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## TIKTOK'S INFLUENCE ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AMONG GEN Z

### *Abstract*

This mixed-methods study investigates how TikTok aids Gen Z EFL learners in Kazakhstan to improve their English language proficiency and develop intercultural communication competence (ICC). Using survey data (n=50), semi-structured interviews (n=10), and content analysis of 30 TikTok videos, the study finds important themes such as digital engagement, pragmatic learning, cultural openness, and language variance. The levels of critical thinking and adaptive communication differed by level of proficiency, despite the participants' considerable knowledge of cultural diversity and worldwide English usage. According to the research, TikTok serves as a casual but effective platform for language learning and cross-cultural inquiry.

**Keywords:** *TikTok, intercultural communication competence, Gen Z, EFL learners, digital learning, pragmatic competence, informal language acquisition, social media in education*

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## TIKTOK-ТЫҢ Z БУЫНЫ АРАСЫНДА АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІН ҮЙРЕНУ ЖӘНЕ МӘДЕНИЕТАРАЛЫҚ КОММУНИКАЦИЯҒА ЫҚПАЛЫ

### *Аңдатпа*

Бұл мақала TikTok платформасының Қазақстандағы Z буынына жататын ағылшын тілін шет тілі ретінде үйренушілерге тілдік дағдыларын жетілдіруге және мәдениетаралық коммуникация құзыреттілігін (ICC) дамытуға қалай көмектесетінін қарастырады. Сауалнама деректері (n=50), жартылай құрылымдалған сұхбаттар (n=10) және TikTok-тағы 30 бейнежазбаға жүргізілген мазмұндық талдау негізінде зерттеу цифрлық белсенділік, прагматикалық үйрену, мәдени ашықтық және тілдік әртүрлілік сияқты маңызды тақырыптарды анықтады. Қатысушылардың мәдени әртүрлілік пен жаһандық ағылшын тілін қолдану туралы білімі жоғары болғанымен, сыни ойлау мен бейімделген коммуникация деңгейлері тіл меңгеру деңгейіне байланысты өзгерді. Зерттеу нәтижелері TikTok-тың тіл үйрену мен мәдениетаралық зерттеулер үшін бейресми, бірақ тиімді алаң екенін көрсетеді.

**Кілт сөздер:** *TikTok, мәдениетаралық коммуникация құзыреттілігі, Z буыны, ағылшын тілі үйренушілері, цифрлық оқыту, прагматикалық құзыреттілік, бейресми тіл үйрену, білім берудегі әлеуметтік медиа*

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## ВЛИЯНИЕ ТИКТОК НА МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНУЮ КОММУНИКАЦИЮ И ИЗУЧЕНИЕ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА СРЕДИ ПОКОЛЕНИЯ Z

### Аннотация

Данное исследование с использованием смешанных методов изучает, как платформа TikTok способствует развитию английской языковой компетенции и межкультурной коммуникации (ИСС) среди изучающих английский язык как иностранный из поколения Z в Казахстане. На основе данных опроса (n=50), полуструктурированных интервью (n=10) и контент-анализа 30 видеороликов TikTok были выявлены ключевые темы: цифровая вовлеченность, прагматическое обучение, культурная открытость и языковое разнообразие. Несмотря на высокий уровень знаний участников о культурном многообразии и глобальном использовании английского языка, уровень критического мышления и адаптивной коммуникации варьировался в зависимости от уровня владения языком. Результаты показывают, что TikTok является неформальной, но эффективной платформой для изучения языка и межкультурного взаимодействия.

**Ключевые слова:** TikTok, межкультурная коммуникация, поколение Z, изучающие английский язык, цифровое обучение, прагматическая компетенция, неформальное изучение языка, социальные медиа в образовании

### Introduction

In the age of technology, social media platforms have emerged as effective instruments for informal learning, particularly among Generation Z. Among different social media platforms and applications, TikTok, with over one billion active users globally, has emerged as a space where users engage with language and culture simultaneously. With its short-form films and algorithm-driven content, TikTok exposes users to diverse cultural expressions and authentic language use. TikTok gives English language learners a chance to hear native speakers, discover idiomatic expressions, and see how individuals from other cultures communicate, offering a dynamic environment for language acquisition and cultural exchange. A systematic review by Jantan et al. (2024) highlights TikTok's role in enhancing speaking and listening skills through engaging, authentic content while the mixed-method study conducted by Mohammed et al. (2025) found that 70% of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners reported improved intercultural understanding through the platform, which fosters cultural exchange and digital identity formation—key components of intercultural communication competence (ICC).

