

TAKING THE PICTURE OF INFORMAL DIGITAL LEARNING OF ENGLISH (IDLE) IN A HIGHER EDUCATION TURKISH EFL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) refers to individual's learning endeavor occurring in out-of-class environments in a naturalistic way independent from the requirements of a formal education program including assessment. Learners' IDLE experiences in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts are quite important to understand their motives, and the potential ways to improve such practices for enhanced language practice. This study aims to present IDLE practices of higher education Turkish EFL learners in detail and investigate the motivations of EFL learners considering their actual endeavors with digital language learning sources. For this purpose, a total of 115 students from an English Preparatory Program at a university in Turkiye took part in the study. Within a quantitative research design, the data were collected through a questionnaire developed for the purposes of the study based on rigorous research on IDLE literature to identify EFL learners' IDLE practices, their motivations on using digital sources for language practice, potential difficulties regarding such practices, and the role of guidance. The results of descriptive statistics indicated that the majority of the participants spent their time on IDLE practices mostly for using social networking platforms, music and song platforms, translation sites, video sharing sites, and series and movies on specific network platforms. Findings also showed that teacher's guidance had great importance on the participants' IDLE practices and learners needed systematic guidance in the vast world of digital sources for effective language practice. What is more, some obstacles hindering EFL learners' IDLE practices were identified such as the expenses related to digital sources (e.g. membership fees, internet costs, etc.) which echoed the reality of the digital divide. The findings of the study are quite important in understanding the need to use digital sources for learners' informal learning practices. This study has certain implications and suggestions for language practitioners and teachers to foster IDLE practices.

Keywords: Informal digital learning of English, IDLE practices, IDLE for language enhancement, the role of informal digital sources in English as a Foreign Language.

INTRODUCTION

Educational advancements have an inevitable role in the development of society. The digital transformation of the 21st century has created an accessible learning environment which leads to a vast source of opportunities supporting education outside the traditional classrooms. This digital age has demolished the walls of formal education settings by giving more space to life-long learning which emphasizes learning regardless of time and space. The recent developments in digital technology and its ubiquitous nature have changed the frame of learning outside of the classroom as well. This constantly updated world has led to a new opportunity for

Language Learning Beyond the Classroom (LLBC) for learners (Reinders & Benson, 2017; Reinders, Lai, & Sundqvist, 2022). With the appearance of digital transformation and digital pedagogy, language learning experiences have started to be examined through online informal learning of English (OILE) (Sockett, 2014; Toffoli & Sockett, 2015) or informal digital learning of English (IDLE) (Lee & Dressman, 2018; Lee, 2019; Lee, 2022). The two views enable to realize the opportunity for language learning expanding beyond the classroom through digital devices and resources and they both value autonomous learning in their relatively unstructured contexts. IDLE in extramural contexts is naturalistic, digital learning of English comes about in unstructured, out-of-class environments and it must be independent from a formal education program. For example, students watch some live videos, make comments during the live stream, and interact with other English users from around the world. In this case, there is no external instruction and no assessment for students; instead, they select the digital source and the content to follow on their own. Besides, they concentrate on being the user of the language. As a term, IDLE covers both the ‘informality’ since language development occurs except formal educational settings, that is beyond the classroom (Benson, 2011), and ‘digital learning’ which emerges as an umbrella concept and as a brand-new approach for learning through technology use (Siemens, 2014).

The place of IDLE has become more apparent with the unexpected fact that most people had to switch to a digital world after the COVID-19 outbreak. This sudden change, as Chik and Benson (2020) noted, showed that the key point was digital adaptation. Digital practices of people have gained much more importance than ever. The pandemic accentuated the digital divide which refers to the inequalities in access to and use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and in digital skills (Hilbert, 2016; van Deursen & van Dijk, 2018). According to OECD (2021) report, in some countries like Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Peru, the Philippines, and Vietnam, four in five disadvantaged students did not have access to the Internet at home but only at school before the pandemic. It is most probable that the digital divide has broadened during the pandemic by making educational conditions worse for disadvantaged learners. This crisis has shown that digital transformation has to be accelerated by highlighting the significance of digital technologies infrastructure to narrow down the digital divide. In another worldwide education report, PISA 2018 ICT familiarity survey showed that learners’ average duration of time per week using digital devices during classroom lessons and outside of classroom lessons for language lessons was 41 minutes across OECD countries. In Türkiye, learners reported about 39 minutes a week which was quite close to the average (OECD, 2021). This amount of time can be utilized to deal with learners’ educational needs in digital learning environments. In this respect, identifying learners’ IDLE practices would help to realize the changing educational needs and the services to be provided to enhance learning. Despite several research on IDLE in various English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts around the world, there has not been a previous study, to the authors’ best knowledge, conducted specifically on IDLE practices in the Turkish EFL context. There is also a scarcity of research related to online English learning outside the classroom in Türkiye (e.g., Balbay & Kilis, 2017; Dincer, 2020; Gorgun, 2015). Thus, the purpose of this study is to find out the informal digital learning of English (IDLE) practices of Turkish EFL learners and to investigate motivating and challenging factors for learners’ IDLE practices in their language learning process.

