

Independent Mobile Learning of English: The Case of Saudi Female University Students

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Dedication

Baba and Mama,

You have put up with a lot and complained very little. You stood by me at my worst and celebrated me at my best. I dedicate this thesis to you, for you are the heartbeat of all my endeavours and achievements.

Abstract

This thesis investigates the use of smartphones for independent language learning, focusing on the experiences of seven female university students in Saudi Arabia. It aims to understand how they use their smartphones for language learning and to identify the challenges they face. This was implemented through my proposed Independent Mobile Learning of English (IMLE) framework: This framework encompasses three phases: 1) planning; 2) management of learning activities; and 3) monitoring and evaluating learning processes and outcomes.

This study employs a qualitative approach, where data were gathered from seven participants through semi-structured interviews. To enrich the dataset, additional media materials, such as screenshots and video clips illustrating their smartphone usage for language learning, were also gathered. MAXQDA software was used to analyse the data. Six key themes were identified to understand the IMLE experience across the three phases of the framework. Within the first two phases, planning and management of learning activities, there were four themes. First, learners incorporated English into their daily routines using various tools, such as social networking sites and films. Second, they identified the importance of choice in deciding on language partners for conversational practice across different social digital tools. Third, learners used a range of digital platform serving different needs. Fourth, they used translation tools to enhance their language competence and confidence.

From the final phase of the IMLE framework, two themes emerged, which dealt with monitoring and evaluating learning outcomes as learners acknowledged challenges and reflected on solutions. First, learners recognised the importance of following their own interests in IMLE. Second, they reported the need for community support to make IMLE more effective. The findings of this study provide insights that will be valuable for educators and researchers who aim to create effective language-learning experiences tailored to learners' needs in an increasingly digital world, as well as for learners interested in engaging in IMLE.

Relevant Publications and Conferences

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List of Abbreviations

App	Application
CALL	Computer-assisted language learning
E-Book	Electronic book
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELI	English Language Institute
IDLE	Informal digital learning of English
IMLE	Independent Mobile Learning of English
KAU	King Abdulaziz University
LBC	Learning beyond the classroom
LLSNS	Language learning social networking site
MALL	Mobile-assisted language learning
OILE	Online informal learning of English
PYP	Preparatory year programme
SDL	Self-directed learning
SNS	Social networking site
SRL	Self-regulated learning
SRM	Self-regulation of motivation
ZPD	Zone of proximal development

1 Introduction to the Study

1.1 Introduction

This study investigates how female university students in Saudi Arabia use smartphones to enhance their English language learning. It explores their experiences and perspectives on the opportunities provided by smartphones, as well as the challenges they face in learning independently with the support of digital tools. This chapter begins with an explanation of my personal interest in these issues. It then provides an overview of the topic and research aims, followed by an examination of the study's context. Next, it discusses the reasons for the research and presents the research questions, explains the importance of the study, and outlines the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Personal Interest and Experiences

My interest in independent learning started during the induction week of my postgraduate studies at the University of Leeds, when I heard the word 'autonomy' for the first time. The speaker told us (international students) that we now needed 'learner autonomy', where we look for information ourselves, and that learning would depend on us rather than on the instructors. I remember how excited and stressed I was in the first two weeks of my master's studies because of this new approach. Apart from my lecturers' guidance and peer support, self-learning was the primary source of knowledge, and then in class, we were involved in discussions and debates. Although it was challenging, I was able to fit in with my classmates and benefit from the courses, as well as enjoy them. Trying to grasp information without the direct intervention of instructors and depending on different digital tools such as YouTube videos, the Research Gate website and Twitter academic accounts undeniably had a positive impact on my learning strategies.

Based on my experience as a learner in the UK, where I was challenged to become more independent, and on stories I came across online, I knew that many learners out there taught themselves different skills like languages. Nevertheless, those learners, including myself, had a long and bumpy learning journey that could have been more manageable. Therefore, I wanted to give learners a voice to explain and express

themselves and to share their personal stories and experiences of learning the English language. I wanted to know the stories of learners who had learned languages on their own and to understand their experiences. For my master's degree dissertation, I had carried out research into the use of social networking sites for language learning among Saudi postgraduate students in the UK. When I collected my data, I noticed that the participants shared their experiences and their belief that activities outside formal learning developed their English language learning. They talked about following English learning accounts, following proficient speakers and interacting in English on social networking sites.

My experiences inspired me to choose the topic of this PhD thesis as I realised that, as a learner, I could direct my learning with the support of technology, and as an educator, I could support learners to do the same. This realisation ignited my interest in the use of mobile devices to expand students' experiences of the English language by increasing opportunities to practise the target language outside the classroom. It also developed my interest in undertaking research on independent learning. I chose to focus on independent learning rather than learner autonomy as this relates more to the process of learning, which I am interested in understanding, and it is also related to learning outside the classroom (see Section 2.2.1 for an overview of independent learning). In this study, I explore how learners use smartphones to facilitate independent language learning and how they reflect upon the language learning process.

1.3 Background to the Study

In addition to my personal interest and my experience as a student in the Saudi and British educational contexts, other factors have contributed to my belief that this study is necessary and timely, notably the worldwide trend toward using mobile technology in language learning, the growing importance of independent learning beyond the classroom, and the ongoing educational reforms in Saudi higher education institutions.

Today's language learners have access to a wide range of digital tools that offer unprecedented opportunities for flexible and personalised learning. One significant development is the emergence of social networking sites (SNS), enabling learners to interact and practise foreign languages with individuals from around the world.

Moreover, interactive educational games and language learning platforms like Duolingo offer engaging avenues for acquiring new knowledge. These platforms employ gamification techniques, making the learning experience both enjoyable and motivating. Additionally, the availability of translation apps and other language-related tools greatly enhances learners' comprehension and usage of target languages.

A specific aspect of digital learning that has gained traction is mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), where handheld mobile devices like smartphones and tablets are used to facilitate language learning (Kukulska-Hulme and Shield, 2008). MALL can be seen as an evolution of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), with a specific focus on mobile learning (Stockwell and Hubbard, 2013). The versatility and portability of mobile devices such as smartphones allow learners to engage in language learning activities anytime and anywhere. Whether they are walking, waiting or commuting, learners can make use of spare moments to listen to foreign language songs, play language games, or read blogs and books. The absence of a centralised location, such as a classroom, removes barriers to language learning and promotes independent learning.

Over the years, mobile devices have evolved to incorporate the functions of both computers and phones. Smartphones offer larger displays with sharper resolutions, enhancing the visual experience for learners. This enables them to interface more effectively with language learning materials, such as e-books, language apps and online courses. The touch-screen technology and virtual keyboard facilitate intuitive navigation and interaction, creating a user-friendly and interactive learning environment. Learners can easily switch between different keyboard layouts, enabling them to practise writing skills in various scripts or alphabets. The increased storage capacity of smartphones allows learners to store and access a vast number of language resources, such as dictionaries, grammar guides and audio recordings. The camera function on smartphones proves particularly beneficial, as learners can capture images of their surroundings and use language translation apps to receive instant translations or definitions. This feature promotes real-world language immersion and aids in vocabulary expansion. Additionally, smartphones allow learners to record videos for speaking practice, to review pronunciation and to engage in conversation exchanges through video chat applications.

Smartphones also offer their users a wide range of pre-installed and both free and commercially available software programmes called applications (apps). In addition, they provide their users with the possibility of accessing information on websites via web browsers and connecting with others from around the globe via SNS. The availability of a wide range of pre-installed and downloadable apps opens up endless possibilities for learners. These apps offer comprehensive language courses, vocabulary drills, grammar exercises and interactive language games. Learners can tailor their language learning experience to their specific needs and preferences, accessing learning materials designed by experts in the field. Smartphones also provide seamless access to authentic language resources such as news articles, podcasts and online language communities. They can enable learners to engage with proficient speakers, participate in language exchange platforms and join online forums or social groups focused on language learning.

