

CLICK AND WATCH YOUTUBE VIDEOS FOR SPELLING SUPPORT IN MALAYSIAN PRIMARY ESL CLASSROOMS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY

Siti Husniyah Hasnan¹, Salizawati Omar¹, Aznan Che Ahmad^{2*}

¹Sekolah Kebangsaan Permatang To' Kandu, Penang, Malaysia

²Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Negara Brunei Darussalam

*Corresponding author: aznan.ahmad@ubd.edu.bn

Abstract: This qualitative case study explores how YouTube videos can support spelling development among primary ESL pupils in Malaysia. Four Year 3 pupils were observed over three weeks while engaging with short, topic-based YouTube videos, followed by interviews in the fourth week. Findings suggest that YouTube increased interest and made spelling practice more enjoyable. Pupils with stronger English foundations demonstrated improved confidence, wider vocabulary, and greater accuracy, while those with lower proficiency enjoyed the videos but required scaffolding to benefit fully. Thematic analysis highlighted two key insights: (i) pupils were more motivated when videos were integrated into lessons, and (ii) perceptions of YouTube varied depending on proficiency. Pedagogically, YouTube is most effective when videos are short, age-appropriate, and paired with guided practice such as spelling drills or collaborative writing tasks. For weaker learners, scaffolding strategies including pre-teaching vocabulary, using subtitles, or slowing playback are essential. Overall, YouTube can serve as a valuable supplementary tool for spelling instruction, provided teacher guidance ensures inclusivity and accuracy.

Keywords: ESL learners, spelling, YouTube, classroom engagement, digital learning for consistency and precision.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most essential skills in language acquisition, yet it is often the most difficult to master for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). Unlike speaking and listening, which rely heavily on oral communication, writing requires learners to integrate multiple sub-skills such as grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling. Among these, spelling is particularly critical because it directly affects clarity and meaning in written communication. A misspelled word can distort the intended message, reduce comprehension, and undermine confidence. For young ESL pupils, spelling errors are not merely technical mistakes; they represent barriers to effective communication and academic success.

In Malaysia, English is taught as a second language from the earliest years of primary education. However, pupils often struggle with spelling due to differences between their native phonetic systems and English orthography. This challenge is compounded by the growing influence of digital communication, where speed and convenience often take precedence over accuracy. At the same time, digital platforms such as YouTube have become integral to children's daily lives, offering opportunities to integrate familiar technologies into classroom learning.

This study investigates how YouTube videos can be used to support spelling practice in writing among primary ESL pupils, focusing on their engagement, confidence, and perceptions of digital learning. By

examining the experiences of Year 3 pupils in Malaysia, the research aims to provide insights into how digital tools can be thoughtfully integrated into classroom practice to make spelling instruction more engaging, accessible, and effective.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Language proficiency is measured across speaking, listening, reading, and writing, with writing often considered the most complex skill. For ESL learners, spelling is foundational, as errors compromise clarity and confidence (Farooq, Uzair, & Wahid, 2021). In Malaysia, pupils are introduced to English from Standard One, yet many continue to struggle with spelling due to differences between Malay phonetics and English orthography. Persistent errors can erode motivation and self-esteem, particularly in inclusive classrooms where diverse learners must be supported equitably.

Digital platforms, especially YouTube, have emerged as popular tools for language learning. Lim and Tan (2022) report that 83% of pupils use YouTube to improve their English, making it the most widely adopted social media platform for educational purposes. Its accessibility and multimodal features make it an attractive supplement to classroom teaching. However, most existing research has focused on secondary or tertiary learners, leaving a gap in empirical studies on primary-level ESL pupils.

This study addresses that gap by examining how YouTube videos can enhance spelling in writing among young learners in Malaysia. By focusing on engagement, confidence, and perceptions of digital learning, the research contributes to understanding how familiar technologies can be integrated into classroom practice to support language development.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Spelling difficulties remain a significant barrier to language acquisition among primary ESL pupils. Incorrect spelling undermines reading fluency, writing accuracy, and overall communication skills. More critically, persistent errors can erode pupils' confidence and motivation, discouraging them from engaging fully with English learning. For young learners, these challenges are not simply technical issues but obstacles to academic success and effective self-expression.