INFORMAL DIGITAL LEARNING OF ENGLISH

Lee (2017) defines the phenomenon of IDLE as “self-directed, informal English learning using a range of different digital devices (e.g., smartphones, desktop computers) and resources (e.g., web apps, social media) independent of formal contexts” (p. 2). Godwin-Jones (2018) has argued that the concept of complex systems theory (complexity theory) can be useful for searching informal language learning in digital environments. In Complexity Theory (CT), language is “a dynamic system that is constantly being transformed through use” (Larsen-Freeman, 2018, p. 58). Regarding CT paradigm, Godwin-Jones (2018, p. 14) states that “change and development occur within the nested subsystems of language, language development, and L2 online use.” Thus, changes in one of the systems can influence other systems, and this results in various outcomes. In this respect, language is viewed as constructed through interactions and as patterns emerging from repeated encounters with language in various contexts. With the changing nature of learning in digital environments, the construction of digital language learning experiences, then, need to be identified to understand the underlying factors that shape out-of-class experiences.

Recently, there has been a growing interest in IDLE which helps learning out of the class in EFL contexts. Several studies have explored the frequency (quantity) and diversity (quality) of IDLE activities used by EFL students concerning English learning outcomes (e.g., Lee, 2018; Lee, 2019; Ohashi, 2019). In one study, Lee and Dressman (2018) investigated the relationship between the quality of IDLE activities used by 94 South Korean university EFL learners and their English outcomes. Findings indicated that engaging in diverse IDLE activities was found to significantly predict students' English-speaking proficiency. It was also seen that a diverse use of IDLE activities contributed to greater willingness to communicate (WTC) online and higher productive vocabulary scores. With respect to the influence of teacher-led support on English language learners' digital technology use out-of-class language learning, Ohashi (2019) carried out a mixed-method study in Japan with questionnaires and interviews. As part of the English writing course, the researcher designed some supportive elements to enhance out-of-class English language learning through digital technologies during a 10-month course. The findings showed the important role of teachers in guiding students in the use of digital technologies, and it was revealed that all students used more online tools during the course than before and the usage increased in six months period compared to pre-course and post-course results. In the Turkish context, Dincer (2020) conducted a study to understand EFL learners' out-of-class language learning experiences through digital practices. With a cross-sectional survey design, the study investigated autonomous language learning and out-of-class technology engagement of 512 university students. The findings indicated that more autonomously engaged students tend to have better language learning proficiency. Besides, the more autonomously engaged students spent more time daily and used varied digital tools. Online websites and social media were the most frequently used digital tools for participants. It was also revealed that students benefited from social media, online websites, dictionaries, and intelligent tutoring system applications (apps). Online games, YouTube, Instagram, and other smartphone apps that enable students to practice communication also had an impact on language development.

Numerous researchers have pointed out that IDLE can enrich the autonomous learning environment for language learners. Therefore, as the learners become more autonomous, they can be more engaged with IDLE. Recent digital sources allow learners to take more control over their own language learning outside class. For instance, research has shown that digital video materials promote incidental vocabulary acquisition (Lin, 2011) and learning autonomy (Watkins & Wilkins, 2011). It was added by Watkins and Wilkins (2011) that YouTube is pretty useful for educators who are interested in facilitating learner autonomy and student-centered learning.

As the digitalized world generates its pros and cons, some challenges in IDLE occur as well. Digital divide can be seen as one of the main challenges for IDLE. While it refers to inequalities in accessing digital facilities mainly, "second order digital divide" refers to not only online access but also unequal broadband speed and consistency of internet connection (Brotcorne, Damhuis, Laurent, Valenduc & Vendramin, 2010). When language learners do not have these fundamental facilities to engage in digital learning environments, they cannot be exposed to the target language except formal education settings. Hence, developments in the infrastructure of the countries can affect language learners' IDLE integration into their daily life directly. Another important challenge in IDLE is lack of digital literacy competencies. In order to find the right digital source to meet learning needs, learners are required to have digital literacy skills; otherwise, they can spend their time and effort in vain among great numbers of content. They are supposed to be a socially responsible user of the Internet and social media (Hobbs & Moore, 2013). Digital literacy helps learners to gain self-confidence in the digital space and reach the information safely.

