


Exploring Self-Directed Informal Digital Learning for English Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

The explosive growth of digital technology has had a substantial impact on English language learning by expanding access to learning resources beyond the classroom. Despite frequent exposure to English content via digital media, many learners continue to engage passively. The purpose of this study was to investigate the nature and activities of self-directed informal digital English learning (IDLE) and their impact on English proficiency. A qualitative descriptive method was used, with ten university students selected by purposive sampling. Data were gathered through interviews, observations, and documentation, then analysed using an interactive model. The data show that students participate in IDLE by watching YouTube videos, utilising apps like Duolingo, listening to podcasts, and communicating on social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Students presented both spontaneous and deliberate learning processes, with IDLE positively impacting vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and speaking confidence. IDLE's efficacy is dependent on motivation, consistency, and self-regulated learning mechanisms.

Keywords: *Self-Directed Learning, Informal Digital Learning, And English Proficiency*

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INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has caused enormous changes in many parts of human existence, including education. In English language learning, technology allows broad access to a variety of learning tools outside of the classroom. Learners are no longer completely dependent on professors or textbooks; instead, they can access videos, podcasts, mobile applications, social media platforms, online games, and numerous digital communities to support their English learning (Ahmad, 2024). Watching English-language videos on YouTube, utilising language learning apps, listening to podcasts, reading online articles, and communicating with overseas users via social media are all part of learners' daily lives. This change has facilitated the establishment of more adaptable and learner-centered approaches. As a result, digital learning has become an important aspect of modern education because it facilitates ongoing and independent learning processes (Zainuddin & Hamdani, 2024).

Opportunities for informal learning have increased as internet-based platforms have grown. Informal learning allows students to gain knowledge outside of conventional educational settings, usually motivated by own interests and daily activities. In English learning, this phenomenon is generally recognised as Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), which refers to learners' use of digital technology for self-directed English learning outside of the classroom (Lee, 2019). IDLE activities allow students to develop their language abilities by engaging with actual English content and real-life communication. For example, learners might improve their listening and speaking abilities by watching English videos, participating in online debates, communicating through social media, or interacting with foreign communities in digital environments (Chen, 2025). This learning process often occurs

naturally without formal instruction, making IDLE increasingly relevant in today's digital learning environment.

Despite its simplicity of use, the utilisation of digital technology for learning has not been fully optimised (Zainuddin et al., 2024). Many learners still use digital devices primarily for entertainment rather than educational purposes (Suwanto et al., 2022). Although students are frequently exposed to English information via social media, streaming platforms, and online applications, active participation in significant learning processes is not always intentional. Furthermore, some students lack adequate techniques and self-regulation skills in efficiently using digital resources for language acquisition (Ivan & Hakim, 2024). As that happens, despite extensive exposure to English, their proficiency does not improve considerably. This circumstance demonstrates a mismatch between the availability of digital technologies and the actual results of language learning.

The use of digital technology in learning can actually be guided towards more meaningful outcomes if learners are conscious and proactive in regulating their own learning processes (Mhlongo et al., 2023). They must be able to define learning objectives, choose relevant materials, track their progress, and assess learning results autonomously. In this regard, student autonomy and self-directed learning become vital components in the success of digital language learning (RUI et al., 2024). Learners who actively engage with English content through digital platforms typically obtain deeper language exposure and more opportunity for authentic communication practice (Ginting, 2021). Thus, digital technology should serve as both a source of amusement and an effective instrument for boosting language skills.

As education's reliance on digital technology grows, the significance of this issue becomes clearer. Without a basic grasp of how to use it successfully, learners may miss crucial learning opportunities (Chew & Cerbin, 2021). On the other side, English proficiency is required for worldwide communication and academic success. Failure to develop this talent optimally may impact future possibilities (Islam & Stapa, 2021). Therefore, a deeper understanding of successful learning processes in utilising digital technology is required.

Self-directed informal digital learning provides a variety of benefits for language development (Morris & Rohs, 2023). This technique allows students to access authentic materials that represent real-life language use. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all activities that can develop together. Furthermore, digital platforms facilitate engagement, feedback, and language practice in meaningful circumstances. This strategy is excellent for modern learners due to its flexibility in terms of time and place.

