



Timorese University Students' Utilization of YouTube as a Learning Media to Improve English Speaking Skills: A Case Study of First-Year Students at UNTL in the English Department

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Abstract

English is a vital language for education, career, and regional integration in Timor-Leste, but many students still struggle with their English-speaking skills. Although there has been previous research studying the impact of YouTube on students' language learning skills, studies focusing on first-year students, and specifically in Timor-Leste, are limited. Thus, this study explores how the first-year students at Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL) use YouTube to improve their English-speaking skills. The qualitative approach was employed, using focus group discussions with 10 students, in-depth interviews with 3 English teachers, and classroom observations. The findings reveal that YouTube helps students build their pronunciation, vocabulary, and confidence in speaking while also motivating students in their self-directed learning. Teachers view YouTube as a complementary teaching tool to the traditional approaches for enhancing students' learning experience and interaction. This study recommends integrating digital-based learning programs into the national curriculum and suggests that the government allocate budgets to relevant areas to maximize the effectiveness of digital learning media use in the education system.

Keywords: Youtube as Learning Media, English-Speaking Skills, EFL University Students, First-Year Students, Case Study

Introduction

While Portuguese and Tetum are Timor-Leste's official languages, English was recognized as a working language in government and education in the country after gaining independence in 2002 (Velasco, 2017). Moreover, proficiency in using English has a potential impact on academic achievement among university students in the country



(Soares & Ferreira, 2019). As Timor-Leste prepares for ASEAN integration and larger global engagement, the ability to communicate in English is increasingly considered vital. However, according to the National Directorate of Statistics in 2015, the level of English proficiency of Timorese remains low, with only 15.6% of the population possessing English language literacy skills (National Institute of Statistics Timor-Leste, 2023).

Historically, English teaching in Timor-Leste was not widely accessible due to its limited exposure to the language and the ban on English use during Indonesia's occupation. This leaves many current educators with limited resources, and often they rely on traditional teaching methods. In non-English speaking countries, low English proficiency among both students and educators remains challenging. Elkhayma (2022) asserts that to address this, English preparatory training is essential not only for university students but also for their professors. Consequently, students are likely to struggle in these academic settings. While in a traditional classroom, students mostly lack contact with authentic English exposure outside their classroom, causing them specific difficulties with speaking skills, including limited vocabulary, poor understanding of accents, and a lack of confidence (Menezes et al., 2019). Hence, the need for supportive learning environments where students can practice English beyond their classroom is considered critical (Nyoni et al, 2023).

To address these instructional limitations, digital media platforms, particularly YouTube, have emerged as crucial solutions for non-English speaking countries like Timor-Leste. At the Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL), the platform is highly valued due to the accuracy and diversity of resources it offers, as well as the opportunities for language practice it provides. UNTL students use YouTube in general for English language learning to improve their public speaking skills and to gain knowledge of different topics related to the target language and culture (Oliveira & Ferreira, 2019). Moreover, other studies also confirm that YouTube is one of the primary resources for self-directed learning and enhancing English-speaking skills among UNTL students (Amaral & Almeida, 2021; Menezes et al., 2019).

Despite the acknowledged importance of digital media, research regarding its impacts on students at the fundamental university level is limited. The first year of university is considered significant as it is a transitional period for students to adapt and also a time to build the foundations for their future academic success. Although prior research in Timor-Leste about the impacts of YouTube on English learning has been conducted, studies specifically focusing on the first-year students are limited. Therefore, by addressing this gap, this study examines the roles of digital learning media, specifically YouTube, at this critical academic stage. It aims to demonstrate how YouTube has been utilized to achieve educational goals in English-speaking skills.



Objectives and Research Questions

1.To investigate how the East Timorese first-year university students utilize YouTube to learn and improve English-speaking skills, relevant learning difficulties, and their perspectives on YouTube’s educational functions and impacts.

2.To examine how and why English teachers utilize YouTube to teach English-speaking skills and their perspectives on the educational functions and impacts of YouTube on English-speaking teaching.

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

1. How do the East Timorese first-year university students utilize YouTube to learn and improve English-speaking skills, and what are the relevant students’ learning difficulties?

2. What are the perspectives of English teachers towards the educational functions and impacts of YouTube on English-speaking teaching?

Literature, Theories, and Conceptual Framework

1) The Roles of YouTube as a Learning Medium

Today’s educational landscape, learning materials are not just books and whiteboards; technology makes many things more straightforward and enjoyable. Learning media is now one of the predominant sources and can be obtained from various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Wikis, YouTube, and Block forums, among others. According to Fitriani & Artika (2020), teachers can increase learning engagement and success by integrating various media to complement traditional teaching strategies – use of multimedia presentations, videos, or online quizzes.

