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Abstract

Because of the widespread use of digital technology, many EFL students access various types of technologies that help them acquire English vocabulary beyond formal classroom learning. This paper aims to explore Saudi EFL learners' attitudes towards informal digital learning of English vocabulary (IDLEV) outside the academic requirements as well as their practices of IDLEV beyond the classroom. To answer the research questions of the study, the researchers recruited 80 Saudi EFL students from the University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia, to respond to a self-reported questionnaire. The study found that Saudi EFL students have positive attitudes towards informal digital learning of English in improving their vocabulary. Results also reveal that the participants tend to use different technologies to learn English vocabulary in informal settings. The study found that receptive activities are more commonly used than the productive activities. The study found a significant correlation between learners' attitudes and practices. The implications of the study and recommendations were presented accordingly.

Keywords: attitudes and practices, English vocabulary, extramural English, informal digital learning, Saudi EFL learners

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Introduction

Before the digital technology, EFL students used to learn English vocabulary in educational institutions or memorize them at home in a traditional way as a formal requirement. They rarely got access to words that were not required to study in educational institutions. As they were not exposed to English beyond the university, learning English vocabulary was restricted to textbooks and other materials. In environments of informal digital learning of English (hereafter, IDLE), learners acquire English vocabulary regardless of the school/university requirements. That is, they acquire vocabulary without awareness whether school/university requires them or not (Al-Kadi, 2020, 2017; Jurkovič, 2019; Rahmawati, Draji & Asib, 2019).

The widespread of technology including the internet-based applications makes it easy for EFL learners to access various English language materials. Students can learn English autonomously via different digital tools. They can improve their English at home and beyond the formal learning requirements while using various technological devices and social applications. EFL learners can improve their English in informal contexts via watching YouTube for entertainment purposes (Al-Kadi, 2020; Temban, Hua & Said, 2021), playing games (Bin-Hady, 2021; Nasser, Bin-Hady & Thabit, 2020; Qasim, 2021), communicating via WhatsApp (Almekhlafy & Alzubi, 2016; Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021), etc.

Technology changed the learning situations altogether, and the Saudi EFL context is no exception. Many studies have examined the impact of technology on English language learning in the Saudi context in formal learning (Al Zumor, Al Refaai, Bader Eddin & Aziz Al-Rahman, 2013; Ali, 2017; Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019; Ja'ashan, 2015). Some other studies looked into formal digital learning of English vocabulary (FDLEV), e.g. Al-Ahdal and Alharbi (2021), Al-Sofi (2020), Shamsan, Ali and Hezam (2021). To the researchers' best knowledge, this attempt is the first study that investigates the role of Informal Digital Learning of English Vocabulary (hereafter, IDLEV) in the Saudi EFL context.

This study aims to uncover the Saudi EFL learners' view regarding the role of IDLE in improving their vocabulary and their practices of technology which improves their vocabulary acquisition. It also intends to ascertain the correlation between EFL students' perceptions of IDLE and their practices while acquiring English vocabulary. To achieve these objectives, the study addressed the following questions:

- 1- What are the students' attitudes toward IDLE to learn vocabulary?
- 2- Which IDLE practices are used by Saudi EFL learners in acquiring English vocabulary?
- 3- To which degree are the IDLEV students' attitudes and practices correlated?
- 4- Are the IDLEV students' attitudes towards and practices of IDLEV correlated with their GPA and study levels?

Review of the Literature

The section presents the related literature of Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL) and IDLE. Technology has been used in language learning and teaching since the inception of early generation of technology, e.g. TV, radio, and animations. The burst of modern digital appliances such as hand-held devices, internet-based Apps, and mobile phones has driven

language learning in new and different directions that the old generation of language learners finds it difficult to catch up with (Al-Kadi, 2017). The problem with using such high-tech technologies is that they were not invented for language learning and teaching but for general uses. The utilization of technology in language education has been driven by theories in other fields such as second language learning and acquisition, artificial intelligence, applied linguistics, and psychology. Al-Kadi argued that the availability of gadgets and Apps is not what matters, but pedagogy that provides ground for such utilization. In so far as the study at hand is concerned, the technology-based language learning that takes place informally is brought to the foreground in order to examine its impact on EFL learners' attitudes and language abilities.

Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE)

The term IDLE, in this paper, was used after Lee and his coauthors in numerous studies (Lee, 2019a, 2019b, 2020; Lee, Xie & Lee, 2021; Lee & Drajati, 2019; Lee & Lee, 2019, 2021). IDLE was studied under different titles, including *out-of-school digital English* (Sundqvist & Wikström, 2015), *out-of-school exposure to English* (Peters, 2018), *English beyond the language classroom* (Lehtonen, 2017), *extramural English* (Sundqvist, 2009), and *informal learning* (Al-Kadi, 2020; Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021; Hezam, 2020). Informal learning is defined as autonomous learning, which is unstructured and naturalistic. It usually occurs out of formal classes, and such informal learning mostly goes unnoticed and unevaluated (Al-Kadi, 2020; Benson, 2011). IDLE is therefore defined as learning English independently from formal authorities, e.g., teachers and lab assistants (Lee, 2019b; Lee & Drajati, 2019). Arguably, IDLE encourages autonomous and independent learning as students learn on their own choices. They pick up English without the intention to learn it (Almekhlafy, 2020; Al-Kadi, 2020; Jurkovič, 2019; Lai, 2019; Toffoli & Sockett, 2010). It also promotes learners' motivation and enjoyment to learn English (Lee & Lee, 2021; Temban, Hua & Said, 2021).

In a similar vein of research, Lee et al. (2021) studied (a) the relationship between IDLE and L2 learners' willingness to communicate, and (b) the role of emotions in such relationship. The researchers recruited 1562 Korean EFL students from ten secondary schools and one university. The results revealed that IDLE was positively correlated with EFL students' willingness to communicate either inside the classroom or online. That is because they were in continuous interaction with English language speakers through digital devices. Similarly, Jurkovič (2019) examined the IDLE via mobile phones in Slovenia. An online survey and semi-structured interview were instrumented to collect data from 905 participants in three Slovenian universities and different disciplines (humanities, social sciences, technical sciences and biotechnical sciences). Of the sample, sixteen were interviewed. The results revealed that despite the wealth of mobile devices, the students focused on receptive activities more than productive activities. The results also showed simultaneous evolution of IDLE and the participants' communicative competence level of English.

Other IDLE studies were carried out with a diversity of focus. Almekhlafy and Alzubi (2016) investigated the role of IDLE in providing Saudi EFL learners with English language outside the classroom. The study focused on WhatsApp as a digital device that EFL students tend to use anywhere and anytime, which is almost free. The researchers used a mixed-method study with 40 undergraduate EFL students and four native speakers of English, and found that such an

App provides EFL students with virtual native-like interaction. Following a mixed-method research design, Bin-Hady and Al-Tamimi (2021) studied the use of technology to improve their English language in informal learning in the Yemeni EFL context. The researchers found that EFL students' use of technology in an informal setting improves their listening, speaking, and reading skills. They also maintained that IDLE enhanced English vocabulary more than grammar and pronunciation. Rahmawati et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study with Indonesian students who speak English fluently because of heavy use of IDLE. Their study aimed to investigate EFL students' motivation, self-confidence, communication competence, and experience using IDLE speaking. The study yielded three main findings: (a) the students employed many applications to communicate with friends in English, watch English movies and listen to English music, (b) EFL students' vocabulary, grammar, comprehension and pronunciation were improved and they could speak English fluently, and (c) the students were not aware of learning English while using English via digital devices, but finally, they realized that their motivation, self-confidence and communicative competence were increased because of IDLE. Peters (2018) examined the frequency of Flemish EFL students' exposure to IDLE and the association between EFL learners' exposure to the English language in IDLE. The researcher collected the data from 79 Flemish EFL students via a questionnaire and frequency-based vocabulary test. They showed, besides frequent exposure to English, a positive association between EFL students' vocabulary and IDLE.

Lee's (2019a) study on IDLE vocabulary is one of the few studies, if not the sole one, on vocabulary acquisition in IDLE settings. Lee's aimed to explore how IDLE relates to English vocabulary outcomes. The researcher conducted a questionnaire, vocabulary test and semi-structured interview with 77 EFL students from three universities in Korea. The study concluded that the adversity of IDLE activities enhances English vocabulary outcomes. Equally important, engaging in various types of digital activities is beneficial for English learners to acquire L2 vocabulary.

To conclude, despite a plethora of IDLE research on vocabulary among other variables such as grammar, language skills, communication, there is a lack of IDLEV research in the Arab World in general and Saudi context in particular. Specifically, research on vocabulary learning in IDLE is a rarity, and for this reason, there is a dire need for studying acquiring vocabulary in IDLEV environments with a specific reference to the Saudi EFL context.

Methods

Guided by Creswell and Clark (2011), this survey study delved into Saudi EFL students' attitudes and practices of IDLEV to determine their perceptions of IDLE and practices while acquiring English vocabulary.