The recent attention and popularity of IDLE have aroused more interest for future research. To this end, Soyoo et al. (2021) prepared a scoping review to examine what has been done in IDLE and what should be done as the next steps. It was found out that studies about IDLE were mostly published between 2017-2020 indicating a recent interest in IDLE practices of learners in various contexts. Most of the studies in this review followed a qualitative design and a mixed-method design while there were only two qualitative studies. Most studies were conducted in Europe followed by Asia and North America; therefore, the review suggested that other learning contexts should be considered for future studies. This study also highlighted the need for more rigorous research on language learners' informal digital practices to shed light on the motives and challenges regarding learners' IDLE practices.

Regarding the growing interest and need to identify EFL learners' IDLE practices to help them effectively deal with the digital world and the scarcity of research in this area, this study attempts to present IDLE practices of Turkish EFL learners in detail and investigate the motivations of EFL learners considering their actual endeavors with digital language learning sources. Hence, the following research question is addressed: What are the IDLE practices of Turkish EFL learners regarding their foreign language learning experiences?

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative research design to find out the IDLE practices of Turkish EFL learners along with their motivations. The rationale for designing a quantitative study was to reveal learners' current IDLE practices, the challenges, and the needs to navigate in the digital world for language learning endeavors that would enlighten to design further IDLE opportunities. For this purpose, a questionnaire was developed addressing demographic variables and various IDLE practices.

Participants and Setting

A total of 115 students from an English Preparatory Program at a private university in Türkiye took part in the study. The participants were selected following a convenient sampling strategy indicating that all of them were voluntary, accessible, and willing to take part in the study (Creswell, 2012). The participants were 64 males (55.7%) and 51 females (44.3%) whose ages ranged between 17 and 25 with the majority of them between 17-19 (n=66). When it comes to the participants' previous English learning experience, 53 of them declared that they have been learning English for 5-9 years. 34 of them have been learning it for 0-4 years and 22 of them have been learning the language for 10-14 years. Some participants (n=6) stated that they have been learning English for 15 years or more than this. The participants were studying at different proficiency levels of the English preparatory program as A1-Elementary (n=83), A2-Pre-intermediate (n=18), and B1-Intermediate (n=14). It was important to include learners from various proficiency levels to take a detailed picture of Turkish EFL learners' IDLE practices.

In the study context, English preparatory program aims B1+ (intermediate +) exit level based on CEFR offering 24-20 hours in a week according to students' levels. The program is comprised of three modules in total and education is carried out on the levels of A1 (beginner), A2 (pre-intermediate), B1 (intermediate), and B1+ (intermediate+). To reach the required exit level of the program, students attend English courses including integrated skills lessons (12 hours for reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and 12 hours for listening, speaking, grammar, vocabulary). As part of extracurricular activities, online asynchronous tasks are given. In terms of IDLE, there is no extramural leading for students formally to out-of-class digital sources, but some instructors can have spontaneous referrals based on their personal observations on students' needs or demands. A higher education ethical committee including experts approved the study and all participants signed consent forms regarding their voluntary participation prior to data collection.

Instrument

An IDLE questionnaire was developed for the purpose of the study based on several previous studies (Arndt, 2019; Ohashi, 2019) and the related literature on IDLE. The questionnaire was revised by four experts in language teaching and digital technologies for reliability and the final version was administered to the participants. The questionnaire included three parts addressing (1) learners' demographic information (i.e. age, English learning experience, level, etc.), (2) their IDLE practices in detail, the role of guidance in their out-of-the-class digital practices, (3) their motivations on using digital sources for language practice, and potential difficulties regarding such practices. The questions were closed responses and there was an "other answers" section for participants to add alternative responses. The second part of the questionnaire aimed specifically to find out the diversity and the frequency of digital tools used by the participants during their informal English learning (e.g. Which digital tools do you use to improve your English out of class? How often do you use these digital tools to improve your English out of class?). Besides, this part investigated how the participants decide on digital sources for IDLE (e.g. Do you follow some criteria while choosing a digital tool to improve your English out of class?). In addition to the list of digital tools presented in the literature, a small sample of EFL learners was asked about the digital tools they use for learning English. Their answers were collected, and appropriate options were added to the digital tool list in the questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered in Turkish, which is the mother tongue of the participants, to avoid incomprehensibility because of low English proficiency and to increase the validity.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection procedure lasted for two weeks. First, all the students in the preparatory program were invited to take part in the study. Voluntary participants were selected based on their consent. The IDLE questionnaire developed for the study was transformed into an online form to collect and store the data. Participants were asked to fill out the questionnaire by using Google Forms. In this way, the data were stored in an online cloud. After the gathering of the data via the IDLE questionnaire, the data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, getting the percentages and frequencies. The aim of conducting descriptive statistics was to identify the time the participants spent while studying English on the digital realm, the tools they used to access the digital sources, their most and least preferred platforms to study various language skills, how they decided on the IDLE sources, the motivating factors for IDLE practices, and the challenges they faced. Following this detailed analysis of higher education Turkish EFL learners' IDLE practices, a further study was designed based on the needs revealed in this preliminary study. Thus, the current study was quite important in revealing various features of IDLE at the Turkish higher education EFL context. While analyzing demographic information in the first part of the IDLE questionnaire, the frequency was calculated. For the second part, data were analyzed by getting the mean values of each digital tools/platforms so how often and how varied participants use IDLE sources was listed through mean values. Besides, frequency values were used to compare some specific digital sources and to present how participants decide on IDLE sources. An open-ended question was asked to find out how the participants decided on digital sources for IDLE and participants' short answers were analyzed through descriptive statistics. The frequency values of short answers were used for data analysis. In the analysis of the last part, percentages of participants' responses were calculated to find out the motivating and deterring factors for IDLE. The findings were interpreted based on the obtained data in the following section.

