



Learning English Across Digital and Social Spaces: Exploring EFL Students' Language Learning Experiences

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Abstract

Background: Digital and social spaces have increasingly expanded opportunities for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners to encounter and use English beyond formal classroom settings. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Discord, and Netflix provide access to authentic language input and opportunities for social interaction, yet students' actual learning experiences across these spaces remain diverse and largely self-directed.

Aim: This study aims to explore how EFL students experience English language learning across digital and social spaces, with particular attention to their patterns of engagement, motivations, learning strategies, challenges, and perceived benefits.

Method: A qualitative research design was employed using semi-structured interviews with twelve EFL students. The interview data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns across participants' experiences. The analysis focused on the digital platforms used, learning activities, motivations, strategies, challenges, and perceived learning outcomes.

Results: The findings revealed five overarching themes: (1) multimodal digital engagement, with YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok serving as prominent spaces for English exposure; (2) intrinsically and incidentally driven motivation, particularly through entertainment, social interaction, and personal interests; (3) active and self-directed learning strategies, including repetition, vocabulary searching, contextual guessing, shadowing, and social negotiation; (4) linguistic, psychological, and behavioral challenges, particularly difficulties with fast speech, slang, unfamiliar vocabulary, accents, and fear of making mistakes; and (5) multifaceted perceived benefits, including improvements in listening, vocabulary, comprehension, pronunciation, speaking confidence, grammar awareness, and writing practice.

Conclusion: EFL students' English learning experiences in digital and social spaces extend beyond passive exposure to English content. These environments function as informal learning ecologies in which learners combine authentic input, social interaction, personal interests, and self-directed strategies. However, the effectiveness of such learning depends on learners' ability to actively engage with digital content and overcome linguistic and affective barriers. The findings highlight the potential of digital and social spaces as complementary environments for EFL learning beyond the classroom.

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally reshaped how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners engage with the target language beyond the traditional classroom (Alhaqi, 2025). Digital tools and platforms are now deeply embedded in learners' everyday lives, giving rise to new, self-directed pathways for language development that operate independently of formal instruction (Lee 2022; Soyooof, Reynolds, Vazquez-Calvo, et al. 2023). This phenomenon, widely referred to in the literature as Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), is defined as self-directed English activities undertaken in informal digital

settings, motivated by personal interest rather than institutional requirement (Lee and Lee 2021). Because of its growing relevance to how learners actually acquire and practice English outside the classroom, IDLE has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years (Wilson, 2024).

Among the many digital environments that support such informal learning, social media platforms occupy a particularly central role. Sites such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) provide learners with continuous access to authentic linguistic input and opportunities for real-time interaction, collaboration, and content sharing that extend well beyond what conventional classroom settings can offer (Barrot 2022). Through these platforms, EFL students are able to interact with native and proficient speakers, participate in online communities and forums, consume multimedia content such as podcasts and videos, and engage in gamified applications, all of which contribute to the development of linguistic, cultural, and affective competencies (Soyooof, Reynolds, Chan, et al. 2023). Empirical studies conducted across diverse EFL contexts—including Kuwait, Jordan, Vietnam, and Iraq—consistently report that such digitally mediated engagement enhances learners' vocabulary, communicative confidence, and intercultural awareness, while also fostering collaboration and relationship-building among peers (Alsenafi et al. 2024; Muftah, 2022).

Beyond social media in its conventional form, the digital learning ecology available to EFL students continues to evolve. The emergence of generative artificial intelligence tools, such as ChatGPT and other AI-based writing and speech assistants, has extended informal learning into a more interactive and adaptive dimension, allowing learners to request explanations, receive immediate feedback, and simulate authentic communicative practice outside class hours. This shift positions digital and social spaces not merely as supplementary resources but as semi-autonomous learning environments that shape learners' access to input, opportunities for output, and their overall sense of control over the learning process.

Despite this growing body of evidence on the benefits of digital and social media engagement, much of the existing research has tended to emphasize quantitative outcomes—such as proficiency scores, engagement levels, or correlational relationships between platform use and achievement while comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how students themselves perceive, interpret, and narrate their language learning journeys across these spaces. Learners' engagement with digital and social platforms is not a uniform experience; it is shaped by individual motivation, digital literacy, emotional responses, and the specific ways learners weave together formal and informal resources. Without a deeper, experience-based understanding of these processes, educators and researchers risk overlooking the nuanced realities of how EFL students actually navigate, make sense of, and derive meaning from their learning across digital and social environments.

It is within this gap that the present study is situated. By exploring EFL students' lived language learning experiences across digital and social spaces, this research seeks to provide a richer, more contextualized understanding of how informal, technology-mediated engagement contributes to English language development—an understanding that can, in turn, inform more responsive and learner-centered approaches to EFL pedagogy.

Literature Review

The Concept of Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE)

Over the past decade, scholars have increasingly recognized that English language development no longer occurs solely within the boundaries of formal classroom instruction. This recognition has given rise to the concept of Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), officially defined as self-directed English activities carried out in informal digital settings, driven by personal interest rather than institutional obligation (Lee and Lee 2021). IDLE is further characterized as a form of learning that is self-directed, unstructured, and independent

of any formal language program, distinguishing it from other related constructs such as extramural or non-formal digital learning (Lee 2022; Reinders, Lai, and Sundqvist 2022). As digital devices and internet access have become more affordable and widespread, EFL learners are increasingly turning to IDLE as a primary means of engaging with the target language outside class hours (Dressman et al. 2023; Soyooof, Reynolds, 2023).

