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EFL Learners' Beliefs and Practices on Informal Digital Learning of English beyond Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The present-day English language learning is characterized by educational potentials of digital technology for formal learning context. However, research examining EFL learners' characteristics on self-directed use of digital devices for language learning still remains a paucity of evidence. Addressing this current issue, the present study aims to shed some light on English language learners' beliefs and practices on informal digital learning of English beyond classroom. A total of 117 Indonesian EFL learners were participated in this study through a 5-point Likert-scale survey and semi-structured interview. The results revealed the disparity between the EFL learners' beliefs and practices on informal digital learning of English. These EFL learners surely believed that informal digital learning activities could significantly enhance the target language skills, but they slightly engaged in digital learning activities beyond the classroom schedule. The results of semi-structured interviews further delineated that native languages use of their social circle relationships and limitations of the digital devices used became particular reasons for this circumstance. The results contribute to the realm of English language teaching as a basis to reach the possible synchronicity between teacher-designed in-class and out-class digital learning activities and students' language learning styles and preferences to achieve the success of target language learning.

Key Words: Autonomous learning; Informal digital learning of English; Learners' beliefs; Learners' practices

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century English language teaching is the witness of advanced information communication and technology (ICT). The availability and affordances of online resources, digital devices, and social networking sites characterize the present-day teaching and learning of English as second or foreign language (Klimova, 2019; Salehi & Salehi, 2012). With this digital environment, fostering the potential use of technology for language learning is highly necessary particularly for language learners (Lee, 2020; Nugroho & Atmojo, 2020). Using a range of digital devices, language learners are equipped with ample opportunities to perform autonomous learning and create personalized learning ecologies (Lai et al., 2015). Thus, promoting learners' autonomy for out-of-class language learning becomes a crucial effort to gain the maximum inputs of language acquisition in this digital era.

Nowadays, ELT scholars have begun to acknowledge how language learners are involved in various language learning activities using digital devices in their daily life (Sundqvist, 2019). Lee (2020) mentions the phenomenon of autonomous learning beyond the formal classroom as an informal digital learning of English. It is defined as language learning activities carried out by

learners outside classroom using digital devices such as computers, smartphones, tablets, or laptops (Lee, 2020). In an informal digital learning context, language learners are encountered with a situation where they have to independently select the most convenient digital learning activity to enhance their language skills, both receptive and productive (Lai, Wang, et al., 2016; Webb & Doman, 2020). Since language learners today are at the center of digital learning environment; hence, examining their beliefs and practices on informal digital learning of English is crucial as a consistent attempt to develop their language skills and abilities.

Research on learners' perspectives about the use of digital technology for language learning have been conducted for years in various points of view (Dashtestani, 2016; Lai & Zheng, 2018). Previous studies have revealed the significant contribution of digital technology to the development of learners' English skills in pedagogical classroom through the use of social networking sites, internet resources, and learning management system (Alberth et al., 2018; Khalil, 2018; Nugroho & Rahmawati, 2020; Slim & Hafedh, 2019). In an informal context, it was shown that language learners gained positive concerns on the use of technology for independent learning, but had hesitations on the absence of helps and supports from teachers

(Isbell, 2018; Lee & Dressman, 2018; Naghdipour, 2017).

Studies have further revealed that language learners preferred using digital devices to practice receptive skills of English (e.g. reading news, listening and watching videos, looking for vocabulary meaning) than to perform productive English skills and build social connectivity (Cole & Vanderplank, 2016; Zainuddin & Perera, 2019). Results of previous studies have also shown that English learners positively perceived the involvement of social media to enhance their language competence such as Instagram (Anggraeni, 2017), Facebook (Islam, 2016), WhatsApp (Ahmed, 2019), and Youtube (Fakhrudin et al., 2020). These results indicate that digital technology plays a significant role for developing language learners' skills in the present-day digital learning environment (Goria et al., 2019; Yurdagül & Öz, 2018).

Having highlighted the results of previous studies, it is obvious that digital technology is a promising pathway to achieve the success of language learning. Previous research has yielded significant roles of technology and language learners' concerns on digital learning activities. However, research examining English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' beliefs and practices on informal digital learning of English still remains a paucity of evidence. As the informal

learning context has educational potentials, how EFL learners are involved in a range of digital learning activities beyond the formal classroom becomes a crucial attribute to explore.

The present study is at the cutting edge of closing the gap by examining EFL learners' beliefs and practices on self-directed use of digital devices for language learning. An in-depth delineation of how EFL learners believe and practice informal digital learning of English activities is crucial to reach a possible synchronicity between teachers' designed digital learning activities and learners' preferences. Such an understanding contributes as fruitful insights for teachers on how to develop technology-based learning activities. The research questions posed in this study are "What are EFL learners' beliefs on informal digital learning of English?" and "How do EFL learners practice digital learning of English beyond the classroom?" The answers to these questions are expected to shed more light on nature and characteristics of EFL learners' digital learning activities in informal settings.

