研究ノート

Learning English Through YouTube

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1. Introduction

Learning a language online has become ubiquitous as online platform services are rapidly improved every day. Nowadays, people can utilize many online platforms to learn a language, such as Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, YouTube, Twitter, LINE, TikTok, and Instagram. Higuchi (2021) investigated the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) by 414 university students in Japan and found that 95% (395 students) used ICT to learn a language. This exemplifies the reality of today's learning, namely, learning via online services.

While quite a few studies have investigated how students learn a language via online platforms (Davis-Wiley, 2014; Elavsky et al., 2011; Stockwell, 2010; Tran, 2018), many of them have been conducted "under controlled conditions" (Stockwell, 2016, p. 300). This means the way technology is used for language learning in a natural setting, including at home, is not well-researched. More research needs to be conducted to capture students' use of online language learning services. This study explores students' actual online learning at home, focusing on the learning platform YouTube. YouTube is one of the most popular online platforms, with "billions of monthly logged-in users" (YouTube, 2023). In the aforementioned research conducted by Higuchi (2021), YouTube was the most used platform by university students, with 59.7% (247 students) stating that they use it to learn a language. Hence, it is beneficial to investigate how learners utilize YouTube for language learning.

A careful investigation of the results of the current study illustrates how students select a YouTube video to learn from, how they interact with the YouTube video, and how they make the best use of other online platforms in conjunction with YouTube. This study tries to identify some features of learning at home that are different from formal, controlled learning. Learning at home, defined here as informal learning, signifies learning not directed by the school or externally instructed (Greenhow & Lewin, 2016). The next section presents previous studies related to learning with YouTube, followed by the methodology applied in the current study, the results, and the discussion.

2. Related studies and response from ChatGPT

Previous studies have addressed the dynamic nature of learning via YouTube outside the classroom. Wang and Chen (2020) collected data from 20 university students in Taiwan who used YouTube as a platform for learning English and found that learners often utilized English-teaching YouTubers' videos as a supplement to their formal learning. It was also revealed that YouTube learning facilitated learning in such a way that eased the burden of studying English as they watched something resonant with their daily lives.

Pires et al. (2022) investigated teens' YouTube usage for language learning. They used 1,633 questionnaires, 58 creative workshops, 311 in-depth interviews, 90 media diaries, and eight websites to draw observations to grasp how teens interacted with YouTube as a learning tool. They found that teens learned through YouTube videos as a complement to school-related activities, as well as for their own interests. The researchers concluded that YouTube is a significant learning space for teens, where the boundaries between the classic dichotomy of formal and informal learning are blurred.

With the prompt "How does YouTube contribute to learning a language?", ChatGPT listed the following six points, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. YouTube's Contribution to Language Learning

#	Title	Description
1	**Language Lessons and Tutorials**	They cover various language topics, such as grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural aspects.
2	**Language Learning Channels**	They provide structured lessons, tips, and practice exercises. Interactive features, such as subtitles, quizzes, and exercises, to enhance the learning experience are included.
3	**Native Speaker Content**	Authentic content in the target language is available. Vlogs, interviews, documentaries, and news reports in authentic contexts are evident.
4	**Pronunciation Practice**	YouTube offers pronunciation guides and drills to facilitate learners in improving their spoken language proficiencies. Videos of specific sounds, intonation patterns, and mouth movements are also available.
5	**Language Practice Communities**	YouTube offers a platform for language learners to connect and practice with one another.
6	**Subtitles and Closed Captions**	Subtitles or closed captions in multiple languages are available in most videos. They are useful for improving reading skills, reinforcing vocabulary, and paying attention to grammar usage.

Cited by OpenAI (2023) and summarized by the author.

As shown in the table above, there are several ways to learn a language via YouTube. While YouTube offers topic-based lessons, focusing on a certain grammar structure or pronunciation, it also includes authentic materials, such as interviews and news. Another prominent feature of YouTube is that subtitles are available in most of the videos, helping learners easily learn a language. In the next section, the method applied in the current study is presented.

