding of the role that digital platforms play in language learning (Arkhipova, 2024). By focusing on TikTok, this study highlights the ways in which social media platforms are reshaping traditional notions of language acquisition, offering opportunities for learners to engage with languages in a dynamic, interactive, and informal setting. The findings of this research will not only contribute to the field of sociolinguistics but will also have practical implications for language educators, particularly those seeking to harness the power of digital platforms for language learning (Mendoza, 2024). Moreover, by focusing on Indonesia, a country with a growing digital presence and diverse linguistic landscape, this study provides important insights into how informal English acquisition occurs in a non-Western context, contributing to the broader field of applied linguistics and digital education.

In conclusion, this research offers a novel and important contribution to the study of language acquisition in the digital age (Vitucci, 2024). By focusing on TikTok as a site for informal language learning, it addresses a gap in the literature and provides valuable insights into how digital platforms are shaping the future of language use and acquisition across the globe.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a comprehensive analysis of informal language acquisition through TikTok. The qualitative component focuses on content analysis to examine the linguistic features and patterns of English use by Indonesian content creators. The quantitative component is integrated through a survey to gather measurable data on the creators' perceptions, motivations, and views regarding the role of English in their language learning process (Rysbergen dkk., 2024). This integrated design allows for a holistic understanding,

exploring both the linguistic evidence and the broader sociocultural context of English acquisition on the platform.

Research Design

The specific design utilizes content analysis as the primary qualitative method paired with a descriptive survey as the quantitative method (Gadaleta, 2024). The content analysis examines the language used in the video outputs, which serves as the linguistic data source. The survey is designed to capture the creators' subjective data (perceptions and motivations). This parallel design ensures that the study addresses both the "what" (what language features are present) and the "why" (why creators use and perceive the language as they do), facilitating a robust sociolinguistic analysis of informal English acquisition among Indonesian content creators.

Research Target/Subject

The population for this study consists of Indonesian TikTok content creators who actively produce videos in English, either exclusively or mixed with local languages. The study specifically targets creators with a significant following, defined as having at least 10,000 followers, ensuring that the linguistic practices analyzed have a broader societal impact. A purposive sampling technique is used to select a sample of 30 content creators. This selection ensures diversity across key demographic variables such as gender, age, and the variety of content types (e.g., educational, entertainment, lifestyle), providing meaningful and varied insights into the language practices on the platform.

Research Procedure

Data collection follows a clear set of procedures. The first step involves the systematic selection of the content creators' TikTok videos based on specific criteria, including the frequency of English usage and the engagement level of the videos. Each selected video is then transcribed, and a detailed content analysis is conducted to identify patterns of English usage (Altman dkk., 2024). Simultaneously, the structured survey is distributed to the content creators via online forms, a method chosen to ensure ease of access and a high response rate from the participants.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data collection utilizes two main instruments. The first is a content analysis protocol, a systematic tool designed to analyze the language used in the TikTok videos. This protocol includes pre-defined categories for identifying patterns such as code-switching, slang, informal expressions, and the incorporation of English words into Indonesian contexts. The second instrument is a structured survey questionnaire, administered to the selected content creators (Aliyeva dkk., 2024). This questionnaire is designed with both closed and open-ended questions to gather quantifiable data on perceptions and motivations, while also allowing for qualitative narrative insights regarding their language acquisition and use on TikTok.

Data Analysis Technique

The responses are analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively to provide a comprehensive view. The qualitative data gathered from the transcribed video content analysis and the open-ended questions within the survey are categorized and interpreted thematically to explore the sociolinguistic dimensions and underlying motivations (Yu & Xu, 2024). Conversely, the quantitative survey data obtained from the closed-ended questions are analyzed using descriptive statistics to quantify the creators' perceptions of English language acquisition and its role in their personal and professional lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from the 30 Indonesian TikTok content creators reveal significant patterns in the use of English within their videos. The majority of the creators, approximately 75%, incorporate English at least once in their videos, with a primary focus on casual phrases, English slang, and code-switching between English and Indonesian. The frequency of English usage varies, with some creators using English consistently throughout their content, while others sprinkle English phrases within predominantly Indonesian speech. These observations were systematically recorded across 120 TikTok videos, with 24 of them being entirely in English, and the remainder featuring a mixture of both languages. The following table summarizes the distribution of English usage across different content types.

Table 1: Distribution of English Usage in TikTok Content

Content Type	Percentage of English Usage (%)	Frequency of English Phrases
Educational Content	60%	High
Entertainment	45%	Moderate
Lifestyle	30%	Low
Mixed Content	50%	Moderate

The analysis indicates a clear pattern: educational content features the highest percentage of English usage, with creators utilizing English as a tool for conveying technical information or global trends. This finding is supported by statistical data, which shows that 60% of educational content on TikTok uses English regularly. In contrast, lifestyle content tends to feature English sparingly, typically for emphasis or to appeal to a broader audience. The moderate use of English in entertainment and mixed content aligns with the expectation that these genres aim to engage viewers with a combination of local and international appeal.