Various studies in recent years, despite using different research methods, all demonstrate that YouTube, in particular, has now served as a primary tool in English language learning beyond the traditional teaching methods (Ajiza & Puspitasari, 2023; Akbar & Bin, 2024; Salsabila et al., 2025; Tahmina, 2023; Truong & Le, 2022; Zayraey, 2025). For instance, Salsabila et al. (2025), who conducted a meta-analysis of 81 empirical research papers, found a “Very High Impact” of YouTube as a tool for English language learning (Effect Size: 1.24), where speaking is the most improved skill.

From the literature, the role of YouTube in English language teaching and learning can be identified through its functional aspects. On one hand, YouTube offers a wide variety of content, including educational videos from well-known websites such as TED- Ed, Khan Academy, and Crash Course. On the other hand, the platform acts as a bridge connecting classroom theory to real-world practice. In this regard, YouTube provides numerous authentic contents by exposing students to the English used in everyday life, including natural pronunciation, stress patterns, and daily expressions (Cabañas & Mercado, 2024; Zayraey, 2025), which can improve better understanding of intonation, better



pronunciation, and expand vocabulary (Anggraini, 2021; Cabañas & Mercado, 2024; Zayraey, 2025). Similarly, Wahyudin (2024) adds that videos featuring native-speakers help students understand spoken language more easily.

Recent empirical studies also discovered the significant gains of students' performance derived from this media platform. According to Akbar & Bin (2024) and Salsabila et al. (2025), YouTube can alleviate social and emotional burdens for learners. By building confidence, mitigating nervousness, and empowering interaction, the platform transforms students from passive learners to confident speakers (Akbar & Bin, 2024). Because YouTube allows students to learn at their own speed and on their own schedule (Lynch, 2020), it acts as a medium where students engage in learning without the pressure of being evaluated by their teachers or classmates (Salsabila et al., 2025).

Furthermore, YouTube promotes self-directed learning. As emphasized by Menggo et al. (2025) and Zayraey (2025), YouTube enables students to take control of their learning pace and methods as they can choose content that aligns with their interests. Additionally, learners can replay, pause, and repeat, which allows them to independently manage their own learning process (Ajiza & Puspitasari, 2023; Truong & Le, 2022).

2) The Advantages of YouTube as a Teaching Tool

From a teaching perspective, Anggraini (2021) demonstrates the benefits of integrating YouTube videos into the classroom, noting significant improvement in students' linguistic performance, while their motivation and interaction in class are also increased. Reinforcing this, Cabañas & Mercado (2024) conducted a further study exploring educators' perspectives in Mexico. They found that educators value YouTube videos as effective resources for introducing speaking topics, correcting pronunciation, and motivating discussion in the classroom. Significantly, the platform closes the gap between the classroom and real-world context by providing authentic language input. Unlike textbooks or audio recordings, YouTube allows teachers to pause and replay content, enabling them to adapt lessons to match learners' proficiency levels and objectives.

While teachers highly value the role of YouTube in pedagogy, Cabañas & Mercado (2024) advise that the effectiveness of the platform depends strongly on the ability of teachers to structure the lesson or class activities around the video, rather than merely watching it. Fitriani & Artika (2020) further highlight potential challenges associated with using YouTube as a teaching tool, such as technology-related issues, and teachers' adaptability to different learning methods. To address these, Cabañas & Mercado (2024) recommend specific digital training for teachers, whereas Menggo et al. (2025) assert that the efficacy of using YouTube in English language learning relies on both students' learning autonomy and institutional support.

3) The Uses and Gratification Theory

This study employs the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) (Katz et al., 1973) to understand why students use YouTube as a means of learning. UGT suggests that individuals choose media based on their needs, motivations, and expectations, which results from active decision-making, rather than passive consumption. Using UGT in this study can help pinpoint the specific needs and incentives that motivate students to use YouTube for learning. Additionally, UGT can help identify how students use YouTube to fulfill their educational needs while also achieving their entertainment purposes. UGT can provide insights into the factors influencing students' decision-making on selected social media platforms and content. So, it can be concluded that UGT can be employed as a valuable framework for this study.