METHOD

Research design

This study aims to explore EFL learners' beliefs and practices on informal digital learning of English beyond the formal classroom. To this end, a descriptive research was adopted by employing a survey design to depict

how EFL learners' view or value out-of-class language learning activities (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Willis, 2018). Following the survey, semi-structured interviews were conducted to jump into more in-depth understanding of the participants' responses in the survey about their beliefs and practices on informal digital learning of English.

Participants

A total of 117 undergraduate students (83 females and 34 male) in English language teaching and linguistics from several universities in Surakarta Indonesia were conveniently recruited for this study. They studied English as a foreign language and they were native Indonesian speakers. Their age was between 18 and 23 and the average age was 19. Most of the participants were juniors (n = 54; 46.15%) followed by sophomores (n = 29; 24.78%), seniors (n = 21; 17.94%), and freshman (n = 13; 11.11%). Sixty-five (55.55%) of them considered themselves as having beginning proficiency level, Forty-one (35.04%) in medium proficiency level, and only eleven (9.40%) self-rated themselves as of advanced proficiency level.

Instruments and data collection

The primary instrument used in this study was the 5-point Likert-scale survey which was directed to explore the participants' beliefs and practices on informal digital learning of English. The survey was adapted from Kearney et

al's. (2012) pedagogical frameworks of digital learning environment. The survey comprised 16 items and divided into three parts. The first part sought participants' demographic information, the second part elicited participants' beliefs about informal digital learning of English, and the last part dealt with participants' practices on self-directed use of digital devices for language learning beyond the classroom. In addition, semi-structured interviews were administered with 8 participants (namely P1-P8) to add their views, values, and perspectives on digital learning activities in informal settings. The interviews were conducted by means of video call on 15-20 minutes for each participant and administered in both Indonesian and English, depending on the participants' preferences.

Data analysis

To understand the participants' beliefs and practices about informal digital learning of English, statistical analysis in the form of mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) was conducted by the employment of SPSS. To ensure the validity and reliability of the instrument, data, and the whole research, one of the researchers developed the survey items and the other researcher checked the instrument and data to perform content-related evidence (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). The participants' interview responses were independently read, coded, and

classified into emerging trends and themes according to the research questions by the first researcher and an inter-rater who is a senior lecturer and earned a Ph.D degree in English language teaching. Stages of discussion on the differences was further conducted to reach a complete agreement and consensus of the final results.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of data analyses with regards to the two main themes as limited in the research questions, i.e. EFL learners' beliefs and practices on informal digital learning of English beyond classroom.

Table 1 Learners' beliefs on informal digital learning of English

No	Items	M	SD
1	Informal digital learning gives significant support to my language development.	4.30	0.86
2	Informal digital learning provides me opportunities to develop my language skills at any time and any place.	4.10	0.91
3	Informal digital learning offers me alternative to practice language skills beyond the classroom.	3.85	0.73
4	Informal digital learning helps me to perform self-paced and personalized English learning outside classroom.	3.60	1.04
5	The flexibility of informal digital learning enables me to gain maximum language inputs without time and space limitations.	3.25	0.96
6	Informal digital learning assists me to expand my language learning experiences.	4.05	0.74
7	Informal language learning gives me chances to perform learning activities based on my own interests.	4.15	1.07
8	Informal digital learning enhance my autonomous and independent learning of English.	4.10	1.06

Notes: The value was based on 5 point-Likert scale with 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree)

As depicted in Table 1, EFL learners agreed to all item statements in the survey as indicated by the mean

Interpretation and implication of the results are further highlighted as the discussion. The participants' representative responses of semi-structured interviews are quoted to support the delineation of the findings.

Findings

EFL learners' beliefs on informal digital learning of English

In relation the first research question, the results of survey about EFL learners' beliefs on informal digital learning of English is presented in Table 1.

scores above 3 (neutral) in all items. The statement of "Informal digital learning gives significant support to my language

development" (item 1) received the highest score of 4.30. Although item 5 (*The flexibility of informal digital learning enables me to gain maximum language inputs without time and space limitations*) had the lowest mean score of 3.25, it still indicates an agreement from the EFL learners that informal digital learning of English is flexible since it enables them to practice language learning activities in informal settings. It was also found that EFL learners agreed that informal digital learning outside the classroom became alternative to practice English skills and perform self-paced learning (item 3 and 4). Table 1 further revealed EFL learners' agreement that informal digital learning of English could enhance their autonomous and independent learning, develop their interests, and expand their language experiences across time and spaces beyond classroom (item 2, 6, 7, and 8).