FINDINGS

In addressing the IDLE practices of Turkish EFL learners to improve their language learning process, descriptive data analysis was carried out and the results were demonstrated in Table 1. below.

Table 1. Results for Time Spent on IDLE and Participants' Access to Digital Devices

Time spent on IDLE	n	Participants' access	n
0-2 hours	76	Smartphone	115
2-4 hours	26	Internet	112
none	10	Sufficient Internet for IDLE	99
6+ hours	3	Computer	88
		Tablet	32
Total	115	Total	115

As given in Table 1., findings showed that the majority of the participants studied English using digital tools/platforms out of the class about 0-2 hours a day (n=76). This is followed by 2-4 hours (n=26), none (n=10), and 6 hours and more (n=3). The data indicated that all participants had smartphones (n=115) while 88 of them had their own computers. It was identified that most of them (n=112) had internet access out of class to study English, but some participants (n=16) stated that their internet access was not sufficient to practice English out of class. The majority of the participants (n=83) did not own a tablet while 32 of them had this device that they used to connect to the internet. This descriptive part showed that all participants had access to the internet even though it was not for the purpose of studying English all the time. The majority of them were familiar with language practice opportunities via digital tools/platforms; however, there were students who did not use digital sources for language improvement. The following parts give the IDLE practices of the participants in detail.

Preferred Digital Tools/Platforms for English Practice

Findings showed that some digital tools/platforms were widely used with the aim of out-of-the-class language practices while some of them were not preferred. Table 2. below summarizes the participants' digital tools/platforms uses. The value for each frequency was determined as follows; 5 (*Daily / Almost daily*), 4 (*At least once a week*), 3 (*At least once a month*), 2 (*Rarely*), and 1 (*Never*). When asked for their preferences regarding digital tools/platforms to study English out of class, the majority of the participants stated that they used social networking platforms (e.g. *Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok*) (M=4.73). The second most preferred choice was music and song platforms (e.g. *Spotify*) (M=4.58). Translation sites (e.g. *Google Translate*) (M=4.54), video sharing sites (e.g. *YouTube, Vimeo*) (M=4.34), and series and movies in the platforms (e.g. *Netflix*) (M=4.33) were other popular platforms used by the participants for their informal digital language practices. Participants stated that they also referred to web-based dictionaries (e.g. *Tureng, Cambridge Dictionary*) (M=4.01), song lyrics (e.g. *Lyricstraining*) (M=3.94), vocabulary apps (e.g. *Memrise, Duolingo, VoScreen*) (M=3.33), online games (M=3.31), and online news sites (e.g. *BBC News, Reuters*) (M=3.26).

As can be seen from Table 2., the most preferred platforms were social networking sites which were not originally designed for English language practice for learners. The participants spent time on these sites to follow the English content (i.e. videos, posts, messages) popular/trendy topics or people's social media posts or accounts, and to communicate with other people in English. Fewer participants stated that they followed contents specifically designed for language learners like English self-study sites (e.g. *British Council Learn English*) (M=3.30) and writing Apps/assistant (e.g. *Grammarly*) (M=2.75). Similarly, podcasts (e.g. *BBC, Nationalgeographic*) (M=2.88) and blogs (e.g. *Espresso English Blog*) (M=2.58) were preferred by fewer participants. Another finding indicated the number of participants who used educational vlogs for language learning (e.g. *ETJ English*) (M=2.75) and attended live EduTuber classes on language learning (M=2.63). It was seen that while video sharing sites were used by most of the participants (M=4.34), they did not spend their time on educational content designed specifically for language practice. The least preferred digital tools/platforms were identified as comics and cartoons (e.g. *Webtoon*) (M=2.60), presentation platforms (e.g. *TED Talks*) (M=2.48), corpora (e.g. *COCA, BNC*) (M=2.13) and audiobooks (e.g. *Audible, Scribd*) (M=2.11).