Participants

80 male and female randomly Saudi EFL learners who study English as a major at the University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia, took part in the study. They were selected from different levels at the three colleges that have English department; College of Arts in Bisha, College of Sciences and Arts in Balqarn and College of Sciences and Arts in Alnamas. The data were collected in 2021, i.e., after experiencing the Covid-19 quarantine and online learning. The information of the participants is shown briefly in Table1.

Table 1. *Frequency and percentage of the participants' demographic information*

		Number	Percent
Gender	Female	56	70%
	Male	24	30%
Year of Study	1st Year	2	2.5%
	2nd Year	7	8.8%
	3rd Year	27	33.8%
	4th Year	44	55%
GPA	Fair	6	7.5%
	Good	18	22.5%
	Very Good	39	48.8%
	Excellent	17	21.3%
Campus	Alnamas	23	28.8%
	Balqarn	23	28.8%
	Bisha	34	42.5%

Research Instrument

For the purpose of collecting the data, the researchers used a quantitative approach using a questionnaire that was extracted from several previous studies (Almekhlafy & Alzubi, 2016; Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021; Jurkovič, 2019; Toffoli & Perrot, 2017). The researchers modified it in such a way to address the research objectives and the situations of the target sample. It was translated into Arabic to ensure that all the participants understand all the items. The questionnaire consisted of three sections. The first section was devoted to demographic information. The second section (11 items) was devoted to collect data from the respondents about their attitudes of the IDLE in acquiring and improving English vocabulary in which the options were ordered from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The third section (11 items) was devoted to collect data about the frequency of using IDLE to improve English vocabulary, in which the options were arranged from *always* to *never*.

Research Procedures

After checking the validity of the questionnaire, it was sent to the respondents as a Google form. After three days of sending the questionnaire, 83 responded questionnaires were collected, out of which three questionnaires were dropped from the study because they were not valid. Then,

the researchers proceeded to the analysis procedures. Eighty responded questionnaires were coded and analyzed using SPSS version 0.25. The reliability of the collected data was checked and it was found that Cronbach's Alpha was .917, indicating higher reliability of the data collected. Following Creswell and Clark's (2011) analysis of descriptive statistics, the numeric values and percentages of the respondents' responses were obtained. Similarly, the data of the perceptions and practices statements were calculated to find the means of the items as a whole using descriptive statistics. Other appropriate statistical measures were used to find the correlations between the variables; the learners' perceptions and practices, perceptions and GPA, practices and GPA, perceptions and years of study and practices and years of study.

Results

It was found that the Saudi EFL students, particularly at the University of Bisha, tend to use IDLE to acquire and improve English vocabulary. Table 2 shows that they have positive attitudes towards the IDLE ($M = 4.3034$) as a useful tool to improve their English vocabulary.

Table 2. *The Mean values of participants' attitudes towards IDLEV*

	N	Mean	SD
Attitudes	80	4.3034	.580
Valid N (listwise)	80		

In general, the learners had a tendency towards acquiring and improving their English vocabulary in IDLE. The results of the attitudes statements shown in Table 3 prove that watching English videos and movies, using social media, listening to English audios and using applications during IDLE are the most useful tools in acquiring and improving the English vocabulary according to the intended learners' attitudes. They agreed on the statement, "Informal learning is better than formal learning in acquiring English vocabulary" ($M = 3.79$). The participants agreed that all the IDLE devices are helpful in acquiring and improving vocabulary.

Table 3. *Means of attitudes statements*

Statement	Mean	SD
Informal Learning is better than formal learning in acquiring English vocabulary.	3.7875	.976
I acquire more English vocabulary during IDLE.	4.1000	.894
The English vocabulary I acquire during IDLE is memorized well and I can use them in my daily conversation.	4.3125	.789
To acquire English vocabulary in IDLE is easier than that in formal learning.	4.0375	.947
The use of technology in informal learning is very useful in acquiring English vocabulary.	4.3875	.787
The use of applications in informal learning is very useful in acquiring English vocabulary.	4.4250	.775

The use of e-dictionaries in informal learning improves English vocabulary	4.2750	.856
Joining English social media (groups) is very useful in improving English vocabulary.	4.5125	.729
Reading English content on the internet (e-books, documents, etc.) is very useful in improving English vocabulary.	4.3875	.803
Listening to English audios on the internet is very useful in improving English vocabulary.	4.5000	.856
Watching English videos and movies is very useful in improving English vocabulary.	4.6125	.720

At the same time, the results in Table 4, show that Saudi EFL learners tend to improve their English vocabulary by using IDLE devices. Their IDLEV practice is positive ($M = 3.74$). It means that they generally use such devices to acquire and improve their English vocabulary.

