

THE ROLE OF YOUTUBE IN SELF-DIRECTED EFL SPEAKING SKILL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: This study explores how two male Indonesian workers in Japan perceive YouTube as a self-directed learning tool for improving their English-speaking skills. Through a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants who used YouTube to enhance their pronunciation, vocabulary, and fluency. Findings reveal that YouTube facilitates autonomous language learning, allowing learners to refine pronunciation through adaptive listening and imitation, expand vocabulary via contextual exposure, and enhance fluency by observing authentic speech patterns. While YouTube offers flexibility and accessibility, its effectiveness is limited by the lack of interactive communication in workplace settings. This study contributes to the growing discourse on informal digital learning, recommending that EFL learners integrate interactive practices alongside YouTube-based learning. Future research should explore strategies to bridge online exposure with real-world language use.

Keywords: *digital language learning, self-directed learning YouTube*

English proficiency, particularly in speaking, is extremely essential for people pursuing global communication and professional interactions. For instance, for individuals working in other countries, acquiring English skills can be difficult due to limited exposure and formal learning opportunities. As a widely accessible platform, YouTube has diverse audio-visual content that fosters language learning through authentic input and interactive engagement. Further, YouTube is platform where its users can upload and watch educational content, allowing the learners to easily and freely access it (Deng & Yuen, 2011). Given these accessible and useful functions, YouTube can support individuals who learn to professionally improve their communication skills, especially in their speaking domain. This study explores how two Indonesian workers in Japan perceive the role of YouTube in improving their English-speaking abilities.

In the context of language acquisition, Binmahboob (2020) refers YouTube as an important internet-based resource that facilitates language learning by providing a vast repository of user-generated and professionally produced videos covering diverse subjects in multiple languages. As an open-access platform, YouTube plays a critical role in fostering autonomous and lifelong learning, enabling learners to engage with authentic language input beyond traditional classroom instructions (Binmahboob, 2020; Wulandari et al., 2024; Umam et al., 2025). Specifically, speaking skills, known as a critical yet challenging component of English proficiency, pose persistent difficulties for EFL learners, given the significance for real-time processing, pronunciation accuracy, fluency, and contextual appropriateness (Chand, 2021). The effectiveness of YouTube in supporting speaking skill development lies in its capacity to provide learners with rich, multimodal input, reinforcing both auditory and visual learning channels, as conceptualized in Multimodal Learning Theory (Mayer, 2001).

Grounded in Multimodal Learning Theory (Mayer, 2001), this study acknowledges the effective impact of video-based learning on language learning. Later in his career, Mayer (2005) claimed that the Multimodal Learning Theory which maintains that multimedia instruction improves the functionality of the individual's brain. In addition, this theory suggests that effective language acquisition involves the use of both images and words. Mayer (2005) also asserted that multimedia can be described as the use of text and pictures or visuals and sounds or any combination of visual and auditory cues. YouTube, therefore, is an ideal tool that contains the integration of visual and auditory elements, enhancing learners' memory retention and speaking skills through dual-channel processing, as stated by Kabooha and Elyas (2018) and Albahiri and Alhaj (2020).

Furthermore, in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, the insights into how learners develop

speaking proficiency are derived from Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis. This theory suggests that comprehensible input in the form of real-life conversations, podcasts, and instructional videos can be provided by YouTube, allowing learners to absorb language naturally at their own pace (Zayraey, 2025). Meanwhile, another theory, Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, applies to YouTube learning because repeated exposure to native speakers' pronunciation, sentence structures, and vocabulary enables learners to notice linguistics features, which can lead to conscious improvements in their speaking skills through imitation and practice (Teng, 2023; Goodale, 2025).

In recent years, extensive research has documented the impact of YouTube on improving students' speaking skills, largely focusing on academic settings. For instance, Balbay and Kilis (2017) examined students' perceptions of a YouTube channel designed for an Academic Skills course, findings that most students found the platform of a YouTube channel engaging and relevant to their coursework. Similarly, Rusgandi et al. (2021) explored YouTube as a tool for English speaking skill development, with findings indicating that students widely credited the platform for improvements in pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary. Furthermore, Saed et al. (2021) provided further empirical evidence by conducting an experimental study on Jordanian EFL students, demonstrating that those exposed to YouTube-based instruction significantly outperformed peers taught using traditional methods. Another experimental investigation was conducted by (Umam et al., 2025) focusing on the effectiveness of YouTube on grade eight students' speaking skills. They found that the experimental group's engagement with YouTube videos contributed to a significant improvement. While these studies underscore YouTube's potential in improving speaking proficiency, they predominantly examine formally structure learning environments and student populations, overlooking how adult learners, particularly those in workplace and migration contexts, navigate self-directed learning through online platforms, including YouTube. The reliance on structured academic settings fails to account for the intricacies of language learning in real-world, professional scenarios, where learners must develop speaking skills without institutional support, guided instruction, or peer collaboration.

