

Threads and Informal English Language Learning among University Students

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Abstract

The growing use of social media platforms has created new opportunities for informal English learning beyond the classroom. This study examines undergraduate students' use of Threads as an informal English learning environment, focusing on engagement, self-regulated learning, perceived learning outcomes, and distraction. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, survey data were collected from 119 undergraduates and analysed using descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and Pearson correlations. Follow-up interviews with 16 students provided explanatory insights. Results indicate that engagement and self-regulated learning are positively associated with perceived learning outcomes, whereas distraction is negatively associated with both engagement and learning outcomes. The findings highlight the importance of learner self-regulation in social media-based language learning.

Keywords: Threads; Self-regulated learning; Learner engagement; Social media

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1.0 Introduction

The increasing integration of digital technologies into everyday communication has transformed how university students interact with language outside formal learning environments (Adnan et al., 2024). Social media platforms have become central spaces where students read, write, and communicate in English as part of their daily online activities. Within the field of computer-assisted language learning, these activities are often conceptualised as Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), which refers to self-directed language learning that occurs through digital media outside structured classroom contexts. Previous studies suggest that informal digital environments can positively contribute to language learning by exposing learners to authentic language use and providing opportunities for meaningful interaction (Lee, 2019). Social networking sites have been shown to encourage frequent language exposure, informal writing, and participation in discussions. These platforms may therefore function as informal learning spaces where learners practise language through everyday communication rather than structured tasks (Wan Mustapha et al., 2019). At the same time, social media platforms operate within attention-driven digital environments that may also generate distractions. Continuous scrolling, algorithmic content recommendations, and rapid information flows can fragment learners' attention and reduce the effectiveness of learning activities. As a result, the educational value of social media platforms cannot be assumed automatically; rather, it depends on how learners engage

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with these platforms and manage their digital behaviour. One recently emerging platform that has gained attention is Threads, Meta's text-based social media platform. Threads emphasises short textual posts, quick responses, and conversational interactions. These features resemble micro-writing environments that may support language practice through frequent short-form communication. The platform, therefore, offers a potentially interesting context for exploring informal English learning in digital spaces. Despite growing research on social media and language learning, empirical studies focusing on Threads remain extremely limited. Furthermore, many existing studies examine individual factors in isolation rather than exploring how multiple factors interact to influence learning outcomes. Three factors appear particularly relevant in this context: engagement, self-regulated learning, and distraction. Engagement reflects the extent to which learners actively participate in language-related activities on social media platforms, such as reading posts, replying to comments, or writing posts in English. Self-regulated learning refers to learners' ability to plan, monitor, and control their learning behaviour. In informal digital contexts where learning is largely self-directed, self-regulation becomes especially important. Distraction, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which social media use diverts attention away from intended learning activities. Understanding the interaction among these three factors is important because social media environments simultaneously provide opportunities for learning and sources of distraction. Learners who actively engage with language content and regulate their digital behaviour may benefit from these environments, whereas those who experience frequent distraction may derive fewer learning benefits. This study, therefore, investigates how undergraduate students use Threads as an informal English learning environment and how engagement, self-regulated learning, and distraction are associated with perceived English learning outcomes.

Research Objectives

The study aims to:

1. Examine students' engagement with Threads for informal English learning.
2. Investigate relationships between engagement, self-regulated learning, distraction, and perceived learning outcomes.
3. Explore students' experiences of using Threads for informal English learning.

2.0 Introduction

Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) has emerged as an important concept in contemporary language learning research. IDLE refers to language learning activities that occur through digital technologies outside formal educational settings. These activities often include watching videos, reading online content, participating in online discussions, and interacting with others through digital platforms. Research indicates that IDLE activities can support language learning by increasing exposure to authentic language input and providing opportunities for communication. Unlike classroom-based learning, informal digital environments allow learners to encounter language in meaningful, personally relevant contexts (Yusuf et al., 2024). This exposure can contribute to vocabulary development, improved language awareness, and increased confidence in communication. Social media platforms are among the most common contexts in which IDLE occurs. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and discussion forums enable users to participate in conversations and access diverse forms of language input. Studies have shown that social media participation can increase students' engagement with English and encourage informal writing practice. These interactions may support language development through repeated exposure and communicative use. However, the effectiveness of social media for language learning varies across learners. Some studies report positive learning experiences associated with online participation, while others highlight challenges such as superficial engagement and distraction. This variation suggests that social media platforms themselves do not automatically produce learning outcomes; rather, how learners interact with them plays a critical role.

