A Study of Learner-Initiated Engagement in Informal English Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This preliminary study aims to determine the level of exposure to English beyond the classroom among ESL learners. A total of 117 learners from various faculties at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) participated in this survey. The survey was designed to gather detailed insights into the learners' exposure to learning English outside of classroom hours, focusing on the four essential language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The survey collected demographic information and assessed learners' informal English activities. A series of questionnaires were used to collect data on the frequency, context, and intensity with which the learners used English. The results show that the learners gained exposure to all four language skills. Findings suggest consistent and varied exposure to informal English activities in different contexts is crucial for learners to reinforce and improve their language skills, resulting in enhanced language acquisition. By analysing responses to these questions, researchers can gain valuable insights into learners' exposure to these informal English activities and their impact on language proficiency.

Keywords—Exposure; informal; skills; acquisition; proficiency

INTRODUCTION

The concept of language exposure is fundamental to understanding second language acquisition (SLA) (Ellis & Laporte, 1997). Language exposure encompasses the diverse ways in which individuals encounter a language, facilitating the internalization of its structural and functional aspects (Al-Zoubi, 2018). Such exposure may occur through multiple modes of interaction—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—each contributing uniquely to the development of linguistic competence. These activities take place across diverse contexts, ranging from formal educational environments to informal, everyday encounters (StudySmarter, 2023). Furthermore, the nature and effectiveness of language exposure are mediated by the channels through which it occurs, including print materials, digital platforms, and face-to-face communication. For English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, exposure to English extends beyond the classroom and encompasses both structured and unstructured learning contexts. In formal settings, such as classroom-based instruction, learners engage with systematically designed lessons that promote explicit language learning. In contrast, informal exposure is more fluid and occurs outside institutional frameworks—through social interaction, engagement with media, and participation in environments where English is actively used (Al-Zoubi, 2018). Collectively, these experiences play a crucial role in shaping learners' linguistic proficiency and communicative competence.

Review Of Related Literature

This research specifically aims to highlight the importance of informal language exposure, which refers to language practice occurring beyond the confines of the classroom. Informal exposure typically takes place in naturalistic settings, such as through conversations with native speakers, watching television shows or movies, engaging with social media, playing online games, or navigating the internet (Lee & Dressman, 2018). These activities provide learners with authentic and meaningful contexts for language use, thereby promoting deeper linguistic and pragmatic competence. Informal language exposure enables learners to observe the target language in real-world situations, helping them understand how it functions across different communicative contexts (Benson & Reinders, 2011). For instance, an English as a Second Language (ESL) learner who frequently listens

to unscripted podcasts or participates in online chatrooms may encounter idiomatic expressions, slang, and diverse accents that are seldom emphasized in formal instruction (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016).

This type of informal learning fosters spontaneous and fluid use of English, which contributes to the development of greater fluency and communicative confidence (Lee, 2019). Moreover, informal activities are inherently less structured and often require learners to adapt to unpredictable situations, making them especially valuable for developing listening comprehension and speaking proficiency (Reinders & Benson, 2017).

The Gap in Research on Informal Exposure

Despite the recognition that language exposure plays a key role in language acquisition, a significant gap remains in research, particularly concerning the impact of informal language exposure. Much of the existing research on language learning focuses predominantly on structured, classroom-based instruction (Nation & Macalister, 2021). In contrast, research on informal exposure—learning that occurs beyond formal educational settings—has been comparatively limited (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). Consequently, there is still a limited understanding of how different types of exposure, whether through media, interpersonal interaction, or other non-academic experiences, influence learners' overall language proficiency (Lee, 2019).