The availability of digital tools for English language learning has opened up numerous opportunities. However, there is still uncertainty about the extent to which students utilise these resources, which raises crucial questions about their true potential. While the existing literature on the use of smartphones for language learning is extensive, it focuses primarily on their application within formal educational settings such as in classrooms or as part of structured language courses. This emphasis overlooks a significant aspect of language learning, where learners engage in MALL outside the classroom, an area which, as Kukulska-Hulme (2016) notes, remains a 'less explored territory' (p.138).

Research consistently demonstrates that active engagement with the target language outside the classroom is positively correlated with language learning success. This concept is supported by studies from Lamb (2002), Benson (2011c), Lai and Gu (2011), among others. Such findings have led to a growing number of scholars, including Benson (2011a), Sockett (2014, 2022), Richards (2015), Lai (2017), and Reinders and Benson (2017), to advocate for more extensive research into the independent language learning practices of students. In this evolving landscape, the focus on MALL becomes increasingly relevant, especially with the rapid advancement of technology. As technology evolves, it introduces a range of new tools and methods for language

learning, which have the potential to transform MALL into a highly personalised and effective learning experience. Studies concentrating on MALL are important as they provide a deeper understanding of how learners interact with and benefit from these technological advancements.

1.4 Research Questions and Aims

This study, therefore, aims to contribute to the existing knowledge and understanding of effective language learning practices outside the traditional classroom setting by examining learners' experiences and engagement in independent learning using smartphones.

The focus is on young adult learners of English, and qualitative data will be collected and analysed using thematic analysis to gain comprehensive insights into learners' experiences, perceptions and challenges in using smartphones for independent language learning. By examining the experiences of students, the study seeks to uncover valuable insights into effective strategies for supporting learners in independent mobile-assisted language learning and maximising the benefits of digital tools. These insights align with Sockett's (2022) suggestion that MALL empowers students to take control of their learning process, construct meaning and evaluate their progress. This reinforces the belief that smartphones offer valuable opportunities for fostering improved independent language learning.

The expected outcomes of this research are as follows: identifying the benefits and challenges associated with mobile-assisted language learning; suggesting effective strategies to support learners in optimising their language learning experiences and providing recommendations for educators and researchers in the field of language education. These recommendations should focus on how to support learners in using their smartphones for independent language learning outside the classroom. For instance, the results of the study could guide educators in how to advise students on the effective use of some smartphone features for language learning, and in how to identify common obstacles and strategies to overcome them; this can make a significant difference in learners' progress and learning experience. Ultimately, this

study aims to establish a clear framework that simplifies the process of independent mobile language learning, benefitting both learners and educators.

The following two questions serve as a guide for the research:

1. How do Saudi female university students use smartphones for independent language learning?

This question guides the investigation into the specific methods and rationales behind the use of smartphones by Saudi female university students in their pursuit of independent language learning. It looks at their preferred digital tools, such as language learning apps like Duolingo or other apps like SNS. Additionally, the research examines the various language learning activities the students engage in using their smartphones, such as reading and vocabulary practice. By examining these practices and motivations, the research aims to uncover the diverse ways in which smartphones are employed as tools for language learning.

Understanding the reasons behind learners' choices and the benefits they attribute to their use of mobile apps and websites will provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of smartphone-based language learning for English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Additionally, exploring how smartphones complement learners' formal language education and facilitate independent learning will shed light on the role of technology in enhancing language learning and autonomy.

2. What challenges do Saudi female university students encounter when using smartphones for independent English language learning, and how do they address them?

This question focuses on identifying the obstacles and difficulties faced by Saudi female university students while using smartphones for independent English language learning. One significant challenge that students may face is related to motivation. Without the structure and accountability provided by formal classroom settings, students may struggle to maintain consistent motivation and discipline in engaging with language learning activities on their smartphones. Additionally, the overwhelming variety of language learning apps and resources may cause decision fatigue, making it

challenging for students to select the most suitable and effective tools for their individual learning needs.

By understanding the challenges students encounter, the research aims to shed light on potential barriers to effective smartphone-based language learning and will propose solutions to overcome them. Addressing these issues can enhance the effectiveness of smartphone-based language learning for EFL learners, fostering more successful and rewarding language learning experiences through the integration of mobile technology.

1.5 Context of the Study

This section discusses two significant aspects of the context for this study: the lives of women in Saudi Arabia and the challenges of English language learning within the Saudi educational system. By delving into these contexts, a comprehensive understanding can be gained of the participants' experiences and perspectives as they engage in independent language learning with smartphones.

As all the participants in this study are females from Saudi Arabia, it is important to examine women's lives in Saudi Arabia to gain an understanding of their unique experiences and challenges. Saudi women, like women in any society, have diverse backgrounds and aspirations. However, due to the specific cultural, social and legal context in Saudi Arabia, there are certain factors that set them apart. Historical restrictions have influenced Saudi women's experiences, with constraints such as driving and guardianship laws impacting their daily lives. Cultural norms and social interactions between men and women in Saudi Arabia are generally more conservative compared to other countries. These norms can impact women's experiences in public spaces, social gatherings and other aspects of their lives.

By focusing on Saudi women's experiences, this research offers valuable insights into the challenges of English language learning within the Saudi educational system. Understanding this specific context provides a deeper understanding of the effectiveness of traditional teaching methodologies and the potential limitations of language exposure outside the classroom. MALL can play a crucial role in addressing some of these challenges. Through the use of smartphones and online language learning platforms, Saudi women can access language resources and practice materials

from the comfort of their homes, bypassing some of the traditional barriers they may face. MALL allows them to engage in language learning at their own pace and on their own terms, which can be empowering. This approach opens up opportunities for independent learning and can supplement formal classroom instruction, providing more flexibility and tailored learning experiences for Saudi women.

1.5.1 Women in Saudi Arabia and Recent Changes

The transformative changes in Saudi Arabia, particularly the significant legal reforms introduced in 2018 by King Salman and Prince Mohammed, have ushered in a new era of freedom and equality for Saudi women. Prior to 2018, Saudi women were required to have the permission of a male member of their family (guardian), such as a father, brother or spouse, in order to pursue university studies. The involvement of a male guardian extended beyond enrolment and encompassed various aspects of academic life, including working at the university and completing advanced degrees. However, with the new legal reforms, women were granted the autonomy to live their lives on an equal footing with males, allowing them to study and travel without the need for a male family member's consent.

In addition, the gender-based restrictions imposed within the Saudi Arabian educational system, where students are separated based on gender after the third grade and the consequent lack of interaction between male and female students limit opportunities for meaningful engagement and knowledge sharing. The strict gender segregation code has been a defining characteristic of Saudi society. However, the emergence of mobile technology presents a unique opportunity to overcome this limitation and revolutionise the learning experience. By leveraging mobile devices and creating virtual learning environments, students can access a diverse range of high-quality learning resources while still adhering to gender segregation norms. This aspect is particularly relevant to the current study on mobile language learning, as it offers a potential solution to bridge the gender divide and facilitate language acquisition among female Saudi university students.

By exploring the experiences of female Saudi university students who have taken the initiative to learn languages independently with the support of their smartphones, we can gain valuable insights into the impact of mobile technology on their educational

journeys. Understanding their motivations, challenges and successes in independent language learning with smartphones will not only shed light on the efficacy of mobile language learning but will also provide valuable information for educators and policymakers to enhance the educational landscape in Saudi Arabia. It is through these personal narratives and experiences that we can fully grasp the transformative power of mobile language learning and its potential to empower learners in their pursuit of knowledge and personal growth.

In the following section, I explain the educational system in Saudi Arabia and how it is developing in accordance with Saudi Vision 2030, which increases the importance of studies such as mine.