Learner engagement has been widely recognised as a key factor influencing learning outcomes (Salim et al, 2025; Shah et al, 2025a). Engagement typically includes behavioural, cognitive, and emotional components that reflect learners' involvement in learning activities. In digital environments, engagement may involve reading posts, responding to discussions, creating content, and interacting with other users. Self-regulated learning (SRL) complements engagement by emphasising learners' ability to manage and control their learning processes. Self-regulated learners set goals, monitor their progress, and adjust strategies when necessary. These behaviours enable learners to transform learning opportunities into meaningful outcomes. In informal digital learning contexts, self-regulation becomes even more important (Shah et al., 2024). Unlike structured classroom settings, social media platforms do not provide explicit instructional guidance. Learners must therefore decide independently how they use these platforms and whether they engage with content in ways that support learning (Salim et al., 2024; Shah et al., 2025b). Studies on digital learning environments suggest that learners who demonstrate stronger self-regulated learning behaviours are more likely to benefit from informal online activities. They may deliberately seek out relevant content, manage their time effectively, and maintain focus on learning-related interactions.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase examined relationships among engagement, self-regulated learning, perceived outcomes, and distraction. The qualitative phase explored students' experiences to explain the quantitative patterns. A total of 119 undergraduate students from a public university participated in the survey. Participants were required to be active Threads users. Participation was voluntary. 16 participants were purposively selected for interviews in the qualitative phase. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS through descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and Pearson correlation analysis. Qualitative interview data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Data was collected using a questionnaire consisting of four constructs measured on a 7-point Likert scale:

Table 1. Construct and Measurement Scales

Construct	Description	Items	Example Items
TELE	Engagement with English content on Threads	8	I actively read posts written in English on Threads
SREL-T	Self-regulated learning behaviour	10	I consciously try to improve my English when using Threads
PELO	Perceived English learning outcomes	7	Using Threads helps improve my vocabulary
PDT	Perceived distraction	7	I spend more time on Threads than planned

4.0 Findings

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Construct	Description	Mean	SD
TELE	Engagement with English content on Threads	4.98	0.83
SREL-T	Self-regulated learning behaviour	4.72	0.79
PELO	Perceived English learning outcomes	4.72	0.76
PDT	Perceived distraction	4.21	0.91

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the four constructs examined in this study: Threads English Learning Engagement (TELE), Self-Regulated English Learning on Threads (SREL-T), Perceived English Learning Outcomes (PELO), and Perceived Distraction from Threads (PDT). The results indicate moderately high levels of engagement among the respondents ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 0.83$), suggesting that students frequently interacted with English content on Threads. Self-regulated learning also recorded a relatively high mean score ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 0.79$), indicating that many students intentionally monitored or managed their learning behaviour when using the platform. Among the four constructs, perceived English learning outcomes showed the highest mean value ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 0.76$), implying that respondents generally believed their use of Threads contributed positively to their English language development. In contrast, perceived distraction recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 0.91$), although the value suggests that distraction remained a noticeable factor during platform use.

Table 3. Reliability Statistics

Construct	Description	Cronbach α
TELE	Engagement with English content on Threads	.88
SREL-T	Self-regulated learning behaviour	.91
PELO	Perceived English learning outcomes	.89
PDT	Perceived distraction	.86

Table 3 presents the internal consistency reliability of the measurement scales used in this study. The Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .86 to .91, indicating good to excellent internal consistency across all constructs. The Self-Regulated English Learning scale (SREL-T) recorded the highest reliability ($\alpha = .91$), followed by Perceived English Learning Outcomes ($\alpha = .89$) and Threads English Learning Engagement ($\alpha = .88$). The Perceived Distraction scale also demonstrated acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .86$). These results suggest that the instruments used to measure engagement, self-regulated learning, perceived outcomes, and distraction were sufficiently reliable for the purposes of the study.