The survey's results were echoed in the semi-structured interview responses. The interview participants positively perceived that informal digital learning of English could significantly supported the development of their language skills at any time and any place. They believed that this flexibility enabled them to perform autonomous learning and gained maximum inputs of English skills based on their language activity preferences and interests. Moreover, some participants in semi-structured

interviews also believed that informal digital learning of English could expand their language knowledge and acquisition beyond what their teachers taught in the classroom. As some participants in semi-structured interviews said:

"..... and I one hundred percent believe that our digital activities in daily life such as online chatting, reading news, looking for vocabulary meaning, and watching English-content videos contribute to enhancing our English skills" (P7. Int)

"Yes, I surely believe this kind of informal digital learning can improve my English skills and knowledge intentionally" (P1. Int)

"Informal learning using digital devices is flexible, and we can perform it at any time and any place we want. This flexibility gives us opportunity to learn and practice language skills according to our preferences" (P4. Int)

"Although I have learned teaching materials in campus, informal learning that I do in my leisure time such as chatting and sharing in my social media can improve my English ability, even though I do not aware of it" (P6. Int)

EFL learners' practices on informal digital learning of English

With regards to the second research question, the results of survey about the learners' practices on

informal digital learning of English is demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2 Learners' practices on informal digital learning of English

No	Items	M	SD
1	I use digital devices (e.g. laptops, mobile phones, and tablets) to perform informal English learning activities in my leisure time outside the classroom.	2.15	1.10
2	I regularly perform informal digital learning activities in my daily life out of doing my school assignments.	1.95	0.74
3	I often read English news online to gain new information and improve my reading skills beyond the classroom.	2.65	0.87
4	I often make use of online dictionary to look for particular meaning of English words and improve my vocabulary mastery beyond my formal classroom.	3.15	0.91
5	I often watch English videos, movies, or dramas with the aim to enhance my language skills beyond my formal classroom.	2.90	1.02
6	I often chat with others in English via social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Line).	1.75	0.84
7	I often use technology to share English contents online via several platforms (e.g. personal blogs, social media, Youtube videos, etc.).	2.05	1.04
8	I often use technology to connect with both native (e.g. American, British, Australian) and non-native speakers (Japanese, Chinese, Arabian) of English all over the world.	1.95	0.98

Notes: The value was based on 5 point-Likert scale with 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (neutral), 4 (agree), and 5 (strongly agree)

Unlike the results of Table 1, Table 2 demonstrates that EFL learners disagreed to most of the item statements about their practices on informal digital learning of English. The only statement agreed by the learners and reached mean score above 3 (3.15) was item 4 (*I often make use of online dictionary to look for particular meaning of English words and improve my vocabulary mastery beyond my formal classroom*). It was also found that the participants were slightly involved in a range of digital activities in informal settings both to enhance their receptive skills and productive skills (item 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8). In short, Table 2 showed that the

participants were acknowledged to not to regularly carry out informal learning activities using digital devices beyond the formal classroom (item 1 and 2).

The results of semi-structured interviews confirmed the findings of survey about EFL learners' practices on informal digital learning of English. The results of survey showed although EFL learners believe that informal digital learning of English could significantly support their language development; however, they slightly practiced digital learning activities beyond the formal classroom. This was a crucial finding, and the researchers tried to investigate

this issue through semi-structured interviews. More than half of the interview participants confessed not performing digital learning activities in the target language because their social circles were in native Indonesian language. It was also mentioned that sharing posts and ideas in social networking sites in English was considered strange to the existent social circles and could potentially disrupted social relationships. It was further revealed that most of the participants preferred to use a mobile phone, and its limitation such as small screens and limited internet connections kept the EFL learners from optimizing the potentials of smart phone for improving their language skills in informal context. As some participants said:

"Of course I believe that digital learning beyond classroom will improve my English, but I am aware that I cannot do it consistently because of some reasons such as most of my friends in social media are using Indonesian and I feel shy if I use English" (P2. Int)

"Hmmm... I often used my smartphone to carry out digital learning including joining online class. But I face some constraints such as small screens and limited internet connections" (P8. Int)

"It was tiring to watch videos, read long texts, and listen to songs online using my smartphone because of the small screens

and it was also difficult to concentrate for a long time" (P2. Int)

Discussion

The present study explored EFL learners' beliefs and practices on informal digital learning of English beyond the classroom and found apparent discrepancies between their beliefs and practices. On one hand, the EFL learners surely believed that informal digital learning of English could significantly enhance their English skills. However on the other hand, they slightly practiced digital learning activities in informal settings beyond the classroom because of some reasons such as interrupting the social circles, limitations of digital devices, and limited internet connections.