In practical terms, this form of learning positions students as the primary agents in the learning process (Cukurova, 2025). They are no longer completely reliant on formal teaching and are accountable for their own development. The use of learning methodologies tailored to individual requirements and preferences increases motivation and engagement. This scenario eventually results in more optimal learning outcomes. The combination of autonomy and technology results in a more dynamic and efficient learning environment (Melliti & Henchiri, 2024).

This study employs multiple relevant learning theories to explain the behaviour. First, Ju Seong Lee's IDLE idea emphasises learners' engagement in self-initiated English learning activities using digital technology outside of formal classroom settings. This notion emphasises the significance of authentic digital contact and learner participation in improving language competency. Second, David Little's Learner Autonomy Theory proposes that learners accept responsibility for planning, monitoring, and assessing their own learning processes (Rasyid, 2021). Third, David A. Kolb established Experiential Learning Theory, which posits that learning occurs through cycles of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and application (Passarelli & Kolb, 2023). In digital learning environments, learners constantly develop knowledge through direct engagement with digital content and online conversation. Furthermore, Dell Hymes' Communicative Competence Theory emphasises that language proficiency includes not only grammatical knowledge, but also the capacity to utilise language correctly in social communication circumstances (Dara et al., 2024). These ideas, taken

together, provide a solid theoretical foundation for understanding how self-directed informal digital learning activities contribute to the development of English competency (Zainuddin et al., 2019).

Previous research has looked at informal digital learning of English (IDLE) from a variety of angles; nonetheless, numerous constraints remain. A study by Rani Rahmawati (2019) for example, concentrated primarily on speaking skills without considering total language competency. Meanwhile, Azwar (2025) focused on a single digital platform, which does not represent the range of learning activities. Other studies, such as those conducted by Arif Nugroho (2021), prefers to emphasise teachers' viewpoints above students' real activities. Additionally, studies such as Iin Almeina Loebis (2025) emphasize specific tools, while Yi Zheng (2023) focuses on the relationships between variables. These settings suggest that study into how students manage and implement self-directed digital learning in their daily lives remains insufficient. As a result, this study aims to address that vacuum by investigating the nature and activities of self-directed informal digital English learning, as well as its impact to overall English proficiency.

This study is supposed to be conducted among university students who actively use digital technology in their daily lives. This group was chosen because they have extensive access to digital devices and are expected to develop independent learning abilities. These settings enable more authentic monitoring of self-directed learning methods. As a result, this study is likely to provide a more complete knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation.

This topic was chosen because it is relevant to current educational advances, which place an increasing emphasis on the integration of technology and learner autonomy. Understanding how learners use digital platforms on their own can help educators create more effective learning practices. Furthermore, the study's findings are expected to have practical consequences for both students and teachers in terms of optimising the use of technology to improve English proficiency. As a result, this work has great value and warrants additional exploration.

METHOD

The study used a qualitative method with a descriptive design to acquire a thorough grasp of the phenomenon (Dwi Saputra et al., 2025). This approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to investigate students' experiences and viewpoints directly. This study focuses on self-directed informal digital English learning that occurs outside of the regular classroom context. This approach allows the researcher to collect detailed data that reflects real-life settings. Furthermore, it allows the researcher to see how pupils learn from their own experiences. The descriptive design is used to clearly and consistently characterise learning activities (Villamin et al., 2025). As a result of that, this approach is deemed the best fit for achieving the study's objectives.

This study's population comprises of students who learn English through digital technologies. The sample consists of 10 junior-level students from Zainul Hasan Genggong Islamic University. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants based on specified characteristics relevant to the research (Obilor, 2023). In this case, the selected students were fourth-semester students who actively participated in self-directed digital English learning activities outside of the classroom, such as watching English videos, using language learning apps, listening to podcasts, and interacting in English on social media. Furthermore, the participants' academic achievement and classroom involvement were used to determine their intermediate English proficiency level. Junior pupils were chosen since they are in an adaptation phase and prefer to explore novel learning approaches (Cameron & Rideout, 2022). A researcher can go deeper into the data because there are fewer participants. As a result, the selected sample is deemed relevant and consistent with the research objectives.