Given the rapid expansion of digital media and the increasing role of informal online communication, this research gap warrants closer examination. Digital environments such as social media, blogs, online gaming, and content streaming platforms offer rich opportunities for authentic language engagement and spontaneous communication (Lee & Dressman, 2018; Reinders & Benson, 2017). These platforms enable learners to encounter naturalistic language input, negotiate meaning in real time, and develop pragmatic awareness—elements often underemphasized in formal classroom settings (Benson, 2021). Therefore, understanding how such informal and technology-mediated spaces contribute to language learning, alongside traditional instructional approaches, is crucial for designing more holistic and effective language education strategies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this research is to examine the level of exposure to English that ESL learners experience through digital media, specifically via the Internet. This includes analysing exposure to various types and frequency of English content learners encounter in their daily lives. The study focuses on three key areas of language exposure:

1. Written English: This refers to learners' exposure to written English in digital formats, including websites, social media posts, online articles, and digital books. Written content provides valuable input in terms of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and writing styles, all of which are essential for language development.
2. Content and Materials in English: This encompasses a wider range of materials that learners may engage with in English, such as educational resources, YouTube videos, online courses, and other digital content. These materials often integrate written and spoken elements, offering learners comprehensive exposure to different modes of language use.
3. Unscripted Spoken English: This includes any form of spoken language that is not pre-planned, such as spontaneous conversations in social media platforms, voice chats in online games, or casual spoken interactions on platforms like Zoom, Skype, or social networking sites. Exposure to and participation in these unscripted exchanges help learners develop natural fluency and communicative competence by familiarizing them with authentic speech patterns and real-world communication.

Several studies have highlighted the importance of language exposure in second language acquisition. Azzolini et al. (2020) emphasised the role of informal language activities in enhancing English proficiency, noting that such activities provide real-world practice, reinforce language skills, and boost learners' confidence. Similarly, De Wilde et al. (2020b) found that learners improved significantly in language proficiency through engagement with digital media, such as gaming, social networking, and conversational use of English. Gass et al. (2015) also demonstrated that watching audiovisual materials with captions or subtitles in the target language enhances learners' comprehension and retention.

Collectively, these studies highlight the value of engaging with the language beyond formal educational settings. Varied forms of exposure provide learners with increased opportunities to practice their skills, deepen their understanding of language structures, and internalize the language through meaningful input. Frequent and diverse exposure thus strengthens learners' ability to absorb, retain, and effectively use the target language.

By investigating these three areas, the study aims to develop a deeper understanding of how learners engage with the English language outside the classroom and how these interactions can contribute to overall language proficiency. This research will address the need for comprehensive studies that explore both traditional, classroom-based learning and informal, digitally mediated forms of language exposure. In doing so, it will help fill the gap in understanding the various factors that influence second language acquisition.

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative approach to examine learners' exposure to English and its influence on language development. A survey served as the primary data collection instrument, and was designed to ensure reliability, validity, and clarity of the research items. The survey was structured to address three main objectives:

1. To examine the demographic profiles of the learners.
2. To explore the extent and nature of their engagement in informal English language activities.
3. To explore the extent and nature of their engagement in informal English language activities.
4. To assess learners' perceptions and attitudes regarding their exposure to English.

Research Participants

A total of 117 learners participated in the survey. The participants were selected from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), representing a diverse demographic in terms of age, academic level, and English proficiency. This diversity enabled the study to capture a broad spectrum of experiences and challenges related to English language learning.

Data Collection Instrument

The main research instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising both closed-ended and open-ended items. The closed-ended items were designed to collect quantitative data on the frequency, duration, and types of learners' informal engagement with English. Likert-scale questions and multiple-choice options were used to elicit standardized responses suitable for statistical analysis (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010).

The questionnaire consisted of four sections:

1. Demographic Background: Questions focused on learners' age, education level, and English proficiency.
2. Exposure to Written English: Assessed learners' online reading practices, including engagement with eBooks, online articles, websites, and social media platforms.
3. Exposure to English-Language Content: Examined learners' interaction with online materials such as videos, tutorials, and educational resources.
4. Exposure to Unscripted Spoken English: Evaluated learners' participation in online interactions, such as social media discussions on video calls, with particular attention to informal conversations with peers.

Online Survey Implementation

The questionnaire was administered as an online survey using Google Forms. This format ensured accessibility for participants and facilitated efficient data collection within a short timeframe. The survey link was distributed via institutional email lists and social media groups to maximize participation.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using the quantitative methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of

learners' informal English engagement. Data from the closed-ended questionnaire items were processed using statistical software such as SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and trend analyses, were computed to examine key aspects of language exposure. The analysis specifically focused on three dimensions: (a) the level of exposure to written and spoken English, (b) the frequency of interaction with online English-language content, and (c) the extent of learners' participation in unscripted English conversations (Dörnyei, 2007).