3. Methods

Mixed methods are employed in this study. Two participants agreed to be interviewed and to send self-recorded video clips of their learning on YouTube to the researcher[i]. All interviews took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the interviews were recorded online using the video conferencing application Zoom, after which they were transcribed and analyzed. Self-recording videos aim to diminish the effect of the researcher's presence. With this strategy, the researcher does not need to be present when the participants record themselves. It is assumed that this method is an effective way of recording to grasp the students' informal learning at home. Table 2 shows information about the two participants. Tailor's video is divided into three because he experienced difficulty in sending a large volume of data.

Table 2. Participants

Pseudonym	Date	Recording length	Interview length	English proficiency
Kenneth	2020/11/23	17:28	34:53	B2
Tailor	2020/11/23	5:00, 4:20, 2:53	1:04:37	B1

Kenneth is a Japanese first-year student at a university in Tokyo. He is an avid language learner, studying on his own for about an hour a day. He learns English in a variety of ways and was chosen as an interviewee because the researcher wanted to know how he conceptualized his learning at home. He belongs to the TEDx club, of which the researcher is an alumnus.

Tailor is a Japanese sophomore attending a university in Tokyo. He is not currently taking language classes but sometimes learns English via YouTube during his spare time. He was a member of the same brass band as the researcher.

4. Results

Based on observations from the self-recorded videos and analyses of the interviews, the participants' (1) content selection process, (2) both passive and active interactions with YouTube video, and (3) connection with other online services have been identified. The following section expounds on the three points listed above by

presenting interview extracts and detailed accounts for the analysis of the video clips.

4.1 Content Selection Process

Kenneth said he watched a variety of YouTube clips, but choosing which video to watch depends highly on the availability of scripts or subtitles, as well as how much he likes the content.

Extract 1: When the researcher asked what kind of YouTube videos he watches to learn a language

Kenneth; まぁ Ted Talk とか、あとは Crash Course って言う、えーと、なんか、向こうの高校生・大学生が習うような、なんか、ちょっと 10 分ぐらいの授業動画みたいなチャンネルがあるのでそれ見たりとか、後は海外の YouTuber のとか、あとは、そうですね、そんな感じです、あとはライブ映像とか

[Well, there are channels called "Ted Talk" and "Crash Course," which comprise 10-minute class videos that high school and college students abroad learn from. I watch those two, YouTubers from overseas, other things that are similar, and also live videos.]

Researcher: 選ぶ基準ってあるの？そのどの動画も見るとか

[Do you have any criteria for choosing which video to watch?]

Kenneth: なんか、そうですね、あー、スクリプトがあるのは絶対選んでます。そこですかねまず、であとはもうご自分の興味あるの、みたいな

[Well, yes, I definitely choose the ones that have scripts. I guess that's the first thing. Then I select the ones that interest me.] (Translated by the author)

It is evident that the availability of scripts or subtitles is essential to Kenneth's learning. In the self-recorded video, he chose a video clip with proper, accurate subtitles placed by the video creator. The video he chose was made available for English learners to learn both language and content matter.

Tailor inferred a similar point, but he said the subtitles on YouTube are not trustworthy. He sometimes utilizes a mobile application called CAKE instead of YouTube.

Extract 2: When the researcher asked how he uses YouTube to learn

Tailor: その YouTube って字幕あるじゃないですか、英語で、けどアレってたまに違うことだったり、よくあるじゃないですか。TED Talk でも、字幕あっても、あれ違うってなるじゃないですか、けどこの CAKE ってアプリ使うと結構

ちゃんと正確な字幕出てくれて、っていう風な何か勉強の仕方してます。なんか座学ってよりはそのなんか聞いて覚えてなんか映像見ててって方が僕、なんか自分的には苦じゃないなって思って

[I've been using YouTube, which has subtitles in English, but they're not often correct. Even for TED Talks, subtitles are available, but I found them incorrect. However, in this CAKE app, the subtitles are quite accurate, and I can study that way. I think it's easier for me to learn by listening and watching videos than by classroom learning.]

Although there is a difference in their opinions regarding the quality of subtitles on YouTube, the two participants both require subtitles when they learn a language on YouTube. In terms of how he selects videos, Kenneth mentions the following:

Extract 3: When the researcher asked how Kenneth searches for YouTube videos

Researcher: 最初 YouTube 開いたら何て検索するの？まずは

[What do you search for when you first open YouTube?]