In this study, the researcher serves as the primary data collector. The researcher directly observed and interviewed the subjects. In addition, a semi-structured interview guide was used to keep the questions focused on the students' learning experiences, digital learning

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activities, goals, and techniques for learning English independently. An observation checklist was also utilised to assess students' learning behaviours, the types of digital platforms they used, and their patterns of participation in informal digital learning activities. Observations were done to investigate how pupils learn in real-world settings. The researcher also gathered data, including screenshots, learning notes, and evidence of digital learning activities. All of these data sources complement one another. This method ensures that the data obtained is complete and comprehensive.

The research began by choosing volunteers who satisfied the defined criteria. After that, the researcher observed the students' learning activities. Next, interviews were conducted to learn about the individuals' experiences and perspectives. The researcher also gathered paperwork as supporting evidence. All data were gathered in an organised and regular manner. The data gathering method lasted around two months, allowing the researcher to constantly observe participants' learning activities and get more detailed information. This procedure was carried out in stages to assure the accuracy of the findings.

The acquired data was then analysed qualitatively. The initial step was to transcribe the interview results and organise the data carefully (Wong et al., 2023). Following that, data from observations, interviews, and documentation were compiled and reviewed together. The researcher then coded by finding key statements and labelling pertinent information on students' digital learning activities, techniques, motivations, and experiences. Following the coding procedure, comparable codes were classified into larger categories. These categories were then expanded into various themes that highlighted the major trends discovered in the data. To acquire a better grasp of the topic under investigation, the researcher discovered themes' linkages and meanings. The researcher found patterns, themes, and linkages in the data. The analysis method was carried out continually during the investigation. This allowed the researcher to obtain a better comprehension of the data. As conclusion, the findings offer a clear explanation of the phenomenon under investigation.

The study's data analysis technique is the interactive model, which is divided into three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Asipi et al., 2022). Data reduction involves identifying useful data while removing irrelevant information. During this stage, the researcher concentrated on data about self-directed informal digital learning activities and English proficiency development. To make data easier to interpret, it is presented in the form of thematic groups. Following that, conclusions are derived from the analysed data. These findings are then validated by comparing various data sources. This step is repeated to verify accuracy. As a result, the study's findings are both clear and trustworthy.

Data validity is verified in order to retain the credibility of the results. The researcher used four criteria: believability, transferability, reliability, and confirmability (Megheirkouni & Moir, 2023). Credibility was established by triangulation, which involved comparing facts from interviews, observations, and documentation. Transferability was guaranteed by including thorough explanations that allow the findings to be applied to different contexts. Dependability relates to the consistency of the research process, whereas confirmability assures that the findings are founded on acquired data rather than researcher bias. These procedures are used to validate the findings. Hence, this investigation can be scientifically justified.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The Nature of Self-Directed Informal Digital Learning

The findings show that students engage in self-directed informal digital learning (IDLE) in a flexible and autonomous manner. According to interview data, the majority of participants said they don't have a set timetable for learning English, but instead rely on their interests and everyday digital activity. These findings indicate that students' learning patterns can be broadly classified into spontaneous and planned learning behaviours. This is demonstrated by several responders who emphasised the spontaneous nature of their

learning. For example, P1 indicated that learning occurs when English content arrives on TikTok, whereas P2 stated that she chooses information based on her preferences, such as videos and music.

Similarly, P3, P6, and P7 stated that they frequently encounter English information while browsing social media and attempt to understand it. P8 also confirmed that learning often happens unconsciously during normal internet activity. These replies imply that spontaneous learning occurs frequently through accidentally exposure to English text in digital environments.

