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# Gaining Qualitative Insights Into Learners' Experiences And Perceptions Of Digital Activities For English Language Learning

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## Abstract

The integration of digital activities into language learning has transformed traditional instructional methods, increasing engagement and interactivity. This study explores the experiences and perceptions of fourth-semester students in the English Education program at State Islamic University Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu regarding the use of digital tools for language acquisition. Employing a qualitative research design, the study investigates students' evaluations of digital resources, their perceived benefits, and the challenges they encounter. Findings reveal that students frequently utilize digital tools such as educational videos, online reading platforms, and social media to enhance vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and interactive language practice. Digital activities, particularly those incorporating gamification, are perceived as engaging and motivating. However, students also identify key challenges, including a lack of structured guidance, limited feedback, and technological barriers such as poor internet connectivity. While digital tools effectively support receptive skills (listening and reading), their impact on productive skills (speaking and writing) is limited without instructor support. This study contributes to research on digital learning by highlighting both its pedagogical advantages and constraints. The findings emphasize the need for structured pedagogical interventions, such as blended learning models that integrate digital tools with instructor-led guidance and feedback. Addressing technological barriers is also crucial to ensuring equitable access to digital learning resources. Future research should examine the long-term effects of digital learning on productive language skills and explore strategies for optimizing digital learning outcomes. By understanding students' experiences, educators and institutions can refine digital learning approaches to enhance engagement and language acquisition.

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## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of digital technology has profoundly transformed the landscape of language learning, offering new opportunities for students to engage with linguistic content in dynamic and interactive ways. No longer confined to traditional classroom settings, learners today navigate a digital ecosystem where educational videos, online games, social media, and digital reading materials serve as integral components of language acquisition. Warschauer (2018) posits that technology is not merely a supplementary tool but a catalyst for reshaping how students interact with language, fostering collaboration and new communicative modes. As digital tools continue to permeate English language education, their potential to enhance student engagement and facilitate personalized learning remains a subject of academic inquiry.

Despite the growing prevalence of digital learning tools, research into students' firsthand experiences and perceptions of these technologies remains limited. While numerous studies have examined the general advantages of digital tools—such as increased motivation and accessibility (Pham & Hanh, 2023)—fewer investigations have explored how learners evaluate the effectiveness of specific digital activities in their language learning process. Understanding these perspectives is crucial, as Prensky (2001) argues that today's students—often referred to as digital natives—require pedagogical adaptations that align with their learning preferences. Moreover, as Reinders and Hubbard (2013) emphasize, digital learning environments must be structured to empower students, providing meaningful interaction and autonomy in their learning journey. Without a nuanced understanding of students' experiences, educators risk implementing digital strategies that fail to optimize learning outcomes.

This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the experiences and perceptions of fourth-semester students in the English Education program at State Islamic University Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu regarding the use of digital activities for language learning. As a higher education institution that integrates technology into its language instruction, this university provides an ideal setting to explore how digital tools influence student engagement and language skill development. While digital learning offers many advantages, its effectiveness is contingent on pedagogical strategies that maximize its benefits (Blake, 2016). Thus, it is essential to assess not only the availability of digital tools but also their practical application in fostering language acquisition.

To achieve this, the study is guided by three key research questions: (1) How do fourth-semester students in the English Education program at State Islamic University Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu experience and perceive the use of digital activities in language learning? (2) In what ways do students evaluate the effectiveness of different types of digital activities (e.g., educational videos, online games, social media, and online reading) in improving their language skills? (3) What benefits and challenges do students encounter when integrating digital activities into their language learning process? Addressing these questions will provide valuable insights into how digital learning activities shape students' educational experiences and outcomes.

By analyzing student perspectives, this research contributes to the broader discourse on digital pedagogy in language education. As Levy and Hubbard (2005) highlight, successful technology integration is not solely dependent on the tools themselves but on how learners perceive their utility and relevance. The findings of this study will inform educators and curriculum designers on best practices for leveraging digital activities in language instruction, ensuring that these tools align with

student needs and learning objectives. Furthermore, the study's insights will be relevant beyond the context of State Islamic University Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu, offering implications for similar educational settings that incorporate digital learning strategies.

Through a qualitative exploration of student experiences, this research seeks to bridge the gap between the theoretical potential of digital learning and its practical implementation in language education. As Chapelle (2010) asserts, the challenge for language educators is not merely to use technology but to deploy it in ways that foster deeper learning and meaningful language use. By shedding light on students' perspectives, this study aspires to enhance the effectiveness of digital pedagogy, ensuring that technology serves as a facilitator rather than a barrier to language acquisition.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Educational technology and digital tools have significantly transformed language education by offering innovative teaching and learning approaches. As technology continues to evolve, understanding its role in language acquisition, learner engagement, and perceptions of effectiveness becomes crucial. This section critically examines existing research on digital tools in language education, particularly in higher education contexts, with a focus on first-semester students. The review synthesizes relevant literature to identify key trends, contradictions, and gaps, providing a foundation for the present study.