Kenneth: YouTube 開いたら、いや、そうですね、なんかチャンネル登録いっぱいして、でそのチャンネルトークのとこ、ニュースとか結構登録してあるんで、気になったの選ぶとか、調べるのだったらなんだろ、なんか例えばこの前気になったのは、韓国の英語の試験がすごい難しいって聞いたんで、例えば、それを Korean English Examination って調べて、出てきた動画をいっぱい、なんか関連動画を見る

[When I open YouTube, I subscribe to a lot of channels. In the channel talk section, I subscribe to a lot of news, so I can choose the ones I'm interested in. I can also look up specific things; for example, the last topic I was interested in was a Korean English exam, which is very difficult. Thus, I looked up Korean English examinations and watched several videos that came up and then watched related videos.]

Analyzing his self-recorded video, Kenneth indeed chose the YouTube video that appeared on the home page, which means he played a video clip without using the search function. As for Tailor, since his self-recorded video started after he selected the video, it is unclear whether he searched for the video clip or not. It may be safe to assume, however, that both Kenneth and Tailor chose a YouTube video they greatly relate to. In Tailor's case, for instance, he watched a video about the seven levels of jazz

harmony created by a YouTuber. Since he belonged to a brass band club and played the flute, the video about jazz harmony interests him. Although both participants have different interests, it is apparent that they watch YouTube videos that resonate with or relate to them.

4.2 Interaction with the Video Clips

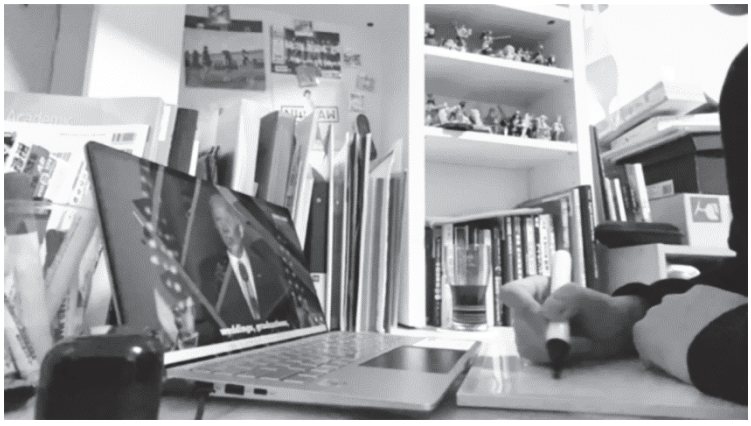
In this section, the self-recorded videos are analyzed. The researcher observes the video that the participants self-recorded at home and asks the participants questions when necessary to interpret a certain action correctly. Table 3 describes the length of the YouTube video that the participants watched, as well as the active–passive time length.

Table 3. Self-Recorded Video

Name	YouTube Video Clip Length	Passive Length	Active Length
Kenneth	15:53[ii]	14:28	1:25
Tailor	13:11[iii]	9:28	3:43

The active length refers to the time that a participant actively interacts with the laptop or other materials, such as a whiteboard or a pen. This entails the participants turning off an automatic translation that YouTube generates, turning up the sound, skipping ads, changing the angle of the screen, and hitting the like button. In other words, the time that the participants just listen to or consume a YouTube video is categorized as passive. The word "passive" does not appropriately describe the students' situation since consuming YouTube videos entails an active cognitive comprehension process, which is difficult to discern from appearance. Nonetheless, in

Figure 1. Using a Whiteboard While Listening



this study, the terms “active” and “passive” are used to distinguish one from the other.

