IS TIKTOK AN EFFECTIVE INSTRUMENT IN THE PROCESS OF SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION? (PERSPECTIVES OF ROMANIAN STUDENTS)

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Abstract: The transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has led educators to reconsider their teaching approaches and resources. A wide range of platforms and applications has gained popularity in the educational landscape. In light of its rapid expansion among younger generations, TikTok has the potential to become a valuable instrument for language learning. This paper explores not only the benefits, drawbacks, and challenges associated with the use of TikTok for language acquisition but also examines how Romanian students perceive the app as an educational tool. The research encompassed 55 Romanian nationality individuals who are engaged in the study of different languages, with ages ranging from 15 to 50 years, and come from various professional fields.

Keywords: language acquisition, instrument, TikTok, Romanian students

1. Introduction

The transition to online teaching during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic prompted educators to rethink their educational methods and tools, leading to the wide spread adoption of different platforms and applications in the field of education. According to DataReportal (2025: 14): “Figures published in TikTok’s advertising resources indicate that TikTok had 8.51 million users aged 18 and above in Romania in early 2025”. Given its swift rise in popularity among younger generations, TikTok holds potential as an effective tool for language learning. Initially a video-sharing social networking service designed for entertainment, TikTok allows its users to create and share short videos up to 60 seconds of any topic, which may result engaging and interactive. These characteristics are valuable in the language learning process.

Numerous scholars (Adnan *et al, 2021:* 2, Fitria, 2023: 115-117, Ibrahim *et all,* 2023: 355-356; Salazar-Rosas *et al,* 2023: 25, Yang, 2020: 167-169) have identified different benefits associated with the use of TikTok in language acquisition:

a) *Motivation*

As active participants in the learning process, learners may feel motivated to study. Language learning on TikTok often feels more like a challenge or a game rather than a demanding task. The videos are creative, interactive, making the practice of speaking, listening, grammar and even writing an enjoyable experience.

b) *Authentic Language*

While traditional language courses do not generally expose learners to everyday language produced by native speakers, with TikTok, students have the possibility to

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listen to native speakers from all over the world, and thus to become aware of multiple accents, slang as well as idiomatic expressions in multiple settings.

c) *Cultural references*

On TikTok students are exposed to different cultural contexts such as daily life, social issues, and humour, which helps them have a better understanding of the culture and improve their ability to communicate in context.

d) *Visual and auditory learning*

Combining different visual and auditory inputs such as dialogues, music, sound effects, gestures, and facial expressions, TikTok videos are beneficial to students with multiple learning styles. Listening to various native speakers, to fast speech, to different accents and vocabulary in real, spontaneous conversations improves learners' listening comprehension skills as well as their pronunciation.

e) *Creative opportunities and collaboration*

TikTok allows users to create their own videos, thus improving their speaking and writing skills as well as interacting in real-time through features like duet with other students. Practicing with peers means fun and reduces pressure.

f) *Accessibility and flexibility*

Access to materials on TikTok is free and flexible. Learners can practice whenever they want, wherever they want and repeat as many times as they want.

g) *Building language communities*

TikTok connects a global community of language learners, teachers, and native speakers and thus provides an interactive place where one can practice, exchange information, ask questions and share progress.

On the other hand, TikTok also has numerous drawbacks to consider (Ibrahim *et al,* 2023: 355-356; Yang, 2020: 171, 176):

a) *Authenticity and misinformation*

The accuracy and quality of the TikTok content are far from guaranteed. Since anyone, regardless of expertise and knowledge, can upload videos with incorrect or incomplete information, learners could be confused and their progress biased.

b) *Cultural sensitivity and language complexity*

There are TikTok videos which include slang, regional dialects or culturally specific themes that may be challenging or even discouraging for beginners. Students have a limited ability to filter or select materials which are appropriate for their language level or cultural understanding. Additionally, since multiple videos use informal language, without proper guidance, students might learn inappropriate words or phrases and use them inadequately.