The methodology employed in this study ensures a comprehensive exploration of learners' engagement with English beyond formal instruction. By addressing learners' demographic background, levels of exposure, and learners' perceptions, the study provides valuable insights into the informal avenues that contribute to English language development. The structured approach and systematic analysis enhance the reliability and validity of the findings, thereby informing future pedagogical practices and curriculum design.

Results

The research team developed a questionnaire comprising both closed-ended and open-ended questions, which was subsequently converted into an online survey. The survey aimed to to gather information on learners' demographic backgrounds, their engagement in informal English language activities, and their perceptions and attitudes toward language exposure. Based on the collected responses, a descriptive analysis was conducted by calculating the frequencies and percentages of the quantitative data.

Table I Learners' Exposure to English Through Various Modes

Category	Key Findings / Statistics	Types of Exposure or Activity
Exposure to Written English	• 16.2% read 4–5 times/month • 14.5% once/month • 34.3% read part of a journal or magazine • 53.6% read hobby-related books • 42.7% comics • 31.6% adventure books • 51.3% subscribe to paid magazines	Books on hobbies, comics, adventure stories, magazines, journals
Exposure to Content and Materials in English	• 90.6% reported online English exposure improved skills • 82.1% use Internet daily • 60.7% use YouTube tutorials • 52.1% watch documentaries	YouTube tutorials, documentaries, grammar/pronunciation videos
Exposure to English via Digital Games	• 89.8% play 1–3 hours daily • 65% communicate with opponents in English	Online games (PUBG, Mobile Legends, GTA 5, Call of Duty, Counter-Strike)
Exposure to social media via the Internet	• 71.7% spend 1–3 hours daily • 82.9% follow English-speaking accounts • 17.9% do not use social media	Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, English-speaking influencers (e.g., English with Emma, Ariana Grande)
Exposure to English via Internet Tools	• 20.5% always use tools • 76.9% use digital tools overall	Duolingo, HelloTalk, Speaker Coach, Grammarly, Turnitin

Exposure to Unscripted Spoken English	• 47% always participate in English calls • 18.8% several times weekly • 50% listen daily • 30% several times weekly	Podcasts, vlogs, live streams, casual calls

Exposure to Written English

The survey findings indicate that learners' engagement with English-language reading materials varies in frequency and type. As shown in Table 1, most learners (16.2%) reported reading English-language materials four to five times per month, while 14.5% read once a month, and 34.3% read parts of journals or magazines. These results suggest a moderate yet consistent level of engagement with English-language reading outside the classroom, aligning with previous research on learners' reading behaviours. Reading habits play a crucial role in language acquisition, as they not only enhance vocabulary but also expose learners to diverse sentence structures and contextual language use (Anderson & Nagy, 1991).

The survey also examined the types of English books most frequently read by learners. Over half of the respondents (53.6%) reported reading books related to hobbies, which likely include genres such as self-help, non-fiction, and other interest-based texts. Reading for pleasure, particularly in personal meaningful areas, has been shown to enhance motivation, comprehension, and vocabulary retention (Grabe & Stoller, 2011). Additionally, 42.7% of learners reported reading comics—a form of literature that combines visual and textual elements, supporting the comprehension of idiomatic expressions and conversational language. Comics provide visual cues that aid in understanding the text, thereby improving overall reading comprehension (Van den Broek et al., 2006). Similarly, recent studies suggest that visual-based materials such as infographics, graphic novels, and mind maps can enhance students' reading engagement and comprehension (Bulut et al., 2024; Dougherty & Gregg, 2024; Retnaningtyas et al., 2024).

Furthermore, 31.6% of respondents mentioned reading adventure books, which can foster a deeper understanding of narrative structures and strengthen learners' ability to process complex storylines and vocabulary. A notable finding from the survey is that 51.3% of learners subscribe to paid magazines or periodicals, underscoring the value of subscription services in providing sustained access to authentic English-language materials. Such services offer learners continuous exposure to real-world English use through articles, stories, and features across diverse topics such as business, culture, and current events. This consistent engagement reinforces vocabulary development and contextual awareness.

Exposure to Content and Materials in English.

