

Self-Directed English Language Learning of EFL Students of Non-English Study Program in Indonesia

Nilam Trahkumala

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia

Nur Hidayat

Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Indonesia

Abstract

This study aimed to examine the learning strategies affecting success in the self-directed English language learning stage and the barriers faced by self-directed learners. The participants of this study were two university students from non-English majors who had learned English independently. They attained a high level of proficiency and multiple wins in English speech competitions, and active involvement in international seminars. The research design was narrative inquiry with two university learners from non English study program who have studied English autonomously, whether through software, digital sources, books, or other learning media and have reached a particular level of proficiency without participating in formal courses or language learning programs. The data were collected through semi-structured interview and the researchers conducted thematic analysis to analyzed it. The result indicated that the strategy of self-directed English learning typically begins with early exposure through video games and interactive computer use, supported by encouragement from family members. As learners transition into adulthood, audio-visual media and social networking platforms become increasingly effective tools for enhancing English proficiency. The integration of technology, combined with consistent learning efforts and adequate time investment, emerges as a crucial factor in optimizing self-directed language acquisition. Nevertheless, this study also identifies two primary challenges faced by learners: a misalignment between their personal interests and the formal curriculum, and persistent difficulties in applying grammatical knowledge during spoken communication.

Keywords

Narrative Inquiry, Self-Directed English Language Learning, Technology, Video Games

Corresponding author:

Nur Hidayat, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia

Email: nh249@ums.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

English has become an international language used across diverse domains, comprising education, business, technology, and global communication. Mastery in English unlocks various prospects for communication with individuals from different countries and cultures, as well as facilitating wider access to global information and resources (Erkir et al., 2025; Tsang et al., 2024). With the information technology and social media advancement, English language capabilities have become a progressively crucial ability, both in professional and personal contexts (Alam, 2025; Nurmetov et al., 2023). Hence, many individuals endeavour to advance the language to keep pace with global growth as well as improve the competitiveness in the international stage.

Amid the high requirement for English language competence, prefer to self-directed learning, or personalized learning, without attending in formal education. Self-directed learning permits someone to administer the pace as well as the techniques based on their certain need, unrestricted by a set curriculum (Lemmetty, 2023; Sachdeva & Mahajan, 2022). The usage of multiple digital sources, like language learning tools, video tutorials, as well as social media, has become a prevalent means in the phase. With a strong perseverance and discipline, people successfully master English autonomously, even acquiring a level of fluency comparable to individuals who have undergone formal courses (Chiang, 2024; Karacan et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the success of individuals for becoming proficient in English through self-directed learning, there remains a paucity of study concerning the potency of the learning technique. An ample of scholarly work accentuate formal education, while self-directed learning tends to be underexamined, especially regarding the difficulties encountered by individual in the phase (Brockett & Hiemstra, 2018; Jossberger et al., 2015; Puma et al., 2018). Further study is vouched to investigate the factors affecting the success of self-directed English language learning and how technology can be maximally impacted in the phase. Moreover, the role of intrinsic motivation and cultural context has not been comprehensively investigated in the current literature.

The purpose of this study is to track the journey of self-directed English language learning, from the novice to a proficient level. The major focus of this research is to examine the learning strategies affecting success in the learner-driven English language learning stage and the barriers faced by self-directed learners. This study is expected to supply a more substantial comprehension of powerful techniques for learning English independently and to recommend stages for enhancing the utilize of technology to support language learning for individuals who learn self-reliantly. To achieve the objectives and contribute to this research, the researchers formulated the following two research questions; what are the learning strategies that affect success in self-directed English language learning and what are the barriers in self-directed English language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-Directed English Language Learning

Self-directed English language learning has become an appealing topic in language learning research. Various studies indicate that individuals can reach a high level of mastery in English despite not adhering formal courses, especially with the assistance of technological tools (Lech & Harris, 2018; Soyooof et al., 2023). One of the most common approaches is the employment of digital media, like language learning tools, for instance Duolingo and Babbel; websites; and video tutorials on YouTube. The utilization of the media permits learners to learn anytime and anywhere, which promotes flexibility in the learning stage (Arifani et al., 2020; Harmadi et al., 2025; Hidayat et al., 2023; Rakhmadi & Haryanti, 2025). Furthermore, the use of English reading materials and audio listening materials, like podcasts and films, is also viewed as an efficient strategy to develop listening and speaking capabilities (Hidayat, 2017; Hidayat & Setiawan, 2020; Rahman & Jamila, 2024).