Table 2. Summary of Results for Digital Tools/Platforms Used by the Participants

Digital tools / platforms	\bar{X}
Social networking sites (e.g. <i>Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok</i>)	4.73
Platforms for music, songs (e.g. <i>Spotify</i>)	4.58
Translation sites (e.g. <i>Google translate</i>)	4.54
Video sharing sites (e.g. <i>YouTube, Vimeo</i>)	4.34
Series and films on video streaming platforms (e.g. <i>Netflix</i>)	4.33
Web-based dictionaries (e.g. <i>Tureng, Cambridge Dictionary</i>)	4.01
Song lyrics (e.g. <i>Lyricstraining</i>)	3.94
Vocabulary Apps (e.g. <i>Memrise, Duolingo, VoScreen</i>)	3.33
Online games (on computer/smartphone/social networks)	3.31
English self-study sites (e.g. <i>British Council Learn English</i>)	3.30
Online news sites (e.g. <i>BBC News, Reuters</i>)	3.26
Podcasts (e.g. <i>BBC, Nationalgeographic</i>)	2.88
Educational Vlogs for Language Learning (e.g. <i>ETJ English</i>)	2.75
Writing Apps or assistant (e.g. <i>Grammarly</i>)	2.75
Live classes of Edutubers (e.g. <i>YouTube-English Speaking Success</i>)	2.63
Comics or Cartoon platforms (e.g. <i>Webtoon</i>)	2.60
Blogs (e.g. <i>Espresso English Blog</i>)	2.58
Presentation platforms (e.g. <i>TED Talks</i>)	2.48
Corpus (e.g. <i>COCA, BNC</i>)	2.13
Audiobooks (e.g. <i>Audible, Scribd</i>)	2.11

Especially for corpora and audiobooks, many participants (n= 52) stated that they were not familiar with these platforms and never used them. Indeed, these digital platforms offer diverse opportunities for language practice. Corpora enable to use concordance lines and help to see authentic language use in the context. The content in the corpora can be used for various language skills. Likewise, audiobooks provide rigorous listening practice for language learners. Some of them include online dictionaries for vocabulary or reflection parts for writing activities. It was clear that the participants in general did not take advantage of such tools as part of IDLE practices.

Similarly, some participants stated that they never used presentation platforms (n=39), comics and cartoons (n=39), live classes of EduTubers (n=38), and writing Apps/assistant (n=35). Other online tools/platforms which were not given in the list but used by the participants to study English out of the classroom were *Discord* (n=1), *Cake* (2-3 days a week) (n=1), *Free4talk* (for speaking practice) (n=1) and *Steam* (English groups/communities in the platform) (n=1). The common feature among these apps is that they offer communication opportunities in English. They provide instant messaging or speaking practice for users. Users can be exposed to real-life English by using these apps; thus, the young generation prefers using these apps while playing games or improving their communication skills.

Criteria for Selecting Digital Tools/Platforms for English Practice

The participants were also asked about the criteria they followed while choosing a digital tool/platform to improve their English outside the class. This part was added to the questionnaire to find out the factors that affect higher education students in their selection of IDLE practices and to be able to foster motivation in the future based on the criteria they follow while choosing IDLE tools/platforms. Figure 1. below displays the criteria used by the participants in their informal digital practices.

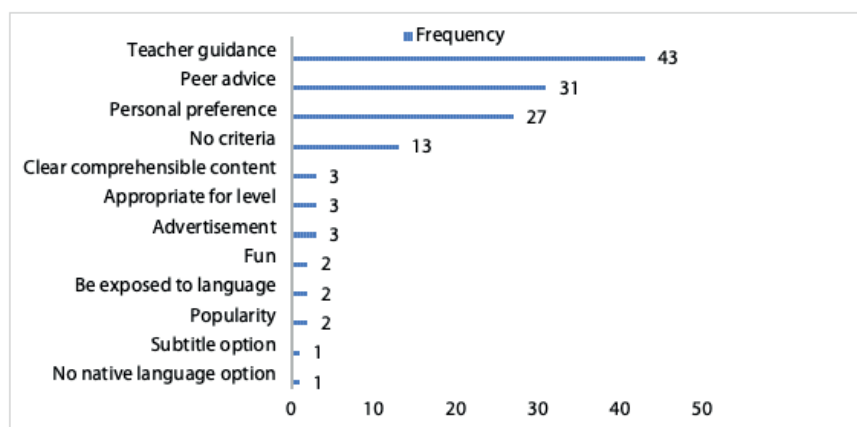


Figure 1. Deciding on IDLE Source

As can be viewed in Figure 1., the results revealed that most of the participants decided on IDLE sources following their teacher's guidance (n=43). Secondly, the participants listened to their friends' advice (n=31), or they decided on the source which appealed to their interest (n=27). It was clear that the majority of the participants followed others' advice (i.e. teacher, peers) when they wanted to practice English out of the classroom. It was seen that some participants did not have any criteria while choosing a digital tool/platform for informal practice (n=13). This showed that for some participants, IDLE practices were at random without any conscious choice to practice language skills or areas. For other participants, there were some other criteria items expressed by the participants in selecting the IDLE source such as its having clear and comprehensible content (n=3), its appropriateness for learner's language proficiency level (n=3), seeing advertisements about it (n=3), its being fun (n=2), its provision of opportunity to be exposed to the target language (n=2), its popularity (n=2), its not having a counterpart in their native language (n=1), and its having a caption/subtitle option (n=1). That is, clearly identified conscious purposes in the selection of IDLE sources were only preferred by a few participants.