c) *Limited focus on comprehensive language skills*

While TikTok is effective in developing speaking and listening skills, it may not provide sufficient support for improving writing and reading abilities.

d) *Distraction factors*

Even though TikTok can be entertaining and engaging, it runs the risk of distracting students with unrelated content. They might spend excessive time watching non-educational videos, even forgetting about the original learning topic of interest.

e) *Privacy and safety*

Due to data privacy concerns, TikTok has been banned or regulated in certain contexts, particularly in schools and government institutions. While searching for language content, users may come across inappropriate material, harmful behaviour, or explicit videos. Moreover, interacting with strangers through messages or comment

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sections increases the risks, especially for young learners. This exposure may lead to cyberbullying, harassment or negative comments, all of which can influence learners' confidence in an educational setting.

f) *Dependence on technology*

Using TikTok for language learning or any purpose requires constant access to technology, which may not always be available. Students with limited internet access or technological resources are at a significant disadvantage.

The purpose of the present paper is to explore Romanian students' opinion on the use of TikTok application as a foreign language learning tool.

2. Method

The present article employs mixed methods research, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to explore Romanian students' perception on the use of TikTok as a foreign language learning tool. The strength of mixed methods lies in the ability to provide an in-depth comprehension of the research topic. The quantitative data can provide measurable insights, while the qualitative data facilitates a deeper understanding and description of the points of view, and experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation.

3. Participants and instruments

The research encompassed 55 Romanian nationality individuals who are engaged in the study of different languages, with ages ranging from 15 to 50 years. The youngest group of participants are college students (13 aged between 15-18), followed by university students from different study programs such as Psychology, Law, Economics, Computer Science, Medicine, and other specializations (16 students between 19-26), a group represented by second degree students (13 aged between 27-40) and employees who need to study a second language for their jobs (13 people above 40). Among the respondents, there were 67% females, 31% males and 2% preferred not to say.

A questionnaire constructed via Google Forms was administered to the 55 respondents as an efficient way to gather information. Google Forms enhances the process of data collection by facilitating response gathering and automating data storage in real time through integration with Google Sheets. The research questionnaire consists of 17 inquiries (14 closed-ended questions and 3 open-ended questions) that explore Romanian students' perceptions regarding the use of TikTok as a tool for foreign language acquisition.

Romanian Students' Perception of Using TikTok for Foreign Language Learning

1. Please indicate your age:
   15-18 19-22 27-40 40-50
2. Gender
   Male Female Prefer not to say
3. Please indicate your field of study:
   Psychology Law Economic Sciences Computer Science
   Philology Medicine other
4. How often do you use TikTok?
   at least one hour per day over 3 hours per day daily weekly rarely
5. What is your purpose for using TikTok?

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Entertainment Information (news and events) Challenges
Educational content Music Socializing Other (please specify) ___

6. Have you ever used TikTok for learning a language?
yes no I have seen educational content, but I haven't used it.

7. Do you consider TikTok to be a useful tool for learning a foreign language?
yes no I'm not sure

8. Which would you choose: a traditional language course based on a textbook or a course with numerous TikTok materials?
a traditional course based on a textbook a course based only on TikTok materials
a course that combines the use of TikTok with other traditional materials.

9. What do you consider the main advantages of using TikTok for foreign language learning?
Short and engaging content that makes learning more enjoyable
Exposure to authentic language use (e.g. slang, idiomatic expressions)
Combined visual and auditory learning
Easy access to free resources
Ability to learn at your own pace
Makes learning more interesting
Other (please specify): ___

10. What do you consider the main disadvantages of using TikTok for learning a foreign language?
Content quality and reliability
Limited time for detailed explanations
Can be a distraction
Lack of structured learning content
The language used may be informal or not suitable for all learning levels
Difficult to concentrate on learning while using TikTok
Other

11. Would you recommend TikTok to other students as a tool for learning a foreign language?
yes no maybe

12. What language skills do you think TikTok can improve?
Vocabulary Grammar Speaking and pronunciation
Comprehension and listening Reading Writing Other (please specify):__

13. How motivated are you to continue learning a foreign language through TikTok?
very motivated fairly motivated neutral not very motivated not motivated at all

14. Have you ever interacted with content creators on TikTok (e.g., commenting, following, participating in challenges) to practice your language skills?
Yes, regularly. Yes, occasionally. No, never.

