What Do Elementary Students Need to Excel in English Learning?

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Abstract

Integrating digital and interactive learning methods is crucial in enhancing English language acquisition among young learners. This study explores the preferences and attitudes of fifth-grade students toward these methods in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. The research aimed to identify the specific needs of young EFL learners and assess the effectiveness of technology-oriented learning models. A questionnaire was administered to 84 fifth-grade students, examining their engagement with various digital tools, including videos, audio materials, interactive games, digital modules, and mobile accessibility. The results indicate a strong preference for visually engaging and interactive methods, with students strongly inclined toward video-based learning and interactive activities, particularly enjoying interactive games. Digital modules with interactive exercises, quizzes, and simple, user-friendly layouts were highly favoured, and colourful transitions and animations further enhanced their experience. The study also highlights the demand for responsive, mobile-accessible modules and tools that provide progress tracking and feedback. These findings underscore the importance of incorporating multimedia and interactive elements in EFL resources to better cater to the needs of young learners, suggesting that digital methods can significantly improve language acquisition and student engagement.

Keywords: Young learner, English language, digital modules, language acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, rapid and continuous technological advances have significantly transformed education, creating a new learning culture. These technological advancements have necessitated innovative approaches to teaching and learning across all subject areas, including English Language Teaching (ELT) (Hockly & Dudeney, 2018; Wong & Moorhouse, 2021). The integration of emerging technologies has given rise to new forms of communication, text production, collaboration, and social networking, fostering more creative classroom practices (Selfa-Sastre et al., 2022; Bereczki & Kárpáti, 2021; García-Martínez et al., 2020). This shift is particularly relevant in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for young learners, where the dynamic nature of digital tools can enhance engagement and learning outcomes (Korosidou et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the teaching and learning of foreign languages, including English, have greatly benefited from technological advancements. Technology provides a wealth of resources and tools that amplify and diversify the input received by learners, which is crucial for adequate language acquisition (Su & Zou, 2020). For EFL teachers working with young learners, understanding the characteristics and needs of their students is fundamental. Young learners, typically between 4 and 12 years, have short attention spans and require engaging, lively, and fun learning activities (Yelland, 2018). By leveraging technology, EFL teachers can create more interactive and modern classrooms, thus maintaining students' attention and fostering a more effective learning environment. Digital tools allow teachers to design diverse activities that cater to the natural curiosity of young learners (Maslin et al., 2023), ultimately enhancing their educational experience and facilitating better language learning outcomes.

Today's children, often called "digital natives", think, behave, and learn differently from previous generations due to their immersion in digital environments and digital culture (Kincl & Štrach, 2021; Arkhipova et al., 2018). This generation's unique digital skills and competencies set them apart, making integrating technology in the classroom essential. The conversation has shifted from whether technology should be used in teaching and learning to how it should be effectively integrated (Smith et al., 2020). This requires exploring the implementation of technology-enhanced instruction in various educational contexts and observing how young learners' interactions with technology mediate their learning experiences. Recognizing the need for high-quality educational experiences, it is crucial to align teaching strategies with young learners' changing learning styles, preferences, and needs.

On the other part, several studies have examined the impact of digital learning approaches on EFL learners. Li et al. (2019) investigated a technology-enriched EFL curriculum in a rural school district in China, revealing that high technology use negatively affected communicative classroom discourse by increasing display questions and directives and reducing spontaneous student output. However, Cheung (2021) analyzed synchronous online English lessons for Grade 6 students via Zoom application, finding that technology-facilitated various verbal and non-verbal responses, with better students demonstrating strong interactional skills in small-group sessions, though student reticence remained a concern. In addition, Vonkova et al. (2021) reviewed EFL motivation trends between 2016 and 2020 across 24 countries, highlighting extensive technology use as a promising avenue for enhancing language learning and teaching. These studies underscore the potential benefits and challenges of integrating technology in EFL education for young learners.

Another study by Lee (2019) investigated the relationship between informal digital English learning (IDLE), strategic cross-cultural communication competence, and perceptions of English varieties among 266 Korean EFL university students. Through a questionnaire and follow-up interviews, Lee found that perceptions of English varieties mediated the connection between IDLE and cross-cultural communication skills. Besides, Zou et al. (2020) explored Chinese college students' perceptions of using mobile devices for EFL learning. Their study involved 166 students from 21 universities, using combined questionnaires and interviews. Results indicated high student motivation for using mobile devices for EFL learning, with regional differences influencing attitudes towards mobile-

assisted language learning (MALL). The study suggested that EFL-focused mobile apps could enhance language learning.