Table 4. *Mean of Practices in IDLEV*

	N	Mean	SD
Practices	80	3.7398	.793
Valid N (listwise)	80		

Based on the results of the means of the participants' attitudes and practices, it was found that their attitudes towards IDLEV are higher than their practices. Table 5 captures the most common uses to acquire and improve English vocabulary in IDLE: watching English videos and movies ($M = 4.36$), using technology (4.28), and listening to English (4.24). Participating in the English forums to improve English vocabulary ($M = 2.65$) is the least practiced during IDLEV.

Table 5. *Means of practice statements*

Statement	Mean	SD
I use technology in informal learning to improve my English vocabulary.	4.2750	.856
I read English content on the internet to improve my English vocabulary.	4.1125	.980
I read English content on social media to improve my English vocabulary.	4.0500	1.00
I listen to English on the internet to improve my English vocabulary.	4.2375	.957
I watch English videos and movies on the internet to improve my English vocabulary.	4.3625	.944
I use e-dictionaries during IDLEV to improve my English vocabulary.	3.9750	1.15
I write down the new English vocabulary I require during IDLEV.	3.4500	1.32
I chat with English native speakers via social media platforms in English during IDLEV to improve my English vocabulary.	3.6000	1.29
I chat with my friends via social media platforms in English during IDLEV to improve my English vocabulary.	3.3000	1.29

I participate in the English forums to improve my English vocabulary.	2.6500	1.33
I use (text in English via) English instant SMSes to improve my English vocabulary.	3.1250	1.45

As shown in Table 6, the analysis of the correlation between the Saudi EFL learners' attitudes and their practices of the IDLE for acquiring and improving English vocabulary displays a statistically significant positive relationship between the two variables ($p = .000$). The relationship between the attitudes and the practices is a moderate positive relationship as Spearman's correlation coefficient is (.406**).

Table 6. *Correlations between attitudes and practices*

		Attitudes	Practices
Spearman's rho	Attitudes	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	80
	Practices	Correlation Coefficient	.406**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
		N	80

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

To measure the influence of the learners' perceptions of the IDLEV and the practices on their performance indicated by GPA, the correlations between the variables were analyzed (see Tables 7 and 8). There is a statistically significant relationship between the attitudes towards the IDLEV and the learners' GPA ($p = .047$) and the relationship between these two variables was found to be a weak positive relationship ($r_s = .140$). Furthermore, it was found that there is a statistically significant relationship between the learners' practices in the IDLEV and their performance (GPA) ($p = .032$) and the relationship between these two variables was found to be a strong positive relationship ($r_s = .640$).

Table 7. *Correlations between attitudes and GPA*

		Attitudes	GPA
Spearman's rho	Attitudes	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.047
		N	80
	GPA	Correlation Coefficient	.140
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.047
		N	80

Table 8. *Correlations between Practices and GPA*

		GPA	Practices
Spearman's rho	GPA	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.032
		N	80

Practices	Correlation Coefficient	.640	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.032	.
	N	80	80

Tables 9 and 10 indicate that the learners' attitudes towards and practices of the IDLE devices to acquire and improve English vocabulary increase with the progress of study, i.e., when the learners pass to higher levels, they have more positive attitudes towards the IDLEV and they use more activities in IDLEV. Table 9 shows a significant relationship between the learners' attitudes and their years of study ($p = .042$). The relationship was found to be a weak positive relationship ($r_s = .163$). The same finding was proved in the significant relationship between the learners' IDLE practices and their years of study ($p = .018$) and the relationship was found to be a weak positive relationship ($r_s = .264$), as shown in Table 10.

Table 9. *Correlations between attitudes and Years of study*

		Attitudes	Year of Study
Spearman's rho	Attitudes	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.042
		N	80
	Year of Study	Correlation Coefficient	.163
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.042
		N	80

Table 10. *Correlations between practices and years of study*

		Practices	Year of Study
Spearman's rho	Practices	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.018
		N	80
	Year of Study	Correlation Coefficient	.264
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.018
		N	80

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Discussion

The findings, supported by evidence from previous studies (e.g., Hamat & Hassan, 2019), show that using social media in informal learning improves EFL learners' vocabulary, reading, writing and communication more than grammar, speaking and listening. Lee and Lee (2021) found that EFL learners enjoyed learning English via IDLE, which helps them to be more active in starting communication. The study also found that learners in IDLE gain more confidence and autonomy. Unlike formal learning, learners in IDLE learn in a way that pleases and suits them - no evaluations and assessments that cause stress and anxiety.

