

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. To further understand how informal digital environments can enhance language learning, Lee (2019) suggests that access to authentic language and the potential for real-life communication can greatly benefit learners. For example, social networking sites can provide users with high levels of continuous exposure to target languages (e.g., as a source of linguistic input), as well as opportunities for informal writing and for contributing to conversations. Therefore, social media platforms can serve as informal environments for language learning, enabling learners to use language for everyday communication rather than solely for structured learning exercises (Wan Mustapha et al., 2019). However, social media also operate in highly attention-driven digital environments. Social media generates distractions due to its design. The constant flow of new content (via algorithms that recommend content based upon user interests and behaviours), the continuous scroll functionality, and the fast-paced nature of the online space all create barriers to focused learning activity (Wan Mustapha et al., 2019). Therefore, the value that social media provides for education cannot simply be assumed. Instead, it will depend upon how learners interact with these social

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media platforms and how they manage their own behaviour. One recent social media platform that has garnered significant attention is Threads. Created by Meta, Threads allows users to make short, simple posts about a wide variety of topics. Users then respond quickly via short messages. This creates a micro-writing environment that could facilitate language practice through the exchange of short-form texts. Due to this combination of features, Threads presents an interesting space for researchers interested in investigating informal English learning in digital environments.

Although there has been considerable growth in research on social media and language learning, there is a lack of empirical studies specifically examining Threads. Additionally, while much prior research examines one factor at a time (e.g., learner motivation), few studies examine how factors interact to impact learning outcomes. Three specific factors seem relevant in this context: engagement, self-regulated learning, and distraction. Engagement represents the degree to which learners are active participants in language-related activities on social media platforms (e.g., reading posts, responding to comments, posting their own content in English). Self-regulated learning refers to learners' ability to self-direct their learning behaviour (i.e., planning, monitoring, and controlling). Given that learning in informal digital environments is often completely self-directed, self-regulation is critical. Finally, distraction represents the degree to which social media distracts learners from the intended learning activity. Understanding the interplay among these three variables is essential, since social media can both serve as a potential source of learning and a distraction. Learners who are engaged with language content on social media and capable of regulating their own digital behaviour may capitalise on the opportunities it offers. Conversely, learners who are frequently distracted may realise less academic gain. The study aims to examine students' engagement with Threads for informal English learning, investigate relationships among engagement, self-regulated learning, distraction, and perceived learning outcomes, and explore students' experiences with Threads for informal English learning.

2.0 Literature Review

This section focuses on Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) that incorporates learner engagement, self-regulated learning, and distractions in digital learning environments. As such, the above-referenced themes are highly relevant to assessing how emerging social media platforms, such as Threads, may serve as informal language-learning environments for university students. Several existing studies regarding digital language learning environments provided the theoretical and empirical foundation for investigating the relationships among the previously identified themes. Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) has recently become an increasingly prominent theme in language learning research. IDLE refers to language learning facilitated by digital technology that occurs outside formal education settings. IDLE encompasses a range of digital language-learning activities, including watching videos, reading online content, participating in online group discussions, and engaging in digital interactions with others. Research demonstrates that engaging in IDLE-type activities can promote language learning via increased exposure to real-world (authentic) language examples and opportunities for communication.

At the same time, traditional classroom-based learning environments offer learners opportunities to experience language in meaningful, contextually relevant ways (Yusuf et al., 2024), and the informal nature of digital learning allows learners to encounter language in personally significant contexts. Exposure to language in these manner(s) can lead to enhanced vocabulary acquisition; greater awareness of language structures and systems; and/or greater confidence in communicating in languages in general. Among the many places where IDLE-type activities take place, social media sites are among the most popular. Examples of social media sites where IDLE can be experienced include Twitter, Instagram and various online discussion boards. Participation in social media activities has demonstrated the potential to increase students' overall engagement with the English language and to enhance informal writing skills. Through repeated exposure and communicative uses, participation in social media sites may also facilitate language development. Nevertheless, the degree to which social media supports or hinders language development varies significantly from student to student. For example, some studies identify positive learning experiences arising from social media participation, while others highlight limitations to these experiences, including superficial engagement, lack of focused attention, and distractions. Therefore, while social media itself does not inherently produce learning outcomes, the way learners choose to utilise social media will play a crucial role in determining the extent to which they develop their knowledge and abilities.