While several research studies have explored the impact of digital learning approaches in EFL education, there needs to be a greater understanding of young learners' preferences and attitudes, particularly fifth-grade EFL students in Indonesia. Most studies have focused on the general effects of technology on teaching methods and classroom interactions, often overlooking the learners' perspectives. Thus, this study aims to address this by examining the preferences and attitudes of fifth-grade EFL students towards digital and interactive learning methods in an Indonesian context. Therefore, this research emphasizes the learners' viewpoints, essential for creating compelling and engaging language learning experiences. By investigating students' understanding, preferences, and attitudes, this study seeks to provide valuable insights into how digital tools can be best integrated into EFL education to meet Indonesian students' unique needs and learning styles. This focus on learner-centred approaches will contribute to the broader field of EFL education, highlighting the importance of adapting teaching methods to the digital age.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive case study design, utilizing a qualitative research approach to explore the preferences and attitudes of fifth-grade students toward digital learning tools in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. A case study approach was chosen because it effectively provides in-depth insights into specific educational phenomena (Yin, 2013). The research was conducted in two elementary schools in Indonesia, focusing on 84 fifth-grade students. This sample size aligns with recommendations by Creswell (2013) for qualitative research, emphasizing the importance of detailed, contextual understanding over broad generalization.

Data were collected through structured questionnaires adapted from the work of Tick (2018), who developed a reliable instrument for assessing students' engagement with digital learning tools. The questionnaire employed a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 ('strongly disagree') to 4 ('strongly agree'), to capture nuanced responses regarding students' experiences and preferences in their English learning journey. Before administering the questionnaire, the researchers provided detailed instructions to ensure clarity and accuracy in the responses, following the best practices outlined by Dillman et al. (2014) for survey administration.

The data analysis process involved systematically organizing and categorizing the collected data to identify significant patterns and themes, as Braun and Clarke (2022) recommended. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the quantitative data, including percentages, mean frequencies, and standard deviations. Mean scores were calculated to investigate further the respondents' views on integrating digital technologies into their language learning process. These statistical measures were employed to ensure a rigorous analysis that could reveal meaningful trends and insights (Pallant, 2020).

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study found students' learning preferences when it comes to utilizing various digital technologies and methods for learning English. The findings reveal an apparent inclination among students towards multimedia resources and interactive tools, which play

a significant role in enhancing their language acquisition process. The data collected indicates that students strongly prefer learning English through videos, which received an average score of 3.27. Latorre-Cosculluela et al. (2021) posit that video-based learning formats can enhance cognitive engagement and equip learners with the skills to interact with learning materials effectively. Similarly, Widiantari and Dewi (2023) found that YouTube, a popular video platform, can make English lessons more engaging and productive for young learners. Their study revealed that YouTube videos create a positive learning environment and boost students' interaction, engagement, and motivation to participate in class activities. This suggests that visual content is engaging and effective in helping students grasp complex language concepts and improve their listening skills. Videos can provide contextualized examples of language use, making it easier for students to relate to and understand the material (Teng, 2020).

In addition to videos, interactive activities garnered considerable support, with an average score of 3.09. This preference highlights the importance of active participation in the learning process. Interactive activities, such as discussions and collaborative projects, encourage students to engage with the language dynamically, fostering deeper comprehension and retention (Ibrahim et al., 2023). Moreover, interactive games emerged as another favoured method, achieving an impressive average score of 3.26. This finding emphasizes the importance of gamified learning in education. Chen et al. (2019) discovered that the positive impact of gamified learning on language acquisition likely stems from the incorporation of challenging, engaging, and authentic elements within assessment and competition mechanisms. These experiences can enhance word retention and overall learning outcomes. Moreover, games create a fun and low-pressure environment that motivates students to practice language skills (Tan, 2018). According to Alsawaier (2018), games' competitive and fun nature can enhance engagement and encourage students to take risks in their language use, ultimately leading to improved proficiency.

In contrast to the strong preference for interactive and multimedia resources, students exhibit a more moderate inclination towards audio materials, with an average score of 2.07. This indicates that while audio resources like podcasts and recorded lectures offer value in language learning, they may generate a different level of engagement than more dynamic, visual approaches. As Yeh (2014) found that while students generally expressed satisfaction with audio-based learning, they also encountered challenges. In particular, podcasts presented at a rapid, authentic speech rate designed for native speakers proved frustrating for learners. This also aligns with Yasin et al.'s (2017) findings, which indicate that video materials are generally more effective than audio materials for EFL learners.

Similarly, reading books or stories receives an average score of 2.64, indicating that while these traditional resources are appreciated for their role in language acquisition, they may resonate less deeply with students than interactive formats. Danaei et al. (2020) found that augmented reality storybooks significantly enhance early readers' comprehension compared to traditional print books. Their analysis revealed notable improvements in retelling, recall, and overall comprehension among children using augmented reality. Based on these findings, this study recommend AR storybooks as an effective instructional tool to support children's learning.