So, what do the findings imply for us? First of all, the findings indicate that EFL learners are in a positive concern on digital learning of English in informal settings. This positive perceptions confirm the current research findings that language learners preferably use affordances of digital devices especially smartphone to practice language skills in a flexible way without time and spaces limitations (Dashtestani, 2016; Lee & Drajati, 2019; Nugroho & Atmojo, 2020). This finding further suggests that motivating EFL learners to consistently involve in informal digital learning of English activities is a promising key to achieve the success of language

learning. Educators can augment educational potentials of technology by focusing on strengthening teacher-designed activities that suit learners' characteristics and interests (Lai et al., 2015; Lai et al., 2016; Lai & Zheng, 2018).

Various efforts should be made to foster EFL learners' engagement in informal digital learning of English beyond the classroom, particularly by teachers. Educational mediation and teacher assistance are necessary to enhance learners' awareness and motivation to engage in informal digital learning activities (Ahmed, 2019; Hembrough & Jordan, 2020; Xodabande, 2018). For instance, teachers can create community programs such as informal social groups of students across social backgrounds and levels of English proficiency. It is to facilitate learners develop their confidence in social communities and practice target language skills in a relatively supportive environment. Moreover, teachers can design digital classroom environment reflected by the frequent use of online resources such as social media and internet sites in assisting classroom learning activities. Precedent research have depicted that teachers' in-class use of digital technology affected students' self-initiated use of technology to engage in informal learning outside the classroom

(Nugroho & Mutiaraningrum, 2020; Webb & Doman, 2020).

With regards to the second research problem, this study demonstrated that EFL learners slightly practiced learning activities using digital technology beyond the classroom. This finding was surprising since they were fully aware of educational potentials of informal digital learning activities as depicted in the results of the first research problem. The particular reasons for this circumstance are the native language use of their social existent circles and the limitations of digital devices. This finding is similar to the result of study conducted by Lai and Zheng (2018) that EFL learners tended to avoid using target language because their social circles were in native languages. Moreover, studies of Güneş and Ortaçtepe (2019), Krishan et al. (2020), and Mutiaraningrum and Nugroho (2020) have acknowledged that the limitations of digital devices became particular reasons for language learners to practice digital learning beyond classroom schedule. This finding is truthfully confirmed by this study's result that small screens and slow internet connections became certain reasons for the EFL learners to not to frequently engage in informal digital learning of English activities.

Above all, this study's results have several implications for English language teaching. First, English

teachers and educators can use the results of this study to understand how language learners believe and practice informal digital learning of English activities. It becomes a continuous effort for language educators to consistently assist language learners to gain paramount inputs of the target language (Atmoj⁷ & Nugroho, 2020; Lam et al., 2018). Previous studies have concluded that the role of teachers in promoting learners' autonomy is crucial (Lyddon, 2016; Zainuddin & Perera, 2019). Second, the results of this study can be used as a reference for school authorities and policymakers to design a learning policy which is suitable to the characteristics of twenty-first digital learning. It will provide a significant support for English teachers to design technology-based in-class and out-class learning activities that suit learners' interests and preferences. We have outreached the era of technological advancement, and running away from this digitalization is almost impossible. Therefore, English language teaching stakeholders should see this circumstance as an ample opportunity rather than an obstacle, and promoting informal digital learning of English activities is a promising way to achieve the success of language learning.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTION

This study aims to shed more light on EFL learners' beliefs and practices on informal digital learning of English. The results demonstrate apparent

disparity between their beliefs and actual practices in the daily digital learning beyond the formal classroom. They believe that informal digital learning of English activities can enhance their language development. However, another result of the study shows that their practices on informal digital learning of English activities are not as strong as their beliefs. The particular reasons for this disparity as scrutinized in semi-structured interviews was the native languages use of their social circle relationships and limitations of digital devices they frequently used. These results provide empirical contribution for ELT stakeholders to reach a possible synchronicity between teacher-designed learning activities and learners' language preferences to achieve the success of language teaching.

Apart from these compelling results, several limitations are acknowledged in this study. First, this study was conducted in the context of English as a foreign language learning by involving more than half of participants who self-rated themselves to have beginning English proficiency level. The results might be biases and potentially show different findings if the study was conducted in English as a second language context. Moreover, this study was conducted in Indonesian EFL context, and it is possible that learners from other socio-cultural

backgrounds and from other countries with different internet facilities might indicate different results. Hence, the authors suggest that future research may conduct further inquiry on the similar topic by involving more heterogeneous participants across social backgrounds and proficiency levels.

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