1.5.2 Learning English in Saudi Arabia

The study of English has particular significance within the educational system of Saudi Arabia. Not only is English a compulsory subject in schools, but it is also a requirement for university entrance following the preparatory year programme (PYP). English language instruction is prioritised in Saudi Arabia owing to the crucial role of English in the majority of regional professions and businesses, and this has contributed to the country's global economic engagement (Alshahrani, 2016). In Saudi state schools, students receive nine years of official English instruction, while private school pupils benefit from 12 to 14 years of official English language instruction. They begin studying English at the age of four or five if they attend optional kindergarten lessons, or at the age of six or seven if they begin attending school in the first grade. While Arabic is the primary medium of education in most schools, English is the primary medium of instruction in private international schools. However, despite a minimum of nine years of English language education, research has documented unsatisfactory outcomes for students' English proficiency, especially among state school graduates¹ (Al-Nasser, 2015; Ashraf, 2018; Alrabai, 2018).

It appears that English is taught in schools as a subject rather than a means of communication. Repetition of words and phrases is a frequent method of aiding memory in English language learning in schools (Alharbi, 2015). As a result, according

¹ All the participants in my study are state school graduates.

to Al-Nasser (2015), even after high school, many pupils are still unable to hold a brief conversation in English. In addition, the dominant educational methodologies may be contributing to pupils' inability to communicate effectively in English. Standard methods for teaching English in state schools include a combination of Arabic and grammar-translation (Alrashidi and Phan, 2015). Curricula and textbook content are often strictly controlled, and the topics they address are not aligned with students' daily linguistic needs, further complicating the learning of English (Assalahi, 2013). This results in a lack of focus on the development of students' analytical and communication skills.

While most explanations of significant issues related to learning English in Saudi Arabia focus on the quality of teaching, the relevance of the curriculum and the learners' attitudes, another possible explanation for shortcomings is the limited exposure to English in day-to-day life and the lack of opportunities for learners to use English in real-life situations (Ashraf, 2018). In light of this and of technological advances, there is a clear need to investigate independent language learning outside the classroom, which may provide opportunities for learners to extend their exposure to English and use it in authentic contexts, particularly through their use of digital technologies.

With smartphones, learners can listen to foreign language songs on the go, play language games while queuing, and read blogs and books while travelling. No classroom or other centralised location is necessary for them to engage in language learning activities using smartphones. In addition, these digital tools may help students overcome many of the issues they face in class, like using the language in an authentic context and adapting learning to their needs. The literature review and discussion chapters will present further discussions of how independent learning and mobile devices, namely smartphones, can support learners.

1.5.3 Independent Learning and the Ongoing Educational Reforms in Saudi Arabia

In most Saudi educational institutions, the model of ‘teachers teach and students learn’ is predominant (Al-Mutawa and Kailani, 1989; Alrabai, 2018; Al-Seghayer, 2021). Although this approach to education dates back more than two decades, it might have generated a passive attitude in pupils, leading to low learner autonomy in Saudi Arabia (Alrabai, 2017; Alzubi et al., 2017; Althaqafi, 2017). As it was rooted in a teacher-centric approach, the Saudi education system might have failed to prepare students for independent learning and critical thinking. Alrabai’s (2017) study underscored this issue, revealing a significant gap in awareness of learner autonomy among both teachers and students in the Saudi EFL context. Similarly, Alzubi et al. (2017) investigated to what extent Saudi undergraduates are autonomous learners. The data analysis showed that the respondents are low autonomous learners. More recently, Asiri and Shukri (2020) explored the perspectives of 150 female preparatory year students at the English Language Institute, King Abdulaziz University. Their findings indicated not only a low level of autonomous learning but also a heavy reliance on teacher-led instruction. Researchers like Ali et al. (2022) assume that ‘students rarely acquire knowledge on their own, as instructors provide them with most of the information’ (p.10342). However, this study aims to challenge these assumptions and to delve deeper into the actual engagement of learners in independent learning with the support of smartphones beyond formal learning.

MALL plays a critical role in this shift as it enhances learner autonomy by enabling students to access educational resources at their convenience, promoting a sense of independence. It also allows for personalised learning experiences where students can learn at their own pace and focus on areas needing improvement. The interactive and engaging nature of mobile apps and platforms can motivate students more than traditional methods. Furthermore, MALL encourages the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills as students are exposed to a variety of resources and learning modalities.

While previous studies in Saudi Arabia have concentrated primarily on measuring the level of learner independence and on examining the challenges and perceptions of teachers, an opportunity exists to examine in greater depth the personal experiences

and observations of learners themselves. By focusing on learners' experiences, the study can uncover valuable insights that quantitative measures alone may fail to capture. For example, learners' experiences can shed light on the strategies they employ when navigating independent learning. The study can also provide valuable feedback on the role of teachers in fostering independent learning with the support of technology. This feedback can help educators adapt their teaching practices to better support learners' independent learning and enhance the overall learning experience. This is especially important now, given the ongoing changes in the Saudi educational system and the expanding technological opportunities for independent learners. Understanding the narratives of 21st-century learners can shed light on the dynamic interplay between learner autonomy and emerging educational technologies, offering a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of independent learning in Saudi Arabia.

Recently, there has been a focus on promoting independent learning in Saudi Arabia, in order to align education with the needs of the country's rapidly changing economy. Saudi Vision 2030, which Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman announced in 2016, aims to promote a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia, focusing on empowering individuals and fostering human capital development. The Vision also emphasises the importance of developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills in students, which aligns with the principles of independent learning. The educational reform strategy called for a move away from a memorisation-based approach to one that emphasises independent learning and critical thinking. To this end, the Ministry of Education has been working to implement new curricula and pedagogical approaches that promote independent learning, such as project-based learning and problem-based learning (Al-Daghmani, 2021).

1.6 Importance of the Study

This study has significant implications for the realm of language education, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia's educational system and the recent changes outlined above, but also much more widely, owing to its emphasis on the use of mobile phones in learning English outside the classroom.

Central to this study's uniqueness is the contextual focus on Saudi Arabia, a setting that remains underexplored in independent language learning research. This study comes at a time when Saudi society is undergoing significant transformations, especially in terms of women's rights and roles. By situating the research in this dynamic socio-cultural landscape, the study offers fresh insights into how these societal shifts are impacting language learning among Saudi female university students. This context is not merely a backdrop but an active element that shapes and informs the language learning experiences of the participants, making the study's findings particularly relevant and timely.

The study combines two of the main goals of Saudi Vision 2030: learner independence and technology-enhanced learning. The research was in part motivated by the fact that improving students' independent learning skills is a top priority for Saudi Vision 2030 educational reform. In addition, this study will increase knowledge about technology-enhanced learning (specifically mobile-assisted language learning), which aligns with the new Vision goals.

Furthermore, as discussed above (Section 1.5.2), English is considered one of the major subjects and a key language in Saudi Arabia's educational system. It is a compulsory subject in school and is a requirement for university entrance following the preparatory year programme. Moreover, English serves as the medium of instruction in fields such as medicine and engineering, making it an essential skill for higher education and future careers (Alshahrani, 2016). Given the importance of English language proficiency in various academic and professional domains, it is crucial to prepare students with the necessary language learning skills for lifelong learning. However, before we can effectively prepare them, it is essential to understand their current language learning practices. By focusing on how smartphones facilitate students' independent language

learning in their first academic year of higher education, this study aims to encourage continuous language development outside the classroom. For students, accessing learning materials and opportunities from the outset of their educational journey is vital. As they progress to higher levels of learning, they require greater independence. Understanding their own educational needs empowers them to take charge of their language learning journey.

Another distinctive feature of this research is its strong emphasis on the voices of learners. This focus on student voice is significant as it departs from traditional, top-down approaches in language education research. By capturing authentic experiences, perceptions, and challenges of the learners in using smartphones for English language learning, the study provides a deeper, more detailed understanding of learner perspectives. This emphasis ensures that the research captures the realities of the students' experiences, adding a rich, qualitative dimension to the literature.