Although independent English language learning offers flexibility and freedom, it has some challenges. Some reports explain that learners who rely on self-directed learning often struggle to develop learning materials appropriate to their skill level without structured guidance (Baars & Viberg, 2023; Johnson, 2023). It can lead to imbalances in language skill development, such as grammar or pronunciation lagging behind other skills. In addition, the lack of direct feedback from teachers or peers can hinder a deep understanding of language use (Astuti & Barratt, 2021; Chen, 2020).

Some studies point out that intrinsic motivation plays an essential role in the success of self-directed English learning. Setiyadi et al. (2016), Sukirlan et al. (2021), Wang and Liu, (2024) motivation is the primary factor of students' language proficiency. Learners with strong intrinsic motivation such as the need for cross-cultural communication or career development demands typically perform higher levels of success. On the other hand, those who are less motivated often struggle to maintain consistency in their studies. Thus, personal motivation becomes a critical component that should be intentionally managed in self-directed English learning.

Psychological and cultural background factors also influence the process of Self-Directed English Language Learning. Previous studies found that individuals from cultures with extremely different language structures from English, like Indonesian or Mandarin, may encounter bigger difficulties in studying English especially in grammar or pronunciation (Rothgerber, 2019; Yao & Wijaya, 2025). It is due to structural disparities and differences in the thinking frameworks between the mother tongue and the target language. Therefore, effective English learning requires technical mastery of the language and awareness of the socio-cultural dimensions that underlie it.

Strategies and Challenges of Self-Directed English Language Learning

There are various strategies for self-directed English language learning, depending on the techniques selected by each learner. One of the most popular strategies is technology usage, such as the use of language learning platforms and various supporting digital apps. Interactive apps like Duolingo, Memrise, and Babbel provides a series of

exercises designed to develop English skills in an integrated manner (Kessler et al., 2023; Pichugin et al., 2023). It supports individuals to learn autonomously with a flexible agenda, based on personal capabilities and pace. The use of audio-visual content such as films, podcasts, or video tutorials has also proven effective in developing students' vocabulary and pronunciation, and the use of English in the real contexts (Basenko & Baskakova, 2021; Teng, 2024). Furthermore, the use of video games in self-directed language learning facilitates linguistic interaction and mediates language learning in a more enjoyable atmosphere (Butler, 2015; Pasqualotto et al., 2023; Setiawan et al., 2025; Stahl et al., 2025). In addition, the use of digital technology in language learning makes it easier for learners to understand and learn the language (Aleid et al., 2024; Arifani et al., 2020).

Beyond technology, reading-based and listening-based methods are also often employed in self-directed English learning phase. Many individuals select to read books, articles, or news in English to improve their vocabularies and understanding of sentence constructions (Ritonga et al., 2024; Wahyuningsih & Citraningrum, 2019). This situation is also strengthened by listening to podcasts or watching English-language television programs, which can assist to identify idioms, daily expressions, and more natural pronunciation. This kind of learning, which is more concentrated on practice as well as everyday usage of the language, has proven efficient in enhancing language fluency personally, though it needs extremely persistence and discipline. Moreover, in the context of self-directed learning, a positive social-emotional environment, such as family support, is also an important factor in improving language proficiency rates (King & Morris, 2021).

Nevertheless, in spite of the various approaches that can be applied, numerous obstacles are experienced by self-directed English language learners. One major hinder is the lack of direct feedback from lecturers or school partners. Without suitable guidelines or refinement, self-directed learners often remain unconscious of the mistakes they produce, especially in error grammar utilization or pronunciation (Fernández-Michels & Fornons, 2021; Yang & Zhang, 2023). This situation can cause to peculiar growth of language competence, particularly in the aspects that need direct guidance, like speaking and writing abilities. Hence, it is critical for individuals to find alternative methods to gain feedback, for instance, by joining in online learning groups or participating in conversations with native speakers. Another obstacle is the disconnection between the students' interest and curriculum. Learners tend not to engage actively when the language learning curriculum is not aligned with their interests or future goals (Cinaglia, 2023). Furthermore, understanding students' interests is key to developing a curriculum that is more contextual and relevant to students (Araneda et al., 2019).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design and Participants

This study used a narrative inquiry research design, which emphasize on the collection and analysis of individual stories or experiences in the phase of self-directed English language learning. The approach permits the investigator to examine the individual journeys of learners in learning English, emphasizing the subjective view of each respondent. Narrative inquiry serves a chance for the investigator to comprehend how personalized-learning experiences are shaped by individual, social, as well as cultural aspects (Haydon et al., 2018; Leproni & De Angelis, 2024; Sztukowski-Crowley & Funk, 2020). Through this approach, the stories show by self-directed individuals will be arranged and analyzed to reveal arising themes concerning the techniques utilized, the barriers experienced, and the aspects affecting accomplishment or failure in English language learning.