Given this gap, this current study aims at investigating how Indonesian workers in Japan, as migrant professionals, perceive the impact of YouTube in improving their English-speaking skills. Unlike students in controlled learning environments, these workers engage in self-directed, necessity-driven language learning, often experiencing linguistic demands alongside work responsibilities and social adaptation in a foreign country. Their unique sociocultural and occupational contexts make them an important yet underexplored demographic in digital language learning research. Focusing on how they use YouTube for their language learning offers critical insights into informal, technology-mediated language learning, bridging the divide between structured EFL instruction and real-world communicative competence. Furthermore, this research is expected to contribute to the broader discourse on second language development in transnational workforces, highlighting the importance for alternative, accessible learning strategies beyond traditional classrooms.

To achieve this, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How do two Indonesian workers in Japan perceive the impact of YouTube on their English-speaking skills?
2. What aspects of speaking (e.g., pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary) do they find most influenced by YouTube?

METHOD

This current investigation employs a qualitative approach to provide a comprehensive, in-depth exploration of how YouTube influences participants' English-speaking skills. As Bogdan and Bilken (2007) suggest, qualitative research enables researchers to capture rich, descriptive data through participants' lived experiences rather than relying on numerical measurements. This approach is particularly well-suited for investigating individual perceptions, motivations, and self-directed learning strategies, offering a context-sensitive understanding of language acquisition beyond surface-level trends (Creswell, 2007). By focusing on participants' perspectives, this study uncovers the nuanced role of technology-mediated learning in professional, real-world settings, aligning with its objective of examining informal, self-directed English learning.

The study involves two male Indonesian professionals working in Japan, selected through convenience sampling based on their accessibility (Dörnyei, 2007) and relevance to the research objectives (Saumure & Given, 2008). While qualitative research does not require a large sample, the selection of fewer participants allows for an in-depth, granular analysis, as suggested by Algozzine and Hancock (2017). Qualitative studies exploring two Indonesian expatriates' perspectives and experiences in foreign professional contexts have successfully employed a similar participant structure (e.g., Hidayatulloh & Sugirin, 2022; Haryadi, 2024), reinforcing the methodological rigor of this study.

For anonymity, the participants are referred to by pseudonyms: Coki and Delon. Both were born and raised in urban cities in Indonesia, where access to digital resources, including YouTube, is widespread. They graduated in 2019 with degrees in International Relations (Coki) and Taxation (Delon) from universities in Jakarta. Prior to their migration to Japan, both participants expressed a strong interest in working abroad and had

independently engaged with English-language content through various media, including movies, digital comics, and YouTube. In 2023, Coki began working in Utsunomiya, while Delon started his career in Osaka. Their personal and professional backgrounds, combined with their self-reported use of YouTube for English learning, make them ideal candidates for this study.

Data were gathered through two separate semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 30 minutes per participant. Semi-structured interviews allow for flexibility in questioning while ensuring consistency across participants (Cohen et al., 2011). This format also facilitates a deeper exploration of verbal and non-verbal cues, enhancing the contextual richness of the data (Creswell, 2012). The interviews were conducted online via widely used communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram, ensuring accessibility and participant convenience.

To minimize language barriers and encourage authentic, detailed responses, the interviews were conducted in Indonesian, the participants' native language. This linguistic choice reduced potential misinterpretations and allowed for spontaneous follow-up questions, fostering clarity and depth in responses. The interview questions focused on three key areas: (1) participants' backgrounds and professional experiences in Japan, (2) their engagement with YouTube as a self-directed learning tool for English, (3) the perceived impact of YouTube on their speaking proficiency and career development. Prior to data collection, verbal consent was obtained from both participants after being informed about the study's objectives, confidentiality measures, and data usage. Following consent, the interviews were audio-recorded using smartphones for subsequent transcription and analysis.