Several studies have sought to theorize IDLE using established frameworks. Jeon (2022), for instance, examined self-directed interactive app-based learning through the lens of self-determination theory, highlighting how learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation drive sustained engagement in digital English practice (Jeon, 2022). Meanwhile, Guo and Lee (2023) reviewed more than a hundred IDLE-related studies through an ecological systems perspective, finding that individual factors—such as personal interest and motivation—together with micro-system influences like peers and family, were the most consistently reported determinants of learners' IDLE engagement.

Social Media as a Space for EFL Learning

Among the various digital environments associated with IDLE, social media platforms have emerged as one of the most extensively studied spaces for informal English learning. Barrot (2022), in a systematic review spanning more than a decade of research, concluded that social media functions as a genuine language learning environment, offering learners continuous access to authentic input and opportunities for real-time interaction, collaboration, and content sharing that extend well beyond the physical classroom. Building on this foundation, subsequent studies have documented how platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and X (formerly Twitter) enable learners to interact with native and proficient speakers, participate in online discussions, and consume multimedia content that supports both receptive and productive language skills (Alsenafi et al. 2024; Muftah, 2022).

Empirical findings across different EFL contexts tend to converge on similar benefits. In Kuwait, Alsenafi et al. (2024) found that university EFL students used social media not only for academic collaboration but also for building peer relationships that indirectly supported their language development. Similarly, Muftah (2022) reported that social media use during the COVID-19 pandemic played a significant role in sustaining EFL learners' exposure to English when access to formal instruction was disrupted. Bui et al. (2023) extended this line of inquiry by conceptualizing the roles of social media in education along affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions, suggesting that its influence on language learning is multidimensional rather than confined to linguistic gains alone.

Affective and Motivational Dimensions in Digital Language Learning

A growing strand of research has examined how emotional and motivational factors mediate the relationship between digital engagement and language learning outcomes. Studies employing structural equation modeling have shown that IDLE is positively associated with learners' online self-efficacy, flow, and behavioral intention, which in turn predict deeper engagement in English learning activities (see PMC 2025 study on IDLE and EFL learners' engagement). Other research has demonstrated that affective variables such as foreign language enjoyment and anxiety mediate the effect of IDLE on learners' willingness to communicate, underscoring that digital engagement is not merely a behavioral phenomenon but one deeply intertwined with learners' emotional experiences (Wu, 2023; Rezai 2023). These findings suggest that understanding EFL students' experiences in digital and social spaces requires attention not only to what learners do online, but also to how they feel about and make sense of these activities.

Toward AI-Mediated and Evolving Digital Spaces

More recent scholarship has begun to extend the IDLE framework to account for the emergence of generative artificial intelligence tools. Xia and Guo (2025) introduced the concept of AI-mediated informal digital learning of English (AI-IDLE), in which learners use

tools such as ChatGPT and automated speech-recognition systems to receive immediate feedback, simulate conversations, and personalize their learning beyond the classroom. This development suggests that the digital and social spaces available to EFL learners are continually evolving, adding further complexity and diversity to the ways students construct their language learning experiences.

Learners' Lived Experiences: A Persistent Gap

Despite the substantial body of research on IDLE and social media use among EFL learners, the majority of existing studies have relied on quantitative, survey-based, or structural equation modeling approaches that measure associations between digital engagement and outcomes such as proficiency, engagement, or willingness to communicate. Comparatively fewer studies have explored, in depth, how learners themselves perceive, interpret, and narrate their language learning journeys across digital and social spaces. Where qualitative inquiry has been undertaken—such as studies using semi-structured interviews to explore students' use of social media platforms for language learning (see EJ1463034, 2024)—findings suggest that learners' experiences are shaped by highly individual factors, including personal motivation, digital literacy, and the specific ways they blend formal and informal learning resources. This indicates that a more experience-centered, qualitative understanding is still needed to complement the predominantly quantitative literature on IDLE and social media-based English learning.

Taken together, the reviewed literature establishes that digital and social spaces play a significant role in shaping EFL learners' language development, engagement, and affective experiences. However, it also reveals a persistent gap: relatively little is known about how learners themselves experience and make meaning of their English learning across these spaces. This gap forms the basis for the present study's exploratory, qualitative focus on EFL students' language learning experiences across digital and social spaces.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how university EFL students experience and engage in English language learning across digital and social spaces. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on participants' lived experiences, learning practices, perceptions, and meanings rather than on measuring predetermined variables. The study particularly examined how students use digital platforms and social interactions as part of their English learning beyond formal classroom settings.

The research was informed by a technology-mediated language learning perspective, which views language learning as an activity that may occur across multiple interconnected formal, informal, digital, and social environments. Rather than treating digital technology merely as an instructional tool, this study examined how learners incorporate digital spaces into their everyday English learning practices.