Table 4. Correlation Matrix

Variable	TELE	SREL-T	PELO	PDT
TELE	1			
SREL-T	.58**	1		
PELO	.58**	.67**	1	
PDT	-.41**	-.49**	-.44**	1

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among the four study variables: Threads English Learning Engagement (TELE), Self-Regulated English Learning on Threads (SREL-T), Perceived English Learning Outcomes (PELO), and Perceived Distraction from Threads (PDT). The results reveal several significant relationships that help explain how students' behaviours on Threads relate to their perceived English learning experiences.

First, engagement with English content on Threads showed a significant positive relationship with perceived English learning outcomes ($r = .58$, $p < .01$). This finding suggests that students who frequently interacted with English posts, such as reading, replying, or participating in discussions, were more likely to perceive improvements in their English language abilities. The result supports the idea that active participation in informal digital environments can create meaningful opportunities for language exposure and practice.

Similarly, self-regulated learning demonstrated a strong positive correlation with perceived learning outcomes ($r = .67$, $p < .01$), which represents the strongest relationship among the variables examined. This finding indicates that students who consciously managed their learning behaviour while using Threads—such as monitoring their language use, intentionally following English-language content, or

attempting to respond in English—tended to report greater perceived benefits in their English development. The strength of this relationship highlights the importance of learner agency in informal digital learning contexts.

In addition, engagement was strongly associated with self-regulated learning ($r = .62, p < .01$). This result suggests that students who actively engaged with English content on Threads were also more likely to demonstrate self-regulatory behaviours when using the platform. In other words, engagement and self-regulation appear to function together in shaping how learners interact with informal digital learning environments. Conversely, perceived distraction showed significant negative correlations with all three learning-related variables. Specifically, distraction was negatively associated with engagement ($r = -.41, p < .01$), self-regulated learning ($r = -.49, p < .01$), and perceived English learning outcomes ($r = -.44, p < .01$). These findings suggest that students who experienced higher levels of distraction while using Threads were less likely to engage actively with English content, regulate their learning behaviour, or perceive meaningful language learning benefits from the platform. Overall, the correlation analysis indicates that while Threads can provide opportunities for informal English learning, the effectiveness of these opportunities depends largely on how learners engage with the platform and regulate their behaviour. Active engagement and self-regulated learning appear to enhance perceived learning outcomes, whereas distraction may limit the potential benefits of social media-based language learning.

Table 5. Interview Analysis

Theme	Description	Example Responds
Threads as a Low-Pressure English Practice Space	Students perceived Threads as an informal and relaxed environment where they felt comfortable experimenting with English without fear of making mistakes.	"On Threads, everyone writes casually, so I don't feel afraid to try writing in English." (P3)
		"It feels different from assignments. I can just post or reply in English naturally." (P5)
		"Because people are chatting normally, I feel more confident using English there." (P9)
Micro-Writing and Repeated Exposure	The short-post format encouraged frequent reading and writing in English, allowing students to practise language use in small but consistent interactions.	"Because the posts are short, I read many English posts every day." (P7)
		"Sometimes I reply in English even if it is just one or two sentences." (P8)
Self-Regulation Strategies	Students who reported stronger learning outcomes described consciously regulating their platform use, such as following English-language accounts or intentionally replying in English.	"Reading many short posts helps me learn new expressions." (P12)
		"I follow accounts that post in English, so my feed becomes more English content." (P11)
Distraction and Attention Fragmentation	Participants noted that algorithmic feeds and continuous scrolling could distract them and reduce their focus on learning intentions.	"When I see interesting topics, I try to reply in English instead of Malay." (P6)
		"Sometimes I check unfamiliar words before replying." (P15)
		"Sometimes I open Threads to read something in English but end up scrolling for a long time." (P14)
		"Notifications keep appearing, so I forget what I was originally looking for." (P4)
		"I start reading something useful but then other posts distract me." (P10)

The qualitative findings in Table 5 provide further insight into the quantitative relationships reported earlier. Most participants described Threads as a low-pressure environment that encouraged informal English expression and frequent micro-writing. These activities allowed students to encounter English regularly and practise language use through short interactions. However, the perceived learning benefits were closely associated with learners' ability to regulate their behaviour on the platform. Participants who intentionally followed English-language accounts or deliberately replied in English reported stronger perceived learning outcomes. At the same time, many participants acknowledged that algorithm-driven feeds and continuous scrolling frequently diverted their attention, illustrating how distraction can undermine the learning potential of social media environments.