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and preservation of participants' original expressions. The transcribed data were then analyzed using inductive thematic analysis, a widely accepted method in qualitative research for identifying patterns, recurring themes, and underlying meanings within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allowed for emergent themes to be identified without imposing predetermined categories, ensuring that the findings are grounded in participants' actual experiences. By employing this qualitative analysis, this research investigation provides a rich, contextualized understanding of how Indonesian professionals in Japan perceive and utilize YouTube as a tool for enhancing their English-speaking skills, aligning with the research objectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study, addressing the participants' perceptions of YouTube as a tool for improving their English-speaking skills. The discussion is structured around key themes that emerged from the interview, analyzed in the light of relevant theories and previous research to provide a comprehensive, academically sound interpretation.

Perceived Impact of YouTube on English-Speaking Skills

YouTube as a Primary Resource for Self-Directed Learning

Both, Coki and Delon, have had extensive exposure to English through formal education, having studied the language more than 12 years in school and university settings. However, beyond the structured learning environment, they have also engaged in self-directed learning using many digital platforms, including digital comics, movies, online video games, and YouTube. Their reliance on digital resources aligns with Benson's (2011) concept of autonomous learning, which emphasizes how language learners take control of their learning outside formal instruction.

Coki reflected on his language learning experience:

“So far, I think I have learned [English] from many medias, like digital comics, movies, online video games, and of course YouTube.”

Delon similarly mentioned the importance of YouTube in his independent learning:

“Well, although I used it [YouTube] a long time ago, I don't have time to watch recently due to my work. But YouTube has been one of my main sources for learning languages [including English] because I can learn at my own pace.”

This finding aligns with Widiyanti and Dewi (2023), who argue that digital media provide flexibility and accessibility, allowing learners to customize their learning experience based on their needs. YouTube, in particular, serves as an interactive and multimodal platform that caters to different learning preferences, reinforcing Mayer's (2001) Multimodal Learning Theory, which emphasizes the effectiveness of integrating visual and auditory input in language acquisition.

Moreover, the finding highlights that both formally trained and informally trained learners perceive YouTube as a valuable and accessible tool for language improvement, supporting the argument that self-directed digital learning is becoming an essential complement to traditional EFL education (Urmilah et al., 2021).

Authenticity and Exposure to Real-Life Conversations

Coki and Delon also expressed that YouTube provided a more authentic learning experience compared to traditional textbook-based instruction. The exposure to natural discourse, idiomatic expressions, and diverse English accents made their learning more engaging and contextually relevant, which aligns with Pradana and Ena (2021) findings that authentic materials significantly enhance learners' engagement and motivation.

Delon described the contrast between traditional classroom learning and YouTube:

"In school, we learned English with scripted dialogues, but YouTube exposes me to how people actually talk in daily conversations."

Similarly, Coki emphasized the importance of exposure to native speakers' pronunciation and conversational styles:

"For me, one of the most important aspects of learning languages is getting as much exposure to native speakers as possible. In school, we learned stiff, formal English, but on YouTube, I hear how native speakers actually talk in real situations. The interactions in the videos, like in movies, use slang, contractions, and casual expressions."

This supports Schmidt's (1990) Noticing Hypothesis, which posits that language learners improve their speaking skills when they actively notice linguistic patterns through repeated exposure. Additionally, Widiyanti and Dewi (2023) emphasize that pragmatic competence in second language learning is best developed through context-rich, informal interactions, which YouTube naturally facilitates. Unlike rigid classroom dialogues, YouTube content provides learners with a dynamic, unscripted learning environment where discourse markers, conversational fillers, and culturally embedded expressions can be internalized in a way that mirrors real-life communication.

These findings reinforce previous studies (e.g., Kusuma & Syam, 2022), which highlight that YouTube serves as an effective tool for developing oral proficiency due to its real-world language input, exposure to diverse speech patterns, and interactive nature.

Confidence Building and Reduction of Speaking Anxiety

Another significant finding was the increase in confidence that both participants experienced in speaking English after prolonged exposure to YouTube content. One possible explanation is that continuous listening to and imitation of spoken English reduced their anxiety and hesitation in speaking, a phenomenon well-documented in Foreign Language Anxiety Theory (Horwitz, 2010).

Delon highlighted this effect:

"You know, on YouTube, there are so many videos of Indonesian vloggers using English when explaining their daily activities. One of the benefits of watching those vlogs is that it motivates me to do the same thing. Not only does my motivation increase, but I also feel more confident in expressing myself in English."

Similarly, Coki shared his shift in confidence:

"I remember being nervous about speaking other languages [English and Japanese] because I thought I might make mistakes. But after watching many YouTube videos, I started speaking more naturally and stopped worrying too much about errors."