Research Participants

The participants were 12 university students enrolled in an English-related program at a university in Indonesia. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on predetermined criteria. The inclusion criteria were: (1) being an active university student, (2) having experience learning English through digital platforms outside formal classroom activities, and (3) regularly engaging with English-language digital or social content.

Participants represented different levels of English proficiency and different patterns of digital engagement. This variation was intended to provide diverse accounts of how students encounter, practice, and develop English across digital and social spaces.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and learning experience accounts. Semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to maintain consistency across participants while providing sufficient flexibility for participants to describe their experiences in their own words.

The interviews explored several areas:

1. students' everyday English learning activities;
2. digital platforms and social spaces used for learning English;
3. reasons for engaging with English outside the classroom;
4. strategies used to understand unfamiliar English;
5. interactions with other English users;
6. perceived challenges and benefits of digital English learning;
7. changes in students' confidence, vocabulary, comprehension, or communication practices; and
8. students' perceptions of learning English independently through digital and social environments.

Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in either English or Indonesian, depending on participants' preferences. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. When interviews were conducted in Indonesian, relevant excerpts were translated into English for analysis and reporting.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke. The analysis involved six stages: (1) familiarizing the researchers with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for potential themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the final report.

Initially, the researchers repeatedly read the interview transcripts to develop familiarity with participants' accounts. Meaningful segments related to English learning practices, digital engagement, social interaction, learning strategies, and perceived changes were then coded. Related codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories and developed into themes representing recurring patterns across participants' experiences.

The analysis was primarily inductive, allowing themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than imposing a predetermined theoretical framework. However, concepts related to learner autonomy, informal language learning, digital engagement, and sociocultural learning were used to interpret the emerging findings.

Trustworthiness

Several procedures were employed to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings. First, interview questions were reviewed before data collection to ensure their relevance to the research objectives. Second, the researchers maintained an audit trail documenting the coding and theme-development process. Third, member checking was conducted by sharing summaries of participants' responses with selected participants to confirm that their experiences had been interpreted appropriately.

In addition, researcher discussions were conducted during the coding process to compare interpretations and reduce the possibility of individual researcher bias. Direct quotations from participants were also incorporated into the findings to provide evidence for the interpretation and preserve participants' perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Participants' identities were protected through the use of

pseudonyms or participant codes, and the collected data were used exclusively for research purposes.

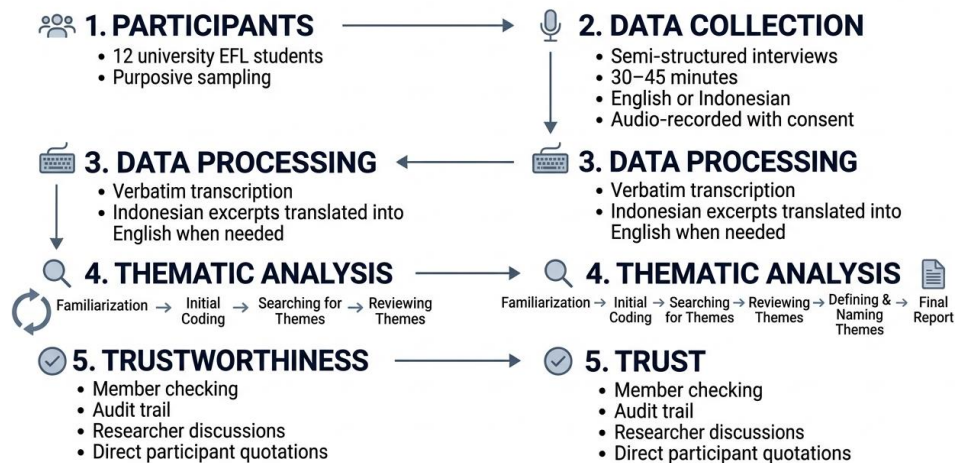


Figure 1. Research Procedure

Result and Discussion

Result

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that all twelve participants (P1–P12) engaged with English learning through a combination of video-based and social interaction platforms, rather than relying on a single digital space. As summarized in Table 1, YouTube emerged as the most frequently used platform ($n = 7$), followed by Instagram ($n = 5$), TikTok ($n = 4$), and WhatsApp ($n = 3$), with Reddit, Discord, and Netflix used by a smaller number of participants. This pattern suggests that participants' English learning experiences are not confined to a single application but are distributed across a broader digital ecology that combines content-consumption platforms (YouTube, Netflix, TikTok) with communication-based platforms (WhatsApp, Discord).

Table 1. Frequency of Digital/Social Spaces Used by Participants

Platform	Participants	Frequency
YouTube	P1, P3, P4, P7, P9, P10, P12	7
Instagram	P1, P4, P5, P8, P11	5
TikTok	P2, P5, P8, P10	4
WhatsApp	P2, P6, P11	3
Discord	P6, P9	2
Netflix	P7, P12	2
Reddit	P3	1

Participants' main activities on these platforms clustered into two broad categories: receptive engagement and interactive/communicative engagement. Receptive activities dominated the data, including watching videos and tutorials (P1, P3, P4, P10), following English-speaking content creators (P4, P5), watching movies and documentaries (P7, P12), and reading posts, captions, or discussion threads (P1, P3, P8). Interactive activities, though less frequent, were equally significant, comprising real-time chatting with friends (P2, P11), communicating with online friends or international gaming partners (P6, P9), and engaging in discussion forums (P3). This distribution indicates that while most participants' English exposure was primarily input-based, a meaningful subset actively used digital spaces for authentic, output-oriented communication.