Intercultural communication competence refers to the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately across cultural contexts. Byram (1997) outlines five core dimensions of ICC: attitudes, knowledge, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery and interaction, and critical cultural awareness. Complementing this, Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) further describes a progression from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, highlighting the psychological stages of intercultural sensitivity. These theoretical models provide a foundation for examining how digital platforms—particularly TikTok—influence ICC development among Gen Z English as EFL learners. Building on this potential, this study investigates how TikTok influences the development of ICC in Gen Z EFL learners, focusing on digital identity formation, cultural exposure, and peer interaction.

### Methods

**Research design** This study employed a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of Gen Z EFL learners' experiences in developing ICC and enhancing English language skills through Tiktok. The research methodology integrated three complementary approaches: (1) content analysis of TikTok videos commonly accessed by EFL learners to examine linguistic and cultural features; (2) online survey to collect broad insights into learners' usage patterns, perceived benefits, and intercultural awareness; and (3) semi-structured interviews with selected participants to explore personal narratives, digital identity formation, and intercultural engagement.

#### **Data collection**

50 participants completed a questionnaire based on Byram's ICC model to assess their intercultural attitudes, knowledge, and skills. Researchers analyzed 30 TikTok videos tagged with #LearnEnglish, #CultureTalk, and #LanguageExchange to identify cultural and linguistic features. 10 participants were selected for follow-up interviews to explore their perceptions of TikTok's role in their intercultural and linguistic development.

**Data Analysis** Survey responses were systematically coded and grouped based on Byram's ICC dimensions to identify trends in learners' intercultural competence. The content analysis examined TikTok videos for recurring themes, including cultural representation, language use, and patterns of user interaction. Interview transcripts underwent thematic coding to uncover consistent patterns in participants' experiences, particularly regarding digital identity, cultural exposure, and peer engagement.

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
CO	Cultural Openness – Curiosity or respect toward other cultures
CL	Cultural Learning – Specific cultural knowledge gained
LV	Language Variation – Observations of English usage across cultures
PL	Pragmatic Learning – Acquisition of idioms, slang, informal expressions
II	Intercultural Interaction – Engagement with users from other cultures
AC	Adaptive Communication – Adjusting speech or behavior for cultural context
SA	Stereotype Awareness – Recognition or critique of cultural stereotypes
BR	Barrier Reduction – Belief that TikTok promotes intercultural understanding
CG	Confidence Growth – Increased comfort or fluency in using English
CP	Content Preference – Types of TikTok content found useful for learning

Table 1. Coding Categories for TikTok Content Analysis Based on ICC Framework

*This table outlines the codes used to analyze interview responses and TikTok content, based on Byram's ICC model and Bennett's DMIS.*

#### **Results**

A total of 50 Gen Z EFL learners participated in the survey, with the majority from Kazakhstan (n=40), followed by Russia (n=5) and other countries (n=5). Most were aged 19–21 and identified as intermediate or advanced English users. TikTok usage was high, with over 75% using the app daily or several times a week.

Overall, participants demonstrated strong intercultural openness and curiosity, with an average score of 4.1 across items related to attitudes toward other cultures. Cultural knowledge was also high, averaging 4.2, as respondents frequently noted differences in how English is used across regions and cultures. Interaction and adaptation skills were moderately strong, with an average score of 3.9, particularly among advanced learners who reported engaging with users from other cultural backgrounds and adjusting their communication styles accordingly. Critical cultural awareness scored slightly lower at 3.7, with participants from Brazil, Egypt, and Spain showing greater sensitivity to stereotypes and cultural nuance than those from Kazakhstan and Russia. TikTok was widely recognized as a valuable tool for informal English learning. Participants reported improved vocabulary, exposure to diverse accents, and increased motivation to use English in everyday contexts, with an average score of 4.3 across related items. Preferred content included slang explanations, cultural comparisons, and humorous sketches, which were seen as both engaging and educational.

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Kazakhstan (n=40)</b>	<b>Russia (n=5)</b>	<b>Other Countries (n=5)</b>	<b>Overall Average</b>
ICC Attitudes	4.0	3.8	4.4	4.1
Cultural Knowledge	4.1	4.0	4.6	4.2
ICC Skills (Interaction & Adaptation)	3.8	3.7	4.3	3.9
Critical Cultural Awareness	3.6	3.5	4.0	3.7
TikTok & English Learning	4.3	4.1	4.5	4.3

**Table 2. Average Scores by Theme and Region (n = 50)**

Ten Gen Z English language learners from Kazakhstan, ages 16 to 24, representing beginner, intermediate, and advanced proficiency levels, participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews investigated the ways in which TikTok affects the development of language skills in English and ICC. TikTok was regularly cited by participants as a source of cultural knowledge, including exposure to international customs, humor, and linguistic diversity. The majority stated they were open to different cultures and characterized TikTok as a platform that encourages inquiry and cross-cultural understanding. Discovering American slang, British sarcasm, and Nigerian weddings were a few examples that improved their comprehension of language and context. Intercultural interaction was common, with participants engaging in duets, comments, and live streams using English. Seven out of ten described adjusting their communication style to accommodate cultural differences, such as simplifying language or using emojis. All participants had encountered culturally insensitive or stereotypical content; responses ranged from reporting and commenting to private reflection. Six participants believed TikTok helps reduce cultural barriers, while others noted that stereotypes still persist.