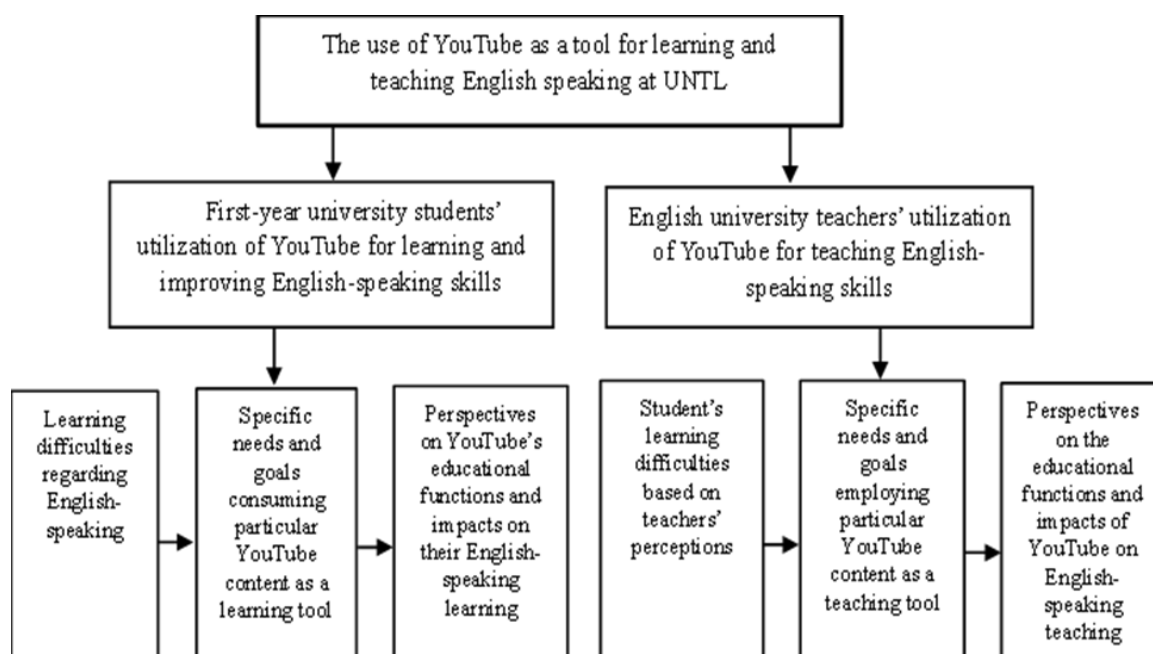


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Research Methodology

This research employed a qualitative method to get an in-depth understanding of how YouTube is used as a learning medium to improve English-speaking skills. There were 13 participants, chosen through purposive sampling, including 10 first-year university students and 3 English teachers from the English Department of the UNTL.

Data were then collected by using three methods: (1) focus group discussion with the students, (2) in-depth interviews with the teachers, and (3) classroom observations. The focus group discussion explored the frequency of YouTube use, types of content used, and how they think YouTube videos help them overcome the challenges in their



speaking skills. The interviews with teachers emphasized how they use YouTube in their teaching methods, what specific skills they see improvement in, and why. Classroom observations were also done to see the learning experience in classrooms. All data were recorded, then transcribed, and analyzed using a thematic analysis, and presented in a descriptive approach.

To achieve this, the collected data were coded and synthesized into themes by the following procedures. First, the researcher employed an open coding method to explore the raw data, identifying and labeling segments using color-coded highlighters. Next, these data were sorted based on their labels and grouped into categories. Finally, these categories were developed into themes that addressed the research questions. For instance, responses such as “I watch YouTube three times a day” and “I can watch a lot of videos within a day” were grouped under the themes of the frequency of using YouTube and the length of use.

Results

1) Students’ Perspectives and Utilization of YouTube for English Learning

Students of the UNTL reported using YouTube every day in their own free time to serve both educational and entertainment purposes. Regarding the most engaging educational content, students said that they watch tutorial videos produced by native speakers that focus on English pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and so on. The videos include Learning English with Ema, 6 Minutes English, Luke’s English Podcast, and Real-life conversations with native speakers. Besides solely watching English teaching videos, students have also consumed other informative programs, such as learning how to cook, play musical instruments, and studying semantics and morphology. Other respondents also watch videos that support their study’s future study achievement. For instance, one student shared, “I used YouTube for students' vlogs on how to attend university in Western countries”. While in terms of the most preferred entertainment types of videos, students mentioned music videos, movies, cartoons, sports, and daily Vlogs.

From using YouTube, students tend to initiate self-driven learning from the videos they consume. For example, they can choose content that serves their needs, then they repeat after or imitate, pausing the video and looking up information on Google for better understanding, then re-watch it, and read subtitles. Students have seen improvement and gained confidence in speaking English, due to the development in their pronunciation, accent, and listening skills. Significantly, YouTube has enabled students to learn and practice English beyond their classroom setting. One student clearly explained that “YouTube has significantly aided my English learning. Without YouTube, the process of learning English at this university would have been much more difficult for me, as



professors often only explain concepts in a general sense and provide some related theory. Since I watch YouTube, I have learned a great deal, and my English has improved in terms of speaking, pronunciation, and grammar”.