The growing influence of digital communication further complicates the problem. Pupils often prioritize speed and convenience when interacting online, which reduces attention to spelling and grammar (Lipschultz, 2020). Informal digital practices, while familiar and engaging, may weaken the discipline required for accurate writing in formal contexts (Healy & Mulholland, 2019). As a result, many pupils struggle to balance the immediacy of digital communication with the precision expected in academic writing.

While platforms such as YouTube are widely used, their effectiveness depends on careful integration. EFLCafe (2024) cautions that video content must be embedded within structured pedagogy to avoid superficial engagement. This underscores the need to investigate how YouTube can be adapted for younger pupils, particularly in spelling instruction where accuracy and confidence are critical.

Given YouTube's popularity among children and its widespread use as an informal learning tool, it offers considerable potential as a pedagogical resource. Its multimodal format, combining visual, auditory, and textual input, can make spelling practice more engaging and accessible. However, empirical evidence on its effectiveness in improving spelling at the primary level remains limited. Most existing studies focus on older learners, leaving a gap in understanding how younger pupils perceive and benefit from such tools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A growing body of research has examined the role of digital platforms in supporting English language learning, with YouTube emerging as one of the most widely studied tools. Its accessibility, multimodal features, and popularity among learners are consistently highlighted as strengths for enhancing engagement and retention (Lim & Tan, 2022; Osman, Elhassan, & Shoufan, 2022). At the tertiary level, Aprianto (2023) found that students use YouTube strategically to improve vocabulary and pronunciation, while Al-Mubireek (2025) reported measurable gains in spelling and writing accuracy. These findings reinforce YouTube's potential but also reveal a critical gap: most studies have focused on older learners, leaving primary-level spelling development underexplored.

YouTube in ESL Learning

YouTube's multimodal input—visual, auditory, and textual—supports comprehension and retention. Studies show that learners benefit from repeated exposure to spelling patterns and vocabulary through video content (Osman et al., 2022). However, most evidence comes from secondary or tertiary contexts, underscoring the need for research at the primary level.

Spelling and Writing Challenges in ESL

Spelling remains a persistent challenge for ESL learners. Errors compromise clarity, reduce confidence, and hinder motivation (Farooq, Uzair, & Wahid, 2021). In Malaysia, differences between Malay phonetics and English orthography exacerbate these difficulties. Inclusive classrooms further highlight the need for strategies that support diverse learners equitably.

Benefits and Limitations of Digital Pedagogy

Digital platforms increase motivation and provide flexible access to content, but scholars caution against over-reliance. Informal digital practices may weaken attention to accuracy (Healy & Mulholland, 2019), and EFLCafe (2024) stresses that video content must be embedded within structured pedagogy to avoid superficial engagement. Lipschultz (2020) similarly notes that speed and convenience in social media often overshadow precision. These perspectives highlight the importance of teacher guidance and scaffolding.

Summary

The literature demonstrates that YouTube and other digital platforms hold promise for enhancing ESL learning, particularly through multimodal engagement. However, most studies have focused on older learners,

leaving primary-level spelling development underexplored. Scholars also caution that digital tools must be integrated purposefully, with scaffolding and teacher guidance to ensure inclusivity and accuracy. This study therefore addresses a clear gap by investigating how YouTube videos can support spelling practice among Malaysian primary pupils.

OBJECTIVES

This study was guided by two central objectives:

- i. To examine how YouTube videos help primary ESL pupils improve their spelling in writing.

This objective focused on observing pupils' engagement with video-based activities to determine whether multimodal input could enhance spelling accuracy, vocabulary acquisition, and overall confidence in written communication.

- ii. To explore pupils' perceptions of YouTube videos as a tool for supporting spelling practice.

This objective emphasized understanding learners' attitudes and experiences, recognizing that perceptions often shape motivation, willingness to participate, and the overall effectiveness of instructional strategies.

Together, these objectives reflect the dual focus of the research: assessing the practical impact of YouTube on spelling development and uncovering the subjective experiences of pupils as they navigate digital learning environments.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative case study design to capture the lived experiences of pupils in their natural classroom environment. A case study approach was chosen because it allows for rich, contextualised insights rather than broad generalisations, which is appropriate for exploratory research on young learners. As Starman (2013) notes, case studies are particularly effective when the aim is to investigate a phenomenon in detail and within its authentic setting. In this study, the phenomenon under investigation was the use of YouTube videos to support spelling practice in writing among primary ESL pupils.