Motivation for Engagement

Participants' motivations for using digital and social spaces to learn English were diverse and can be grouped into four overarching categories:

- Entertainment-driven motivation (P1, P4, P7): participants engaged with English content primarily for enjoyment, with language learning occurring as an incidental outcome.
- Social and communicative motivation (P2, P6, P9): participants were driven by the desire to interact with friends, online communities, or international gamers, positioning English as a tool for connection rather than an explicit learning goal.
- Personal interest and curiosity (P3, P8, P12): participants pursued content aligned with their personal interests or self-development goals, using English as a medium to access that content.
- Academic motivation (P5, P10): a smaller group of participants used digital platforms with a more explicit intention of supporting their formal academic English learning.

This pattern suggests that participants' engagement with English in digital and social spaces was largely intrinsically and incidentally motivated, rather than driven by formal academic demands—reinforcing the self-directed, interest-based nature of their learning experiences.

Learning Strategies

Participants reported employing a range of self-directed strategies to maximize their English learning while navigating digital and social spaces. These strategies were categorized into three main patterns:

1. Repetition and rehearsal strategies — replaying videos (P1), imitating pronunciation (P4), repeating examples (P10), and shadowing (P12), all aimed at reinforcing listening comprehension and oral accuracy.
2. Vocabulary- and meaning-focused strategies — noting new vocabulary (P1), searching unfamiliar words (P3), saving useful videos for later review (P5), and using contextual guessing to infer meaning (P3, P8).
3. Social and negotiation-based strategies — asking friends for clarification (P2), actively using English in real conversations (P6), speaking with international players (P9), and selectively translating between English and Indonesian (P11).

These findings indicate that participants did not passively consume English content; rather, they actively applied metacognitive and social strategies to convert exposure into learning opportunities.

Challenges

Despite these strategies, participants also reported a number of recurring challenges, which can be grouped into three categories:

- Linguistic challenges were the most commonly reported, including difficulty following fast speech (P1), understanding slang (P2), navigating difficult vocabulary (P3), interpreting accents (P4), and managing informal or complex expressions (P8, P12). This category accounted for the majority of reported difficulties (7 out of 12 participants).
- Psychological challenges, such as fear of making mistakes (P6), reflect affective barriers that may inhibit participants' willingness to engage in spontaneous English communication.
- Behavioral and technical challenges, including dependence on subtitles (P7), information overload (P5), difficulty maintaining consistent engagement (P10), and unintentional code-mixing between Indonesian and English (P11).

Perceived Benefits

Participants consistently reported positive perceived outcomes from their engagement with English across digital and social spaces. The most frequently cited benefit was improved

listening skills (P1, P7, P12), followed by expanded vocabulary (P2, P5), improved comprehension (P3, P8), and enhanced pronunciation (P4, P12). Several participants also reported gains in speaking confidence (P6, P9), while individual participants noted improvements in grammar awareness (P10) and writing practice (P11).

Table 2. Summary of Perceived Benefits

Benefit Category	Participants	Frequency
Listening skills	P1, P7, P12	3
Vocabulary expansion	P2, P5	2
Comprehension	P3, P8	2
Pronunciation	P4, P12	2
Speaking confidence	P6, P9	2
Grammar awareness	P10	1
Writing practice	P11	1

Overall, the thematic analysis of the twelve participants' experiences produced five overarching themes: (1) multimodal digital engagement, reflecting participants' simultaneous use of content-based and communication-based platforms; (2) intrinsically and incidentally driven motivation, dominated by entertainment, social connection, and personal interest rather than formal academic goals; (3) active, self-directed learning strategies, encompassing repetition, vocabulary-focused practices, and social negotiation; (4) persistent linguistic and affective challenges, particularly related to authentic, fast-paced, and informal language use; and (5) multifaceted perceived benefits, spanning listening, vocabulary, comprehension, pronunciation, and confidence gains.

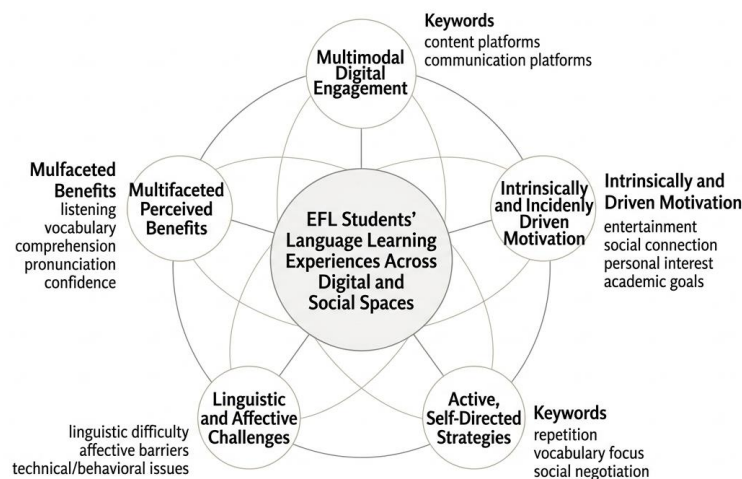


Figure 2. Thematic Map of EFL Students' Language Learning Experiences Across Digital and Social Spaces

Together, these themes illustrate that EFL students' language learning experiences across digital and social spaces are not monolithic, but are shaped by an interplay of platform choice, motivation, strategic behavior, and the challenges inherent in engaging with authentic, unstructured English input.