Recognising the unique characteristics of the EFL context is crucial to understanding the importance of this study. In this context, learners typically have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, unlike learners who are immersed in an English-speaking environment. As a result, they usually have fewer opportunities to practise English in real-life situations. The lack of easy access to proficient English speakers or a rich English-speaking environment can impact the language development of EFL learners. Thus, exploring alternative ways to enhance learning, such as through technology and mobile devices, becomes vital.

1.7 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis consists of seven chapters that provide a comprehensive exploration of the research topic. Chapter 2 delves into the relevant literature in the fields of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and independent language learning. It sheds light on the existing knowledge gaps that the current study aims to address. Chapter 3 presents the framework of Independent Mobile Learning of English (IMLE) that guides the study and provides a conceptual foundation for understanding the role of mobile devices in facilitating independent language learning. In Chapter 4, the research methodology is extensively discussed, encompassing detailed descriptions of the sampling procedures,

research methods employed, data analysis techniques and ethical considerations. This chapter serves as a roadmap for the research process, ensuring transparency and rigour in the study's design and implementation. Chapter 5 presents the findings derived from the interview data collected during the research. These findings offer valuable insights into the experiences, perspectives and practices of learners engaged in independent language learning through mobile devices. Building on the findings presented in Chapter 5, Chapter 6 presents a thorough analysis of the key findings, synthesising them with the relevant literature. This analysis facilitates a deeper understanding of the research outcomes and their implications, further contextualised within the existing scholarly discourse. Finally, Chapter 7 captures the research conclusions, drawing together the main findings, implications and limitations of the study. Additionally, this chapter provides recommendations for future research directions, highlighting the potential avenues for further exploration and development in the field of mobile-assisted independent language learning.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the existing literature on the use of smartphones for independent language learning. It is organised into three sections. The first section establishes the context for the study by explaining key topics like independent learning, language learning theories and popular digital tools used for language learning. The second section addresses learners' experiences of both the advantages and challenges of using smartphones for independent language learning. Finally, the third section highlights the gaps in the existing literature and explains the original contribution of this study.

2.2 Setting the Scene for the Study

It is essential to clarify some key concepts that underpin this study and that feature prominently in the literature. First, I will define what is meant by 'independent learning' as this term forms the basis of the study. This explanation will then lead into an exploration of different scholars' accounts of how individuals learn languages. Engaging with various language learning theories enables a multifaceted understanding of the learning process, where each theory offers valuable insights into how individuals learn languages. Second, following this theoretical grounding, I will present some of the popular digital tools used for language learning and how they have been presented in the literature. Surveying these tools enables an understanding of the digital resources available for language learning. Together, the explanation of language learning theories and the presentation of learning tools construct a well-rounded view of the use of smartphones for independent language learning.

2.2.1 Independent Learning

The term 'independent learning' was first used to distinguish this practice from the more common phenomenon of teacher-led learning, where a teacher would typically direct the broad subject areas studied and the methods used within and occasionally outside the classroom (Dron, 2018). In independent learning, students learn independently of teachers (Lamb and Reinders, 2006). However, this is more than just learning without a teacher as it requires students to be responsible for developing their

own learning and to actively plan, implement and evaluate their learning experiences (Livingston, 2012).

The literature on independent learning features three related terms: learner autonomy, self-directed learning and self-regulated learning. The concept of learner autonomy comes from Holec (1981), who defines it as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' (p.3). This definition focuses on the primary attributes of independent learners. 'Ability' indicates that independent learning is not innate but rather relies on the capacity to learn how to learn. In other words, students can develop their independence either through formal classroom teaching and training or through real-world practice and application. This highlights the role educators can play in promoting learners' independence (Smith, 2008).

The research on language learner autonomy has identified two main strands: self-directed learning and self-regulated learning (Benson, 2011b; Lamb and Reinders, 2006). My study investigates how learners self-regulate their motivation, direct their learning activities, and reflect on their learning outcomes. These topics are frequently raised in theoretical writings on self-regulated learning (SRL) and self-directed learning (SDL), which are two distinct approaches. SDL emerged in the 1970s as a concept in adult education and encompasses learning activities outside the traditional school environment (Benson, 2011b). By contrast, SRL originated in the fields of educational and cognitive psychology and is primarily used within school settings (Benson, 2011b). In SRL, the learning task can be defined by an instructor or facilitator, whereas in SDL, learners themselves take on the responsibility of defining their learning tasks (Saks and Leijen, 2014). However, both SRL and SDL emphasise the importance of learners taking responsibility for their own learning processes. SRL focuses on the cognitive, metacognitive and motivational processes involved in independent learning (Zimmerman, 2000), while SDL emphasises how learners take the initiative in identifying their learning needs, formulating learning goals and selecting appropriate resources and activities to achieve these goals (Knowles, 1975).

My study does not prioritise one concept over the other, as both SRL and SDL provide valuable insights into how learners can take ownership of their learning. Instead, the study aims to combine and adapt these concepts in the context of the Independent

Mobile Learning of English (IMLE) framework that I will propose in Chapter 3. By examining how learners self-regulate and direct their learning activities to achieve their goals, as well as by looking at how they evaluate their learning outcomes and the challenges they face, I hope to contribute to a better understanding of effective independent language learning strategies.

Before looking at independent language learning in more detail, it is important to understand the broader context of how individuals learn languages. By considering this wider picture, I establish a comprehensive and informed foundation for exploring independent language learning and appreciate the diversity of learning strategies and experiences. The literature on the process of language learning discusses various theories, each offering valuable insights into how individuals learn languages. In the next section, I will provide an overview of language learning theories that can enhance our understanding of the learning process.

2.2.2 How Individuals Learn Languages

Theories of language learning play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of how individuals acquire and develop language knowledge and skills. Two of the most influential theories are behaviourism and constructivism, which offer distinct and contrasting perspectives on the role of the learner and the learning process.

Behaviourism uses psychology to understand how learners gain knowledge. Behaviourist teaching techniques rely heavily on repetition, imitation and reinforcement drills (Lightbown and Spada, 2013). As a result, the learner is treated as a blank canvas that needs to be filled with linguistic knowledge through drills and practices that emphasise forms and accuracy. Skinner (1974) proposed the behaviourist method of learning as a response to external actions. These external actions include positive reinforcement, where desirable stimuli are presented after desired behaviours to increase their occurrence. Brown (2014) explains that 'behaviourists might consider effective language behaviour to be the production of correct responses to stimuli. If a particular response is reinforced, it then becomes habitual, or conditioned' (p.22). Reinforcement could be a word of encouragement from the tutor or a digital tool, an improvement in examination results or progress to the next level in a language app. Therefore, learning processes are encouraged and

developed through the connection between a specific stimulus and a corresponding response (Wang and Shen, 2012).

Whereas behaviourists like Skinner believe that learners learn through imitation and repetition, constructivists like Piaget (1964) believe that humans construct knowledge in their own way by relating new knowledge to their prior experiences. Constructivism is 'an approach to learning that holds that people actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learner' (Elliott, 2000, p.256). These experiences come from a combination of innate capacities and environmental information (Lightbown and Spada, 2013).

In language learning, 'innate capacities' refer to individuals' cognitive and linguistic abilities from birth (Lightbown and Spada, 2013). These abilities include recognising and distinguishing speech sounds, inferring grammatical rules and patterns, and acquiring vocabulary and syntax (Chomsky, 1959). This view is supported by empirical evidence from studies on infant language acquisition, which show that infants as young as a few months old are able to distinguish between the speech sounds of different languages, and that they acquire the sounds and structures of their mother language with remarkable speed (Kuhl, 2004).

Environmental information refers to the linguistic and cultural input that individuals receive from their surroundings, including interactions with others, exposure to media, and participation in educational and social activities (Lightbown and Spada, 2013). This input provides learners with opportunities and resources to practise and refine their language skills and to learn about the cultural norms and values associated with the language (Larsen-Freeman and Anderson, 2011). Both innate capacities and environmental information are essential for successful language learning. While innate capacities provide the foundation for language acquisition, environmental information shapes and enriches the language learning experience.