### **Impact of Digital Tools on Language Acquisition**

Educational technology encompasses a wide range of digital tools designed to enhance language learning through interactive and multimedia platforms (Chen & Chen, 2019; Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). Research highlights that digital tools such as educational videos, online games, social media platforms, and online reading materials create authentic language-learning contexts, promoting both receptive and productive skills (Hwang & Hsueh, 2020; Peterson, 2019). These tools encourage active engagement, foster meaningful practice, and contribute to improvements in proficiency and fluency.

Despite these benefits, some studies point to potential limitations. While digital tools increase exposure to language input, their effectiveness is influenced by learners' motivation, digital literacy, and the instructional design of technology-integrated activities (Stockwell, 2015). Additionally, some scholars emphasize the need for pedagogically sound implementation to ensure that digital activities align with language learning objectives (Godwin-Jones, 2018). These considerations highlight the importance of understanding how students perceive and interact with digital tools in real learning environments.

### **Learner Experiences and Engagement**

A critical factor in the effectiveness of educational technology is its ability to engage learners through interactive and personalized experiences (Lee & Lehtonen, 2019). Digital tools offer accessibility and flexibility, accommodating diverse learning styles and allowing students to control their learning pace (Thorne, 2018). Personalized learning pathways, adaptive technologies, and gamification elements further enhance motivation, particularly among students who benefit from self-directed learning environments (Stockwell, 2015).

However, engagement levels vary. Some students thrive in digital learning environments, while others struggle with self-regulation and the distractions posed by technology (Godwin-Jones,

2018). Additionally, while digital tools facilitate collaboration, the extent to which students actively participate in interactive activities depends on their familiarity with technology and their perceptions of its usefulness (Chapelle, 2017). Understanding these dynamics is essential for optimizing digital language learning strategies.

### **Perceptions of Effectiveness**

Students' perceptions of digital tools play a crucial role in determining their willingness to integrate technology into their language learning routines. Research suggests that educational videos are highly effective for visual and auditory learners, whereas online games and social media platforms support interactive and collaborative learning (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014). These preferences emphasize the importance of varied digital learning approaches to accommodate different learning styles.

Despite generally positive perceptions, some students express concerns about the reliability and credibility of online learning materials (Lee & Lehtonen, 2019). Others argue that excessive reliance on digital tools can lead to passive learning, limiting opportunities for face-to-face communication and structured language practice (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). These mixed perceptions underscore the need to investigate how digital tools can be effectively integrated into language curricula to maximize their benefits.

### **Context of Higher Education and First-Semester Students**

The transition to higher education presents challenges and opportunities for first-semester students, particularly as they adapt to new learning environments and instructional methodologies (Herrington & Oliver, 2019). Digital tools play a crucial role in facilitating this transition by providing supplemental resources, promoting self-directed learning, and encouraging peer collaboration (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). However, their effectiveness depends on students' prior exposure to technology, digital literacy skills, and ability to navigate online learning platforms independently (Thorne, 2018).

Given the growing reliance on digital tools in higher education, it is essential to examine how first-semester students engage with these technologies. Understanding their needs and preferences can inform pedagogical strategies that enhance learning outcomes and ensure that digital tools are utilized effectively to support language acquisition (Herrington & Oliver, 2019). This study builds on existing literature by focusing on student experiences in a specific higher education context, identifying both the benefits and challenges of digital learning tools.

### **Identifying Gaps and Justifying the Study**

While research has demonstrated the potential of digital tools in language education, gaps remain in understanding their practical application in specific educational settings. Many existing studies focus on broad technological trends rather than examining how students in particular institutional contexts perceive and engage with digital learning activities. Furthermore, while the advantages of digital tools are well-documented, limited research explores the challenges students face, particularly first-year university students adapting to technology-enhanced learning environments.

By addressing these gaps, this study contributes to the literature by offering a focused analysis of fourth-semester students' experiences with digital tools in the English Education program at State Islamic University Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu. The findings will provide insights into the

pedagogical value of digital activities, informing educators and curriculum designers about effective digital learning strategies. Ultimately, this research aims to bridge the gap between the theoretical promise of digital learning and its practical application in language education, ensuring that technology is leveraged effectively to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the experiences, perceptions, challenges, and benefits of fourth-semester students in the English Education program at State Islamic University Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu regarding the use of digital activities for language learning. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable for capturing in-depth subjective experiences, offering rich insights into participants' perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, the study adopts a phenomenological approach, which focuses on students' lived experiences with digital learning tools, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their engagement with technology in language acquisition.

