

YouTube as a Tool for Self-Directed Learning: English Education Students' Efforts to Improve Their Own Speaking Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

In the context of digital globalization, this study explores the role of YouTube as a self-directed learning (SDL) tool to enhance speaking proficiency among English Education students at Citra Bangsa University in Indonesia. Recognizing that classroom-based speaking practice is often limited by structural and pedagogical constraints, the research investigates how learners independently engage with YouTube to improve pronunciation, fluency, vocabulary, and confidence. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from the sixth-semester students through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and speaking practice logs over a six-week period. Thematic analysis revealed that students employed diverse strategies such as imitation, shadowing, monologue creation, and video-based roleplay, drawing on a wide range of content from educational channels like BBC Learning English to informal vlogs and podcasts. Participants reported increased engagement, language awareness, and motivation. However, they also faced challenges including lack of feedback, difficulty in selecting level-appropriate materials, and digital distractions. Despite these limitations, the overall attitude toward YouTube-based learning was positive, highlighting the platform's potential to supplement formal instruction. The findings suggest that YouTube can serve as an effective tool for promoting learner autonomy and speaking competence when integrated with structured support and digital literacy training. This study contributes to the growing discourse on technology-enhanced language learning and underscores the need for guided self-directed learning models in EFL contexts.

Keywords: English Education Students, Self-Directed Learning, Speaking Proficiency, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

In the era of digital globalization, language learning is no longer confined to traditional classrooms. Online platforms, particularly YouTube, have emerged as powerful tools in shaping how learners acquire and refine language skills autonomously. The accessibility, interactivity, and vast repository of authentic content available on YouTube present promising opportunities for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to engage in self-directed learning (SDL) aimed at improving their speaking proficiency. As learners increasingly seek flexible and personalized ways to develop their communicative competence, the integration of YouTube into self-initiated speaking practice becomes a timely subject for academic inquiry (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

Speaking is widely regarded as one of the most challenging yet essential language skills for EFL students. Unlike receptive skills such as listening or reading, speaking requires learners to produce language in real-time, drawing on their grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, pronunciation, and sociolinguistic awareness simultaneously (Burns & Seidlhofer, 2002). In many Indonesian classrooms, however, speaking practice is often limited by large class sizes, lack of interactional opportunities, and a strong emphasis on written assessments (Renandya & Widodo, 2016; Ate, dkk, 2024). This has prompted a growing interest in technology-enhanced autonomous learning approaches that offer learners more control over their speaking development.

Self-directed learning, as defined by Knowles (1975), refers to a process in which individuals take initiative with or without external help in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, identifying resources, and evaluating learning outcomes. SDL shifts the responsibility of learning from the teacher to the learner, encouraging greater autonomy and motivation. In language education, SDL fosters active engagement with learning materials and enables students to adapt their strategies according to personal goals, proficiency levels, and interests (Benson, 2011). The integration of YouTube into SDL contexts offers a rich, multimodal environment that supports not only language input but also output, thereby promoting meaningful speaking development.

YouTube, in particular, provides an abundance of video content ranging from interviews and vlogs to academic presentations and instructional tutorials. These resources offer learners authentic models of spoken English across various registers, accents, and contexts. More importantly, learners can mimic, shadow, and interact with these materials in self-paced and self-structured ways. Research has shown that learners who use YouTube to engage in speaking-focused activities such as imitation, repetition, and monologue creation experience improved fluency and pronunciation (Sun & Yang, 2015). These activities are consistent with communicative language teaching principles, which emphasize the importance of real-life communication and learner agency.

Furthermore, YouTube's interactive features such as comment sections, likes, playlists, and video responses can foster a sense of digital community and encourage spoken interaction. Learners can participate in challenges, post their own videos, and receive feedback, thus creating opportunities for real-world speaking practice beyond the classroom (Kelsen, 2019; Al Khairi, dkk, 2025). While not all students may feel confident enough to produce spoken content publicly, many benefit from private mimicry or practice routines inspired by YouTubers or online educators. In this sense, YouTube serves as both a content repository and a platform for identity construction and expressive experimentation in the target language.

Nevertheless, the autonomous use of YouTube for speaking development is not without its limitations. Learners often face difficulties in selecting appropriate materials, maintaining focus amidst digital distractions, and evaluating their own progress effectively. Moreover, the lack of real-time feedback and interaction may hinder the development of discourse-level fluency and pragmatic awareness (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011). These issues underscore the need for scaffolding and digital literacy training to ensure that learners can maximize YouTube's potential as a speaking enhancement tool while minimizing its drawbacks.