The research sample consisted of four Year 3 pupils from a primary school in Penang Island, Malaysia. The pupils were nine years old, with two male and two female participants. They were selected through convenience sampling, as they had already been exposed to basic writing skills and were familiar with social media platforms such as YouTube. While the small sample size limits generalizability, it is appropriate for in-depth qualitative case analysis, enabling close observation of individual differences and responses. Similar micro-case studies in language education have demonstrated the value of small samples for uncovering nuanced learner experiences.

Two primary instruments were employed: structured observations and semi-structured interviews. The observation rubric, adapted from Haron (2023), focused on dimensions of learning engagement including pupils'

interest, visual memory, motivation, confidence, vocabulary usage, and peer interaction. Each observation session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, depending on the class timetable, and was conducted during English lessons over three consecutive weeks. The videos selected were short, age-appropriate, and aligned with topics from the Year 3 English textbook to ensure contextual relevance. Selection criteria included clarity of pronunciation, visual support for spelling, and suitability for nine-year-old learners.

In the fourth week, individual interviews were conducted with each pupil to explore perceptions of YouTube as a spelling tool. Interviews lasted between 15 and 25 minutes and were guided by structured questions designed to elicit attitudes, challenges, and perceived benefits. Questions included prompts such as “How do the videos help you with spelling?” and “What do you find difficult when watching the videos?” Interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim.

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six steps: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Codes were derived inductively from the transcripts and observation notes, ensuring that themes reflected pupils’ actual experiences rather than preconceived categories. To enhance trustworthiness, triangulation was achieved by comparing observation data with interview responses. Peer debriefing was conducted with a fellow researcher to reduce bias in coding, and reflective notes were maintained throughout the process.

Ethical considerations were observed at all stages. Pupils and their guardians were informed of the purpose of the study, consent was obtained, and confidentiality was assured. No personal data beyond the scope of the study was disclosed.

FINDINGS

The observations and interviews revealed a spectrum of experiences among the four Year 3 pupils, highlighting both the promise and the challenges of using YouTube videos to support spelling practice in writing. Each pupil’s engagement, confidence, and vocabulary development varied, offering nuanced insights into how digital tools interact with individual learner profiles.

Pupil A: Active Engagement and Growing Confidence

Pupil A demonstrated consistently high levels of engagement throughout the lessons. When the videos were played, this pupil leaned forward, repeated words aloud, and eagerly joined group discussions. The observation rubric noted that Pupil A “was engaged in the activity and showed active interest towards the videos.” In the interview, the pupil explained: *“I like the videos because they show me how to spell. I can see the letters and hear the words, so it is easier.”*

This behaviour indicates heightened cognitive engagement, consistent with dual coding theory, which suggests that information presented through both visual and auditory channels enhances retention. Pupil A’s willingness to volunteer answers and interact with peers further reflects Vygotsky’s emphasis on social collaboration as a driver of learning.

Pupil B: Steady Improvement and Positive Attitude

Pupil B also responded positively, though with a more gradual trajectory. Initially, this pupil displayed moderate confidence, but over the three weeks vocabulary expanded and spelling accuracy improved. The rubric noted that Pupil B “showed effort and desire to improve from time to time.” In the interview, the pupil remarked: *“Sometimes I forget the spelling, but the video helps me to remember. I like when the teacher asks us to write after watching.”*

This response highlights the importance of pairing video content with guided practice. The combination of multimodal input and teacher-led reinforcement supported steady progress, illustrating how scaffolding can bridge the gap between passive viewing and active application.

Pupil C: Passive Participation and Nervousness

In contrast, Pupil C was noticeably passive during the sessions. The rubric recorded that this pupil “was quite passive and did not really participate in the activity.” During group discussions, Pupil C hesitated to contribute and often avoided eye contact. In the interview, the pupil admitted: *“I like watching, but sometimes I don’t understand the words. I feel shy to say them.”*

This behaviour suggests limited comprehension and low confidence, consistent with research on language anxiety among ESL learners. While YouTube captured initial interest, the pace and unfamiliar vocabulary created barriers. Pupil C’s nervousness indicates the need for scaffolding strategies such as simplified explanations, repeated exposure, or subtitles to reduce cognitive load.

Pupil D: Minimal Engagement and Difficulty with Vocabulary

Pupil D struggled the most, showing minimal engagement and difficulty with new vocabulary. The rubric noted that this pupil “was not able to pay attention when the YouTube videos were played” and “had trouble expressing themselves.” In the interview, Pupil D stated: *“The videos are fast. I don’t know the words, so I just listen.”*

This finding highlights a key limitation: without teacher intervention, pupils with lower proficiency may find video content overwhelming. Pupil D’s experience reflects cognitive overload, where the pace and density of input exceed processing capacity. Differentiated instruction is therefore essential to ensure weaker learners are not excluded from the benefits of digital tools.