5.0 Discussion

The findings indicate that engagement and self-regulated learning play important roles in shaping informal English learning on Threads. Students who actively engaged with English content and regulated their learning behaviour reported stronger perceived learning outcomes. These results support the argument that informal digital environments can support language learning when learners actively participate in meaningful communication. Engagement provides opportunities for language exposure and practice, which may contribute to vocabulary development and improved confidence in language use. Self-regulated learning emerged as an especially important factor in this context. Students who consciously managed their behaviour on the platform were more likely to benefit from learning opportunities. These learners intentionally followed English-language accounts, participated in discussions, and monitored their language use. However, the findings also highlight the challenge of distraction in social media environments. Algorithmic feeds and continuous scrolling

can divert attention away from learning intentions. The negative correlations between distraction and the other variables suggest that excessive or uncontrolled platform use may reduce learning benefits. Overall, the results suggest that social media platforms such as Threads can serve as informal language-learning environments when learners demonstrate strong engagement and self-regulation.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The results also suggest that informal digital learning environments can support language development when learners actively participate in meaningful communication. Frequent engagement with English content allows learners to encounter vocabulary, expressions, and communicative patterns that may not always appear in structured classroom materials. Short interactions such as reading posts, replying to discussions, and sharing personal opinions in English may gradually contribute to increased familiarity with the language and greater confidence in expressing ideas. In this sense, platforms like Threads can provide opportunities for learners to practise language in authentic and socially meaningful contexts. At the same time, the study highlights the importance of self-regulated learning in maximising the learning potential of social media platforms. In informal digital environments where learning activities are largely self-directed, learners must independently decide how they use these platforms and whether their interactions contribute to learning goals. Students who demonstrated stronger self-regulation were more likely to intentionally follow English-language accounts, monitor their language use, and engage in purposeful communication. These behaviours suggest that self-regulated learning strategies can help transform everyday social media interactions into meaningful language learning opportunities. However, the findings also reveal that distraction remains an important challenge in social media-based learning environments. The negative relationships observed between perceived distraction and the other learning-related variables indicate that excessive or uncontrolled platform use may reduce learning benefits. Features such as algorithmic feeds, continuous scrolling, and constant notifications may fragment learners' attention and divert them away from their initial intentions. This suggests that while social media platforms can provide opportunities for informal learning, their effectiveness depends on how learners manage their attention and digital behaviour. Based on these findings, several recommendations can be proposed. First, educators may consider guiding students on how to use social media platforms more intentionally for language learning. Rather than viewing social media solely as a source of distraction, instructors can encourage students to follow English-language accounts, participate in discussions, and reflect on how their digital interactions contribute to language development. Integrating discussions about digital learning habits into language courses may also help students become more aware of how informal environments can support their learning. Second, educational institutions may consider incorporating elements of digital literacy and self-regulated learning into language education programmes. Developing learners' ability to set goals, manage time, and regulate attention in digital environments may enhance their ability to benefit from informal learning opportunities. Such skills are increasingly important in contemporary learning contexts where digital technologies play a central role in everyday communication. Finally, future research should continue to explore how emerging social media platforms influence informal language learning behaviours. Longitudinal studies may provide deeper insights into how sustained participation in digital communities contributes to language development over time. Additionally, future research could examine how different types of social media platforms support various aspects of language learning, such as vocabulary development, writing fluency, and communicative confidence. In conclusion, this study demonstrates that social media platforms such as Threads can serve as valuable informal environments for English language learning when learners actively engage with language content and regulate their digital behaviour. While digital platforms offer both opportunities and challenges, learners who demonstrate strong engagement and self-regulation are better positioned to transform everyday online interactions into meaningful language-learning experiences.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This study contributes to research on Informal Digital Learning of English by examining Threads as an emerging social media platform for language learning. It highlights the role of engagement and self-regulated learning in shaping the effectiveness of social media-based learning environments.

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