In the Indonesian context, where English is predominantly taught as a foreign language and exposure to native-like speaking models is limited, YouTube presents a viable solution for supplementing formal instruction. Students in English Education programs, in particular, must not only achieve high levels of spoken proficiency but also model effective speaking practices for future students. Yet, few empirical studies have explored how prospective English teachers

in Indonesia employ YouTube independently to improve their speaking skills a gap that this research seeks to address.

This study investigates how English Education students at Citra Bangsa University engage with YouTube in their self-directed efforts to enhance speaking proficiency. Specifically, it examines their strategies, motivations, perceived benefits, and challenges in using the platform for speaking development. By focusing on pre-service teachers, this study contributes to the broader discourse on technology-enhanced language learning and teacher preparation in Southeast Asia.

The central research questions guiding this study are: (1) How do English Education students use YouTube for self-directed speaking practice? (2) What are the perceived benefits and challenges of using YouTube to enhance speaking proficiency? The answers to these questions will offer insights for both learners and educators on how to effectively integrate YouTube into SDL routines and EFL curricula, thereby empowering students to become more confident and competent speakers of English.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore how English Education students use YouTube as a self-directed learning tool to improve their speaking proficiency. The case study method was chosen due to its strength in capturing detailed, context-specific insights into learner experiences, behaviors, and perceptions (Creswell, 2014). Through this approach, the study aimed to understand the personalized strategies students adopted, the types of YouTube content they used, and the challenges and benefits encountered during their independent speaking practice.

The research was conducted at the English Education Study Program of FKIP, Citra Bangsa University in Kupang, Indonesia. The setting was selected based on its relevance to teacher education and its growing emphasis on learner autonomy and digital literacy. The participants were 18 students in their sixth semester who had previously used YouTube for English language learning and were willing to engage in self-directed speaking practice. These students were chosen using purposive sampling, ensuring that they had prior familiarity with YouTube and a clear interest in enhancing their speaking skills outside formal instruction.

To gather rich and reliable data, multiple qualitative instruments were used. These included semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and speaking practice logs. The semi-structured interviews, each lasting 30–45 minutes, enabled the researcher to delve into students' motivations, experiences, and personal techniques when using YouTube for speaking development. The reflective journals, collected over a period of six weeks, required students to document their weekly speaking activities, video selections, and self-assessments. In addition, speaking practice logs were used to track their imitation, shadowing, and monologue practices based on YouTube content, offering insights into the frequency and intensity of their learning routines.

The data collection took place from March to May 2025. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Themes were identified through a coding process that categorized patterns across participants' learning behaviors, such as content selection strategies, speaking techniques (e.g., repetition, recording oneself), and common obstacles. To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation was applied by comparing insights from interviews, journals, and practice logs. Member

checking was conducted by sharing interpretations with participants for validation, and peer debriefing was carried out with fellow researchers to enhance reliability.

Overall, this methodology provided a comprehensive picture of how self-directed speaking practice with YouTube functions in the Indonesian EFL context. The insights generated from this research are expected to inform future language learning models that leverage digital platforms while supporting learner autonomy and communicative competence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the key findings from the analysis of interview transcripts, reflective journals, and speaking practice logs of 18 sixth-semester English Education students. The results are organized under three major themes: (1) YouTube usage patterns for speaking practice, (2) perceived benefits of self-directed speaking activities, and (3) challenges faced during the self-directed learning process. These findings offer insight into how students engage with YouTube independently to enhance their speaking proficiency.

YouTube Usage Patterns for Speaking Practice

All participants reported using YouTube specifically for speaking development, with varying frequencies and strategies. The majority (72%) practiced speaking using imitation and repetition techniques, often by pausing videos and mimicking native speakers' pronunciation and intonation. Around 56% of students engaged in shadowing, where they repeated spoken text simultaneously with the video. Some students (44%) created short monologues or summaries after watching a video, simulating spontaneous speaking.

Table 1. Speaking Strategies Used by Participants

Strategy	Percentage of Students	Description
Imitation and Repetition	72%	Repeating phrases after pausing videos
Shadowing	56%	Speaking along with the speaker in real-time
Monologue Practice	44%	Speaking summaries or personal opinions
Roleplay with Video Scenes	28%	Reenacting scenes with varied intonation
Recording and Self-Review	22%	Using mobile devices to evaluate spoken output

Students reported diverse preferences in the types of YouTube content they used to enhance their speaking skills. A significant number favored educational channels specifically designed for English language learners. Among the most frequently mentioned were BBC Learning English, EnglishClass101, and Speak English with Mr. Duncan. These channels provide structured lessons on pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and conversational strategies, often with subtitles and clear explanations. Students found these resources helpful for practicing formal speech patterns and improving their overall articulation and confidence.