15. In your opinion, what could improve TikTok's effectiveness as a tool for learning a foreign language?

16. Can you share any personal experience or example of how TikTok helped you learn a foreign language?

17. Do you think schools and universities should integrate platforms like TikTok into their foreign language learning programs? Why or why not?

Table 1. Romanian Students' Perception of Using TikTok for Foreign Language Learning

4. Results

The research results reveal valuable information on students use and interest in using TikTok generally for multiple purposes, mainly for language learning. Among the 55

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respondents, 34 admitted a frequent use of the platform: 17 spending a significant time daily on TikTok (1-3 hours per day), 8 spending daily time and 9 once a week time. Selecting these options shows that students include the app in their everyday routines, some of them engaging regularly with TikTok and 9 just casually, probably just when the content interests them. On the other hand, 21 respondents admitted rarely using the platform, meaning that they may not consider the app an important part of their daily activities.

When asked about the purpose of using TikTok, 32 respondents named entertainment, which indicates that students turn to the platform mainly for fun, joy, for amusing videos and trends. 21 respondents selected education purposes, which may indicate that they search videos to learn new information, tutorials to develop their skills such as language learning. 17 students chose information (news and events) as a reason to use TikTok, which shows that they may rely on the platform to get informed on recent political and social events, news, etc. 10 respondents prefer TikTok for socializing, showing the platform's role in bonding with friends or people with similar opinions through collaborations, comments and challenges. 9 students mentioned music as a reason for TikTok use, which may link it to the entertainment purpose through music-videos or dance routines. Still related to entertainment, 3 respondents mentioned challenges as a purpose of the app use, which may seem surprising due to the fact that the aspect is generally considered among the main features of TikTok. On the other hand, 13 respondents mentioned other reasons for the use of TikTok such as creativity and self-expression through art, inspiration through life tips and tricks, and empowering stories, shopping, product discovery, travel insights, and personal growth.

For the question "Have you ever used TikTok for language learning?" 31 respondents (56%) never used the app for language learning, probably preferring more structured learning methods. 14 students (26%) answered affirmatively, which means they may have included the platform in their language learning routine. Thus, TikTok might increase its potential to become an educational tool, mainly in language acquisition. Moreover, the answer given by 14 respondents (18%) "I have seen educational content, but I haven't used it" could be seen as an opportunity for further engagement of language learning content on TikTok.

Whether they used the app for language learning or not, 28 respondents (51%) consider TikTok as an effective tool for language acquisition, 18 respondents (33%) are not sure, probably having little experience with language learning content. Only 9 students (16%) question the platform's functionality due to its lack of structure, which is mandatory in language learning.

When asked about the type of course they prefer, 28 students (51%) chose the course combining TikTok videos with traditional teaching materials, 24 respondents (44%) mentioned the traditional course based on textbooks and only 3 individuals (4%) would rather have a course entirely based on TikTok. The results suggest that even though learners might prefer more traditional, structured methods like classroom learning or formal language apps, they are willing to include TikTok in the learning process as an additional tool, but not to completely rely on it as the main single method.

Among the main advantages of the use of TikTok for language acquisition 32 students mentioned its short and engaging content that makes learning more enjoyable, but also the fact that it combines visual and auditory learning. Moreover, 30 respondents opted for the easy access to free resources, 23 students chose the ability to learn at their own pace as a plus, while 17 mentioned the exposure to authentic language use (e.g., slang,

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idiomatic expressions) as a strength of the platform. The respondents identified most of the advantages generally discussed in research on TikTok as a language learning instrument (see above) and also identified micro-learning as an advantage. Being exposed to short videos, learners might absorb small amounts of information in a short period of time, which could make its consolidation and application faster.