The participants of this research were two university learners from non-English study program who have studied English autonomously, whether through software, digital sources, books, or other learning media and have reached a particular level of proficiency without participating in formal courses or language learning programs. They also achieved a TOEFL score above 600, won several English speech contests, and actively participated in international seminars. The criterion is hoped to serve multifaceted views on the self-directed learning journeys they have experienced, from novice to proficient levels.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data collection in this study proceed through semi-structured interviews with each informant. The questions of the semi-structured interviews were adapted from Morris and Rohs (2023). The interviews phase gave the participants to describe their journeys in the stage of self-directed English language learning, with queries leading them towards particular themes, like learning motivation, techniques used, barriers experienced, as well as outcomes reached. The interviews phase was carried out face-to-face to gather more in-depth details data. All interviews stage were audio-recorded with the participants' consent as well as subsequently transcribed for further analysis.

The data gained from the interviews phase analyzed utilizing a thematic analysis technique, which permits the investigator to examine the major themes arising from the stories described by the informants. The analysis phase initiated with a comprehensive reading of the interview transcript to know the context of every informant's narrative. Afterward, the researchers coded the data by identifying relevant words or phrases, which were classified into certain groups. From these classifications, the major themes contemplating the self-directed learning activities were extracted as well as analyzed. Finally, the researcher made a conclusion based on the result of data analysis. Along with the thematic analysis, the researchers also perform member checking member checking with the informants to gather feedback. The purpose of the phase is to improve the clarity as well as credibility of the study results, and to obtain a profound

comprehension of the connection between learning approaches, difficulties experienced, as well as other aspects affecting the success of self-directed English language learning.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Strategies Affect Success in Self-Directed English Language Learning

“At first, I didn’t study English specifically at all. However, one day my brother recommended an interesting game on Nintendo and we played it together. In the game, there were many English sentences that I didn’t understand at first. My brother then explained the meaning, such as, “This means this, that means that,” and so on. Thus, my English learning process started from video games that used English and my brother then helped translate the words in them.” (P1)

“My English learning process actually started since kindergarten. At that time, there was an English subject that was taught with a very interesting method. The teacher had a good and unique way of teaching, namely using interactive computer media as a learning aid. The learning activities were made fun, such as games of arranging and connecting words. This interactive and fun learning method was what first sparked my interest in English. Because of my fairly good English achievements and grades, my father then encouraged and supported me to be more serious about studying English in more depth.” (P2)

Based on interviews with two participants, it is clear that interactive media and informal contexts play a crucial role in motivating English learning. Participant 1 (P1) began his English exposure through video games on Nintendo, where his older sibling acted as a mediator by translating the text in the game. This process indicates that video game-based learning combined with social interaction within the family is an effective strategy for the English language acquisition process. In the case of Participant 2 (P2), exposure to English began in kindergarten through interactive digital learning methods, such as word-building games. This method not only creates an enjoyable learning experience but also successfully instills a natural interest in English from an early age.

One of the important factors in supporting self-directed learning in English acquisition is support from the family. As conveyed by participant 1 (P1). His brother's help in translating English words according to the context in the video game made it not only fun but also a learning opportunity. Meanwhile, participant 2 (P2) received support from his father to improve his English skills which gave rise to a strong commitment to learning English. Notably, both participants emphasized the fundamental role of enjoyment and contextual relevance as the primary motivators for their learning. These aspects appear to be essential components that form a positive foundation for long-term language learning.

The differences in the learning trajectories of the two participants underscore the flexibility of language acquisition methods. P1 experienced implicit and incidental learning through digital media, while P2 received structured explicit learning in an educational institution. However, both share similarities in terms of the combination of interactive media and socio-emotional support. This indicates that the integration of

digital technology and supportive environments can be an effective strategy for language learning, both in formal and informal settings.

“When I was 18 years old, I started using my time to watch podcasts as learning material. This habit started when I often accompanied my brother to watch PewDiePie's channel, a game streamer who also has podcast content. By watching with my brother, I could more easily understand the English content. When there was vocabulary that I didn't understand, my brother usually explained the meaning. In addition to podcasts, films are also an effective learning medium. Actually, since elementary school I have been used to watching Western films such as "The Box Office" on Global TV or Trans TV which use subtitles. When I entered adulthood, I started watching English films without subtitles. To maximize the learning process, after watching a film I always discuss its contents. If I watch with my brother, we will discuss it together. Meanwhile, if I watch with friends, the discussion is done together. This method is very helpful in improving my understanding of English." (P1)