Motivating Factors for IDLE Practices

For the purposes of the study, the participants were asked to state their motivations to use digital tools/platforms in English. Identifying the motivations to resort to IDLE practices as an extramural activity was crucial to find out the needs of the learners in the digital English language environments. The results regarding this part of the questionnaire can be seen in Figure 2. below. According to the results of the analysis shown in Figure 2., 96% of the participants wanted to improve their speaking skills most. This was followed by goals in other main language skills and use such as learning vocabulary (92%), improving pronunciation (88%), improving listening (86%), and improving grammar (84%). This finding was in parallel with the preferred IDLE tools/platforms as the students spent time online communicating with people via social media platforms, playing interactive online games that require communication skills, and watching/listening/reading various English content on different platforms. It was clear that learners reported a need to improve language skills and areas to keep up with the digital world. Getting better grades in English classes (83%) was regarded as more important than improving reading skills (79%) by the participants. Since the students were at a higher education institution, getting good grades was considered as a motivating factor to look for IDLE practices outside the regular classrooms.

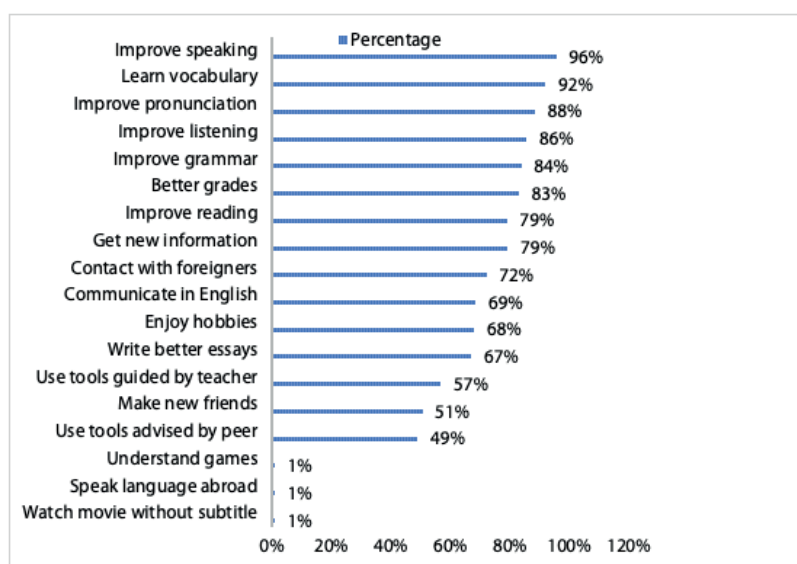


Figure 2. Motivating Factors for IDLE

Getting new information (79%), having contact with foreigners (72%), communicating in English (69%), enjoying hobbies (68%), and writing better essays (67%) were other motivational reasons stated by the participants. They also asserted using digital tools/platforms guided by the teacher (57%), making new friends (51%), and using digital tools/platforms advised by a friend (49%) as motivating factors for IDLE. Some participants noted other reasons that motivated them to use digital tools/platforms to study English out of the classroom as to understand online games with English stories (n=1), speak the target language abroad (n=1), and watch movies without subtitles (n=1).

Deterring Factors for IDLE Practices

The participants were also asked to state deterring factors to use digital tools/platforms in English. Along with the motivational factors, identifying the challenges and problems of IDLE practices was quite important to help learners deal with the drawbacks they are experiencing. Figure 3 displays the deterring factors that deprive learners of effective IDLE practices. As Figure 3 below displays, the most discouraging issue for the participants was the expenses required for the use of digital tools/platforms (e.g. membership fee, internet bill, etc.) expanding their budget (36%). Considering the financial difficulties of a higher education student,

the cost of digital tools/platforms is revealed as a compelling factor. Some participants also had concerns about the protection of personal data security, and they did not want to share their personal information online (e.g. real name or profile photo) (19%). A considerable number of participants declared that they did not know how to use digital tools/platforms for their out-of-the-class language learning (17%) practices.