This finding aligns with Saed et al. (2021) research, which suggests that digital platforms such as YouTube enhance learners' willingness to communicate (WTC) by providing continuous exposure to spoken language in a low-pressure environment. Additionally, Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis argues

that lowering anxiety and boosting motivation directly facilitates language acquisition, a mechanism that appears to be at play in the participants' experiences.

Limited Use of English in Workplace Contexts

Despite acknowledging the benefits of YouTube in improving their speaking skills, both participants admitted that their opportunities to use English in Japan were limited due to their workplace environment. Working in the food and beverage industry, they primarily communicated in Japanese, as required by their job roles. This finding suggests that while technological tools like YouTube can enhance language proficiency, real-world application is highly dependent on contextual factors (e.g., Basalamah et al., 2021).

Coki expressed his frustration about the lack of opportunities to use English:

"I wish I could use English more often. But because I work in the kitchen, where interactions are limited, I rarely get to practice. Mostly, I communicate in Japanese because my employer does not require me to be able to communicate in English. But sometimes, when the restaurant is busy, and no waitstaff is available, I have to speak English to customers."

Delon, who works at an airport-based restaurant, reported slightly more opportunities to use English:

"It's crazy how many languages I speak now, Indonesian, English, and Japanese. Haha... Here, I use Japanese every day with my coworkers. English is not widely used in Japan, but since I work at an airport, I interact with foreign customers, and that's when I use English. My manager also expects me to handle English-speaking customers."

This finding underscores a critical limitation of digital self-directed learning, while platforms like YouTube can enhance receptive and productive skills, contextual constraints determine the extent to which these skills can be actively applied. This supports the argument made by Ren et al. (2015) that language learning outcomes are deeply shaped by social and professional environments, regardless of learners' proficiency levels

Aspects of Speaking Most Influenced by YouTube

Pronunciation Improvement through Imitation

One of the most significant impacts of YouTube on participants' speaking skills was the enhancement of pronunciation through shadowing and imitation techniques. Both participants emphasized that their ability to articulate English words more accurately was largely due to repeated exposure to native speakers' pronunciation on YouTube. These findings align with Multimodal Learning Theory (Mayer, 2001), which posits that dual-channel learning (visual and auditory) enhances language processing and retention. The combination of sound and visual cues on YouTube allows learners to observe mouth movements, stress patterns, and intonation, making pronunciation learning more effective (Fernández-Carballo, 2021).

Coki, for instance, described how he actively used the shadowing technique to refine his pronunciation:

"What I do to improve my speaking from YouTube is to shadow speakers. It's well known that the best way to improve pronunciation is by listening to many people's pronunciation, particularly native speakers. I listen to speakers on YouTube and try to imitate how they pronounce the words. That way, I can get better pronunciation."

Delon echoed a similar sentiment, acknowledging the role of imitation in developing pronunciation accuracy:

"I also wonder how I learned from YouTube videos, but I think imitating someone exactly as shown on YouTube will affect Indonesian speakers' speaking skills such as pronunciation style, accuracy in speaking. For me particularly, watching YouTube videos helps me in terms of pronunciation because there are many choices of videos and accents used by content creators on YouTube, so viewers, like me, can try to imitate accents and pronunciations by the content creators."

This finding is consistent with previous studies (e.g., Nurfauzan & Rahmatika, 2022), which confirm that video-based input facilitates pronunciation acquisition more effectively than audio alone, as learners internalize phonetic structures through both auditory and visual engagement. Moreover, Juma (2021) argues that exposure to diverse accents enhances learners' ability to comprehend and produce varied speech patterns, supporting the idea that YouTube, with its vast range of speakers, serves as an optimal platform for pronunciation training.

Furthermore, Flege's (1995) Speech Learning Model suggests that L2 learners develop their pronunciation by mapping new phonetic categories onto their existing L1 system. This process is facilitated when learners repeatedly hear and imitate authentic speech, as observed in the experiences of Coki and Delon. The participants' reliance on shadowing and mimicry techniques further aligns with Hamada and Suzuki (2021) findings, which highlight that pronunciation training through imitation is an effective strategy for acquiring native-like pronunciation patterns.

Expansion of Vocabulary through Contextual Learning

Another key finding in this study is the participants' perceived expansion of vocabulary through contextual exposure on YouTube. Both participants reported that they actively chose videos featuring speakers they admired, repeatedly listening to specific sections, slowing down playback, and using subtitles as scaffolding. This aligns with Mahmoodi et al. (2014) Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) Model, which highlights how autonomous learners set goals, monitor progress, and adjust strategies to enhance skill acquisition. Coki, for instance, mentioned that he preferred watching industry-related content, not only for vocabulary acquisition but also for observing how professionals communicate in English.