“When I entered high school, I started the learning process by watching various English videos, especially tutorials taught by native speakers. In addition, I regularly listened to podcasts on YouTube that provide subtitles. These podcasts often discuss complex topics, which helped me learn advanced vocabulary. When I encountered difficult terms, I immediately wrote them down to study them further. I usually found podcast topics through trending issues on Twitter. After finding related podcasts on YouTube, I listened to them while taking notes on new terms, especially those that were popular. To understand the terms, I googled their meanings and learned how to use them in sentences. If they were still difficult to understand, I wrote them down specifically. Topics like law are usually more challenging, so they require more detailed notes.” (P2)

Audio-visual based digital media (podcasts, films, video tutorials) play a central role in English language learning from adolescence to adulthood. Participant 1 (P1) utilized podcast content (e.g., PewDiePie) and English-language films without subtitles as learning media, with the support of an older sibling as a facilitator in understanding vocabulary and context. This process showed that the combination of exposure to authentic language input and social scaffolding can improve linguistic comprehension. Meanwhile, Participant 2 (P2) adopted a more independent strategy by focusing on complex-themed podcasts and native speaker video tutorials, equipped with subtitle features and active recording of new vocabulary. This approach reflects the principles of needs-based learning and metacognitive awareness in language acquisition.

Social interaction is an essential factor in self-directed learning although there are different patterns. P1 relies on collaborative discussions with his brother while watching podcasts or movies to gain deeper understanding. P2 tends to use digital networks to identify topic trends followed by independent learning by searching for information from the internet.

The findings also highlight the importance of digital literacy in contemporary language learning. Both participants used technological features (subtitles, online search) to address comprehension gaps, while developing lifelong learning skills. P1 emphasized the immersive value of removing subtitles, while P2 used subtitles as an initial aid before moving on to full language processing.

“Currently, I continue to hone my English skills through various digital activities. One of them is by playing online games while communicating in English with players from various countries through platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. The development of digital technology also allows me to interact in English on social media platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, both through the comments column and the available chat features. I still maintain the habit of playing games as part of my daily routine. The games I currently play are mostly filled with players from various Asian countries, such as India, the Philippines, Cambodia, Singapore, and Malaysia. Interaction with this international community is an effective means of practicing English for me. For the division of study time, I usually spend around 6 hours a day studying through various media such as games, podcasts, articles, or webtoons. The combination varies every day, for example today playing games while reading articles, tomorrow listening to podcasts while reading webtoons.” (P1)

“I consume English content more often in the form of videos than text. However, when reading, I choose English novels. When reading, I mark words that I don't understand and write down their meanings. For further understanding, I write examples of the application of the word in sentences in a special notebook. I usually set aside about 3 hours every day to study English intensively. During that time, I really focus on listening and understanding the learning material. In addition, I also often play various English content as listening exercises during my daily activities, which can total about 8 hours. However, in this mode I do not fully concentrate on studying, but rather aim to get my ears used to English while doing other activities. This method helps me train my listening skills naturally.” (P2)

Both participants adopted highly personalized digital-based learning strategies, yet were equally effective in creating an immersive environment for English language acquisition. Participant 1 (P1) utilized a multinational online game as a real-world linguistic practice space, where interactions with players from different countries through platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook created an authentic communication context rich in linguistic and cultural variations. In addition, P1 applied a hybrid approach by flexibly combining various digital media (games, podcasts, articles, webtoons) for 6 hours a day, demonstrating an adaptation to the principles of microlearning and personalized learning. Meanwhile, Participant 2 (P2) focused more on structured input through English novels and videos, with an emphasis on systematic lexical note-taking and passive listening practice (8 hours/day) to familiarize herself with English phonemes. These differences reflect the spectrum of language acquisition strategies from intentional learning to incidental learning.

The agency aspect of learning was prominent in both participants, albeit with different manifestations. P1 demonstrated a social-constructive pattern in which interaction with the global community in the game served as a distributed learning environment. P2 developed a rigorous self-learning system through cognitive elaboration techniques (sentence creation) and extensive exposure, which is in line with the principles of deep processing in cognitive psychology. These findings strengthen the evidence that intrinsic motivation and self-directed are key predictors in technology-based language learning. Furthermore, both cases illustrate how adult learners in the

digital age actively curate their own learning environments, integrating online resources into their daily lives without being tied to formal educational structures.