Engagement has long been recognised as a key variable contributing to academic achievement (Salim et al., 2025; Shah et al., 2025a). Generally speaking, engagement involves behavioural, cognitive, and affective dimensions that define learners' level of involvement within specific learning activities. Within digital learning environments, engagement may manifest as reading posts, replying to forum discussions, developing original content, or interacting with other users. Additionally, engagement complements SRL by emphasising learners' capacity to regulate their own learning processes. Learners using self-regulatory strategies set learning objectives; track their progress toward those objectives; and modify their approach/strategies as needed. By employing these strategies, learners can translate opportunities for learning into meaningful results. Given the informal nature of IDLE, self-regulation becomes even more important (Shah et al., 2024). Since social media platforms do not provide explicit instructions to guide user behaviour, learners must decide for themselves how to use them to achieve their learning objectives (Salim et al., 2024; Shah et al., 2025b). Overall, studies on digital learning environments indicate that learners who demonstrate higher levels of self-regulated learning behaviours are generally more likely to benefit from participation in informal online activities (Zimmerman, 2002; Lee & Lee, 2021; Guo et al., 2023). Self-regulating learners will often make deliberate choices about which online resources to pursue, use effective time management to remain focused, and limit their non-learning-related interactions with others.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods methodology. The quantitative portion analyses the relationships among student engagement, self-regulated learning, perceived outcome, and distractions. The qualitative aspect of this study sought to provide explanations for the quantitative results. In total, 119 undergraduate students from a public university completed surveys. Survey participants were required to use Threads actively. Participation was optional. Of those surveyed, 16 were purposely sampled to participate in qualitative interviews. Participants were recruited through course announcements and electronic notifications distributed via institutional communication systems (e.g., in-class announcements and digital communications). As such, only students who stated they actively used Threads and were familiar with the application's English content were eligible to participate. Each participant was fully aware of the study's purpose before participating, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Responses were kept anonymous to protect participants' identities; all collected data were maintained securely for this study only. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and Pearson correlation analysis were conducted using SPSS to analyse the quantitative data. Data collected during the qualitative interview process underwent thematic analysis. An Explanatory Sequential Mixed-Methods Design was chosen because the quantitative component would allow researchers to identify statistical associations among the primary variables. In contrast, the qualitative component would enable them to understand how students' perceptions and experiences affected their use of threads for informal English language acquisition. Pearson Correlation Analysis was utilised in this study because it measures the strength and direction of correlations among continuous variables that are scaled on a Likert scale. Thematic analysis was used in the qualitative portion of this study because it is an effective method for identifying recurrent patterns and themes in students' experiences of engagement, self-regulation, and distractions. 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 had the highest mean ($M = 5.12$, $SD = 0.76$), indicating 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 study.

Table 4. Correlation Matrix

Variable	TELE	SREL-T	PELO	PDT
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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 ($r = .67, p < .01$), the strongest 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 work together to shape 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. Based on Cohen's interpretation of correlation effect sizes, the relationship between self-regulated learning and perceived learning outcomes ($r = .67$) is considered a strong positive relationship. In contrast, the correlations involving engagement and distraction may be considered moderate in strength. This indicates that self-regulated learning is a particularly influential factor in shaping perceived English learning outcomes within the Threads environment.

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 do not feel afraid to try writing in English." (P3)
		"It feels different from assignments. I can just post or reply in English naturally." (P5)
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 people are chatting normally, I feel more confident using English there." (P9)
		"Because the posts are short, I read many English posts every day." (P7)
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.	"Sometimes I reply in English even if it is just one or two sentences." (P8)
		"Reading many short posts helps me learn new expressions." (P12)
Distraction and Attention Fragmentation	Participants noted that algorithmic feeds and continuous scrolling could distract them and reduce their focus on learning intentions.	"I follow accounts that post in English, so my feed becomes more English content." (P11)
		"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 data presented in Table 5 provide additional context for understanding the quantitative data from before. Many participants identified Threads as an informal, low-stress learning experience which facilitated regular casual use of English (micro-writings) and/or spontaneous communication. As a result, this type of activity allowed students to encounter English repeatedly and utilise their knowledge of the language in real time. In addition, these participants indicated that the perceived educational benefits were directly linked to their ability to regulate their behaviour when using the platform. Participants who chose to follow specific English-language accounts and therefore consciously attempted to communicate in English reported stronger perceived learning outcomes. Additionally, many participants recognised that while algorithmic feeds and constant scrolling enabled them to view content quickly, they often distracted them, thereby diminishing the overall learning capabilities of social media-based learning platforms.