Coki, in particular, highlighted how his hobbies and interests in industrial content influenced his vocabulary acquisition:

"I love watching videos related to how products are manufactured. You could say I enjoy 'documentary-style videos', my favorite part is seeing how machines or workers create products in industrial settings. They often explain what is happening and how a process is completed to ensure good quality. I think I have learned many new words from these types of videos. Also, since the video creators are from abroad, I learn about their cultures, and the vocabulary naturally comes from those videos."

This observation aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), which argues that comprehensible input that aligns with a learner's interests enhances language acquisition. Research by Webb (2008) further supports this, demonstrating that contextualized exposure to vocabulary in authentic media leads to deeper lexical retention compared to traditional memorization methods

Delon noted similar sentiment like Coki:

"When I watch YouTube, I don't just learn new words, I see how they are used in real situations. That's different from memorizing word lists."

This finding aligns with Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990), which suggests that learners acquire new vocabulary when they consciously notice lexical patterns and structures in authentic discourse. Unlike controlled classroom settings where vocabulary is explicitly taught, YouTube provides organic exposure, enabling learners to observe word usage in varied sociocultural contexts. Studies such as Santos and Ilustre (2022) confirm that authentic video content significantly aids vocabulary development by reinforcing contextual meaning and usage patterns.

Furthermore, YouTube's interactive features, such as subtitles and comment sections, create opportunities for incidental learning. Learners can pause, replay, and engage with content, making the vocabulary acquisition process more dynamic and self-regulated (Urmilah et al., 2021). This multi-layered input mechanism positions YouTube as a powerful tool for vocabulary expansion, particularly in informal learning contexts.

Fluency Development through Continuous Exposure

Fluency, often defined as the ability to produce speech smoothly and spontaneously, represents a critical aspect of speaking proficiency. However, the participants' perceptions of YouTube's impact on fluency varied. While Delon viewed YouTube as beneficial in improving fluency, Coki expressed a more reserved perspective, acknowledging that while YouTube provided exposure, it did not significantly enhance his ability to speak fluently.

Delon explained:

"I think YouTube helps me in terms of fluency, this is because YouTube provides a lot of practice videos that can be watched and learned not only by me but also by Indonesian speakers."

Coki, however, emphasized the limitations of passive exposure in developing fluency:

"Although it does not have a big effect on fluency, YouTube makes it easier for me to understand how a sentence is expressed because there are many practices provided by YouTube that I can watch".

These responses highlight an important distinction in fluency development: while exposure to authentic speech enhances comprehension and language patterns, fluency improvement often requires active engagement and real-time interaction (Kristiani & Pradnyadewi, 2021). This finding aligns with Suzuki and Kormos (2023), who argue that while listening to fluent speech aids language internalization, true fluency emerges from actual speech production, requiring conversational practice.

Additionally, Bot's (1992) Model of Speech Production suggests that fluency is developed through automatic retrieval of language structures, a process that necessitates frequent practice and real-time usage. YouTube, while effective for exposure and passive learning, lacks the interactive component necessary for active fluency enhancement. Research by Zaitun and Salsabila (2022) further confirms that fluency is best developed through a combination of input, interaction, and output-based activities, reinforcing the need for complementary speaking practice alongside YouTube-based learning.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study has explored the role of YouTube as a self-directed learning tool for enhancing English-speaking skills among Indonesian workers in Japan. The findings highlight that YouTube is not merely a platform for passive language exposure but a dynamic space for autonomous learning, where learners engage in pronunciation refinement, vocabulary expansion, and fluency development. Unlike traditional classroom instruction, YouTube provides authentic, multimodal input, allowing learners to observe, process, and internalize linguistic patterns at their own pace. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on how working professionals, rather than students, navigate language learning independently through digital resources, revealing that self-regulation, strategic content selection, and metacognitive awareness play crucial roles in the language acquisition process.

Based on these findings, EFL learners are encouraged to approach YouTube not just as an entertainment platform but as an adaptive learning tool, integrating interactive strategies such as shadowing, playback speed control, and contextual vocabulary acquisition to maximize language gains. Educators can also leverage YouTube's authentic content to supplement formal instruction, fostering a hybrid approach to pronunciation and speaking skill development. For researchers, this study opens avenues for further exploration into how digital learning environments can bridge the gap between informal and formal language education, particularly among working professionals. However, a key limitation of this study is that participants had limited real-world opportunities to use English actively, suggesting that future research should investigate how YouTube-based learning can be complemented with interactive speaking practices to ensure communicative effectiveness.

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