Participation in conversations rated an average of 3.00, is highly valued by students as a positive aspect of their learning journey. This indicates that conversational practice is

both essential and engaging. Students find the dynamic exchange of ideas and perspectives inherent in conversation stimulating and rewarding (Sulis, 2022). When analyzing student preferences for digital learning modules, it is evident that an apparent inclination exists towards designs that prioritize simplicity and ease of navigation. With an average score of 3.26, students strongly prefer straightforward and intuitive layouts, allowing them to focus on content rather than struggling with complex interfaces. Faisal et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of straightforward and user-friendly navigation and information features, including information presentation and menu design, for enhancing user experience. They argued that positive and immersive experiences contribute to overall satisfaction. This desire for clarity is complemented by a preference for visually engaging elements, as indicated by the average score of 3.19 for modules that incorporate colourful transitions and animations. Graphics and multimedia elements create an engaging learning environment that fosters active participation. Colour is a crucial attribute of visual design, capable of evoking cognitive, physiological, and emotional responses (Moshagen & Thielsch, 2010). Such features enhance the aesthetic appeal of the learning experience and capture and maintain students' attention, making the learning process more enjoyable.

Moreover, including interactive exercises and quizzes, which also received an average score of 3.26, underscores the importance of active participation in the learning process. These interactive components foster engagement and help reinforce understanding by allowing students to apply what they have learned hands-only (Liao et al., 2018). This active learning approach keeps students motivated and invested in their educational journey. Yang et al. (2021) found that while overall testing positively impacts student academic achievement, the effect is moderate. Increasing the stakes of tests to boost extrinsic motivation may have limited influence on long-term learning outcomes. Instead of relying on external rewards, quizzing might foster intrinsic motivation, encouraging students to seek knowledge for its own sake. In contrast, while features like mobile device accessibility (average score of 2.81) and progress tracking tools (average score of 3.00) are recognized as valuable, they do not hold the same priority level as the more immediate and interactive elements. The lower scores suggest that while students appreciate the convenience of accessing learning materials on various devices and the ability to monitor their progress, these aspects are secondary to the need for engaging and interactive content (Al-Bogami & Elyas, 2020; Soria et al., 2020).

On the other side, the data indicates that students are highly engaged with digital devices, utilizing them daily, with an average usage score of 2.87. This suggests that digital tools are integral to their daily routines, likely for educational and recreational purposes. Choi et al. (2020) argued that students are highly engaged with digital devices and use them daily. For young English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners with limited English exposure, digital learning resources such as picture books and interactive pen features can offer significant benefits for language acquisition. Furthermore, the average access score of 3.31 reflects that students generally have the means to use smartphones, tablets, or computers, which are essential for modern learning and communication. The benefits of technology integration were associated with increased student involvement and motivation, interactive and enjoyable lessons, easy access to information, and students' familiarity with technology (Nikolopoulou, 2020; Chen et al., 2020).

However, a notable discrepancy arises when examining the ownership of these devices, which has an average score of only 2.04. This suggests that students may have access to digital devices but do not necessarily own them. This disparity highlights a critical issue that, many students might rely on shared or borrowed devices, limiting their ability to engage fully with digital learning opportunities.

Thus, this gap between access and ownership could have implications for educational equity, as students without personal devices may face challenges in completing assignments, participating in online learning, or accessing educational resources outside of school hours. Therefore, addressing this disparity is essential for ensuring that all students can benefit from digital technology's advantages in their educational journeys. Educators can enhance students' learning experiences and promote greater engagement with digital content by fostering an environment where personal ownership of devices is more common.

CONCLUSION

This study unveiled a strong preference among fifth-grade students for visually engaging and interactive English language learning methods. Their inclination towards videos, games, and digital modules underscores the significance of multimedia integration in creating captivating and compelling learning experiences. The data revealed a fondness for interactive elements within digital modules, such as exercises, quizzes, and user-friendly layouts. Moreover, students valued the convenience of mobile accessibility and the ability to track their progress. These findings emphasize the need for educational resources that are stimulating and adaptable to diverse learning styles and technological advancements. By harnessing the potential of digital and interactive learning, educators can cultivate more dynamic and student-centered English language classrooms, thereby enhancing motivation, engagement, and language acquisition.

While this study offers valuable insights into fifth-grade students' preferences, it is essential to acknowledge certain limitations. The relatively small sample size might restrict the generalizability of findings to a broader population of EFL learners. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data through questionnaires could introduce biases. Although questionnaires provide valuable qualitative information, they do not directly measure the impact of these methods on language proficiency. To expand upon the findings of this study, future research could delve into several areas. Comparative studies assessing the effectiveness of different digital and interactive learning methods on language proficiency provide valuable insights. Longitudinal studies investigating the long-term impact of these approaches on language development and motivation are also warranted. Furthermore, research exploring the challenges and needs of teachers in integrating digital and interactive learning into their classrooms is essential. Additionally, studies focused on making digital resources accessible to students with disabilities and examining the influence of individual factors on learning outcomes would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the potential and challenges associated with digital and interactive learning in English language education.

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