Regarding the disadvantages of TikTok for learning a foreign language, 33 students feared its content might not be always educational, accurate and therefore reliable. 19 respondents mentioned the limited time for detailed explanations, as the videos generally last 60 seconds; 18 individuals considered that the language may be too informal or not suitable for all learning levels, as well as they worried the app could distract them from studying; 15 students opted for the lack of structured learning content and 13 chose focusing difficulties in learning while using TikTok. Also, in this case the respondents identified some of the disadvantages mentioned in various research on TikTok as a language learning tool. (see above) However, they also mentioned lack of progress tracking as learners can't measure their progress or set traceable learning goals on TikTok and content overload as it could be overwhelming for learners to identify the relevant educational material among the multitude of entertainment videos.

There is a mixed perception of TikTok as a language learning instrument among the respondents. While a relevant number 29% would not recommend TikTok due to its drawbacks, 44% is open to the idea, considering some reservations but also recognition of its potential benefits. 27% of the respondents is firmly in favour of its use for language acquisition. The percentages reveal that despite its limitations, the app is still perceived as valuable for educational purposes, by a part of the students, who might recommend it or consider it as a supplementary tool.

When asked about the language skills TikTok can improve, the questionnaire showed that the app is perceived as particularly effective in enhancing certain language skills. A significant number of respondents (36) believe that TikTok can improve vocabulary, speaking and pronunciation. Comprehension and listening are also seen as advantages of the platform, with 28 respondents indicating it can improve these skills. However, fewer respondents believe TikTok can help with reading (14 respondents) and writing (9 respondents), as these skills might not be easily addressed through the app's video-based format. 6 respondents mentioned other skills such as cultural understanding: (being exposed to real-life contexts, customs, and traditions, learners can gain insights into the cultural aspects of the language they are studying) and non-verbal communication (body language, facial expressions, and gestures that accompany speech are essential for understanding how language is used in a social context). Overall, the data suggests that TikTok is most valued for its ability to improve vocabulary, speaking, and listening skills, meaning that the app's short, engaging videos and authentic language use are beneficial for expanding vocabulary and practicing verbal communication skills.

As far as motivation is concerned, there is a mixed level among respondents whether to continue learning a foreign language through TikTok or not. While a small number of students (4 people) are "very motivated" to keep using the platform for language learning, a larger group (12 people) are "fairly motivated". Most respondents (21 people) are neutral, showing neither strong motivation nor lack of interest. On the other hand, 9 people are "not very motivated," and another 9 are "not motivated at all," indicating that a significant part of the group lacks enthusiasm or does not find TikTok a convincing tool

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for language learning. Overall, the results show a somewhat divided response regarding its effectiveness as a long-term language learning tool.

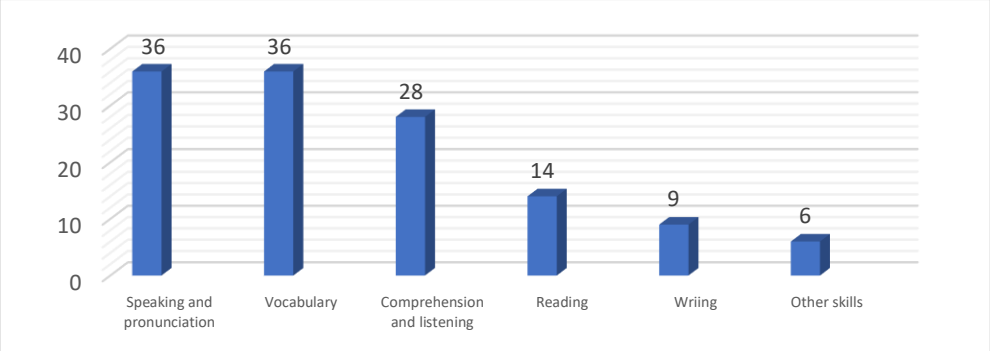


Figure 1. TikTok impact on language skills

It is worth mentioning that only 1 participant in the questionnaire has regularly interacted with language skills content creators on TikTok (e.g. commenting, following, participating in challenges), while 13 people have just occasionally been in contact with them, probably when they found the topic relevant for their interest. On the other hand, most respondents (41) have never interacted with TikTok language learning content creators, suggesting that they may consume content, but they are not participating in the interactive aspects of the platform aimed at improving language skills.