### **Participants**

The study involves fourth-semester students enrolled in the English Education program at State Islamic University Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu. A purposive sampling strategy is employed to ensure diversity in gender, language proficiency, and prior experience with digital learning tools. Approximately 15–20 students are selected based on their willingness and availability to participate in detailed discussions about their experiences. The inclusion criteria for participants are:

1. Active enrolment in the English Education program.
2. Prior use of digital tools for language learning.
3. Willingness to provide consent for participation in interviews and focus group discussions.

Participant recruitment is conducted through official university communication channels, and voluntary participation is emphasized to maintain ethical compliance.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection is conducted using two primary qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs).

1. **Semi-structured interviews** are conducted individually with each participant to gain in-depth insights into their experiences and perceptions of digital activities in language learning. The open-ended question format allows participants to discuss their engagement with various digital resources, such as educational videos, online games, social media, and online reading. Participants also reflect on the perceived effectiveness of these tools in developing language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, as well as the challenges they encounter.
2. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** are conducted to facilitate interactive discussions among participants, allowing them to share and compare experiences. Each FGD consists of 5–8 students and follows a structured discussion guide covering key topics such as:
  - Common challenges in digital learning.
  - Strategies for overcoming these challenges.
  - Benefits and drawbacks of digital tools.
  - Recommendations for enhancing digital integration in the English Education program.



By employing these two qualitative methods, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' engagement with digital learning tools and their impact on language acquisition.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis follows the thematic analysis framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), ensuring a systematic approach to identifying key patterns within the data. The process includes the following steps:

1. **Transcription:** All interview and focus group recordings are transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and completeness of participants' responses.
2. **Coding:** Systematic coding is applied to the transcripts to identify recurring themes and patterns relevant to the research questions.
3. **Theme Development:** The generated codes are categorized into broader themes, encapsulating students' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and benefits related to digital learning activities.
4. **Iterative Refinement:** Themes are continuously reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, clarity, and alignment with the study's objectives.

This structured approach enables a thorough and nuanced analysis of the data, providing valuable insights into students' engagement with digital tools in language learning.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study based on the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The results are organized according to the research questions and the major themes that emerged from the data.

### 1. Experiences and Perceptions of Digital Activities for Language Learning

Participants reported diverse experiences with digital activities in their language learning. Three key themes emerged: integration into learning routines, engagement and motivation, and perceived learning outcomes.

#### Integration into Learning Routines

Many students described incorporating digital tools into their daily study habits. Educational videos and online reading platforms were commonly used for vocabulary expansion and listening practice, while social media and online forums facilitated interactive language use. These digital activities became integral to their learning routines, enabling flexible and accessible language practice.

*"I watch English YouTube videos every day, especially travel vlogs and educational channels. It helps me learn new words naturally and get used to different accents."* (Participant 3)

*"I use an online dictionary app while reading news articles. It makes it easy to check meanings instantly, and I remember words better when I see them in context."* (Participant 7)

*"I participate in language exchange groups on Facebook. We discuss topics in English, and I get to practice writing and responding in real time."* (Participant 12)

#### Engagement and Motivation

Students expressed those digital activities enhanced their motivation for language learning by making the process more engaging. Online games were particularly noted for their interactive nature, while social media platforms provided exposure to authentic language use. The multimedia elements of digital tools sustained interest and made learning more dynamic.

*"I love using Duolingo because it feels like a game. The streak system and rewards make me want to practice every day."* (Participant 5)

*"Watching TikTok videos in English is fun, and I pick up slang and expressions that textbooks don't teach."* (Participant 9)

*"When I comment on Reddit or Twitter in English, I feel like I'm using the language for real communication, not just for school."* (Participant 15)

### Perceived Learning Outcomes

Participants generally perceived digital activities as beneficial for language development. However, while these tools were effective for vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension, some students noted their limitations in improving writing and speaking skills due to the lack of structured guidance and corrective feedback.

*"Listening to podcasts has improved my comprehension, but I struggle to speak fluently because I don't get enough speaking practice."* (Participant 8)

*"Online tools are great for learning vocabulary and grammar, but writing is harder because I don't get feedback on my mistakes."* (Participant 11)

*"Speaking apps like AI chatbots are helpful, but they don't correct my pronunciation or grammar errors like a teacher would."* (Participant 14)

## 2. Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Different Digital Activities

Students had varying opinions on the effectiveness of different types of digital activities. The findings highlight differences in perceived usefulness across four categories: educational videos, online games, social media, and online reading materials.

