TIKTOKING TO IMPROVE SPEAKING SKILLS: A SOCIOCOGNITIVE CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS

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Highlights: Inspired by Dwight Atkinson's sociocognitive perspective of second language learning (SLL) which postulates that human mind, body, and socially mediated world as integrally intertwined in a rich and complex system of L2 learning, this research suggests that the social media TikTok can become a powerful tool to mediate learners' cognitive activities while learning to speak in English. The capacity of TikTok to provide a wide range of resources can become great scaffolding to accommodate the different needs of the learners.

Key words: second language learning, e-learning, speaking, sociocognitive

Introduction

The factual account of English as the global language has resulted in the need for people to be well-versed in that language so that they can have better social life opportunities. In Malaysia, English has been taught as a second language and made a compulsory subject at all levels of education (Azman 2016). Despite numerous attempts by the government to improve the standard of English among Malaysian ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, the issue of low oral performance, particularly among the university graduates, still, to a certain degree, remains unresolved (Abdul Hamid 2014; Ganeson 2018; Ken & Cheah 2012). Thus, driven by the sociocognitive perspective, this present study is conducted to provide alternative pedagogical practices using the social media TikTok, to enhance oral communication skills among Malaysian graduates.

Research question

In what ways does TikTok help improve Malaysian ESL learners' speaking skills?

Methods

This qualitative case study involved 6 undergraduate students at a public university in Malaysia. They were of mixed gender (5 female and 1 male) and mixed race (4 Malays, 1 Chinese, and 1 Indian), and their age ranged from 20 to 23 years. Since the participants' English proficiency was gauged according to their results in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET)1, they were therefore of a mixed proficiency, comprising of Band 2 (limited), 3 (modest) and 4 (good) students. All these participants were individually interviewed to get their opinions about their personal experiences using the social media platform TikTok to improve their English oral communication skills.

Theoretical framework

This study used a comparatively recent theoretical approach of sociocognitive theory by Dwight Atkinson to analyse the collected data. According to this theory, cognition occurs in response to environmental and/or social stimuli to allow humankind to continue its existence. In other words, individuals depend partly on their biological brain and partly on environmental features to operate sensibly in public spaces. Atkinson (2002, 2010) presented this concept of sociocognition in humans in relation to SLL in terms of three different principles as follows:

MUET is a high-stakes test run by the Malaysian Examinations Council to measure English language proficiency, largely for university admissions (Rethinasamy & Chuah, 2011).
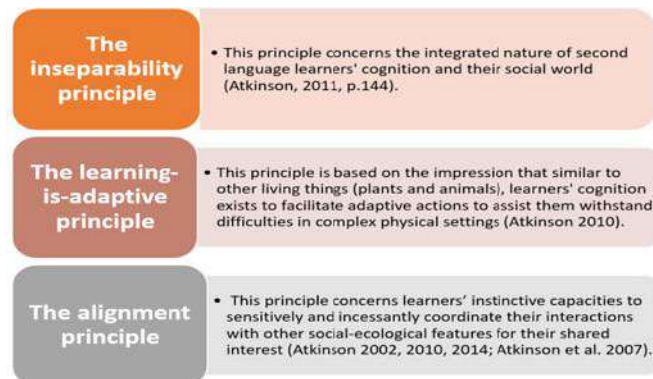
Figure 1: Three key principles of sociocognitive theory

Findings and discussion

There were four themes that emerged from the analysis of the data:

Table 2: Themes emerged from the interviews with the participating students

Num.	Themes	Description
1.	Fun and Interesting	The students claimed that TikTok had various interesting features that could become fun resources to their process of learning speaking (e.g. listening to native speakers' natural speech and accents).
2.	Autonomy	The students argued that TikTok allowed them to decide what to watch to help them improve their spoken English.
3.	Ubiquity	The students believed that TikTok was necessary in today's life; not only to learn English, but also to keep up to date with the current world events.
4.	Self-confidence	The students reported that TikTok gave them a sense of comfort while talking in English (as compared to in the classroom) and therefore being more confident with themselves.