For the open-ended question: *What could improve TikTok's effectiveness as a tool for learning a foreign language?* some answers could be relevant to enhance TikTok's educational features and overcome some of its drawbacks such as lack of structure, limited explanations and potential distractions. Some of the relevant answers of the respondents (R1-R11) are randomly listed below:

(R1) The existence of marked posts (e.g., educational content) to ensure that what you listen to, see, and learn is provided by an expert.
(R2) TikTok could be improved if it gave much more detailed explanations regarding grammar.
(R3) There sould be a way to check certain accounts of TikTok that focus on language learning, to confirm they are reliable sources.
(R4) Series of lessons on conversational topics with native speakers.
(R5) I'm not sure, it should probably be thematic, covering a wide range of interests/fields.
(R6) Structured programs. Introducing a special section with structured lessons, corrected and approved by experts of the field. Checking the content.
(R7) Longer videos, interactive boxes (by clicking on them) to select the correct/incorrect answers.
(R8) Customized subtitles in multiple languages for more difficult-to-understand expressions.
(R9) The possibility to adjust the speed of videos to make it easier to understand the pronunciation of expressions.
(R10) The content should be checked beforehand to ensure its accuracy.

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(R11) Consistency in the algorithm or a way to focus only on language studies without being distracted by other types of content.

Overall, the respondents' suggestions for the enhancement of TikTok effectiveness in language learning reveal their main concerns related to its content reliability, accuracy and consistency, as well as its lack of structure.

Among the personal experiences or examples of how TikTok helped students learn a foreign language here are some of the respondents' answers, randomly named R1-R18:

(R1) TikTok has helped me learn a foreign language through linguistic games with given answers.

(R2) Through TikTok's multiculturalism (music, funny posts), I learned a few words and customs from other countries.

(R3) I improved my English vocabulary just by watching and listening to videos.

(R4) I'm trying to learn Serbian, which has many words written exactly the same, but with different pronunciations. There is a specific Serbian creator who makes videos about such words, and it helped me differentiate between them (because pronunciation is something that's difficult to learn from someone who is not a native speaker or fluent).

(R5) (…) but it helped me slowly learn some English expressions.

(R6) TikTok videos in English enriched my vocabulary and pronunciation.

(R7) It is strictly related to sociocultural linguistic exposure and immersion in a language.

(R8) (…) I was preparing for the British Council exam and, by entering the app, I found a profile that correctly demonstrated and explained the speaking part.

(R9) TikTok helped me learn by showing me how to write correctly.

(R10) Linguistic games with answers provided.

(R11) Through TikTok, I learned how to hold a short conversation in a foreign language.

(R12) Pronunciation, reading, translation, learning important phrases (Thai Romanian).

(R13) With TikTok's help, I refreshed my memory on verbs and their tenses.

(R14) Videos related to exceptions to grammar rules or the pronunciation of certain words or word groups.

(R15) I would say I learned how to pronounce French better thanks to TikTok and speak a bit more fluently. You can listen to it as many times as you need.

(R16) There are many videos with people teaching words and phrases that you use daily, which is a very good and effective way to get an introduction to a language. But personally, I learned a few common adjectives in Spanish and common words in French, etc.

(R17) Through short videos or posts showing specific words from a certain field, vocabulary development became possible.

(R18) TikTok taught me the basics of the Korean language, how to read the Cyrillic alphabet, and how to use certain words in context in Japanese (though I never focused solely on one specific language).