### Educational Videos

Most participants found educational videos highly effective for improving listening skills and pronunciation. The combination of visual and auditory reinforcement made complex linguistic concepts easier to grasp.

*"Watching educational YouTube channels has helped me understand English grammar better. The explanations are clear, and I can replay difficult parts."* (Participant 2)

*"I like watching English movies with subtitles. It helps me connect words with pronunciation, and over time, I rely less on subtitles."* (Participant 6)

### Online Games

While generally enjoyable, online games were perceived to have varying levels of effectiveness. Games that incorporated storytelling and contextualized language use were considered more beneficial than simple vocabulary quizzes.

*"I play role-playing games in English, and they help me learn phrases in context. Talking with other players makes it feel like real communication."* (Participant 10)

*"Some vocabulary games are fun, but I forget the words quickly because there's no real context."* (Participant 13)

## Social Media

Social media platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and language-learning groups on Facebook, were viewed as useful for informal language exposure. However, some students raised concerns about distractions and the quality of language input, noting that not all content was reliable for language learning.

*"Scrolling through Instagram posts in English introduces me to new words and phrases, especially in captions and comments."* (Participant 4)

*"I follow English-speaking influencers on TikTok. It's great for picking up everyday expressions, but sometimes the grammar they use is incorrect."* (Participant 9)

## Online Reading Materials

Digital reading materials, including e-books and blogs, were perceived as effective for vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension. However, students emphasized the need for comprehension exercises or guided discussions to maximize learning outcomes.

*"Reading news articles online expands my vocabulary, but I wish there were quizzes to check my understanding."* (Participant 1)

*"E-books with interactive dictionaries are helpful. I can tap on a word to see its meaning, which makes reading in English less frustrating."* (Participant 7)

## 3. Challenges and Benefits of Digital Activities for Language Learning

### Challenges

One of the primary challenges identified was the issue of distractions and lack of focus. Many students reported difficulty maintaining concentration when using digital platforms due to the presence of non-academic content.

*"I often start watching an English learning video, but then I get distracted by recommended videos that have nothing to do with studying."* (Participant 3)

Another significant challenge was internet connectivity issues, especially for participants in rural areas, which hindered their ability to access digital resources consistently.

*"Sometimes the internet is too slow to stream videos, so I can't always watch English lessons online."* (Participant 7)

Furthermore, several students expressed the need for structured guidance from instructors, as independent learning often led to gaps in understanding.

*"Digital tools are great, but I still need my teacher to explain things. Learning alone online is sometimes confusing."* (Participant 2)

### Benefits



Despite these challenges, students recognized several benefits of using digital activities for language learning. The flexibility and accessibility of digital tools allowed students to learn at their own pace and provided access to a wide range of authentic language materials.

*"I like that I can study English anytime I want. If I don't understand something, I can replay the video."* (Participant 1)

Additionally, students valued the opportunity to engage with real-world language use through social media and online discussions with native speakers.

*"Watching English YouTube videos every day has really improved my listening. I can understand different accents now."* (Participant 4)

Overall, fourth-semester students in the English Education program at State Islamic University Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu had diverse experiences and perceptions regarding the use of digital activities for language learning. While they generally found digital tools beneficial for listening and vocabulary acquisition, they highlighted the need for more structured support in developing speaking and writing skills. The challenges of distractions, internet connectivity, and lack of guidance were noted as significant barriers. Despite these obstacles, students expressed enthusiasm for integrating digital activities into their learning routines, recognizing their potential to enhance engagement and access to authentic language materials.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the experiences, perceptions, challenges, and benefits of digital activities in language learning among fourth-semester students in the English Education program at State Islamic University Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu. The findings underscore the integral role of digital tools in students' language learning routines, aligning with prior research on educational technology and digital learning (Hwang & Hsueh, 2020; Peterson, 2019). While digital activities enhance learner engagement and facilitate autonomous learning, challenges such as inadequate structured guidance and technological constraints highlight areas for pedagogical improvement.

A key finding is that students extensively integrate digital activities into their language learning practices. Educational videos, online reading platforms, and social media were commonly utilized for vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, and interactive language practice. These findings support theories of authentic language exposure and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), emphasizing that learning is most effective when embedded in real-world contexts. However, while digital tools promote independent learning, the absence of structured guidance presents a challenge, particularly in the development of productive language skills such as speaking and writing. This aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of scaffolded learning through expert guidance.