Cross-case Insights

Across the four pupils, two key themes emerged. First, YouTube videos increased motivation and made spelling practice more enjoyable. Pupils A and B explicitly linked their enjoyment of the videos to improved confidence and spelling accuracy. Second, perceptions of YouTube varied depending on proficiency and comfort with English. Pupils C and D enjoyed watching but struggled to translate the content into improved spelling, reflecting the importance of tailoring digital tools to individual learner needs.

Comparative Table

Table 1 shows a clear comparative view of each pupil's profile, engagement, confidence, outcomes, and challenges.

Table 1

Pupil Profiles and Outcomes

Pupil	Profile	Engagement	Confidence	Vocabulary/Spelling Outcomes	Challenges
Pupil A	Stronger English foundation	Highly engaged	Growing confidence	Improved spelling accuracy, wider vocabulary	Minimal challenges; benefited most from multimodal input
Pupil B	Moderate proficiency	Steady engagement, effort increased over time	Positive attitude, gradual confidence growth	Vocabulary expanded, spelling accuracy improved with guided practice	Needed teacher reinforcement to sustain progress
Pupil C	Lower proficiency, shy	Passive participation but hesitant in group work	Nervous	Limited spelling improvement due to comprehension gaps	Required scaffolding (simplified explanations, repeated exposure)
Pupil D	Weakest proficiency	Minimal engagement, distracted during videos	Low confidence, struggled to express ideas	Difficulty with new vocabulary, little spelling improvement	Overwhelmed by video pace; needed differentiated support

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, the findings provide clear evidence that YouTube videos can both support and challenge spelling development among primary ESL pupils. In relation to the first objective, pupils with stronger English foundations (A and B) demonstrated improved spelling accuracy, vocabulary growth, and greater confidence, showing that multimodal input can enhance writing skills. In relation to the second objective, pupils' perceptions varied: while some found the videos motivating and helpful, others struggled with comprehension and pace, revealing that attitudes toward YouTube are shaped by proficiency levels and comfort with English. These insights confirm that YouTube has the potential to make spelling practice more engaging and meaningful, but its effectiveness depends on careful integration, teacher guidance, and sensitivity to individual learner needs.

DISCUSSION

The findings underscore YouTube's potential as a supplementary tool for spelling instruction in primary ESL classrooms. Pupils A and B, with stronger English foundations, showed improved confidence, vocabulary growth, and spelling accuracy, aligning with dual coding theory, which emphasizes retention through multimodal input (Osman, Elhassan, & Shoufan, 2022). Their active participation also reflects constructivist principles and Vygotsky's emphasis on social collaboration.

In contrast, Pupils C and D struggled with comprehension and confidence, highlighting the risk of cognitive overload when video pace and vocabulary exceed learners' processing capacity. This supports Healy

and Mulholland's (2019) caution that excessive reliance on digital media can undermine accuracy. Their experiences reinforce the need for scaffolding strategies such as pre-teaching vocabulary, subtitles, or slowed playback to ensure inclusivity.

Overall, the study confirms that YouTube can make spelling practice more engaging and meaningful, but effectiveness depends on careful integration, teacher guidance, and differentiated support. Stronger learners benefit directly from multimodal input, while weaker learners require structured scaffolding to translate enjoyment into measurable progress.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study suggest several important implications for classroom practice. First, teachers must carefully curate the YouTube videos they use. Short, age-appropriate, and topic-relevant materials are most effective, as longer or complex videos risk overwhelming younger learners and reducing comprehension. By selecting concise and focused content, teachers can maximize engagement and ensure pupils remain attentive throughout the lesson.

Equally important is the integration of video content with guided practice. Pupils benefited most when videos were paired with spelling drills, writing exercises, or collaborative group work. This combination of multimodal input and active application helps learners move beyond passive viewing, reinforcing spelling patterns and vocabulary through practice. Guided activities also provide opportunities for teachers to monitor progress, correct errors, and encourage pupils to apply what they have learned in meaningful contexts.