In today's digital age, learners increasingly rely on the Internet to improve their language skills, and the survey results highlight the significant role that online content plays in this process. As shown in Table 1, most learners (90.6%) indicated that exposure to English-language content online has helped them improve their English proficiency. Specific online activities include watching English-language tutorials and educational videos. This finding underscores the transformative impact of digital learning resources, which provide learners with diverse and easily accessible materials that supports both formal and informal language development.

The Internet has revolutionized language learning by offering interactive and authentic resources. According to Lai and Zhu (2015), integrating technology into language learning enhances engagement and motivation, particularly when learners use authentic materials such as videos, blogs, and online tutorials. These materials expose learners to real-world language use, which is essential for developing listening, vocabulary, and pronunciation skills. The survey findings reflect this trend, with 82.1% of respondents reporting that they use the Internet daily to access English-language content.

This demonstrates a growing reliance on online platforms as informal learning spaces where learners can immerse themselves in authentic English and improve their skills in real-life contexts. Only a small percentage of respondents rarely or never using the Internet for this purpose. Additionally, 60.7% of learners stated that

YouTube tutorials have contributed to their English language improvement. When asked about the types of tutorials they watch, 52.1% of respondents reported viewing documentaries, followed by educational video lectures, grammar lessons, and pronunciation videos. These preferences suggest that learners seek both informational and instructional content to develop their English proficiency. Documentaries, in particular, are valuable because they expose learners to authentic language in context, often covering a wide range of topics and offering insights into cultural nuances. This aligns with Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), which emphasises that exposure to comprehensible input—language slightly beyond a learner's current level but still understandable—can significantly accelerate language acquisition.

Exposure to English via Digital Games on the Internet

In recent years, digital gaming has emerged as a powerful tool for language learning, providing learners with immersive, interactive environments in which to engage with English. Research indicates that learners who participate in interactive, language-rich video games tend to demonstrate higher levels of second-language proficiency, particularly in vocabulary development and reading and listening comprehension.

Sundqvist (2024) recently emphasized that engagement in extramural English (EE) activities—including gaming—should be regarded as an individual-difference variable in second-language acquisition research, as it significantly influences proficiency outcomes. Even prior to formal schooling, learners who engage in extramural English activities, such as gaming or watching English-language media show stronger receptive vocabulary gains. As shown in Table 1, most learners (89.8%) reported spending one to three hours daily playing online digital games in English, underscoring the growing prominence of gaming as a medium for informal and enjoyable learning outside the classroom.

A particularly noteworthy finding from the survey is that 65% of learners reported communicating with opponents in English while playing digital games. This reflects the widespread use of gaming platforms as informal English-learning spaces and highlights the value of peer-to-peer communication in developing spoken fluency. Online multiplayer games—especially first-person shooters such as Call of Duty and Counter-Strike, and battle royale games such as PUBG—require real-time, collaborative interaction involving negotiation, cooperation, and competition. These interactions demand effective and spontaneous language use. The opportunity to communicate in real time with players from diverse linguistic backgrounds enhances learners' ability to understand various accents and speech patterns, while fostering greater confidence and fluency in spoken English.

Exposure to Social Media via the Internet

The growing role of social media platforms in language learning reflects a significant shift in how learners engage with the English language outside of traditional classroom environments. According to the survey, most learners reported using social media platforms in English in their daily interactions with WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok identified as the most frequently used. As shown in Table 1, 71.7% of learners spend between one and three hours per day on social media, while 17.9% reported not using social media at all.

A striking 82.9% of learners indicated that they follow English-speaking accounts on the Internet, such as celebrities, influencers, and content creators further highlighting the influential role of social media in language acquisition. Many participants reported following English-language influencers and celebrities including English with Emma, English Enjoyed with Thomas, Emma Chamberlain, and Ariana Grande. This pattern of engagement exposes learners to informal and authentic language use and enables them to stay attuned to real-time linguistic and cultural trends.

Exposure to English via Internet Tools

Based on Table 1, the survey found that 20.5% of learners consistently use language-learning applications, tools, or software to improve their English proficiency. Learners mentioned several tools, including Speaker Coach,

HelloTalk, and Duolingo. Overall, 76.9% of learners reported using Internet-based tools to enhance their English

skills. As Sundqvist and Sylvén (2016) note, digital tools can significantly expand learners' opportunities for extramural English practice—a finding that aligns with the present survey, in where nearly 77% of participants reported engaging with such resources.