Students generally perceived digital activities as engaging and motivating, particularly interactive platforms such as online games and social media. This corroborates research on digital engagement theories, which suggest that interactivity and personalization enhance learner motivation (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Lee & Lehtonen, 2019). The multimedia nature of digital tools supports diverse learning styles and sustains interest (Thorne, 2018). However, despite the engagement benefits, students highlighted the lack of structured feedback, a critical factor in developing writing and speaking proficiency. This is consistent with feedback-centered learning theories (Hyland & Hyland, 2006), which stress the role of corrective feedback in language acquisition.

Perceptions of digital activities varied based on their specific functions. Educational videos were particularly valued for improving listening comprehension and pronunciation, reinforcing the effectiveness of multimodal input in language learning (Chapelle, 2017). Online games were seen as beneficial when they incorporated storytelling or contextualized language use, supporting research on the role of meaningful interaction in gamified learning (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014). Social media and online reading materials were regarded as useful for vocabulary development and informal language exposure, though students raised concerns about potential distractions and unreliable language input. These findings align with the cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1994), which suggests that extraneous distractions can impede learning efficiency.

Despite these advantages, digital tools also posed notable challenges. The most frequently reported issue was maintaining focus due to digital distractions, a widely documented concern in educational technology literature (Warschauer & Matuchniak, 2010). While digital activities were effective for receptive skills (listening and reading), students found them insufficient for productive skills (speaking and writing) without instructor support. This aligns with research advocating for structured digital tasks that integrate active language use and instructor-led feedback (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014).

Another significant challenge was internet connectivity issues, particularly for students in rural areas, which limited consistent access to digital resources. This reinforces the digital divide in educational access and the critical role of technological infrastructure in shaping learning experiences (Chen & Chen, 2019). Addressing these challenges requires institutional support, including reliable internet access and blended learning models that integrate digital tools with face-to-face instruction.

The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of literature on digital learning by reaffirming the role of digital tools in fostering autonomous learning and authentic language exposure. However, they also highlight the need for structured pedagogical interventions to optimize digital learning outcomes. In practice, educators should implement blended learning environments that combine digital tools with explicit guidance and formative feedback. Strategies such as designing goal-oriented digital tasks and minimizing extraneous cognitive load should be prioritized to enhance learning efficiency. Additionally, institutional investments in technological infrastructure are crucial to ensuring equitable access to online learning resources.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of digital learning on productive language skills, particularly in speaking and writing. Investigating the effectiveness of specific digital interventions, such as instructor-guided tasks and feedback mechanisms, could provide further insights into optimizing digital learning experiences. Additionally, studies examining the role of digital literacy in maximizing the benefits of educational technology would be valuable in informing pedagogical strategies.

Overall, this study underscores the significant role of digital activities in language learning while identifying challenges that must be addressed for more effective implementation. While digital tools promote engagement, flexibility, and learner autonomy, structured support and feedback remain essential for maximizing their potential. By integrating digital tools within well-designed blended learning frameworks and addressing technological barriers, educators and institutions can enhance the effectiveness of digital learning in language education.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights the increasing role of digital activities in language learning, particularly among fourth-semester students in the English Education program at State Islamic University Fatmawati Sukarno Bengkulu. The findings suggest that digital tools are valuable for enhancing vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension, reinforcing their potential to support language development. However, students also reported challenges such as distractions, unreliable internet connectivity, and the need for structured guidance, which can hinder the effectiveness of digital learning if left unaddressed.

These findings contribute to ongoing discussions on educational technology by emphasizing the need for pedagogically sound integration of digital tools. To maximize their benefits, educators should consider blended learning approaches that combine digital resources with structured instructional support, ensuring a balance between learner autonomy and guided learning.

Despite its contributions, this study has certain limitations, particularly regarding the sample size and its focus on a specific institutional context. As a result, the generalizability of the findings may be limited. Future research should explore how blended learning models can address the identified challenges, assess their impact on productive language skills such as speaking and writing, and investigate the role of teacher mediation in digital learning environments.

By addressing these areas, future studies can provide deeper insights into the effective integration of digital tools in language education, ensuring that technology complements rather than replaces structured instruction.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Regarding this study, the author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Study concept and design: Risnawati Risnawati. Acquisition of data: Risnawati Risnawati. Analysis and interpretation of data: Risnawati Risnawati. Drafting the manuscript: Risnawati Risnawati. Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: Safnil Arsyad. Statistical analysis: Dian Eka Chandra Wardhana.

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