2. Barriers in Self-Directed English Language Learning

“One of the main obstacles I experienced at the beginning of the learning process was the lack of learning resources. I only relied on two sources, namely help from my brother and friends. Although there was an English teacher at school, I felt less comfortable consulting him about game-related material because it was considered less relevant or even awkward. In addition, I also faced difficulties in understanding new vocabulary and applying proper grammar in English.” (P1)

“In particular, I have quite a lot of difficulty in mastering grammar, especially in understanding the second form of the verb (Verb 2) and the past tense sentence structure. This material is still often confusing for me. However, when working on reading questions, I find it easier to recognize the correct sentence structure because I am used to reading English texts. However, the challenge arises when I have to apply the grammar in spoken conversation, where I still often make mistakes.” (P2)

Interviews with both participants revealed a gap between informal and formal learning in English language acquisition. Participant 1 (P1) experienced limited learning resources in the early stages, relying only on help from older siblings and friends as the main sources. This obstacle was exacerbated by the psychological discomfort of consulting with English teachers at school regarding game-based materials, which were considered less relevant in the context of formal education. This shows a disconnect between learner interests and conventional curriculum, as well as the importance of a mentor figure who understands the contemporary learning context. Meanwhile, Participant 2 (P2) faced specific difficulties in mastering grammar, especially in the past tense aspect (Verb 2) and its application in oral conversation. Interestingly, P2 actually found it easier to recognize grammatical structures when reading English texts, which shows a gap between receptive and productive competencies in language learning.

Discussion

The results of this study show that one of the participants' early exposures in self-directed English learning was the use of interactive video games and computers. This finding strengthens the evidence that informal context video games play a central role in English language acquisition motivation (Butler, 2015; Pasqualotto et al., 2023). Stahl et al. (2025) and Setiawan et al. (2025) who stated that video games provide linguistic affordances through embedded interaction and social scaffolding. It is also in line with Rankin et al. (2021) findings that peer-mediated translation in games can transform recreational activities into implicit learning. Family support in both cases, both in the form of older sibling mediation in participant 1 and father's structural encouragement in participant 2, confirms King and Morris (2021) reports that a responsive socio-emotional environment is a prerequisite for successful language acquisition in informal contexts. The next strategy is the use of audio-visual and social media-based digital media in the process of learning English independently. This finding strengthens the evidence that audio-visual-based digital media plays a central role in English learning

(Rahman & Jamila, 2024). The use of technological features by both participants is also in line with the concept of technology-enhanced language learning (Aleid et al., 2024; Arifani et al., 2020). Both participants developed unique strategies that were equally effective using technology-based English learning. P1's case of utilizing a multinational online game as a linguistic practice space. P1's hybrid approach that combines various digital media (6 hours/day) is also in line with the concept of digital literacies (Dudeney et al., 2013) as an adaptive strategy in the digital era. Meanwhile, P2's focus on structured input through novels and videos with systematic note-taking (8 hours/day) strengthens Schmitt and Schmitt (2020) research on the importance of intentional vocabulary learning.

Participants encountered two main barriers in implementing self-directed learning in English learning, namely the disconnection between interest and the existing curriculum and the difficulty of implementing oral grammar. These findings align with the previous studies which report that disconnection between interest and the existing curriculum is a barrier for the students in language learning (Araneda et al., 2019; Cinaglia, 2023). Moreover, lacking appropriate instruction or feedback, independent learners often fail to recognize their errors, especially in grammar usage or pronunciation. (Fernández-Michels & Fornons, 2021; Yang & Zhang, 2023).

CONCLUSION

From the findings above, it shows that the strategy of self-directed English learning begins with initial exposure through video games and the use of interactive computers followed by family support. Entering adulthood, the use of audio-visual media and social media becomes an effective way to develop their English skills. The use of technology accompanied by continuous learning intensity and sufficient time is the key to perfecting self-directed English learning. However, this study also highlights findings about two main barriers they face when carrying out self-directed English learning, namely: disconnection between participant interests and the existing curriculum and the difficulty of implementing grammar in speaking English.

The findings of this study indicate that independent English language learning can be optimized through the integration of technology and media that are tailored to learners' interests and developmental stages. Educators and curriculum developers should consider using interactive games, social media, and audio-visual content as learning tools, particularly for beginners and teenagers. Additionally, family support in creating an environment that fosters early exposure to the English language plays a crucial role. On the other hand, efforts are needed to reduce the gap between learners' interests and curriculum content, for example by providing more personalized content options. Adult learners can also utilize digital media to practice speaking skills, including the use of AI-based applications or conversation practice platforms to address grammar challenges.

Although this study provides meaningful insights, it has several limitations. This study only involved two participants, so the results cannot be generalized. Therefore,

future researchers need to conduct similar studies with a larger number of participants. This study also used narrative inquiry research focused on qualitative data. Future research could employ mixed-method research that combines quantitative and qualitative data, resulting in richer data and stronger findings.

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