However, some of these tools require paid subscriptions, which may limit access for certain learners. Several participants suggested that the university provide institutional subscriptions popular tools such as Oral Practice software, Duolingo Premium, Grammar Corrector, Grammarly Premium, and Turnitin. Prior research has shown that institutional access not only democratizes practice opportunities but also fosters sustained learner engagement (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Lai & Gu, 2011).

Exposure to Unscripted Spoken English

The survey also highlighted learners' engagement in unscripted English conversations, an important dimension of authentic language exposure. Based on Table 1, 47% of learners reported that they always participate in voice or video calls conducted in English, while an additional 18.8% engage in such conversations several times per week. Moreover, half of the participants (50%) indicated that they listen to unscripted spoken English daily, and another 30% do so several times a week. The most frequently cited contexts for these interactions include podcasts, online videos (such as vlogs and live streams), and casual conversations with native speakers.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study highlight the multiple ways learners engage with English beyond formal instruction, revealing that exposure occurs through reading, online content, digital games, social media, language-learning tools, and unscripted speech. Each form of engagement offers unique linguistic and cognitive benefits that contribute to learners' vocabulary growth, comprehension, fluency, and overall communicative competence.

Firstly, exposure to written English—through books, comics, magazines, and journals—plays a central role in vocabulary development and comprehension. Reading enables learners to encounter language in context, reinforcing grammar, collocation, and discourse patterns (Anderson & Nagy, 1991; Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Krashen, 1982; Van den Broek et al., 2006). Moreover, the integration of visual-based materials such as comics and infographics increases engagement and supports meaning-making through contextual and visual cues (Bulut et al., 2024; Dougherty & Gregg, 2024; Retnaningtyas et al., 2024). Regular exposure to authentic reading materials not only strengthens comprehension but also encourages autonomous reading habits, especially when learners select materials aligned with their interests.

This part of the survey highlights the significant role of reading materials and subscription services in learners' English language development. By engaging with English-language materials—whether hobby-based books, comics, adventure stories, or periodicals—learners not only improve their vocabulary and comprehension skills but also stay connected to real-world English usage. The fact that most learners subscribe to paid magazines or periodicals suggests that subscription-based resources are an important tool for supporting their language learning outside of formal education. To maximize the benefits of these reading habits, learners should aim for more consistent exposure and diverse reading materials, including academic and professional content, to further enhance their language proficiency.

Secondly, digital and online content—including YouTube tutorials and documentaries—provides multimodal input that supports pronunciation, listening, and vocabulary development (Lai & Zhu, 2015; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). According to Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, comprehensible input from authentic media can significantly enhance acquisition by allowing learners to internalize natural language patterns. Recent studies (Zulaefa & Rizal, 2023; Rahmawati et al., 2024; Hasan, 2025) also show that digital exposure encourages self-paced and autonomous learning, enabling learners to engage with content that matches their proficiency level and personal interests.

The survey also highlights YouTube tutorials as a key tool for learning English. Vandergrift and Goh (2012) emphasized that multimodal learning—the integration of visual, auditory, and textual inputs—is a powerful method for second-language acquisition. YouTube exemplifies this model, enabling learners to hear native

speakers, observe contextual cues, and follow subtitles. Its interactive nature allows learners to pause, rewind, and replay content, promoting self-paced and personalized learning. This self-paced approach is particularly beneficial for non-native speakers, as it provides flexibility to focus on areas that require additional practice or reinforcement. Furthermore, YouTube's visual content helps learners connect new vocabulary with real-world contexts, improving their ability to remember and use new words effectively (Hasan, 2025; Yuyun & Simamora, 2021). Overall, the findings illustrate that digital platforms—particularly YouTube and other educational video resources—serve as powerful tools for informal English learning. By engaging with authentic, multimodal materials, learners gain increased exposure to natural English input, leading to measurable improvements in their listening, vocabulary, and overall language competence.