The positive impact on students’ English learning is attributed to its extensive resources, flexible and convenient accessibility, and role in fostering students’ learning autonomy. Regarding the use of YouTube in the classroom, the research found that nearly all students had a favorable view, even though concerns about its distracting students’ attention were raised.

2) Teachers’ Perspectives and Utilization of YouTube for English Teaching

Teachers revealed that YouTube and other social media platforms, such as TikTok and Facebook, were used to supplement lectures in addition to the traditional teaching methods. The combining methods include sending links to study materials before class to a group chat, posting study materials on a Facebook page, and encouraging observation skills and classroom Q&A activities using content from social media in the classroom. One teacher has even used a rewarding technique through social media platforms to enhance students’ interactivity and encourage students’ self-directed learning. She stated that “I posted a question on Facebook and encouraged students to answer it in the comments, rewarding them with points”. This encourages students’ interaction and enhances the learning experience in both in-class and out-of-class environments.

Teachers observed higher engagement and participation in class while YouTube was used. They have also noticed improvement in their students’ English-speaking skills. Despite the potential for distractions, there are compelling reasons to use YouTube as an educational tool in the classroom, provided that it is closely monitored and utilized under the guidance of teachers.

Conclusions and Discussion

The findings of this paper support the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) by Katz et al. (1973), which demonstrates that audiences actively choose media to fulfill their specific needs. In this study, the need for information and education appeared as noticeable. Students actively used YouTube to enhance their English skills, while teachers integrated the platform into their teaching methods to achieve their students’ learning goals. In addition, the findings revealed that the need for entertainment and escaping from daily life also critically encourages audiences, especially students, to use YouTube. Finally, the need for social integration was also discovered. Teachers have used media to foster students’ interaction and participation, and more engaging communication.

The research results further show that YouTube is a potential tool for improving students’ speaking skills by enhancing the compound speaking skills such as vocabulary,



accent, grammar, pronunciation, and listening skills; then this leads to gaining confidence to speak in public. These results support a previous study by Salsabila et al. (2025), which indicated that speaking is the most enhanced skill among the four-pillar skills when using YouTube as a learning medium. This is also further described by Akbar & Bin (2024) and Wahyudin (2024), who assert that exposure to the authentic videos that feature natural native-speaker conversations enhances speaking fluency, leading to gaining confidence in the target language usage (Akbar & Bin, 2024; Salsabila et al., 2025).

In this study, YouTube facilitates the development of students' English-speaking skills by 3 main factors: (1) serving as a rich, updated source of knowledge; (2) offering flexible and convenient access to content; and (3) fostering motivation for self-directed learning. The findings are consistent with previous research, which has highlighted that learning media, especially YouTube, can serve as a platform that provides a wealth of updated information and knowledge to enhance students' learning experience, and it is an online platform that anyone can access at any time and from any place (Lynch, 2020). By allowing students to replay, repeat, and review materials at their own pace (Ajiza & Puspitasari, 2023; Lynch, 2020; Menggo et al., 2025), YouTube promotes students' self-directed learning (Amaral & Almeida, 2021; Truong & Le, 2022; Zayraey, 2025). This transforms students into more autonomous learners who depend less on the teacher or traditional pedagogy for their achievement, as reinforced by Truong & Le (2022), who conducted the study with 106 EFL University Students in Vietnam. Interestingly, the study also discovered that learners use YouTube for their entertainment purposes while the educational need is also achieved simultaneously. This finding aligns with the recent studies by Ajiza & Puspitasari (2023) in Indonesia and by Tahmina (2023) in Bangladesh, which discovered the overlap of entertainment and learning function where YouTube enables a stress-free learning environment, then ultimately leads to the fostering of learning autonomy.

Furthermore, this study confirms that the effectiveness of YouTube utilization is amplified when combined with traditional classroom teaching methods. Teachers can promote discussions, debates, and peer feedback, create a highly engaging learning environment, and build confidence. This aligns with the research findings by Anggraini (2021) and Fitriani & Artika (2020) on integrating multimedia tools with traditional methods. However, the study also emphasizes the crucial role of educators or teachers in guiding students on how to navigate the platform and absorb maximum benefits from it. As Cabañas & Mercado (2024) suggest the importance of digital training for educators, Truong & Le (2022) pointed out the lack of structure on student's autonomy learning, and thus, the need of teacher's guidance is crucial. This is strongly aligned with the study by Tahmina



(2023), which developed a meaningfully shifted concept from “should we use YouTube?” to “how do we guide the usage?”

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