The constructivist perspective asserts that learners are not passive recipients of knowledge but are active constructors of their own understanding. According to this perspective, language learners learn by interacting with authentic and meaningful language input, using their prior knowledge and experiences to make sense of new

information (Li, 2017). This view is supported by Krashen's input hypothesis, which emphasises the importance of comprehensible input in language acquisition. Krashen (1982) argues that input is any direct contact made with the target language through activities like reading and listening to the language, whereas comprehensible input is input beyond the learner's current level of language competence. He terms this level of input 'i+1'.

Later, Schmidt (1990) proposed that input alone is not enough for language learning, as learners also need to pay attention to the input in order to acquire new language features. This conscious attention to language input is referred to as noticing. According to the noticing hypothesis, learners must first become aware of the language features in the input before they can begin to learn them. In other words, noticing is a necessary step in the language learning process. The processed parts of the input are called intake, as is it not what the speaker says (input) that matters, but rather what the learner hears (intake) (Badger, 2018). However, mere exposure to language input does not guarantee effective learning. As highlighted by Long (1983) in his interaction theory, input is beneficial if it leads to meaning negotiation among speakers. This interactive exchange enriches understanding and facilitates language learning.

Moving beyond the focus on individual cognitive processes, social constructivism emphasises the role of social interaction in cognitive and language development. Social constructivism is influenced by the work of Vygotsky (1978), who emphasises the importance of social interaction. From a social constructivist perspective, language and cognitive development are mediated through social interaction. Vygotsky (1978) stresses the need for assistance from others within the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD), which he defines as the gap between what the learner can accomplish alone and what can be accomplished through cooperation with more skilled others. In other words, learning occurs when students attempt to solve a problem together by scaffolding each other; it can also occur between a tutor and a learner (Richards and Rodgers, 2014). The social constructivist approach emphasises the importance of social interaction, collaboration and the negotiation of meaning in the learning process. This approach assumes that learners are active and engaged in constructing their own

understanding of knowledge and that this process is enhanced through interaction with others who can provide support and guidance.

These three learning theories (behaviourism, constructivism and social constructivism) provide insight into how learners in mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) might approach learning differently. For instance, behaviourism emphasises the importance of stimulus-response associations and reinforcement in shaping behaviour. In the context of MALL, this could mean that learners might benefit from digital tools that provide immediate feedback, such as language learning apps that use gamification techniques to reward correct answers. Gamification involves incorporating gaming ideas and elements into non-game environments to motivate and modify participant behaviour (Lee and Hammer, 2011). According to Nah et al. (2013), there are five fundamental elements of gamification: 1) goal orientation, which involves setting clear objectives; 2) achievement, fostering a sense of success; 3) behaviour reinforcement, responding to outcomes; 4) competition, encouraging motivation for better performance; and 5) fun orientation, aimed at reducing stress and enhancing engagement. These elements have a wide range of potential applications, particularly in mobile platforms, where they can significantly impact user experience.

Constructivism, on the other hand, emphasises the active construction of knowledge through learner-centred activities, exploration and reflection. In MALL, this could mean that learners might benefit from digital tools that encourage inquiry-based learning, such as multimedia resources that allow learners to explore English language and culture in context; examples are films and songs. Social constructivism builds upon constructivism by emphasising the role of social interaction and collaboration in the construction of knowledge. In MALL, this could mean that learners might benefit from digital tools that enable them to connect with other learners and proficient speakers of English, such as social networking sites or language exchange apps. More details on the popular digital tools that can facilitate language learning will be presented in the following section.

2.2.3 Digital Tools for Language Learning

This section explores the diverse range of digital tools available for language learning (for a summary, see Appendix 1). These digital tools range from specialised language learning apps to social networking sites, offering learners various pathways to enhance their language proficiency. The section focuses on their functionalities and unique features and the roles these digital tools play in the context of language learning.

2.2.3.1 *Language Learning Apps*

Language learning apps are software applications designed to facilitate the acquisition of a new language through lessons, exercises and assessments. These apps often incorporate multimedia elements like audio clips, images and quizzes to reinforce learning and provide a more engaging experience. They are accessible via smartphones, tablets and computers, making it convenient for users to practise a new language whenever and wherever they wish. Duolingo and Babbel are two of the most popular language learning apps and they exemplify different approaches to language learning such as behaviourism, gamifications, and social constructivism.

Duolingo is a language learning platform that uses gamification to keep its users engaged (Duolingo, 2022), as outlined in the previous section. It offers a variety of reading, writing, and listening exercises that users can complete to earn points and badges as rewards. The platform is highly rated for its user-friendly interface and the wide range of languages it offers (Rosell-Aguilar, 2018). Babbel takes a more practical, conversation-focused approach (Feyoh, 2019). It uses speech recognition technology to aid in improving pronunciation, and the lessons are structured around real-life dialogues and simulated conversations. These lessons are created by language experts and are customised to the learner's native language and personal interests, aiding more efficient learning (Babbel, 2023). Moreover, Babbel's content focuses on vocabulary and phrases that one would likely use in everyday conversations, particularly in travel situations. Both apps have their own advantages and limitations, and the most effective approach often depends on individual learning preferences and goals.

2.2.3.2 *Films and Songs*

Films and songs serve as valuable digital tools for independent language learning on smartphones, providing learners with immersive and authentic language experiences that enhance a wide range of language skills and foster cultural understanding. Films provide a multifaceted educational resource. In addition to offering authentic linguistic and cultural insights, they help learners grasp the rhythm, pace and intonation of native speech. They frequently feature a range of dialects and accents, giving learners a comprehensive view of language variations across regions (Kaiser, 2011). The integration of visual storytelling elements, such as costumes, settings and traditional practices, further deepens learners' understanding of the cultural context where the language is spoken. Subtitled films enhance language acquisition by linking spoken dialogue with written text, improving both listening comprehension and vocabulary (Sanon, 2006). Complex narratives and character development in films also emotionally engage learners, facilitating deeper understanding (Donaghy and Xerri, 2017).

Like films, songs offer an enjoyable and effective way to enhance language learning. They provide rhythmic and melodic cues that aid memory retention (Katz et al., 2021). The repetitive structures and rhymes in lyrics help learners more easily understand and remember linguistic patterns and vocabulary (Mordsley, 2017). The emotional impact of music adds enjoyment and motivation to the learning process (Pavlenko, 2005). Listening to songs, much like watching films, improves comprehension through extensive exposure to the target language, aligning with Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis. This also enables learners to expand their vocabulary and enhance their pronunciation skills (Lai et al., 2015). Both films and songs offer complementary benefits such as providing contextual language learning and vocabulary retention.

2.2.3.3 *Social Networking Sites*

Social networking sites (SNS) have become widely recognised as an effective tool for encouraging language learners to practise the languages they have learned or wish to improve in a natural setting. SNS are valuable tools for language learning because they provide authentic target language materials, create an environment for students to learn from activities they enjoy, give them privacy and control over what they view and follow, and offer various types of materials that appeal to different learner styles, such

as videos, blogs and more (Derakhshan and Hasanabbasi, 2015). Although SNS generally share social connectivity as their main feature, different SNS offer different functionalities. For example, WhatsApp is a messaging tool, Instagram and Snapchat are photo and video sharing tools, and Twitter is a microblogging tool.

2.2.3.3.1 WhatsApp

WhatsApp is an instant messaging platform that facilitates both one-on-one and group interactions, with multiple features to share various files, images, videos, voice-notes and hyperlinks. In several countries, educational institutions use WhatsApp's multifaceted capacity to create group chats, share information and discuss aspects of learning, which leads to the construction of collaborative spaces where language learning can take place effectively (Hanisi et al., 2018). Moreover, language learners who are hesitant to speak in a traditional classroom setting may feel more comfortable practising and communicating in a virtual environment like WhatsApp (Alshumaimeri and Alhumud, 2021). However, it is currently unclear whether learners use WhatsApp for independent language learning and if so, how they use it.