These findings suggest that TikTok serves as a dynamic space for intercultural engagement and informal language development among Kazakh youth. While ICC features such as cultural learning and pragmatic competence were consistently strong, the depth of critical reflection and adaptive communication varied by proficiency level.

<b>Code</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
CO	Cultural Openness	9
CL	Cultural Learning	10
LV	Language Variation	10
PL	Pragmatic Learning	10
II	Intercultural Interaction	10
AC	Adaptive Communication	7
SA	Stereotype Awareness	10
BR	Barrier Reduction	6
CG	Confidence Growth	1
CP	Content Preference	10

Table 3. Frequency of Codes Across Interviews (n = 10)

Based on its applicability to cross-cultural communication and English language acquisition, a total of thirty TikTok videos were selected for content analysis. Videos were chosen using purposive sampling and analyzed using a qualitative coding framework aligned with Byram’s ICC model and pragmatic language features. The videos came in a variety of formats, such as comical jokes, slang explanations, dialect challenges, and cultural comparisons. The creators were from different backgrounds, including South Korea, Nigeria, The United Kingdom and the United States. Thematic coding revealed consistent patterns across the dataset. Most videos demonstrated cultural openness and promoted cultural learning by showcasing traditions, stereotypes, and humor from different regions. Language variation was prominent, with creators highlighting differences in pronunciation, idioms, and informal expressions. Pragmatic learning was evident in 26 out of 30 videos, often through storytelling, role-play, or reaction formats. Intercultural interaction was less direct but present in comment sections and duets. Adaptive communication strategies—such as code-switching, simplified speech, and emoji use—were observed in 18 videos. Stereotype awareness was addressed in 21 videos, often through satire or critique. Content preference leaned heavily toward humor and relatable scenarios, which appeared to enhance engagement and retention.

<b>Code</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
CO	Cultural Openness	28
CL	Cultural Learning	27

LV	Language Variation	30
PL	Pragmatic Learning	26
II	Intercultural Interaction	19
AC	Adaptive Communication	18
SA	Stereotype Awareness	21
BR	Barrier Reduction	15
CP	Content Preference	30

Table 4. Frequency of ICC Features in TikTok Videos (n = 30)

These results indicate that informal English learning and ICC development are actively supported by TikTok content. The videos encourage cultural understanding, pragmatic skill, and motivation through captivating, creator-driven narratives

### Discussion

According to this study, TikTok has a significant impact on Gen Z EFL learners in Kazakhstan's informal English learning and intercultural communication competence (ICC). Three recurring themes in the data from surveys, interviews, and content analysis included digital engagement, pragmatic learning, and cultural openness.

The results of the survey demonstrated a high level of knowledge of linguistic variance and positive sentiments toward cultural diversity. The pragmatic growth of the participants was supported by the regular exposure to idioms, dialects, and slang. Critical cultural awareness scores, on the other hand, were marginally lower, suggesting that there was little reflection on cultural bias or preconceptions. Data from interviews supported these conclusions. Students characterized TikTok as a platform for casual communication and cultural exploration. Although just one individual specifically mentioned feeling more confident when using English, several changed their communication techniques to interact with individuals from other backgrounds. This suggests that while exposure is high, perceived gains in fluency may vary.

Content analysis confirmed that TikTok videos often promote cultural learning and language variation through humor, storytelling, and relatable scenarios. Although there was less obvious direct cross-cultural interaction, authors regularly addressed stereotypes and employed adaptive techniques like simplified speech and code-switching.

Taken together, these findings highlight TikTok's potential as a supplementary tool for developing ICC and enhancing English language skills. However, the depth of intercultural reflection and the consistency of adaptive communication strategies may depend on learners' proficiency levels and digital literacy. Future research could explore how guided use of TikTok—through structured classroom activities or reflective prompts—might deepen intercultural awareness and support more intentional language development.

### Conclusion

To summarize, this study shows that TikTok supports Gen Z EFL learners in Kazakhstan by promoting cultural awareness, exposure to diverse English use, and informal language practice. Whereas participants showed strong ICC traits including pragmatics and cultural learning, there were differences in deeper contemplation and adaptive communication. Gen Z's digital habits are in line with TikTok's entertaining structure, and its educational potential could be increased with supervised classroom use.

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