Discussion

Learning English Across a Multiplatform Digital Ecology

The finding that participants used multiple digital and social platforms rather than relying on a single application indicates that contemporary EFL learning increasingly occurs within a distributed digital learning ecology. YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Discord,

Netflix, and Reddit served different functions, ranging from exposure to authentic language input to interpersonal communication. This finding is consistent with recent research conceptualizing informal digital learning of English (IDLE) as a broad ecosystem in which learners encounter English through multiple interconnected digital activities rather than through formally designed instructional environments (Liu et al., 2025; Kusuma et al., 2024; Apoko & Waluyo, 2025). A recent thematic review of 49 empirical studies in Asian EFL contexts similarly demonstrates that IDLE has expanded considerably and encompasses diverse forms of digital engagement across platforms and learning activities.

The predominance of YouTube in the present study is particularly meaningful because video-based platforms provide sustained access to multimodal English input. Participants reported using videos, tutorials, documentaries, and creator content to expose themselves to pronunciation, vocabulary, accents, and naturally occurring expressions. This finding corresponds with recent evidence that digital video environments can provide learners with accessible and repeated exposure to English while allowing them to control the pace of learning. Research in Indonesian higher education has likewise found that social media platforms facilitate access to authentic English communication and diverse information networks (Apoko & Waluyo, 2025). Similar observations have been reported in recent Indonesian studies showing that YouTube and other social platforms are perceived as useful for developing listening and reading skills (Amalia & Ahmad, 2025; Pratiwi et al., 2025).

The coexistence of content-oriented and communication-oriented platforms is also important. YouTube and Netflix primarily provided receptive exposure, whereas WhatsApp, Discord, and online gaming environments created opportunities for interaction. This distinction suggests that students' digital learning ecology involves both input-oriented and socially mediated learning experiences. Earlier IDLE research has demonstrated that receptive and productive digital activities can have different relationships with learners' attitudes, motivation, and willingness to communicate (Lee, 2021; Lee et al., 2021). More recent work further emphasizes that IDLE should be understood through ecological perspectives because learners' practices are shaped not only by individual motivation but also by social networks, interpersonal relationships, technological affordances, and broader cultural environments (Soyoo et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2025).

Thus, the present findings support the argument that digital EFL learning should not be conceptualized as a simple transfer of classroom instruction into online platforms. Instead, students construct individualized learning environments by combining different digital spaces according to the affordances available to them. This interpretation is particularly relevant to the Indonesian context, where recent research has shown that university students use Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and WhatsApp for authentic communication, language practice, and engagement beyond formal classroom settings (Apoko & Waluyo, 2025; Imita et al., 2025).

From Formal Learning to Interest-Driven and Incidental Learning

Another important finding concerns the predominantly entertainment-driven, social, and interest-based motivations reported by participants. Only a smaller number of participants explicitly described academic achievement as their primary reason for engaging with English digitally. Instead, many participants encountered English while watching entertainment content, following creators, playing games, communicating with friends, or exploring personally interesting topics.

This pattern is strongly aligned with the conceptualization of IDLE as learning that occurs through learners' everyday digital activities rather than through explicitly structured educational tasks. Liu et al. (2025) argue that informal digital English learning in Asian EFL contexts has developed partly because learners can engage with English voluntarily through digital technologies and personal interests. Similarly, Soyoo et al. (2023) found that

individual-level factors, particularly personal interests and motivation, are among the most frequently discussed influences on IDLE behavior.

The present findings therefore suggest that English learning may occur as an incidental consequence of meaningful digital activity. For P1, P4, and P7, entertainment was not merely a distraction from learning; it created sustained exposure to English without the pressure associated with formal instruction. This is theoretically significant because voluntary engagement may increase the amount of language exposure learners receive. Previous research has connected IDLE with positive emotional experiences, including foreign language enjoyment, which can support continued engagement with English (Lee, 2021; Lee et al., 2021). More recent research has similarly shown that informal digital learning can contribute to EFL achievement partly through learners' emotional experiences, including enjoyment and anxiety (Zhang et al., 2025).

The social motivation identified among P2, P6, and P9 provides another important dimension. These participants did not necessarily approach digital interaction with the explicit intention of studying English. Rather, English became a functional resource for social participation. This is particularly evident in gaming and international online communication, where students needed English to accomplish communicative purposes. Such findings reinforce the argument that language learning can be embedded within social practices rather than isolated as a discrete educational activity. Research on IDLE and willingness to communicate has similarly demonstrated that informal digital engagement can be associated with learners' readiness to communicate in the target language (Lee et al., 2021).

This finding also corresponds with recent Indonesian research. Ilmita et al. (2025), for example, found that Indonesian EFL learners used Instagram not only to consume English-learning content but also to create captions, produce English-related content, and interact in English. Thus, social media may function simultaneously as a learning environment and a social environment, making language use more embedded in everyday digital life.