2.2.3.3.2 YouTube

YouTube is a powerful platform for language learners due to its vast amount of content and its accessibility. The platform has a broad range of videos, including educational content, language lessons and cultural information (Kohler and Dietrich, 2021). It offers learners the chance to immerse themselves in authentic language and culture while practising their language skills. Language learners can see videos of people speaking their target language, for instance, by watching TED Talks or vlogs, or by tuning into language learning channels (Wu, 2020). In addition to being a source of entertainment and education, YouTube also provides opportunities for language learners to engage with speakers of the target language and other learners from around the world. The comments section allows learners to ask questions, get feedback on their language skills and connect with others who share their interests.

2.2.3.3.3 Instagram

Similarly, Instagram can provide opportunities for language learners to engage with the language in a more interactive way. With its user-friendly interface and visually rich content, Instagram offers an immersive and engaging learning environment that can aid in language learning. Instagram's interactive features, such as comments and stories, allow learners to engage with the content actively, creating a dynamic learning process (Al-Garawi, 2019). Furthermore, learners can create their own language learning accounts, posting and captioning images in the target language, which encourages active use and practice of the language in a meaningful context (Gomes, 2020) .

2.2.3.3.4 Snapchat

Snapchat, another social networking site, has been acknowledged as a potential tool for language learning. This temporary multimedia messaging app enables users to communicate via short videos and images, offering a unique approach to language learning (Al Fadda, 2020). Much like Instagram, Snapchat is a platform where learners can follow accounts dedicated to language learning, which often share daily vocabulary, idioms and common expressions (Muftah, 2022). As the messages disappear after being viewed, this may stimulate users to pay closer attention to the content and make a note of new vocabulary or grammar structures (Yadav, 2021). The use of short videos (or 'snaps') provides an opportunity for learners to practise both receptive and productive language skills in an authentic context. For instance, learners can use Snapchat to record themselves speaking in the target language and receive feedback from peers. This practice promotes oral fluency, pronunciation and spontaneity in the target language.

2.2.3.3.5 Twitter

Twitter is a popular microblogging site that allows users to post short messages, known as tweets, of up to 280 characters in length (up to November 2017, the limit was only 140 characters) (Beaven et al., 2018). The platform's character limit demands concise and precise language use, which can sharpen a learner's ability to express ideas effectively within these constraints (Boot et al., 2019). Twitter has become an important social digital tool for language learners, providing a platform for

communication and collaboration, and giving access to authentic language materials (Beaven et al., 2018). Engaging in English on Twitter not only promotes social interaction but also plays a vital role in language development and the formation of meaningful connections. Twitter serves as a platform for authentic communication and connection with English speakers, thanks to features like hashtags (#) and other interactive functions (Malik et al., 2019).

In a study conducted by Alshammari (2020), the emphasis was on investigating the prevalent use of mobile devices by EFL students at a prominent all-male university located in the central-north region of Saudi Arabia. Students highlighted various informal uses of mobile devices outside the classroom setting to support their English language learning. For example, some students stressed the importance of social media applications (e.g. Twitter, Instagram and YouTube) to provide them with platforms giving them access to a range of English language learning resources, especially English language speakers. Interestingly, Twitter was frequently cited as a useful tool for communicating with proficient speakers. Other students found Twitter useful in finding accounts specifically dedicated to learning and practising English. Learners also followed accounts of proficient speakers and interacted with their posts through comments, likes and direct messages (Erarslan, 2019). This can help learners to become more familiar with the use of the language in everyday contexts and to develop their reading and writing skills.

It should be acknowledged that the platform has recently undergone a transformation, now operating under the name 'X', and there is speculation about a forthcoming transition to a fee-based model. This development casts a shadow of uncertainty over its prospective utility in the field of language pedagogy.

2.2.3.4 Translators and Dictionaries

Online dictionaries and translators are helpful tools for language learning. These tools, exemplified by platforms like Merriam-Webster Dictionary and Google Translate, offer users quick and easy access to linguistic resources, thereby aiding individuals in their pursuit of language mastery. Online dictionaries like Merriam-Webster focus primarily on providing comprehensive definitions of words, their usage and other lexical features. They offer an in-depth approach to the meaning, origin and phonetics of

words, often including audio features for pronunciation and sample sentences to illustrate usage in various contexts. They are especially useful for vocabulary expansion, offering information on synonyms, antonyms and related words (Clark, 2013).

On the other hand, online translators such as Google Translate aim to facilitate comprehension at the sentence or paragraph level, translating text from one language to another (Niño, 2020). These tools are practical for those who need to quickly understand content in a foreign language, although they may lack the depth of understanding that dictionaries provide for individual words. Both online dictionaries and translators are indispensable tools for language learners as they play distinct yet complementary roles. While dictionaries provide an in-depth understanding of individual words, thereby enriching vocabulary, translators facilitate rapid comprehension of sentences or even larger text segments in foreign languages (Ahangari and Dogolsara, 2015). Further explanation of these tools and their use in language learning can be found in Section 2.3.4.

Online dictionaries and translators provide learners with quick access to word definitions, translations and language explanations, aiding comprehension and facilitating the independent language learning process. This immediate availability makes them a highly efficient tool for language learners who are navigating an unfamiliar text or attempting to compose in their target language. These tools may also provide learners with audio pronunciations, thus aiding in their oral language development. In terms of vocabulary expansion, these tools are also invaluable. They offer a wide range of synonyms, antonyms and related words, enabling learners to broaden their lexical knowledge (Laufer and Hill, 2000). Moreover, they often include sample sentences that illustrate word usage in context, which can assist learners in understanding differences in meaning and use between synonyms.

Having explained the foundational theories of language learning and catalogued the pertinent digital tools, the discussion now shifts to an in-depth examination of learners' perspectives and experiences on using smartphones for independent language learning.

2.2.4 Summary of Key Concepts in this Study

The approach taken in conducting the literature review for this study is wide-ranging, establishing a foundation for exploring the phenomenon of independent language learning, with a particular focus on the use of smartphones. This review begins with a clarification of key concepts, particularly 'independent learning,' which is essential to the overarching narrative of the research. In reviewing literature related to independent language learning, I looked at learner autonomy, self-directed learning (SDL), self-regulated learning (SRL), and informal learning. A notable strength of this literature review is its differentiation between closely related yet distinct concepts such as SRL and SDL. By dissecting these terms, the review provides a clear and detailed understanding of the mechanisms through which learners navigate their learning. This distinction is vital for articulating the study's specific focus and framing the subsequent discussion within the appropriate theoretical and practical contexts.

In delving deeper into language learning theories, the review adopts a multidimensional perspective, engaging with various scholarly opinions and theoretical frameworks such as behaviourism, constructivism, and social constructivism. The discussion ranges from traditional theories such as behaviourism, focusing on stimulus-response learning paradigms, to more contemporary views like constructivism and social constructivism, which emphasise the active role of learners in constructing knowledge through interaction with their environment and others. This theoretical grounding is crucial, as it situates the study within a broader scholarly conversation, demonstrating an understanding of the multifaceted nature of language learning.

Following this theoretical exploration, the review focuses on the practical realm, examining popular digital tools that facilitate language learning. This part highlights the relevance of digital resources in contemporary language learning and use, and it bridges the gap between abstract theoretical concepts and their tangible applications in real-world settings. By surveying these tools, the review sheds light on the resources available for language learners and critically assesses how they are presented and evaluated in existing literature. This analysis is instrumental in understanding the current landscape of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). It sets the stage for

further investigation into how these digital tools can be optimised for enhancing independent language learning experiences.