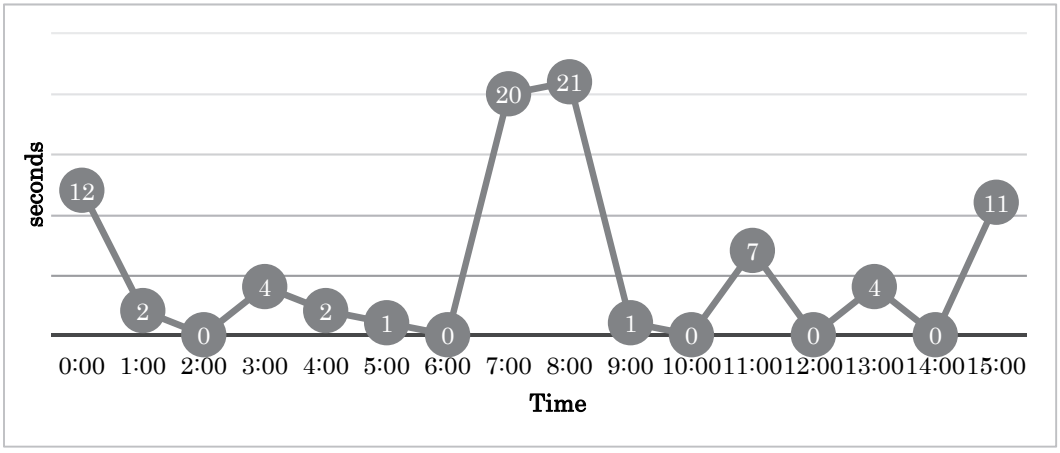
The results in Table 3 confirm that the participants had more passive than active time when they watched a YouTube video. In his active time, Kenneth utilized a whiteboard and a pen to write a word he did not know. Figure 1 shows how he utilized the whiteboard to take down notes while listening.

He wrote the word “folks,” which appeared repeatedly in the YouTube video. After watching YouTube, he practiced pronunciation by actually enunciating the word, as well as searching for images associated with the word. This is the reason his video recording (17:28) is longer than the YouTube video itself (15:53). This learning behavior will be analyzed more carefully in the following section in connection to other websites or apps.

Tailor, on the other hand, did not use any materials, such as a whiteboard, but he sometimes stopped the video and rewound it to understand the content better. Tailor was asked a follow-up question by the researcher, and he said that he stopped the video so he could fully understand what the speaker stated. He also mentioned that the visual aid that YouTube offers helped him greatly.

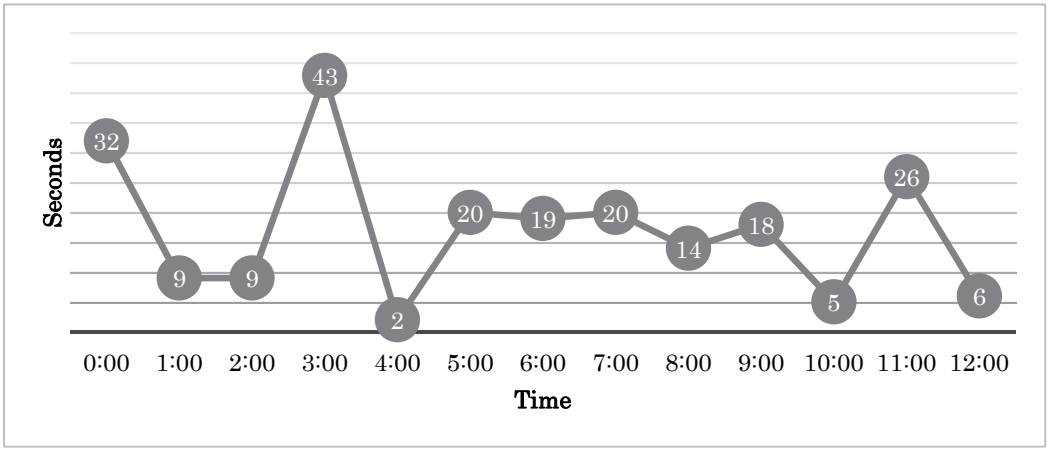
Looking closely at the active time length by minute, there is a certain sequence in Kenneth’s active time. Figure 2 presents his active time by minutes. For instance, from 0:00–0:59, he was active for 12 seconds. Overall, he started with an active status, followed by a passive period from 1:00–6:59, and then there was a bump at the range of 7:00–7:59, where he hit the like button. There was a peak at the range of 8:00–8:59 with 21 seconds, where he interacted with the whiteboard and pen to jot down the word. Finally, he increased his active time to finish the YouTube video.