Differentiated support is essential, particularly for pupils with lower proficiency. These learners often struggled to keep pace with the videos, highlighting the need for scaffolding strategies such as pre-teaching vocabulary, simplified explanations, subtitles, or repeated playback. Such approaches align with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, where structured support bridges the gap between current ability and potential growth.

Collaborative learning also emerged as a valuable strategy. Pupils who engaged in peer discussions were more confident and willing to experiment with new vocabulary and spelling patterns. Collaborative activities foster a supportive environment where learners can share strategies, clarify misunderstandings, and build confidence through social interaction. This reflects the social dimension of learning, where peer collaboration amplifies the benefits of digital tools like YouTube.

Finally, the study highlights the importance of balancing digital engagement with traditional literacy practices. While YouTube can make spelling practice more enjoyable, it should complement rather than replace structured instruction in spelling rules, phonics, and writing conventions. A blended approach ensures that pupils develop both the motivation to learn, and the discipline required for accuracy, making spelling instruction both engaging and effective.

Broader Debates in Digital Pedagogy

The findings of this study contribute to wider discussions about the role of digital tools in language education. YouTube, as one of the most accessible platforms among children, offers clear advantages in terms

of motivation, multimodal input, and familiarity. Its ability to combine visual, auditory, and textual elements resonates with contemporary theories of multimodal learning, which argue that information presented through multiple channels enhances comprehension and retention (Osman, Elhassan, & Shoufan, 2022).

At the same time, the study highlights the importance of thoughtful integration. Digital tools should not be viewed as replacements for traditional methods but as complementary resources. When used purposefully, YouTube can transform spelling practice from a repetitive task into an engaging activity that sparks curiosity and reduces anxiety. This reflects broader debates in digital pedagogy, where scholars argue that technology is most effective when embedded within structured instructional design rather than used in isolation (Lim & Tan, 2022).

Caution is warranted, however. Over-reliance on digital platforms may lead to distraction or superficial engagement, particularly among younger learners who require discipline and structured guidance to develop literacy skills. Healy and Mulholland (2019) warn that informal digital practices can weaken attention to accuracy, a concern echoed in this study's findings for pupils with lower proficiency. The challenge for educators is therefore to balance digital engagement with traditional literacy practices, ensuring that pupils develop both motivation and precision.

This study also raises questions about equity and access. While YouTube is widely available, not all pupils may have equal opportunities to use it outside the classroom. Teachers must consider how digital tools intersect with issues of accessibility, socio-economic background, and parental support. These debates remind us that technology is not a neutral solution but a pedagogical choice that requires careful consideration of context.

In summary, YouTube exemplifies both the promise and the complexity of digital pedagogy in ESL education. It can enhance motivation and engagement, but its effectiveness depends on teacher guidance, scaffolding, and balanced integration with traditional methods. By situating this study within wider debates, it becomes clear that digital tools like YouTube are most valuable when used as part of a holistic approach to language learning that respects both opportunities and limitations.

CONCLUSION

This study explored how YouTube videos can support spelling development among Malaysian primary ESL pupils. The findings show that YouTube increased motivation and made spelling practice more enjoyable, particularly for pupils with stronger English foundations who demonstrated improved confidence, vocabulary growth, and spelling accuracy. At the same time, weaker learners enjoyed the videos but struggled with comprehension and pace, highlighting the need for scaffolding strategies such as pre-teaching vocabulary, subtitles, or slowed playback.

The results confirm that YouTube has potential as a supplementary tool for spelling instruction, but its effectiveness depends on careful integration with guided practice and teacher support. Multimodal input can enhance retention and engagement, yet pupils benefit most when video content is paired with structured activities that reinforce spelling patterns and provide opportunities for collaboration.

Pedagogically, the study emphasizes the importance of curated content, differentiated support, and a blended approach that balances digital engagement with traditional literacy practices. By situating these findings within broader debates on digital pedagogy, the research demonstrates that YouTube is not a replacement for conventional methods but a valuable complement that can transform spelling practice into a more engaging and meaningful experience.

Future research should expand the sample size and explore long-term impacts to strengthen generalizability. Investigating how YouTube can be integrated across different proficiency levels and classroom contexts will provide deeper insights into its role in inclusive education. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing evidence that familiar digital tools, when thoughtfully applied, can enhance language learning and support the development of essential skills such as spelling among young ESL learners.

ORCID

Siti Husniyah Hasnan: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6997-5258>

Salizawati Omar: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9338-4258>

Aznan Che Ahmad: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3744-0091>

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