The ambition of the study to contribute original insights to the field is evident in the proposal of the Independent Mobile Learning of English (IMLE) framework (explained in Chapter 3). This innovative framework signifies a move beyond the review of existing literature towards developing new conceptual models that can better explain the dynamics of independent language learning in the digital age. The IMLE framework, therefore, represents both the culmination of the literature review and a steppingstone towards the empirical exploration that follows.

2.3 Investigating Learner Perspectives and Experiences

The advent of smartphones has impacted various aspects of contemporary life, including the field of language education. Consequently, understanding the role and impact of these digital tools in language learning has become increasingly important. Several studies have investigated the use of smartphones for language learning, and these provide valuable insights into learners' preferences and behaviours when using digital tools and engaging in language learning activities on their mobile devices. For instance, Demouy et al. (2016) found that a significant proportion of adult distance language learners used their smartphones to listen to audio in the target language, highlighting the importance of receptive skills, particularly listening and vocabulary acquisition, in independent language learning with smartphones. However, the study failed to explore the reasons for the popularity of some resources and the underutilisation of others. It is crucial to understand these reasons as they could provide grounds for recommending digital tools based on learners' preferences, thereby enabling potential barriers to be addressed and promoting independent learning experiences.

Also, while many researchers have studied specific aspects of learners' digital experiences, they often focus on particular tools. While these studies are undeniably valuable, they may miss the bigger picture by focusing solely on isolated experiences or tools. Such a focus can obscure understanding of how learners use technology outside the classroom and how technology can enhance language learning. This

section, therefore, explores the existing body of research on smartphone-assisted language learning, giving particular emphasis to independent learning experiences.

Lai et al. (2018) suggest that it is essential to shift attention from merely categorising technology types towards a comprehensive understanding of learners' experiences and their use of digital tools. This approach ensures that we do not overlook the fact that the same digital tool can offer different types of learning experiences. For instance, while Instagram is primarily known as a social networking site, it also provides instructional and authentic language learning experiences, such as language learning pages and exposure to posts from English speakers.

Drawing upon the framework proposed by Lai et al. (2018), my study will explore four primary categories of technology-assisted language learning experiences outside the classroom: entertainment- or information-oriented, socially oriented, instruction-oriented, and assistive-oriented experiences. In doing so, I aim to provide a unifying perspective that encapsulates the multifaceted nature of learners' interactions with technology. This contribution not only acknowledges the diverse ways in which technology is employed but also strives to present a more holistic understanding of how learners engage with digital tools for language learning.

2.3.1 Entertainment

For the reasons explained above, I now turn my attention to learners' experience of different categories of technology-assisted language learning outside the classroom. The first type of language learning experience is oriented towards entertainment or information. Entertainment or information-oriented experiences revolve around accessing resources in the target language for everyday purposes. Learners engage in activities like listening to songs, news or entertainment podcasts; watching films and YouTube videos; playing digital games; reading online news; browsing Instagram postings; and following updates from celebrities on Twitter (Lai et al., 2018). These activities provide them with authentic and engaging language input, helping them improve their listening and reading comprehension skills while also expanding their vocabulary and cultural knowledge.

In a study by Trinder (2017), focusing on Austrian university students engaging in independent language learning via smartphones, it was found that learners consistently used their devices for reading online news, an approach aimed at broadening their English vocabulary. Viewing TV series and films was another activity of choice, enhancing language abilities, particularly by boosting listening comprehension. These results emphasise the inherent potential for smartphones to deliver personalised and contextually relevant language learning experiences (Kukulska-Hulme and Viberg, 2018). Personalisation in this scenario is manifest in the learners' discretion to choose engaging content that resonates with their interests, as seen in the preference for online news, TV series and films. Simultaneously, the notion of relevance is embodied in the selection of materials related to their interests. This intersection of personalisation and relevance supports learner motivation and enriches learning, thereby fostering language proficiency (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Consequently, adopting smartphones for independent language learning gives learners the unique advantage of moulding their language learning in line with their interests and specific language objectives.

Moreover, Alghasab and Alfadley (2018) highlighted the potential of SNS in promoting English fluency. They emphasised that engaging with comments on Twitter and captions on Instagram allowed learners to immerse themselves in authentic language use and gain exposure to various linguistic styles and expressions. This active engagement not only contributed to overall language proficiency but also provided opportunities for practising reading comprehension skills and for understanding cultural aspects embedded in online interactions.

Despite the benefits of SNS for language learning, there are also potential drawbacks. For example, Alshabeb and Almaqrn (2018) revealed that while Saudi Arabian students learning English as a foreign language had favourable attitudes toward using SNS, their use of shortened words such as 'LOLing' could negatively affect their vocabulary and language learning. Therefore, it is important to determine whether learners are aware of the limitations of SNS when it comes to language learning. Furthermore, while using authentic materials (see Section 3.3.1.4 on authenticity) such as SNS posts and films can have benefits, there are several potential challenges to consider. A significant

disadvantage is that such materials might prove overly complex for beginners due to the fact that they typically include advanced vocabulary, complex sentence structures and cultural references (Vanderplank, 2010; Case, 2012). Furthermore, the idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms common in authentic materials may lead to misunderstandings or confusion (Friedman, 2023). Finally, due to the wide variety of authentic resources, learners may find it challenging to discover appropriate materials that correspond to their language level (Conole and Dyke, 2004).

2.3.2 Social

The second type of experience for language learning is socially oriented. Socially oriented experiences focus on learners' use of various digital tools such as WhatsApp, Twitter, online forums and language learning social networking sites to connect with proficient speakers and engage in daily communication and social exchange (Lai et al., 2018). SNS play a major role in a social interaction-based learning approach, allowing users to virtually cross the boundaries of their countries and to connect and express themselves on a global scale (Walker and White, 2013). Through these platforms, learners have the opportunity to practise their speaking and writing skills, receive feedback from proficient speakers and immerse themselves in authentic communicative situations (Wilde et al., 2020).

Ideally, feedback would involve a focused response directed at a learner's use of language. Such feedback generally comes from a proficient speaker or a language expert equipped with an understanding of language learning. This feedback typically aims to correct or improve linguistic skills and usually encompasses specific corrections, suggestions for improvement, or precise identification of successful language use (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). However, in a social context such as SNS, the flow of communication or responses does not usually encompass this level of analytical depth or emphasis on language enhancement. For instance, when individuals interact via platforms like WhatsApp or Twitter, their mutual responses are primarily intended to extend the conversation, express ideas or foster relationships, and not necessarily to correct language use. While learners can undeniably derive useful linguistic insights from such exchanges, these responses do not equate to feedback (Lantolf, 2000). When it is available, feedback from proficient speakers during socially oriented language learning experiences is an added advantage.

Additionally, some learners have raised concerns about the authenticity of online communication. They perceive that online interactions fall short of mimicking real-world, face-to-face communication (Trinder, 2017). Essential elements like non-verbal cues, context and the spontaneous nature of in-person interactions are often lost in the digital landscape. Consequently, these learners tend to believe that platforms like SNS do not provide 'authentic' language practice opportunities. These findings

underscore that the choices language learners make are not dictated solely by the practical utility of digital tools but are significantly influenced by emotional factors as well. This calls for a broader research focus, not just on the development of effective digital language learning tools, but also on strategies that can assist learners in overcoming these emotional barriers, thereby encouraging them to fully leverage the social aspects of digital language learning.

Mindog's (2016) study involving Japanese university students revealed that they used smartphone apps primarily to access content and to engage in communication on SNS. Notably, SNS emerged as the most popular choice among the digital tools used, while language learning apps such as dictionaries and vocabulary acquisition apps were less popular. It is worth noting that HelloTalk, a social language learning app, was the only language learning app mentioned in the study. One limitation of Mindog's study is the quantitative analysis of qualitative data. By subjecting qualitative data to quantitative analysis, the study may have overlooked rich and important insights. Despite using interviews as a means of data collection and successfully capturing some narratives regarding learners' smartphone use for language learning, the analysis concentrated predominantly on categorising the types of apps used and the duration of app usage. This emphasis on app classification and usage duration highlights the limitations of the study's primary focus.