Figure 2. Active Time Length by Minute – Kenneth’s Case



A somewhat similar sequence was found in Tailor’s active time. Figure 3 describes his active time by minute.

Figure 3. Active Time Length by Minute – Tailor's Case



Although his graph fluctuates more than Kenneth's, at the beginning of and at the end of the video, he tended to be more active, with 32 seconds for the first 1 minute and 26 seconds between 11:00–11:59. Similar to Kenneth's graph, there was a sharp drop after the beginning (1:00–2:59). In his case, as he was distracted by the position of the camera, he constantly changed the position of laptop and the camera, making his active time longer compared with that of Kenneth.

To summarize this section, the participants had more passive time than active time. However, they exhibited a certain sequence of active time at the beginning and ending and a sharp drop after the beginning. It was also revealed that each student has a different way of interacting with a YouTube video, with one using a whiteboard to take down notes while the other rewinded the video clip several times to comprehend the content better.

4.3 Connection with Other Online Services

YouTube is not the only application that the participants utilized. For example, as mentioned earlier, after watching the YouTube video, Kenneth googled the word "folks" and opened a site for an online dictionary to listen to the pronunciation of the word. Then, he typed "Folks Meaning" and "Folks Image" to obtain more information about the word. Figures 4 and 5 show how he interacted with the websites after watching YouTube.

Figure 4. Result of Searching the Meaning of "Folks"

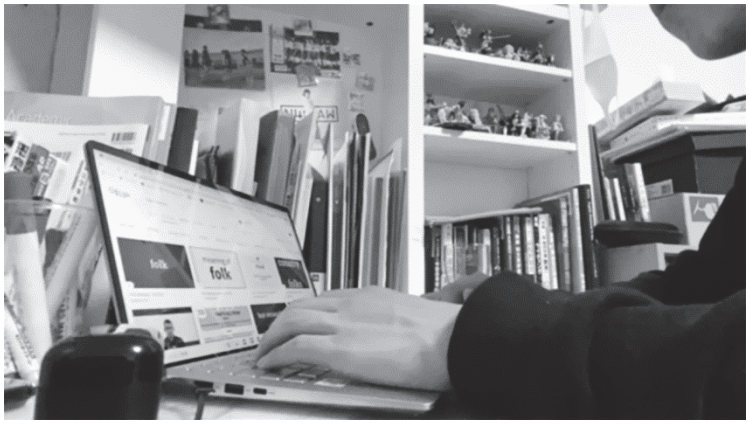
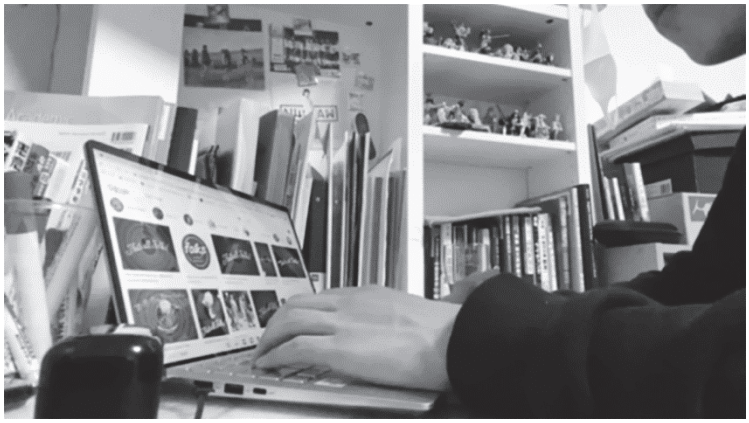


Figure 5. Result of Searching Images of "Folks"



The interview results revealed that Tailor differentiated the use of YouTube and other apps to learn based on what the online platform affords him.

Extract 4: When the researcher asked how he selected YouTube and CAKE
Tailor: 何か物によって YouTube の字幕使うものと CAKE 使う物って分けてますね
[I have separated the use of YouTube subtitles from the use of CAKE, depending on what I study.]