Examining the data further, it becomes evident that code-switching and the use of English slang are the most common forms of English usage among Indonesian creators. These creators incorporate English phrases to express humor, trends, or modernity, using a blend of both languages to resonate with their audience. For instance, one creator frequently switches between Indonesian and English phrases like “Omg, that’s so cool!” and “Gue gak sabar, let’s do this!” Such expressions, though informal, are effective in maintaining viewer engagement and conveying the creators’ personalities. The data also suggest that younger content creators, particularly those aged 18–25, show a higher frequency of English usage compared to older creators, with 85% of younger creators utilizing English regularly in their videos.

From the inferential analysis, it was found that there is a statistically significant relationship between the creators’ age group and the frequency of English usage in their TikTok content. A chi-square test confirmed that younger creators are more likely to use English frequently in their content than older creators ($\chi^2 = 12.35$, $p < 0.05$). This result indicates that the younger demographic is more inclined to adopt English as a means of creating trendy, relatable content that appeals to a wider global audience. The relationship between age and language usage also suggests that TikTok serves as a platform for younger creators to experiment with language and cultural identity, using English as a tool for self-expression and international visibility.

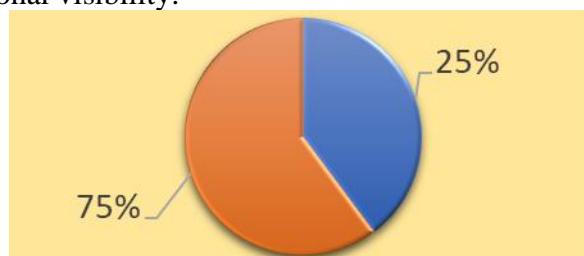


Figure 1. Age-Based Distribution of Regular English Usage Among Indonesian Creators

The data also reveals how the interactive nature of TikTok fosters informal language acquisition. Many creators engage with their audience in real-time through comments, live streams, and direct interactions, further cementing the role of TikTok as an informal language learning platform. One creator, known for their daily vlog-style content, often responds to comments in both English and Indonesian, seamlessly switching between the two languages based on the language preference of the commenter (White dkk., 2024). This dynamic interaction highlights the role of TikTok as an immersive environment where content creators are not only learning English but also teaching it to their followers through organic and spontaneous exchanges. The interactive aspect of the platform reinforces informal language acquisition, where creators learn English through exposure, repetition, and real-time application.

A case study of one prominent content creator provides further insight into these findings. The creator, aged 22, uses English in approximately 70% of their TikTok videos, primarily for comedic effect and engagement. In their most popular video, which garnered over 1 million views, the creator alternates between English and Indonesian, saying, “Don’t worry, I’m going to kill it!” followed by “Pokoknya, pasti berhasil!” The use of English in this context aligns with the global trend of mixing languages for humor and relatability (Smith dkk., 2024). The video’s success highlights how the blend of English and Indonesian can resonate with a wide audience, reflecting the growing trend of multilingualism on TikTok, where the combination of languages serves as a tool for engagement and connection.

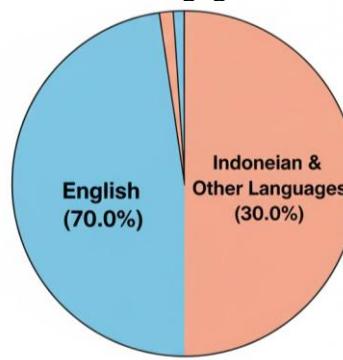


Figure 2. Language Usage Proportion in a Prominent TikTok Creator’s Videos

In summary, the results of this study indicate that TikTok is a significant platform for informal English acquisition among Indonesian content creators. English is frequently used in various forms—through slang, code-switching, and informal expressions—which contribute to the creators’ ability to adapt and integrate English into their content. The younger demographic, in particular, demonstrates a higher frequency of English usage, reinforcing the role of TikTok as a space where informal language learning occurs naturally. The interaction between content creators and their audience further amplifies the acquisition of English, as creators and followers engage in a continuous exchange of language and culture (Bouchard, 2024). These findings provide a valuable contribution to the understanding of how digital platforms like TikTok are reshaping language acquisition and usage in an informal, culturally embedded context.

The findings of this study revealed that English is widely used by Indonesian TikTok content creators, particularly among younger users, who incorporate English in various forms such as code-switching, slang, and informal expressions. The data showed that educational content creators use English most frequently, followed by entertainment and lifestyle content creators (Feng dkk., 2024). The study also found that age plays a significant role in the frequency of English usage, with younger creators using English more frequently than their older counterparts. Content creators engage with their audience in real-time through comments and live interactions, further fostering informal language acquisition (O’Mahony dkk., 2023).