Furthermore, P9 and P10 stated that they typically choose content based on their interests, while they do occasionally purposefully select items to support their learning objectives. These comments demonstrate that learning is frequently inadvertent and seamlessly interwoven into daily digital engagement. However, not every student relies solely on spontaneity. P4 and P5 used a more systematic approach, determining what to learn in advance. Similarly, P10 stated that she sometimes actively seeks out English content rather than waiting for it to come. This planned learning pattern demonstrates students' understanding of organising their own learning activities based on their goals and needs. These findings imply that learner autonomy occurs on a continuum, from spontaneous involvement to more deliberate and intentional learning. As an outcome, the nature of IDLE can be described as flexible, interest-driven, and variable in terms of planning.

Students identified both inner and extrinsic motivational elements. Based on the question on learning motivation, P2 and P8 stated that they want to develop their communication abilities and understand global topics. Meanwhile, P5 and P7 emphasised how technology can make learning more accessible and practical. P9 also identified academic needs as a motivating element. These comments suggest that motivation is an important factor in determining how students engage in self-directed digital learning. Intrinsic motivation, such as personal interest and curiosity, appears to promote ongoing engagement with English content, whereas extrinsic motivation is associated with academic and communicative needs. Thus, the nature of IDLE is not only adaptable but also heavily influenced by learners' aims and personal interests.

Students' Learning Activities in Digital Environments

The data indicate that students participate in a variety of digital learning activities across numerous platforms. Participants said they used platforms like YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Google, Duolingo, and ChatGPT. For example, P1 and P6 described utilising Duolingo and TikTok, whereas P2 and P8 reported using YouTube, Instagram, and Google to watch videos, listen to music, read articles, and leave comments. Similarly, P9 highlighted more structured activities, such as listening to YouTube, shadowing on TikTok, and writing with ChatGPT. P3 and P7 also reported using films, songs, and vocabulary apps to promote their learning, while P10 emphasised the usage of subtitles to improve comprehension. These data suggest that students integrate entertainment-based activities with intentional learning methods in their digital surroundings.

Students reported a variety of listening and speaking tactics, including viewing videos, shadowing, and recounting topics. For example, P1 and P6 claimed that watching English movies allows them to get more comfortable with native pronunciation and intonation. P5 and P9 discussed shadowing to emulate native speakers, whereas P3 recommended repeating stories to develop speaking skills. P7 also reported practice listening to songs and then repeating the information orally. These activities demonstrate that students actively engage with actual language input and improve their speaking skills through imitation and repetition. The findings indicate that listening and speaking abilities are primarily acquired by frequent exposure to real English content and oral practice exercises.

Students displayed meaningful learning practices in both reading and writing. P1, P2, and P8 indicated that reading allows them to learn new language and better understand texts. P5 and P9 also use digital tools like ChatGPT to improve their writing correctness and grammar. P3 and P7 practice writing by rewriting what they hear, while P10 stated that subtitles help her recognise language and sentence structures. These findings indicate that

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digital settings promote both receptive and productive skills. However, most children tend to prioritise receptive skills like listening and reading, while productive skills are performed less frequently. This suggests that pupils are more comfortable accepting language input than actively producing language output in digital learning settings.

The Contribution of Self-Directed Informal Digital Learning to English Proficiency

The findings show that self-directed informal digital learning improves students' English ability, while the extent of improvement varies by individual. According to student feedback, growth is mostly shown in improved comprehension, vocabulary development, and enhanced speaking confidence. For example, P1, P6, and P10 reported that they notice improvement when they can better understand English content. P2 and P8 showed enhanced speaking confidence, whereas P9 claimed the ability to understand content without subtitles and communicate more effectively. These replies indicate that consistent exposure to authentic language aids in the development of communicative competence. Furthermore, consistent interaction with English text appears to improve pupils' vocabulary knowledge and listening comprehension abilities.

However, some problems were discovered. P3 and P7 expressed a lack of desire and lethargy, which they attempted to address through peer support. P2 and P8 indicated a restricted vocabulary and difficulty understanding sentences, whilst P5 and P9 emphasised inconsistencies in learning. P10 also mentioned the difficulty in comprehending spoken English without subtitles. These data suggest that exposure alone is insufficient to achieve optimal learning outcomes. To reap the full benefits of IDLE, students must maintain consistency, employ suitable tactics, and be highly motivated. The data also suggest that self-directed learning necessitates self-regulation and ongoing involvement in order to result in considerable language improvement.