In addition to formal educational content, students also engaged with lifestyle vlogs, celebrity interviews, and talk-show clips. These types of videos were popular among 61% of the participants who aimed to learn more natural and spontaneous language use. Through this informal content, learners were exposed to idiomatic expressions, casual transitions, and the rhythm of unscripted English. One participant commented in their journal, *"Listening to vloggers helps me speak more naturally. I can copy how they start a conversation or express surprise."* (Student S05)

Moreover, several students highlighted the benefits of watching podcast-style videos and long-form discussions. These videos provided extended input and contextualized speaking models, allowing learners to observe how speakers maintain coherence, shift topics, and use fillers or discourse markers. Students appreciated being able to replay complex sections and shadow native speakers in real time. The variety of video genres supported different learning goals, enabling students to practice both structured and spontaneous speaking in ways that textbooks or classroom practice alone could not provide.

Perceived Benefits of YouTube-Based Speaking Practice

Participants consistently reported improvements in multiple aspects of their speaking skills. Approximately 83% of students noted enhanced pronunciation accuracy and better control of intonation after regular shadowing and repetition. Furthermore, 67% of participants stated that they gained increased fluency and confidence when speaking English, especially when practicing impromptu responses or daily routines.

Vocabulary expansion was another reported benefit, particularly among students who watched thematic content such as cooking tutorials, travel vlogs, or motivational speeches. One participant reflected in their journal:

“I started using cooking videos, and now I know how to describe actions like chop, boil, stir, those are hard words to learn from textbooks.” (Student S07)

The visual and contextual cues from YouTube videos helped students connect meaning with use. Additionally, 39% of participants mentioned that recording and replaying their own speech enabled them to identify mistakes and track progress, which increased their motivation to practice consistently.

Challenges in Self-Directed Speaking Practice

Despite these benefits, several challenges emerged. The most frequently mentioned issue was lack of feedback (72%). Without teacher input or peer correction, students were unsure whether their pronunciation or grammar was correct. This led to hesitation about whether they were improving or simply repeating errors.

Table 2. Reported Challenges in YouTube-Based Speaking Practice

Challenge	Percentage of Students	Description
Lack of feedback	72%	Uncertainty in self-evaluating performance
Content selection issues	61%	Difficulty in choosing level-appropriate materials
Distractions	56%	Interruptions from unrelated YouTube recommendations
Technical limitations	33%	Poor internet access or low video/audio quality
Shyness or lack of privacy	28%	Embarrassment to speak aloud at home

Many students reported difficulty in finding YouTube content that was specifically aligned with their current level of speaking proficiency. Although the platform offers a vast range of videos, not all of them are appropriate for learners, especially those at intermediate or lower-intermediate levels. Several participants expressed frustration when encountering content that used complex grammar, idiomatic expressions, or cultural references they did not understand. This mismatch often led to confusion and reduced their motivation to continue speaking practice with certain videos.

Another common challenge involved the speed of speech in many YouTube videos. Some students noted that native speakers in vlogs or interviews spoke too quickly, making it difficult to catch pronunciation patterns or to mimic intonation accurately. Without built-in guidance or simplified versions of spoken English, students felt overwhelmed. Those with limited listening comprehension found it hard to use such content effectively for speaking improvement, even when using YouTube's playback speed controls.

In addition to content-level difficulties, YouTube's algorithmic features such as autoplay and video recommendations were also reported as significant distractions. Instead of staying focused on English-speaking practice, many students admitted to being sidetracked by unrelated entertainment videos. These distractions reduced the time spent on purposeful learning and sometimes led to feelings of guilt or regret. One participant shared in their journal, *"I started watching an English speech video, but ten minutes later I was watching music videos. It's hard to stay on track."* (Student S10)

Despite these challenges, students generally expressed positive attitudes toward using YouTube as a tool for improving speaking skills. They appreciated the platform's accessibility, authenticity, and variety of content, which allowed them to practice speaking outside the constraints of the classroom. Still, their self-directed learning experience was shaped by both enabling factors (such as the availability of models for imitation and shadowing) and limiting factors (such as lack of corrective feedback and digital distractions). These contrasting aspects highlight the need for structured support in guiding learners to use YouTube effectively a topic that will be explored further in the following discussion section.

The findings of this study reveal that YouTube serves as a highly accessible and versatile platform for supporting self-directed speaking practice among English Education students. Participants actively engaged with a variety of speaking strategies such as imitation, shadowing, and monologue practice to improve their pronunciation, fluency, and vocabulary. These practices are consistent with the tenets of self-directed learning (SDL), as outlined by Knowles (1975), which emphasize learner autonomy, initiative, and self-evaluation. The students' ability to select, adapt, and repeat materials based on their individual needs demonstrates their growing competence in managing their own learning paths an essential skill for future language educators.