Similarly, the qualitative data reinforced the quantitative data by describing the contexts under which the quantitative observations were made. For example, students who stated they purposefully engaged in English-based communication and monitored themselves throughout their time on the platform were similar to students whose perceptions of their learning experience were consistent with the statistically significant correlation found between participation, engagement, self-regulated learning and student-perceived success.

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.

These findings are also consistent with previous studies on other informal digital learning platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and online discussion forums, which similarly reported that learner engagement and self-regulated learning behaviours significantly influence language development outcomes. Compared with more structured classroom-based learning environments, Threads offers a more spontaneous and learner-driven space for authentic language exposure and micro-writing practice.

6.0 Limitations

This study is not without limitations. First, the data were collected from undergraduate students in a single public university, which may limit the generalisability of the findings to other institutional contexts. Second, the study relied on self-reported perceptions of learning outcomes rather than direct measures of language proficiency. Third, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causal relationships among the variables examined.

7.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

The results of this study also show that informal digital learning environments may support language development if learners have some degree of involvement and control in developing their own language use through frequent interaction with content created in English. Learners may encounter new words and phrases, and/or ways of communicating that may not always be evident in formal classroom settings. For example, short interactions such as reading messages, responding to comments and creating your own post in response to a prompt) will gradually build learners' familiarity with the language and increase learners' confidence in using it to communicate. Thus, platforms like threads can afford learners opportunities to practice language in authentic and socially relevant contexts. It is also possible to see evidence of the value of self-regulated learning as a means of maximising the learning opportunity afforded by social media. Since many learners interact in informal digital environments with little direct instructor guidance, they must decide how to use social media sites and whether their use helps them achieve their learning objectives.

Therefore, the learner's degree of self-regulation is significantly correlated with whether a student engages in intentional following of English-language accounts, monitors their own language use, and utilises social media for communication related to their intended learning objectives. Evidence of these behaviours suggests that students who utilise self-regulated learning strategies can leverage casual social media interactions to create additional opportunities for language learning. However, this study's results also illustrate the impact of distractions on learning in social media-based learning environments. The inverse relationship, illustrated by the negative correlations between perceived distraction and the other variables, indicates that excessive and uncontrollable use of social media sites may detract from potential learning. Platforms that include features such as algorithmically driven feeds, continuous scrolling, and notification systems may split learners' focus and lead learners down paths unrelated to their original intent. As a result, although social

media platforms can offer opportunities for informal learning, learners' success in making effective use of them as informal learning tools will depend on how well they manage their attention and behaviour on these platforms.

Based on the findings presented above, two sets of recommendations can be made. The first recommendation is directed at educators. Educators may want to guide students in using social media platforms as intentional vehicles for language learning. Rather than viewing social media as a mere distraction, teachers can encourage students to follow English-language accounts, participate in discussions, and reflect on how their casual social media interactions contribute to their language development. Incorporating topics on digital learning practices into language courses may also help students become more aware of how informal environments can support their language acquisition. The second recommendation is addressed to educational institutions. Educational institutions may want to develop programs that incorporate elements of digital literacy and self-regulated learning into existing language education programs. Helping students develop their capacity to set goals, manage time, and regulate attention in digital environments may enable them to make better use of opportunities for informal learning. In today's learning environment, where digital technologies are the primary means of communication for most people, developing learners' capacities in digital literacy and self-regulated learning is more important than ever before. Practically speaking, the results suggest that teachers may want to guide students to utilise social media platforms more intentionally as informal learning environments. Examples of how teachers might do this include having students follow English-language academic or discussion-based accounts; encouraging students to engage in reflective micro-writing; and helping students establish their own personal language-learning objectives, which can be used together to maximise the instructional utility of platforms such as threads. Finally, future researchers need to investigate further how emergent social media platforms affect informal language learning practices. Longitudinal studies would provide insight into how continued participation in digital communities affects language development over time. Future researchers could also investigate how different types of social media platforms facilitate different aspects of language acquisition.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the students who participated in this study.

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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