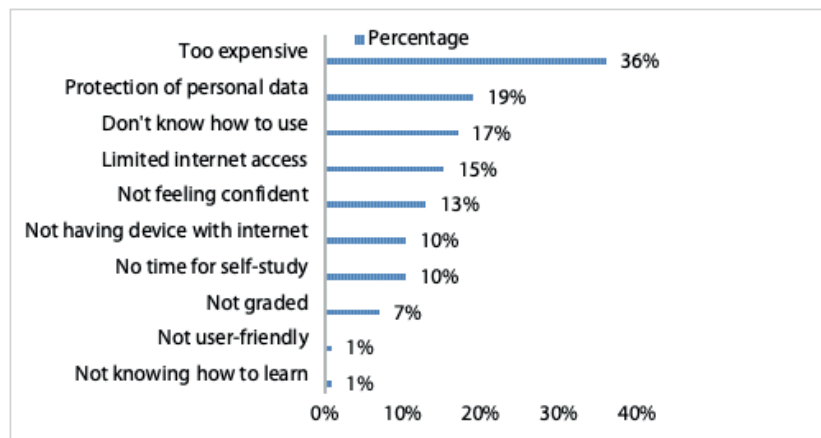


Figure 3. Deterring Factors for IDLE Practices

Other deterring factors were listed as limited internet access (15%), not feeling confident using digital tools/platforms (13%), not having a device with internet for out of class study (10%) and having no time for self-study out of the class (10%). 7% of the participants did not think out-of-the-class study using digital tools was necessary since their efforts were not graded in formal educational contexts. Some participants noted other reasons that discouraged them to use digital tools/platforms to study English out of the classroom as some platforms' not being user-friendly (n=1) and not knowing how to learn through IDLE experience (n=1).

All in all, the findings of the study indicated that higher education students in a Turkish EFL context had varying needs and motivations to navigate in the digital realm for English language learning purposes. This study presented in detail the IDLE sources learners preferred, learners' criteria for consulting IDLE sources, their motivations in using digital tools/platforms, and the challenges they faced in their attempt to get involved in digital English language practices. In this regard, in the following section, this study has certain implications for language practitioners and teachers to use digital sources more effectively for language learning/teaching purposes, and it also offers certain suggestions for further studies remarking on the future of IDLE.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

The study has shown that most participants spent approximately 0-2 hours a day on IDLE practices. Among these practices, music and song platforms, translation sites, video sharing sites, and series and movies on the platforms were quite common. Social networking platforms were the most preferred digital tool, a finding consistent with the previous research (Dincer, 2020) in the Turkish EFL context. On the other hand, it was found out that educational content which was designed for language practice like live language classes on YouTube was preferred by fewer participants. It might be concluded that using technology frequently and accessing digital tools easily do not guarantee a conscious use of technology for educational purposes (Wang & Chen, 2020). Live language classes prepared by professional tutors on digital platforms offer lots of opportunities including grammar explanations, related examples, live interaction with participants through question-and-answer sessions, and mainly exposure for the target language. However, it is apparent from this result that the participants cannot take the opportunity to use some of the most useful digital content which can meet their language needs. In this respect, instead of using technology for technology's sake, using technology in a purposeful and an effective manner in language teaching and providing guidance for this perspective is highly crucial. In the vast realm of digital resources, it is clear that the students need the guidance of more knowledgeable tech-savvy teachers. In this respect, there is also a need to inform teachers and provide them training in IDLE as well.

The findings revealed that there were several platforms that were rarely used by the participants such as audiobooks, corpora, presentation platforms, comics and cartoons, and writing applications. The reasons might stem from the level of students or inadequate information on these platforms. In other words, if the participant was an elementary-level student, many books on the audiobook platforms might be difficult for that student due to low level of proficiency. At this point, leading students to free platforms that include different levels of reader content can be beneficial. In addition, students may not know about particular resources such as corpus-induced content since such tools are not presented within the formal curriculum content. Hence, guiding students to this kind of supportive platforms which presents spoken or written productions of language from real life will be helpful. The concordances which involve authentic pieces of language in real-life contexts can be presented in the language classrooms with samples and students can be motivated to use them outside the class. There are several professional, beneficial, and free digital writing assistant platforms as well. These sources help writers to find their own mistakes by presenting feedback and offer some suggestions through paraphrasing the content written by the informal learner. There are free automated writing evaluation tools that give online feedback and instant correction. As it is found out, unfortunately, the participants use digital sources for writing less frequently than other tools. Therefore, integrating these digital sources into the classroom environment and modelling the use of them can give some ideas to learners for their language production using informal learning outside the classroom. As a result, it was revealed that students were not familiar with specific tools/platforms catered for language learning purposes and the teachers' integration of such tools within the classroom environment would help the students use them as part of IDLE practices.