One of the most noteworthy outcomes was the role of content variety in motivating learners to practice speaking. Educational channels such as *BBC Learning English* and *EnglishClass101* were widely used due to their structured and learner-friendly approach. Meanwhile, more informal content like vlogs and podcasts enabled students to access real-life spoken English and develop a more natural command of the language. This aligns with Godwin-Jones (2018), who emphasizes the value of digital media in offering authentic, multimodal input that goes beyond textbook learning. By mimicking native speakers from different genres of videos, students not only expanded their vocabulary but also became more aware of conversational rhythm, intonation, and cultural nuances factors that are often overlooked in formal education settings.

However, the study also highlights several persistent barriers that limit the effectiveness of YouTube as a self-directed learning tool for speaking. Chief among these was the lack of feedback, which left students uncertain about their progress and susceptible to reinforcing errors. This concern is echoed by Watkins and Wilkins (2011), who note that while YouTube offers ample input, it lacks built-in mechanisms for verifying learners' output. Without peer interaction or instructor guidance, students risk plateauing or developing inaccurate speech habits. This points to the importance of incorporating peer review systems, speech recognition

tools, or feedback-oriented platforms alongside YouTube to create a more balanced learning environment.

In addition, the issue of content selection emerged as a double-edged sword. While YouTube's vast library empowers learners with choices, it can also overwhelm them. Many students struggled to identify level-appropriate materials, wasting valuable time browsing instead of practicing. Kelsen (2019) similarly observed that EFL learners often encounter difficulty navigating YouTube's entertainment-driven algorithm, which prioritizes engagement over educational relevance. This calls for digital literacy training and curated playlists that can help learners filter content based on difficulty level, accent type, or speaking focus (e.g., academic vs. casual speech).

The problem of distraction was another significant challenge. Although students started with educational intentions, many found themselves diverted by unrelated videos due to YouTube's autoplay and recommendation systems. This behavior reflects the broader tension between YouTube's dual role as an entertainment and educational platform. As Renandya and Widodo (2016) suggest, effective SDL requires not only motivation and access but also self-regulation—a skill that some students had yet to fully develop. Institutions can address this issue by embedding YouTube use within structured learning plans, such as assigning speaking tasks based on selected videos or encouraging goal setting before viewing.

Interestingly, despite these obstacles, the overall attitude toward using YouTube remained positive. Most students expressed a willingness to continue practicing speaking through the platform, citing its authenticity, flexibility, and convenience. This suggests that YouTube holds strong potential as a supplementary learning tool, especially when integrated into formal language education with proper scaffolding. As Benson (2011) argues, autonomy does not mean isolation; rather, learners thrive best when they are supported in their self-directed efforts through structured environments, peer collaboration, and reflective practice.

In summary, YouTube can effectively support speaking skill development in EFL learners particularly those enrolled in English Education programs when used strategically. It offers a unique combination of authentic input, interactive features, and learner control that aligns with the core principles of self-directed learning. However, maximizing its benefits requires addressing its limitations through thoughtful guidance, curated content, and feedback mechanisms. These findings suggest a need for hybrid learning models that combine digital autonomy with institutional support, enabling students to not only learn independently but also effectively.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the use of YouTube as a tool for self-directed learning to enhance the speaking proficiency of English Education students. The findings demonstrate that YouTube offers a flexible, engaging, and authentic platform that supports learners in developing key speaking skills such as pronunciation, fluency, intonation, and vocabulary. Through imitation, shadowing, monologue practice, and content reflection, students were able to engage in independent learning that complemented their classroom instruction.

The study also revealed that students actively selected different types of content ranging from formal educational channels to informal vlogs and podcasts to suit their learning preferences and goals. This indicates a high level of learner autonomy and adaptability, consistent with the principles of self-directed learning. However, the benefits of this approach were tempered by several challenges, including the lack of corrective feedback, difficulties in

selecting level-appropriate content, frequent distractions from non-educational videos, and limitations in technical infrastructure.

Despite these challenges, students maintained a generally positive attitude toward using YouTube for speaking practice. Their experiences highlight the platform's potential to foster greater learner autonomy and communicative competence, especially in contexts where in-person speaking opportunities are limited. However, for this potential to be fully realized, it is essential that learners receive appropriate guidance in content selection, self-monitoring strategies, and digital discipline.

Therefore, it is recommended that English language educators incorporate YouTube more purposefully into speaking instruction by designing structured speaking tasks, offering curated playlists, and integrating peer or teacher feedback mechanisms. Institutions should also provide training in digital literacy and self-regulated learning strategies to help students navigate the platform effectively.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing field of technology-enhanced language learning by demonstrating that YouTube, when used mindfully, can serve as a powerful tool for developing speaking proficiency through self-directed learning. As digital learning becomes increasingly prominent in education, leveraging such platforms with pedagogical intention will be key to empowering autonomous, confident, and communicatively competent language users.

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