The common theme among the respondents' experience with TikTok is its effectiveness in improving language skills, such as vocabulary (words, phrases, expressions), pronunciation and speaking (fluency), grammar (rules, exceptions), and cultural understanding (multilingual content, contextualization). Overall, these examples suggest that TikTok can serve as a useful, informal, and flexible supplement to traditional language learning methods.

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For the third open-ended question, Do you think schools and universities should integrate platforms like TikTok into their foreign language learning programs? Why or why not?, the respondents revealed a mixed perception. Here are some of the answers randomly named R1-R6:

(R1) Yes, I believe that the integration of such platforms for foreign language learning would be well received by students because it would bring professors/universities closer to the new generation of students.

(R2) I believe that to attract younger generations, integrating TikTok into the learning process is important because young people spend a lot of time on this platform, and the information is short and to the point, which would be an adaptation to the needs of the new generations.

(R3) Yes, mainly because TikTok is widely used by younger generations. Considering that students/pupils are attracted to "cool" teachers and often avoid traditional learning methods, I believe integrating TikTok would spark their curiosity. Moreover, if students were encouraged to use their TikTok accounts to watch educational content, they would have a feed with similar videos. Thus, they would have contact with the foreign language they are learning even when using the app just for recreation or entertainment.

(R4) Yes, because through short and interactive videos, students' attention can be captured faster and easier.

(R5) Yes, if it's a good material, because it is popular among young people, and they would be interested.

(R6) Yes, because it is much more interactive and engaging.

(R7) Probably yes, to maintain interest, shift away from traditional learning methods, and keep up with the trends toward digitalization in all fields.

(R8) No, it would be too much of a distraction from learning.

(R9) Not exactly because students would lose patience with learning in the traditional way.

(R10) No, platforms of this type are specifically created to keep the mind engaged in an endless scrolling cycle, (…) Additionally, learning a language correctly and for the long term can only be done by following a meticulous model, not in a hurry, with fleeting and superficial information (…)

(R11) No, because this is not properly validated for use in institutions.

(R12) No, because there are much more effective ways to learn a foreign language.

(R13) I think the two systems should be combined, as both the traditional one is useful, as well as the one through platforms, which makes lessons more engaging, especially for children.

(R14) I believe that schools and universities could introduce foreign language teaching with the help of TikTok, as long as it includes detailed exercises and it is not used abusively or for activities that serve other non-educational purposes.

A majority of 28 people (approximately 42%) support the idea, suggesting that there is potential value in integrating TikTok into language education, possibly due to its appealing, interactive, and handy nature. However, 22 people (33%) are against this idea, which shows their concerns related to the platform's lack of structured learning content and distractions, as well to the potential effect on traditional educational practices. Interestingly, 5 people (7%) consider TikTok to be useful, but only when combined with traditional methods. This suggest that some respondents accept the possible value of TikTok as a supplementary tool, but they emphasize the importance of

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maintaining conventional and structured teaching methods for qualitative language learning. Overall, the results show a positive attitude toward TikTok as an additional resource for language learning, though there is serious concern about its use without traditional methods.

5. Conclusions

The study results indicate that TikTok is widely used by students, with many including it into their daily routines, mainly for entertainment purposes. While entertainment is the first reason for using TikTok, a significant portion of respondents also turn to the platform for language learning. The fact that 56% of respondents have never used TikTok for language learning suggests that the app is not yet a primary educational resource, as more traditional and structured learning methods are still preferred. Nevertheless, 26% of respondents have used TikTok for language learning, emphasizing the platform's potential as a tool for language acquisition. Students appreciate its short, engaging content, which makes learning more enjoyable, while its combination of visual and auditory elements enhances the overall learning experience. Furthermore, easy access to free resources, exposure to authentic language, including slang and idiomatic expressions, and the platform's flexibility, which allows learners to progress at their own pace, are also seen as significant benefits. On the other hand, the fact that some respondents have encountered educational content but have not actively engaged with it suggests that TikTok has room to increase its educational offerings and encourage more active participation. Overall, TikTok shows promise as a supplementary tool for language learning, especially if it integrates more structured and targeted educational content.

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