This study found that Saudi EFL learners have a tendency to use informal digital learning to improve their English vocabulary. The same finding was found by Al-Ahdal and Alharbi (2021), Almekhlafy and Alzubi (2016) and Bin-Hady and Al-Tamimi (2021). This implies that the students could be active users of IDLEV. The findings reported in the present study indicate that the most useful tools in improving English vocabulary are watching English videos and movies, using social media, listening to English audios and using applications during IDLE. The Saudi EFL learners, in general, prefer informal digital learning to improve their vocabulary more than formal learning. These findings can be exploited in pedagogical situations. In other words, the mentioned tools can be used in formal learning and even in the classrooms.

Another salient finding is that the means of the learners' attitudes towards IDLEV are higher than their practices. This finding provides a clear insight about the learners' realization of the importance of IDLEV devices even if their IDLEV practices are less. Being higher in their attitudes than practices can be ascribed to many reasons including involvement in their formal learning, i.e., lectures, assignments, tests, etc., or spending more time on the digital devices using their mother tongue (Arabic) rather than English. This was supported by Putrawan and Riadi's (2020) study on Indonesian EFL students who spend most of their time on digital devices in their mother tongue rather than in English. In contrast, Barua (2019) found that 75% of Bangladeshi students in Saudi Arabia communicate via digital devices in English language. For the Saudi context, it needs future investigation.

For acquiring and improving English vocabulary, Saudi EFL learners use receptive tasks, such as watching English videos and movies and listening to English, more than the productive tasks, such as participating in the English forums. This finding is in line with a previous study conducted in Slovenia (Jurkovič, 2019) that declares that the learners hold positive attitudes towards receptive tasks more than the productive tasks. This could lead to generalizing the results as similar contexts with learners of English as a foreign or second language. Furthermore, this can be attributed to the time and efforts needed in producing more than receiving. Perhaps this is because students are used to teacher-centered methods in formal learning reflected in the IDLEV settings. Numerous studies asserted that the predominant method of teaching in Arab World countries is the teacher-centered method, and the emerging informal learning frees students from the confinements of the teacher dominance; they get involved in receptive skills and they also get a chance to use their productive skills. Likewise, they do the same thing in IDLE. The analogy is that in formal learning, students listen to their teachers, read from the board, and look up new words in traditional dictionaries; they do not communicate, write notes, talk with teachers and classmates in English which is the same thing that occurred in IDEFLV settings. This is possibly because students in informal learning hardly learn the importance of involving in productive activities. The predominance of receptive activities during IDLEV is consonant with Jurkovič (2019). This could be due to the effects of formal learning methods following a teacher-centered approach, which becomes a habit for students to receive knowledge but not produce it.

The moderate positive relationship between the Saudi EFL learners' attitudes and practices of the IDLE indicates that whenever the attitudes increase, the practices increase and vice-versa. This implies that one important way to increase the learners' practices of the IDLEV by the teachers is increasing the learners' attitudes of the IDLEV and vice-versa. Additionally, it was found that

the influence of the learners' practices of IDLEV on their performance was stronger than that of their attitudes. This is normally expected because practices have a direct influence on the learners' achievement more than their attitudes have. Moreover, a parallel correlation between the learners' attitudes and practices of IDLEV with the years of study was found. This can be ascribed to the more activities the students do in the higher levels of study.

Conclusion

This study examined Saudi EFL learners' attitudes and practices of IDLEV. The researchers recruited 80 Saudi English major students from the University of Bisha. The results of the study reveal that Saudi EFL learners have positive attitudes towards the important role of IDLE in acquiring English vocabulary. It shows that they have a willingness to improve their English with IDLE devices. The study found that the most commonly practiced activities are receptive activities such as watching videos, listening to English, reading English on the internet or in social media and looking up new words in e-dictionaries, respectively. The least commonly practiced activities are productive activities such as chatting with native English speakers, writing down the newly learned vocabulary, chatting with friends in English via social media and SMSes and participating in forums, respectively. All the findings imply that EFL learners and teachers can use informal digital learning to help in acquiring and improving the learners' English vocabulary. EFL teachers in formal learning are recommended to accentuate the role of IDLEV devices and encourage their students to practice them. They should guide their students to improve their receptive activities as well as productive activities. EFL teachers should follow the student-centered approach, which in turn will instill a communicative approach in students and become a preferred learning style either in the classroom or beyond the walls. As the study is not saturated with research, future researchers should inspect the reasons behind concentrating on receptive skills and neglecting productive skills. They should expound if bridging formal and informal is needed or not.

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