Active Strategies in Apparently Informal Learning

Although participants described their digital English learning as informal, their accounts demonstrate considerable evidence of active strategic engagement. Replaying videos, imitating pronunciation, taking vocabulary notes, inferring meanings from context, selectively translating, and asking others for clarification indicate that learners were not simply consuming English passively.

This finding is consistent with recent research emphasizing that successful informal digital learning involves learner agency and strategic decision-making. Kusuma et al. (2025), in a phenomenological study of Indonesian university students, found that learners employed different strategies to acquire and practice English knowledge during IDLE (Kusuma, 2025). Similarly, recent research on the relationship between IDLE and online self-regulated learning indicates that informal digital engagement can positively contribute to learners' self-regulatory development over time.

The repetition and rehearsal strategies reported by P1, P4, P10, and P12 are particularly relevant to cognitive engagement. Replaying a difficult segment, imitating pronunciation, and shadowing require learners to notice linguistic features and repeatedly process input. These practices transform otherwise passive media consumption into deliberate learning activity. Recent research on social-media-supported English learning also reports that repeated exposure, contextualized input, and multimedia presentation can facilitate vocabulary development and comprehension (T et al., 2026; Faruq & Fitriah, 2025).

The vocabulary-focused strategies reported by participants further illustrate the importance of learner-controlled attention. P3 and P8, for example, attempted to infer meaning from context instead of immediately translating unfamiliar words. Such behavior suggests that digital environments provide opportunities for learners to regulate the depth and direction of

their attention. This is consistent with research showing that social media can support contextualized vocabulary learning by exposing learners to words through captions, comments, videos, and authentic interactions (Rahayu et al., 2026; Yunisa & Oktavia, 2024).

The social negotiation strategies identified in P2, P6, P9, and P11 are equally important. Rather than resolving every linguistic problem individually, these participants relied on interpersonal communication to clarify meaning and practice English. Such findings support a socially situated understanding of language learning in which knowledge is constructed through interaction with other users and digital communities. Apoko and Waluyo (2025) similarly found that social media provided Indonesian university students with opportunities for authentic communication and collaborative language practice.

Authenticity and the Development of Language Skills

Participants' perceived benefits—particularly improvements in listening, vocabulary, comprehension, pronunciation, and speaking confidence—suggest that digital spaces provide forms of English exposure that differ from conventional classroom input. Rather than encountering only pedagogically simplified English, students reported interacting with accents, slang, informal expressions, rapid speech, and naturally occurring language.

This finding is consistent with recent research identifying authentic and multimodal exposure as one of the central affordances of informal digital learning. Liu et al. (2025) emphasize that IDLE provides learners with access to diverse forms of English beyond traditional classroom materials, while Apoko and Waluyo (2025) found that Indonesian university students perceived social media as a source of authentic communication and language practice.

The prominence of listening improvement in the present study is particularly understandable given the extensive use of audiovisual content. Participants could repeatedly listen to natural speech, adjust playback, use subtitles, and compare spoken forms with written forms. Similar benefits have been reported in Indonesian research on social media-based English learning, where students perceived improvements in listening, pronunciation, and vocabulary (Fitrisia et al., 2025; Amalia & Ahmad, 2025).

The findings concerning pronunciation are also noteworthy. P4 and P12 described imitating creators and using shadowing techniques. Digital media therefore allowed learners to observe and reproduce pronunciation in context rather than merely learning pronunciation rules abstractly. Recent studies of social media and EFL learning have likewise reported perceived gains in pronunciation and speaking confidence among students who engage with audiovisual English content (Nusi et al., 2025; Fitrisia et al., 2025).

However, these perceived benefits should not be interpreted as evidence that digital exposure automatically produces measurable language gains. The current study examined students' experiences and perceptions, not standardized changes in proficiency. Consequently, the findings demonstrate how students perceive digital environments as supporting language development, but they do not establish causal effects on actual language proficiency.

Authenticity as Both an Affordance and a Challenge

An important contribution of the present study is that the same authenticity that students perceived as beneficial also generated substantial difficulties. Seven participants reported linguistic challenges involving rapid speech, accents, slang, difficult vocabulary, and complex informal expressions. This demonstrates that authentic digital English can create a tension between exposure and comprehensibility.

Recent Indonesian research has reported remarkably similar challenges. Yunisa and Oktavia (2024) found that although students viewed social media positively for vocabulary learning, they still experienced difficulties when encountering unfamiliar language. More recent studies have identified fast speech, slang, distractions, and limited subtitles as recurring challenges in social-media-mediated English learning (T et al., 2026; Nusi et al., 2025).

The finding concerning fast speech is particularly significant because authentic audiovisual materials often expose learners to speech that is considerably less controlled than classroom materials. While this may provide valuable exposure to naturally occurring language, students with lower proficiency may struggle to process the input. The use of replaying and subtitles reported by participants can therefore be understood as learners' attempts to regulate the difficulty of authentic input.