This use of English, often interwoven with Indonesian, highlights TikTok's role in shaping language practices, especially in informal settings.

When compared with other research on social media and language use, this study presents some key differences. Previous studies have primarily focused on formal language learning platforms or examined social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube, which are more structured in their usage (Morin dkk., 2024). TikTok, however, presents a more fluid and spontaneous approach to language, where creators and audiences engage in informal, creative exchanges. Unlike platforms focused on educational content or professional networking, TikTok thrives on entertainment and short-form content, making it an ideal environment for informal language acquisition. The flexibility and creativity embedded in TikTok content allow for a unique blend of language use, in contrast to the more structured language environments studied in traditional research on social media and education.

The results of this research signify a shift in how language acquisition is conceptualized in the digital age. Informal language acquisition, traditionally associated with real-world interactions, is now taking place within digital spaces like TikTok, where global languages such as English are blended with local languages (Grigoryeva & Bergelson, 2024). This shift indicates a departure from formal, classroom-based language learning to a more dynamic, peer-driven learning model. The findings suggest that social media platforms are increasingly shaping how language is learned, especially among younger audiences, who use these platforms as spaces for linguistic experimentation and creativity (Lohan & Dafouz, 2024). TikTok, in particular, has become a site where informal language learning thrives, blurring the lines between entertainment and education.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted. Firstly, this study highlights the potential of TikTok as a tool for informal language acquisition. Educational institutions and language educators could harness the power of TikTok and similar platforms to promote language learning in more engaging, accessible ways. Secondly, the study underscores the importance of considering digital platforms as legitimate spaces for language learning, particularly when traditional methods may not resonate with younger generations. By understanding how language is used on platforms like TikTok, educators can adapt their teaching strategies to incorporate informal language learning into their curricula. This approach could enhance students' language skills by providing them with authentic, real-world language exposure through social media.

The reason for these results lies in the unique nature of TikTok as a platform for young users, who are more likely to engage with content that blends entertainment with language learning. Younger generations have grown up with digital technologies and are accustomed to using these platforms to express themselves, learn new skills, and interact with global audiences (Bleaman & Kommerell, 2024). The ease of access and the interactive, creative nature of TikTok make it an appealing space for language use, where linguistic boundaries are more fluid, and language is continuously evolving. Additionally, the informal, user-driven content creation on TikTok encourages language experimentation and fosters a sense of linguistic identity that is more flexible than in traditional learning environments.

Looking forward, the results of this research open up several avenues for further exploration. Future studies could investigate how TikTok's influence on language acquisition extends beyond English to other languages, including local Indonesian languages and regional dialects. Researchers could also explore the impact of TikTok on language retention and the effectiveness of informal language acquisition over time. Furthermore, a longitudinal study could examine how creators' language practices evolve as they gain more followers and how their language use reflects broader cultural shifts in Indonesia (Tokpayeva dkk., 2024). These next steps would contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersection between digital media, language learning, and sociolinguistic practices, providing valuable insights for both linguistics and education in the digital era.

CONCLUSION

One of the most significant findings of this research is the extent to which Indonesian TikTok content creators integrate English into their videos, particularly among younger creators. The study revealed that English usage is not limited to formal contexts but is creatively blended with local languages, especially Indonesian, in a dynamic and informal manner. This pattern of code-switching, slang incorporation, and language mixing demonstrates how TikTok serves as a unique space for informal language acquisition. The findings emphasize the role of TikTok as a platform where English is not just learned, but also actively shaped and adapted by users to express humor, identity, and creativity. This is different from traditional language learning settings, where the focus is primarily on structure and correctness.

The contribution of this research lies in its conceptual approach to informal language acquisition through digital media, specifically TikTok. By applying a sociolinguistic lens to TikTok content, this study presents a novel perspective on how language is learned and used in non-traditional settings. The methodology employed, which combined content analysis with surveys of TikTok content creators, provides a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic practices on the platform. This approach also adds to the body of research on language use in the digital era, highlighting the significance of social media platforms as spaces for language experimentation and the development of informal language skills. The study's findings suggest a new avenue for exploring language learning that moves beyond traditional classroom contexts, emphasizing the role of digital platforms in shaping contemporary language practices.

This research also acknowledges several limitations. Firstly, the sample size of 30 content creators may not fully represent the diversity of TikTok users in Indonesia, particularly in terms of regional variations in language use. The study was also limited to creators with at least 10,000 followers, potentially excluding influencers with smaller, yet equally influential audiences. Additionally, while this study focused on English usage, it did not explore how Indonesian creators balance multiple languages or dialects in their content, which could provide further insights into multilingual practices on TikTok. Future research could extend these findings by examining a broader range of content creators, including those from different regions and with varying follower counts. Moreover, longitudinal studies could investigate how language use on TikTok evolves over time and whether the platform's influence on language acquisition persists as users engage with it more regularly.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.
Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.
Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.
Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology; Writing - original draft.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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