Author:どういう分け方なの？
[How do you separate them?]

Tailor:んー、あ、そう、なんか YouTube 聞いて、あー、なんかこの字幕めちゃくちゃだな、けど内容知りたいなってやつは、その CAKE で調べて、でこれ、

> CAKE でも見れるものと、何か字幕にできるものとできないものがあって、で出来たやつは見てって感じで、まあ、多分なんかこのアプリも万能ではないんですけど、けど、どんな動画でも字幕付けれるわけじゃないですけど、まあ割と付けれるやつは結構正確につけてくれてるので、あったら、勝ちって感じです、なかったらもう、ドンマイって感じです。
> [If you listen to a YouTube video and find that the subtitles are messed up, but you want to know what it's about, you can use CAKE to look it up. You can then watch the ones that you can with CAKE, and for the ones that you can't, well, maybe... The app is not a panacea, and it can't add subtitles to every video. However, the ones that have subtitles are pretty accurate, so if I find one, I am happy. If not, well, that can't be helped.] (Translated by the author)

The results from the two participants demonstrate that they do not merely use YouTube but actively choose an online platform that suits their mode of learning. In Kenneth's case, when he wanted to focus on learning vocabulary, he utilized an online dictionary and images as tools for learning. Tailor's decision to watch YouTube videos to learn a language or not depends on the availability of subtitles on YouTube.

4.4 Summary

Some similarities and differences between the results of the current study and previous studies presented in Section 2 need to be addressed. The current study confirms that the participants' selection of YouTube video clips is highly based on their own preference or interest in the content. The current study also infers that the participants enjoy learning via YouTube. As Tailor stated, "I think it's easier for me to learn by listening and watching videos than by classroom learning." In addition, the importance of subtitles is highlighted when they decide which videos to watch on YouTube. By contrast, while previous studies have focused more on the ambiguity of online and offline dichotomy and how informal learning relates to formal learning, this study's participants did not mention any connection with formal learning. Therefore, their choice of content was freer and more closely related to their interests.

A close analysis of the participants' actual learning behaviors reveals that they were often passive yet still interacted with YouTube videos in an active way. Kenneth's act of pronouncing the word can be a prominent factor for learning at home because he can use his time and space to say whatever words he wants to pronounce. Richards (2015) highlighted the benefit of informal learning and stated that out-of-class activities "allow for flexibility and convenience in learning so that learners can manage their place, mode, and manner of learning" (Richards, 2015, p. 20). Tailor's act of stopping the video and putting it on rewind to understand the content better is

another affordance (Gibson,1977; Gibson,1986; Hammond, 2009) that informal learning offers. He can stop the video whenever he wants, unlike in formal learning, where students are expected to learn together in a designated, limited class time.

A similar sequence of the active–passive time is found between the two participants, although they chose completely different video clips. However, it should be mentioned that this study offers a small amount of data; thus, more research is necessary to determine the active–passive relationship.

The participants used various online services based on what each medium and online service could afford them. It can be inferred that researching one medium alone does not reveal the participants' dynamic and complex learning styles, as they use YouTube at times and other online services at other times. This suggests that holistic research is also needed in the future.

Conclusion

This study analyzed how university students select YouTube videos for learning, how they actually interact with the YouTube videos, and how they maximize learning through a wide variety of online platforms. The data presented in this study are limited and not generalizable. However, the fact that this study was able to specifically describe the students' actual learning and ways of interacting with YouTube, which were not revealed in previous studies, is a significant contribution to this domain.

The present study is meaningful as it reveals how students learn a language at home. The result shows that students learn similarly (i.e., active–passive time sequence, interest-based video selection, importance of subtitles) and differently (i.e., different contents, different learning styles, different environments, different opinions as to the quality of subtitles YouTube offers). It is inferred that teachers and educators need to comprehend students' informal learning and connect it with in-class activities to attain a bigger pedagogic picture.

The finding that YouTube is viewed in relation to other media and that students' evaluations of YouTube differ depending on what it affords them will contribute to understanding the complex aspects of learning. Future research on YouTube's connection with different types of online platforms, as well as with formal learning, needs to be conducted using more holistic data.

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