Overall, our data indicate that, while digital technology provides several chances for language acquisition, its efficacy is determined by how students use it. Self-directed informal digital learning has the potential to significantly improve English proficiency, but it takes active participation, learning awareness, and persistent practice. To attain the best results, effective learning methodologies must be used in conjunction with the integration of technology and learner autonomy. These findings support the notion that digital learning environments can help learners improve English proficiency when they actively participate and manage their learning autonomously.

Discussion

The discussion suggests that students engage in self-directed informal digital learning (IDLE) in a flexible and autonomous manner. According to the interview data, most participants do not have a set timetable for learning English; instead, they rely on their hobbies and everyday digital activities. This implies that learning is frequently spontaneous and entrenched in everyday online behaviour, rather than formally structured. Several students said that they learn when English content arrives on sites like TikTok, while others choose content based on their personal interests, such as films and music. In many situations, students come upon English information while browsing social media and try to grasp it, demonstrating that learning occurs accidentally.

However, not all students rely solely on spontaneity; some take a more planned approach, determining in advance what they want to learn. This suggests that learner autonomy occurs on a continuum, from spontaneous participation to more planned and intentional learning. Furthermore, motivation is important, as students are driven by variables such as increasing communication skills, academic needs, and the availability of digital technologies.

Based on a discussion, students engage in a variety of digital learning activities across platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Google, Duolingo, and ChatGPT. These platforms offer opportunity to watch films, listen to music, read texts, and practice writing, all of which help with language exposure and skill development. In terms of listening and speaking, students frequently use tactics like viewing films, shadowing, and recounting

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information to become comfortable with native pronunciation and improve their speaking abilities through imitation and repetition. In addition, students engage in reading and writing tasks such as reading subtitles, articles, and writing comments or short paragraphs. Some students use digital tools to verify grammar and enhance writing accuracy, demonstrating active participation in the learning process.

On the other hand, skill development is imbalanced, with most students focusing on receptive skills such as listening and reading. Productive abilities, such as speaking and writing, are practiced less frequently, indicating that participation in digital learning is typically selective. As a result, the success of these activities is determined not only by their availability, but also by how actively students use them.

Furthermore, the debate shows that self-directed informal digital learning improves students' English ability, especially in terms of vocabulary acquisition, comprehension, and speaking confidence. Many students indicate that they can better understand English content and feel more confidence using the language in everyday communication. This shows that consistent exposure to authentic language is critical for developing communicative ability in a natural and meaningful way. However, other obstacles arise, including a lack of vocabulary, consistency, and drive. Some pupils have trouble understanding spoken English without subtitles, indicating a dependency on certain learning assistance. These data indicate that exposure alone is insufficient to achieve optimal learning outcomes. To achieve the most benefits from digital learning, students must practice consistently, employ suitable tactics, and be highly motivated. Overall, while IDLE has great promise for language development, its success is ultimately determined by how well students manage, regulate, and sustain their own learning processes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that self-directed informal digital learning (IDLE) plays a significant role in improving students' English proficiency by enabling flexible, independent, and interest-based learning through digital platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, and other online media. The findings reveal that students frequently engage in receptive language activities, especially listening and reading, while productive skills are less actively practiced. The effectiveness of IDLE is influenced by learners' motivation, consistency, self-regulation, and level of learner autonomy, which range from spontaneous digital exposure to more structured and goal-oriented learning practices. These results demonstrate that everyday digital activities can become meaningful language learning environments that support communicative competence and autonomous learning development when accompanied by appropriate learning strategies. Therefore, IDLE can function as a valuable complement to formal language learning. The study also suggests that teachers and educational institutions should encourage balanced language skill practice, digital literacy, and learner autonomy by integrating digital platforms into classroom learning. Nevertheless, the study is limited by its small sample size, specific institutional setting, and reliance on self-reported data, which may reduce the generalizability and accuracy of the findings. Consequently, future research should involve more diverse participants, apply mixed-method approaches, and further investigate long-term impacts of IDLE as well as strategies to enhance productive language skills in digital learning contexts.

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