The problem of slang and informal expressions similarly illustrates the complexity of learning English through social spaces. Social media frequently exposes learners to expressions that may be highly contextual, culturally specific, abbreviated, or non-standard. While such exposure may contribute to communicative competence and sociocultural awareness, it may also create confusion regarding appropriateness and meaning. Recent research on informal digital learning emphasizes precisely this tension between the richness of authentic language exposure and the lack of pedagogical structuring in informal digital environments (Liu et al., 2025; Soyoo et al., 2023).

Autonomy, Distraction, and the Need for Learner Regulation

Although digital spaces provide students with substantial autonomy, the findings demonstrate that autonomy does not necessarily mean effective self-regulation. P5 reported information overload, P7 described dependence on subtitles, P10 experienced difficulty maintaining consistency, and P11 reported code-mixing. These findings suggest that the abundance of digital resources can simultaneously expand and complicate learners' opportunities for independent learning.

This issue has been highlighted in recent research examining the relationship between IDLE and self-regulated learning. Longitudinal evidence indicates a positive relationship between informal digital English learning and online self-regulated learning, with the effects increasing across time (Cui et al., 2025). Similarly, research involving Indonesian EFL students has identified positive relationships among digital literacy, self-regulated learning, and IDLE, suggesting that students' ability to navigate digital environments may influence how effectively they exploit these environments for language learning.

The present findings extend this argument qualitatively. Students did not simply need access to digital resources; they needed to decide what content to select, when to stop consuming, what vocabulary to record, which expressions to verify, and how to convert exposure into active practice. Therefore, learner autonomy in digital environments should be understood as a process of managing choices rather than merely having unlimited access to resources.

The challenge of information overload reported by P5 is particularly relevant. Saving numerous videos without returning to them demonstrates that digital affordances can encourage accumulation of learning resources without necessarily producing sustained learning behavior. This finding supports recent research emphasizing the importance of self-regulation and strategic digital literacy in maximizing the educational potential of informal digital learning (Cui et al., 2025; Kurniawati et al., 2026).

Social Interaction and Affective Development

The experiences of P6 and P9 demonstrate that social interaction can extend the benefits of digital learning beyond linguistic knowledge. Both participants reported increased speaking confidence after communicating with other English users. This suggests that digital environments may provide opportunities for low-stakes communicative practice, particularly for learners who may feel uncomfortable speaking English in formal classroom settings.

This finding is compatible with research linking informal digital engagement with affective dimensions of language learning. Lee et al. (2021) found that foreign language enjoyment and anxiety mediated the relationship between IDLE and willingness to communicate. More recent research similarly indicates that IDLE is associated with learner

engagement through psychological mechanisms such as enjoyment, online self-efficacy, and behavioral intention (Cui et al., 2025).

The social nature of platforms such as Discord and online gaming is especially relevant. In these environments, English is not necessarily the object of learning but the medium through which social activity is accomplished. This distinction is theoretically important because it suggests that communicative competence may develop through meaningful participation rather than through explicit language exercises alone.

Recent studies in Indonesia similarly indicate that social media enables students to use English through captions, comments, content creation, and interpersonal interaction (Ilmita et al., 2025). Thus, digital environments can provide opportunities for learners to shift from being recipients of English input to active participants in English-mediated social practices.

Implications for EFL Education

The findings have several implications for EFL pedagogy. First, teachers may benefit from recognizing students' existing digital practices rather than treating informal digital environments exclusively as distractions. Recent research on Indonesian higher education suggests that social media can complement formal instruction by providing authentic communication, diverse information, and opportunities for learner engagement (Apoko & Waluyo, 2025).

Second, teachers should not simply encourage students to “use social media for English.” Instead, students may need explicit guidance in how to learn from digital content. Activities such as maintaining vocabulary logs, comparing formal and informal expressions, shadowing selected videos, reflecting on new linguistic forms, and discussing the reliability or appropriateness of online language could transform spontaneous digital exposure into more deliberate learning.

Third, digital learning should retain a balance between autonomy and pedagogical structure. Research on integrating IDLE into formal instruction suggests that teachers' attitudes, perceived norms, and perceived behavioral control influence their willingness to incorporate informal digital learning into classroom contexts (Liu & Wang, 2024). The present findings similarly suggest that students already possess substantial informal learning practices, but structured pedagogical support could help them manage challenges such as distraction, inconsistent engagement, excessive subtitle dependence, and exposure to unfamiliar expressions.

Finally, educators should acknowledge that students' digital English experiences are social and cultural as well as linguistic. Platforms expose learners to different accents, varieties of English, cultural references, interactional norms, and forms of identity expression. Recent work on informal digital learning in Asian EFL contexts emphasizes the importance of examining broader ecological, cultural, and social factors rather than treating digital learning as an exclusively individual activity (Liu et al., 2025; Soyoof et al., 2023).

Taken together, the findings indicate that EFL students' learning across digital and social spaces is best understood as a multimodal, self-directed, socially embedded, and emotionally influenced process. Participants moved fluidly between watching, reading, listening, speaking, chatting, gaming, searching, saving, replaying, and interacting. Their motivations were often unrelated to formal academic requirements, yet meaningful language learning emerged through entertainment, personal interests, and social participation.

The findings therefore support a broader conceptualization of language learning in which the boundaries between formal and informal, learning and leisure, individual and social activity, and input and interaction become increasingly blurred. Recent research on IDLE has similarly argued that digital environments constitute complex ecological spaces in which personal interests, social networks, technological affordances, and learning strategies interact.