Findings also show that teacher's guidance has great importance on the participants' IDLE practices. This finding justifies previous studies which support the role of teacher's guidance in constructing effective IDLE experiences (Lai, Zhu & Gong, 2015; Lee, 2019; Lee, 2020). Nevertheless, the opposite side of the coin indicates the necessity of learner autonomy and digital literacy through which learners can decide on the right source of IDLE on their own; in other words, without the teacher's assistance. In this regard, the development and introduction of certain checklists to guide students' selection of effective digital language sources would assist them to make appropriate choices while navigating in the digital world. After the teacher's guidance, participants mostly follow their friends' advice while choosing IDLE tools, or they decide on the digital sources based on their personal interests. Some participants stated that they had no criteria for deciding on the right IDLE sources. Besides, some participants added that they were influenced by the advertisements and popularity of the digital tool while deciding on IDLE sources. As Sockett and Toffoli (2012) suggest, training learners for the development of communication and media skills would be more valuable than the demonstration of specific tools or platforms. Constantly evolving technology necessitates various digital learning tools in the course of time and up-to-dateness changes rapidly. Critical evaluation of digital sources as part of digital literacy skills is highly important for learners to navigate in the world of IDLE. Making conscious choices in this digitalized world can yield the best benefit for informal learning. One implication here is to offer digital literacy courses to the students as part of formal education to help them critically evaluate the effectiveness and reliability of any digital resource they are using.

Additionally, most of the participants indicated that they wanted to improve their speaking skills in the target language first. Learning vocabulary, improving pronunciation and listening are the following motivating reason for IDLE according to the participants. To cope with the digital content, language learners feel the need to improve speaking skills and related language areas such as vocabulary and pronunciation. Hence, guiding learners to use effective digital tools/platforms for interaction purposes is also gaining importance. Language learners in EFL contexts, like Turkiye, are disadvantageous of not being exposed to English much as part of daily endeavors and tasks. That is, in their daily life, EFL learners do not have opportunities to produce the target language; therefore, they feel the need to be exposed to spoken input. One way of providing such exposure is the integration of digital sources and informal learning that takes place out-of-the-class contexts ubiquitously. This need has been echoed in many EFL contexts in which EFL learners tend to use informal sources to be communicative, speak with fluency and use vocabulary and idioms they have gleaned from digital sources (Dressman, 2020).

Albeit several advantages IDLE promises, the participants had to consider some obstacles to make IDLE a part of their life since the expenses for IDLE (e.g. membership fee, internet cost, etc.) were expanding their student budget. This finding once again echoes the reality of the digital divide regarding the financial availability of the digital world for some learners (van Dijk, 2019). One implication here is to support language learners at an institutional base and make at least digital tools tailored for language learning purposes available to students. Ministries of education, universities and private business endeavors can fund students to have free access to language learning resources. What is more, one of the main deterring factors for IDLE was identified as not knowing how to use digital tools/platforms for out-of-the-class language learning purposes. This finding is in accordance with findings from previous research (Ohashi, 2019) indicating the importance of awareness in using technology for educational purposes. The young generation may well be familiar with social media use, as indicated by the results of this study as well, however, they may not know which sources are effective and reliable for language learning purposes. Besides, they may not know how to use them in a sustainable manner to enhance language learning. As mentioned by the latest OECD (2022) brochure entitled “Building the Future of Education”, education has been on the verge of the combination of formal and informal learning. Hence, in the same document, one of the propositions is that improving the understanding of educational institutions as sites offering both formal and informal opportunities to learn and develop policies to empower schools as positive learning environments (OECD, 2022). As a result, in spite of leaving students on their own in the digital world, there is a need to bridge the gap between formal and informal foreign language education. In this respect, making students familiar with available and accessible tools/platforms and how to use them through modelling and guidance to select and use the most appropriate ones outside the classroom would likely to shape the future of IDLE.

This study presented here had some limitations as well. As Ardnt (2019) pointed out in her study, the findings obtained from the surveys are relatively broad and may not provide an accurate idea to realize how the participants used these tools/platforms for their English learning practices. For instance, using social media websites can cover various behaviors including watching videos, taking a glance at a post or a photo, reading the content of different lengths, or producing their own content through spoken or written language production. Hence, there is a need to investigate IDLE practices in more detail. The results of the current study might shed light on designing an IDLE model to guide learners and teachers to enhance personalized language learning. As Reinders and Benson (2017) suggested, reflective journals might contribute to comprehend learners’ engagement in digital environments. Thus, more detailed studies which involve both quantitative and qualitative data collection tools are believed to offer a better understanding for the nature of IDLE in EFL contexts. Besides, digitalization produces new tools and artificial intelligence technologies each day like the recent digital chatbot tool ChatGPT. Recent digital sources like these and the platforms stated by the participants in the current study might be involved in further studies to investigate their role in IDLE. Thus, this study might well be considered as the first step in exploring the IDLE practices of EFL learners. Future studies may consider providing systematic and comprehensive guidance on IDLE, developing tools such as checklists and digital handbooks to help students navigate more effectively in the vast world of digital advancements.

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