Thirdly, digital gaming environments offer highly interactive opportunities for language use. Through games such as PUBG, Mobile Legends, and Call of Duty, learners engage in authentic communication, collaboration, and negotiation of meaning. Such activities promote not only vocabulary and listening comprehension but also pragmatic awareness and confidence in real-time conversation (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2012, 2016, 2024; Gee, 2003; Ardianto et al., 2025; Mohd Tap et al., 2024; Squire, 2003). As Gee (2003) and Squire (2003) argue, gaming constitutes a form of situated learning where language is used purposefully to achieve goals, reinforcing both linguistic and cognitive development.

Learners in this study reported engaging with popular games such as PUBG, Mobile Legends, GTA 5, Call of Duty, and Counter-Strike. Through interactions involving game narratives, instructions, and team communication, learners are exposed to a wide range of vocabulary, including idiomatic expressions and slang that are often difficult to acquire through traditional classroom methods. Many of these games feature complex storylines and scenarios that require strategic decision-making, thereby fostering not only language comprehension but also problem-solving and critical-thinking skills (Squire, 2003; Supramaniam & Wan Shahirah, 2022; Snigdha & Debnath, 2024) Previous studies further demonstrate that multiplayer and narrative-driven games promote authentic interaction, peer collaboration, and spontaneous language use, creating immersive contexts for incidental vocabulary acquisition and pragmatic competence development (Ardianto et al., 2025; Mohd Tap, Abdul Samat, & Abdullah, 2024). These digital environments encourage learners to use English meaningfully and purposefully, mirroring the communicative conditions found in real-world language use.

The survey findings highlight the growing influence of digital games as a tool for language acquisition, demonstrating that gaming platforms have become an increasingly popular and effective means for learners to improve their English skills. Spending on to three hours daily on online games exposes learners to a rich array of language, from formal instructions to informal conversations with other players. By engaging with these games learners not only improve their vocabulary and grammar but also develop their listening, speaking, and social communication skills in a dynamic, real-world contexts. As digital games continue to grow in popularity, they will likely remain a valuable tool in the language learning process, offering an enjoyable and effective means of acquiring English in a social, immersive environment.

Exposure through social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and WhatsApp further contributes to informal and authentic language learning. Following English-speaking influencers and interacting in online spaces provide learners with continuous contact with contemporary English usage, including slang and idiomatic expressions (Thorne, 2008; Chen & Tsai, 2022; Al-Ghazali, 2021). Such informal learning contexts bridge the gap between formal classroom instruction and real-world communication, helping learners develop pragmatic competence and cultural awareness (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Social media platforms offer a multimodal environment in which learners can engage simultaneously with written text, spoken language, and visual cues, creating rich opportunities for contextualized learning. This multimodal input supports vocabulary development, listening comprehension, and pragmatic awareness, aligning with previous studies that emphasize the importance of authentic, interactive content for second-language acquisition in digital spaces (Reinhardt, 2020; Sundqvist, 2024). Through consistent interaction with English-language content and communities online, learners develop not only linguistic competence but also intercultural awareness and confidence in real-world communication.

The use of internet-based language-learning tools such as Duolingo, HelloTalk, and Grammarly illustrates the

growing importance of technology-mediated autonomous learning. These tools offer instant feedback, personalized learning paths, and adaptive content that cater to individual learner needs (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Reinders & Benson, 2017; Lai & Gu, 2011; Zhang & Lee, 2023). However, as Sundqvist and Sylvén (2016) emphasize, the effectiveness of these tools depends on regular use and learner motivation. Institutional support—through guided integration into coursework and equitable access to premium tools—can enhance the sustainability and inclusiveness of such learning opportunities.

By investing in these resources, the university could enhance equitable access to both structured and informal English-learning opportunities. Reinders and Benson (2017) emphasize that promoting autonomous learning through technology requires not only the availability of tools but also their guided integration into learners' routines. Recent studies reinforce this perspective, showing that while learners may have access to digital materials, without sufficient scaffolding, training, and curricular integration, the benefits of autonomous learning remain limited (Lai et al., 2024; Zhang & Lee, 2023). Ensuring both access and pedagogical support is therefore essential to fully realize the potential of digital language-learning tools.