Based on Table 2 above, it can be suggested that the interactions occurred between the students' and the platform TikTok while learning to speak English exhibited a sociocognitive phenomenon. The fun and interesting social engineered tool of TikTok developed the positive feelings in the students (cognition), before they were translated into desirable embodied actions (e.g. focusing on how native speakers pronounce words in English). The ability of TikTok to provide options to learners while experiencing their own learning can also promote learner autonomy or ownership as co-producers of knowledge, that is critical for their spoken English growth. Moreover, the students' reliance on TikTok in their daily lives may as well substantiate the connection between cognition and the sociomaterial world. As posited by Shuck, Albornoz and Winberg (2007, p.108), humans react and learn through the lens of emotionally laden experiences. Hence, when the students believed that TikTok was ubiquitous and significant, their strong sense of agency, or an individual's will and capacity to act (Gao 2010) might have been developed to motivate their learning performance as a whole. Apart from that, the feelings of security that the students experienced while talking in English on TikTok can certainly influence their self-confidence and motivation to explore the target language unreservedly.

On the whole, it appears that the social media TikTok has the potential to become an effective social and environmental affordance that enhances adaptive actions in learners, to align with the demanding process of learning spoken English. The learners' positive perceptions of that digital platform may not only influence their personalised motivation at large, but it can also organise and regulate their mental and physical activities in a manner that scaffolds their development of speaking skills.

Contributions and implications

This study contributes to the sociocognitive theory of second language learning (SLL), which, according to Atkinson (2014), is still under development. Apart from revealing strong interdependence and inseparability between learners' cognition and their social world in SLL, this study demonstrates that the learning of L2 speaking is a process of ongoing physiological activity of adaptation and alignment. That is, like other organisms that depend on their environment to prosper, learners complicatedly rely on a broad range of physical, social and conceptual resources that are co-constructed in their surroundings to enact appropriate learning actions.

This view contrasts sharply with the other two conflicting theoretical perspectives that have traditionally dominated SLL studies: 1) cognitive theory that holds mind/brain as the self-sufficient source of cognition (Harrington 2002; McLaughlin, B & Heredia 1996; O'Malley & Chamot 1990), and 2) sociocultural theory that emphasizes the important role of society and culture in the individual learner's development (Johnson 2004; Lantolf, Poehner & Swain 2018). Since sociocognitive theory highlights on the necessity to acknowledge the all-embracing constructs of sociocognition throughout the second language learning (Atkinson, 2014), it is imperative for second language teachers to make sure that all social agents and properties in the learning environment are supportive of learners' "higher-order" cognitive activities – alignment. As such, there are some pedagogical implications can be drawn from the present study in relation to the utilisation of the social tool TikTok in facilitating students' learning of speaking:

Table 3: Pedagogical implications concerning the use of TikTok in learning spoken English

Num.	How TikTok can be implemented to facilitate speaking skills	Description
	In classroom	As learners are often scared to speak English in public (especially those who have low English proficiency and low self-confidence), asking the students to create a video using TikTok may not only encourage them to speak the language, but also assist them to become independent or autonomous in improving their speaking abilities. For example, teachers can ask learners to use TikTok for digital storytelling (an online form of storytelling), in which learners use their own meaning through their multifaceted life experiences to construct the assigned story based on the lesson plans.
	Outside classroom	With the rise of online learning, TikTok is a medium that teachers can adopt to extend learning beyond the physical classroom. However, to avoid unintended outcomes (as teachers may not be physically present to monitor learners' progress), teachers must consider a range of individual and contextual factors before integrating the technology into lesson plans (e.g. the features of the tool, learners' needs and interests, etc.). For example, teachers may ask learners to create an interesting video weekly on TikTok. Learners may choose to come up with their own dialogues, lip-sync, or even sing along, to foster their creativity and full potential. Teachers may then come up with an online feedback session to make sure that learners can meaningfully experience the speaking activities, to bring them closer to the intended learning goals.

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