Importantly, however, the findings do not suggest that digital spaces are inherently beneficial. Their educational value appears to depend on how learners navigate them. Strategic behaviors such as replaying, note-taking, contextual inference, rehearsal, and interpersonal negotiation allowed participants to transform everyday digital exposure into learning opportunities, whereas distraction, information overload, linguistic complexity, and inconsistent engagement limited that potential. This interpretation is consistent with emerging longitudinal evidence connecting informal digital learning with self-regulated learning and with recent Indonesian research demonstrating the relevance of digital literacy and self-regulation to IDLE engagement.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the study involved only twelve EFL students, which limits the transferability of the findings to broader populations of language learners. Although the small sample enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, students from different educational levels, geographical backgrounds, and proficiency levels may demonstrate different patterns of digital language learning. Future studies could therefore involve larger and more diverse samples to examine whether the themes identified in this study are also evident across different EFL contexts.

Second, the data were based primarily on participants' self-reported experiences obtained through interviews. Such data provide valuable insights into learners' perceptions and strategies but may not always correspond precisely to their actual digital learning behaviors. Participants may unintentionally overestimate or underestimate the frequency and effectiveness of their language-learning activities. Future research could address this limitation through methodological triangulation by combining interviews with digital activity logs, screen recordings, learning diaries, platform-based behavioral data, or direct observation. Such approaches would provide a more comprehensive picture of how learners actually use digital spaces for language learning.

Third, the study examined participants' experiences across a range of platforms, including YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Discord, Netflix, and Reddit. However, the affordances and interactional characteristics of these platforms differ considerably. Content-oriented platforms may provide extensive exposure to authentic input, whereas communication-oriented platforms create greater opportunities for language production and social interaction. Treating these spaces collectively may therefore obscure platform-specific differences in learning processes. Future research could conduct comparative investigations of particular digital platforms to determine how platform affordances influence language exposure, interaction, learner agency, and language development.

Fourth, the present study focused primarily on students' perceived learning experiences and benefits rather than objectively measured language development. Participants reported improvements in listening, vocabulary, comprehension, pronunciation, confidence, grammar awareness, and writing practice, but these perceptions cannot by themselves establish measurable gains in language proficiency. Future studies could employ pre- and post-tests or longitudinal designs to investigate whether sustained engagement with digital and social spaces produces measurable improvements in specific language skills.

Finally, the study was conducted from the perspective of learners and therefore provides limited insight into the roles of teachers, peers, families, and institutional environments in shaping students' digital language-learning practices. Digital language learning does not occur independently of social and educational contexts; teacher guidance, peer interaction, digital literacy, and access to technology may influence how effectively learners transform everyday digital exposure into meaningful learning opportunities. Future research could consequently adopt a more ecological perspective by incorporating multiple stakeholders and examining how

individual, social, technological, and institutional factors interact in technology-mediated EFL learning.

Future research could also move beyond descriptive accounts by examining how digital engagement develops over time. Longitudinal studies may reveal whether initially incidental exposure to English gradually develops into intentional and self-directed learning practices. Experimental or mixed-methods studies could further investigate whether specific interventions, such as digital learning diaries, reflective prompts, social interaction tasks, or strategy-based instruction, can help students make more systematic use of informal digital environments. In addition, cross-cultural research involving EFL learners from different countries could provide insights into how sociocultural norms, language-learning beliefs, and patterns of digital participation shape learners' experiences across online spaces.

Conclusion

This study explored how EFL students experience English language learning across digital and social spaces. The findings demonstrate that students' language learning extends beyond formal classroom environments and occurs through diverse digital platforms, including YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Discord, Netflix, and Reddit. These spaces provide students with opportunities to encounter authentic English through videos, social media content, online discussions, entertainment, and interpersonal communication.

The findings further indicate that students' engagement with English in digital environments is shaped primarily by entertainment, social interaction, personal interests, and curiosity, while explicit academic purposes represent a comparatively smaller motivation. Importantly, students did not simply consume English content passively. They employed various self-directed strategies, such as repeating and shadowing language input, recording unfamiliar vocabulary, inferring meaning from context, saving useful content, asking others for clarification, and communicating with English-speaking users. These practices demonstrate that informal digital engagement can create opportunities for autonomous and experiential language learning.

At the same time, students encountered challenges when navigating authentic digital English, particularly fast speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, slang, accents, informal expressions, fear of making mistakes, information overload, and inconsistent engagement. Nevertheless, participants perceived several benefits from their digital experiences, particularly improvements in listening, vocabulary, comprehension, pronunciation, speaking confidence, grammar awareness, and writing practice.

Overall, the study suggests that digital and social spaces constitute an important part of contemporary EFL learning ecologies. Their educational value does not arise from technology alone but from how learners interact with digital content, other users, and available linguistic resources. The findings therefore highlight the importance of recognizing informal digital engagement as a complementary dimension of EFL education while helping learners develop strategies for critically selecting, processing, and transforming everyday digital exposure into meaningful language-learning experiences. Future research should further examine these processes through longitudinal, cross-platform, and mixed-methods approaches to determine how sustained digital engagement influences measurable language development over time.

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