Finally, frequent engagement with unscripted spoken English through podcasts, vlogs, and voice or video calls plays a vital role in developing listening fluency and communicative confidence. Authentic spoken input exposes learners to natural speech patterns, accents, and discourse markers, which are often absent in scripted or textbook materials (Gilmore, 2011; Wagner, 2014). Consistent with Sundqvist and Sylvén (2016), learners who actively participate in authentic communicative situations demonstrate greater fluency and pragmatic competence, reflecting the benefits of experiential language use.

These findings align with Gilmore's (2011) assertion that authentic, unmodified speech—often encountered in digital and social communication spaces—provides rich linguistic input that fosters pragmatic awareness, vocabulary development, and listening fluency. Consistent with Wagner's (2014) findings, regular engagement with spontaneous speech enhances learners' listening comprehension and adaptability in conversational contexts. The high participation rates observed in this study therefore suggest that learners are effectively leveraging diverse, informal opportunities to strengthen their oral proficiency and communicative competence beyond the classroom.

In summary, the results underscore that meaningful exposure to English across diverse contexts—both structured and informal—is fundamental for comprehensive language development. The combination of reading, digital media engagement, gaming, social networking, and interactive technology creates a rich linguistic environment that promotes motivation, autonomy, and balanced skill growth. For educators, these findings highlight the importance of integrating authentic materials and digital tools into instruction while encouraging learners to sustain their exposure to English beyond the classroom.

Implications and and Suggestions for Further Research

The findings suggest several important implications for English language instruction. Learners' engagement with English reading materials indicates that teachers should integrate authentic texts—such as comics, magazines, and hobby-related articles—into classroom activities to align instruction with students' real-world literacy practices. Such materials support vocabulary development, comprehension, and reading motivation (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Elturki & Harmon, 2020).

The frequent use of digital platforms such as YouTube and online tutorials highlights the value of incorporating multimedia resources into teaching. Short videos and online materials can strengthen listening, pronunciation, and contextual understanding while promoting multimodal literacy (Lai & Zhu, 2015; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Similarly, learners' engagement with digital games and social media underscores the pedagogical potential of gamified learning and online communication, which enhance collaboration, engagement, and intercultural awareness (Gee, 2003; Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016; Thorne, 2008; Chen & Tsai, 2022).

Moreover, the widespread use of digital learning tools such as Duolingo and Grammarly emphasizes the importance of teacher guidance to ensure effective use and foster learner autonomy (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Reinders & Benson, 2017). By connecting classroom instruction with learners' extramural English practices,

educators can cultivate more authentic, engaging, and learner-centered environments that promote lifelong language learning (Sundqvist, 2024; Krashen, 1982).

Future research could investigate the long-term effects of sustained engagement with authentic reading and digital materials on vocabulary acquisition, comprehension, and learner autonomy. Longitudinal and comparative studies could also explore how different text types—such as visual-based versus academic materials—shape motivation and comprehension strategies. In addition, examining how subscription-based and digital reading platforms influence learners' exposure, engagement, and proficiency would provide valuable insights. Expanding such research across varied learner populations and proficiency levels would deepen understanding of how authentic and technology-mediated learning experiences contribute to long-term English language development.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, while classroom exposure remains a cornerstone of language learning, this study demonstrates that informal exposure through digital media and everyday interactions is an equally critical factor in shaping learners' language proficiency. Engagement in informal English activities—such as using mobile applications, accessing online resources, participating in digital conversations, and consuming media content—provides learners with authentic, meaningful, and context-rich opportunities to practice language beyond structured lessons. These experiences not only reinforce vocabulary and grammar knowledge but also enhance listening comprehension, speaking fluency, and pragmatic awareness.

The findings indicate that informal exposure significantly contributes to learners' confidence and autonomy, fostering a self-directed and sustainable approach to language acquisition. Moreover, it bridges the gap between classroom knowledge and real-world application, enabling learners to internalize language use across diverse communicative contexts. This research offers a nuanced understanding of how informal language activities, particularly those conducted outside the classroom, support the development of language skills. It underscores the pedagogical value of integrating both formal and informal exposure strategies within language learning curricula. By recognizing and incorporating learners' out-of-class practices, educators and institutions can create more holistic, flexible, and impactful learning environments that reflect the realities of language use in today's digitally connected world.

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