Utilising appropriate methods of qualitative analysis would have provided a more comprehensive understanding of learners' experiences and motivations. With a more robust qualitative analysis, the research could have delved into the underpinnings of students' preferences and behaviours. For instance, a thematic analysis could have uncovered key motivations driving the popularity of SNS, perhaps related to their desire for authenticity. Similarly, narrative analysis of the interview data could have unveiled personal stories revealing why traditional language learning apps were not favoured, possibly due to past experiences, distinct learning styles or specific difficulties encountered. Moreover, such analysis could have provided insights into how the students' language choices reflected their attitudes and beliefs about different types of apps and about language learning in general. Lastly, in-depth case studies of individual students or small groups could have offered a rich, detailed picture of unique

experiences, hurdles and motivating factors that the quantitative approach might have overlooked. These more detailed qualitative approaches would have enriched the findings, providing a better understanding of the students' experiences and motivations in using digital tools for language learning. This highlights the need for further qualitative analysis to reach a deeper understanding of learners' smartphone usage.

In contrast to Mindog's (2016) findings, which showed a preference among Japanese university students for using SNS as a language learning tool, several studies present a different perspective. Research conducted by Ma (2017), Lai et al. (2018), Lamb and Arisandy (2019) and Ariantini et al. (2021) indicate a certain degree of avoidance among language learners of socially oriented experiences via smartphones. This avoidance was often attributed to concerns about their language proficiency and potential humiliation, or to a perceived lack of authenticity in online communication. Affective factors, such as fear of losing face during communication, influenced learners' preferences for digital tools and their willingness to engage in socially oriented experiences.

According to Lamb and Arisandy (2019), one contributing factor is the learners' self-perceived proficiency level. Many students feel their language skills are insufficient for public display, which SNS interaction often involves. For instance, posting comments or sharing content in a foreign language exposes them to potential criticism or corrections, making them feel vulnerable. This perceived threat can cause anxiety and thus inhibit learners from taking full advantage of the opportunities for learning and practice that SNS offer. Lamb and Arisandy (2019) also highlight the cultural concept of 'face' and the fear of 'losing face'. This concept, strongly ingrained in many Eastern cultures, represents a person's reputation and self-esteem. The fear of making mistakes in public and thereby 'losing face' can create a psychological barrier, discouraging language learners from engaging in socially oriented experiences. The interview data corroborated Lai et al.'s (2018) finding in another Asian context that a reason for the relatively low use of social-oriented online informal learning of English is that learners find online social communication in English to be awkward and risky, even though they recognise its potential value for learning. Unless the use of English is

somehow integral to a personal relationship, it often feels inauthentic to use the language.

Among the other social platforms, Twitter serves as a platform for authentic communication and connection with English speakers, thanks to features like hashtags (#) and other interactive functions. In research conducted by Alshammari (2020), Twitter was frequently cited as a useful tool for communicating with proficient speakers. Similarly, Alsharidi (2018) highlighted Twitter as an effective platform for authentic English language interactions among Saudi female EFL learners. The collaborative nature of Twitter enables these learners to act as active users of English. The platform's setting encourages spontaneous English usage, facilitating an unconscious acquisition process akin to first language development. Learners highly value these authentic contexts and audiences on Twitter, believing they accelerate language growth. Additionally, easy access to mobile devices amplifies this learning experience, allowing for real-world language interactions.

In Alsharidi's (2018) study, the focus was on understanding how female Saudi EFL students use Twitter for English language development and exploring their perspectives on it. The study involved 25 Saudi women studying at various levels at a health sciences university in Saudi Arabia. A mixed-methods research approach was employed, with data collected primarily through surveys administered to the EFL students. Additionally, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three participants. The findings revealed that Twitter creates an environment for Saudi female EFL learners to engage actively in thinking in English – a significant benefit of the platform's collaborative nature. A distinct correlation emerged between the students' English usage outside academic settings and their active Twitter involvement. This suggests that Twitter's interactivity provides a conducive setting for learners to practise English actively, going beyond passive learning. It also expands their network, introducing them to native English speakers among others. Taking advantage of this, participants find themselves naturally employing their second language in real-world settings, contributing in real time, sharing thoughts and engaging in authentic dialogues. This engagement in real-time conversations allows them to use English as they would in everyday interactions. Furthermore, the widespread availability and

accessibility of mobile devices enhance their exposure to authentic language settings, thereby fostering natural language learning.

Moreover, some apps mimic SNS but focus primarily on language learning. These apps are generally termed language learning social networking sites (LLSNS) in the research literature and include platforms such as Busuu and Babbel. Websites like these allow users to add 'friends' and to contact them publicly or privately, and they encourage users to post regularly in their target language about topics of interest. LLSNS often provide more structured language courses to complement their social activities. Creating accounts on LLSNS is usually free, but premium members gain access to a broader range of features and resources.

Several studies have explored the appeal of LLSNS, the issues that arise with their use and their effectiveness for language learning. One key advantage of LLSNS is the opportunity to interact with proficient speakers of the target language (Clark and Gruba, 2010; Rosell-Aguilar, 2016). Rosell-Aguilar (2018a) found that learners value the opportunities for authentic language exchange on Busuu when learning independently. Several studies have investigated the effectiveness of Babbel in language acquisition. For instance, a study conducted by Loewen et al. (2020) with adult learners of Spanish using Babbel found that participants showed significant improvements in their oral communicative ability and vocabulary knowledge. However, studies also indicate that users often find the blend of SNS and educational features jarring, which leads to mixed perceptions of the platform's usefulness. Stevenson and Liu (2010) reported that learners find relationships on LLSNS to be superficial, and some students prefer to integrate language learning on existing social networks like Facebook rather than adopting a new platform.

2.3.3 Instructional

The third type of experience is instructional. Instruction-oriented experiences involve the use of digital tools such as instructional YouTube channels, language teachers' Facebook pages, instructional podcasts and vocabulary apps to facilitate and enhance language learning (Lai et al., 2018). These tools provide learners with structured and guided learning materials and activities, allowing them to acquire new vocabulary, grammar rules and general language skills.

As presented in Section 2.2.3.1, Duolingo is one of the most popular digital language learning platforms. Research studies have investigated the effectiveness of Duolingo as a language learning tool (e.g. Botero et al., 2018; Isbell et al., 2017). Botero et al. (2018) conducted a study with 118 higher education language students. Responses to questionnaires highlighted that Duolingo could encourage out-of-class learning through engaging activities. However, interviews conducted as part of the study revealed a lack of sustained motivation, resulting in low app usage. Similarly, Mindog (2016) and Isbell et al. (2017) reported that university and adult learners found the app uninteresting or no longer helpful and stopped using it after a few initial attempts.

One significant drawback observed with language apps like Duolingo is poor sustainability. The lack of variation in the approach to language learning across these apps devalues the gamified incentives and renders the overall learning activity redundant. This can lead to learners losing interest over time. Additionally, the translation function in Duolingo, which instantly translates phrases to the learner's first language, may initially seem beneficial. However, Teske (2017) highlights that these platforms lack key aspects, such as communication opportunities, that are necessary for learners to use the target language effectively.

Research indicates that language learners are diversifying their educational tools beyond apps like Duolingo and Babbel and are increasingly turning to social media platforms. For instance, Instagram accounts that specialise in language education offer daily vocabulary, grammar tips and exercises (AlGhamdi, 2018; Gonulal, 2019). Gonulal's (2019) study highlights this trend, revealing that EFL learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds improved their comprehension, vocabulary and pronunciation through active engagement with such platforms. Instagram's interactive features further enrich the learning experience, encouraging active engagement through comments, stories and direct messages (Erarslan, 2019; Al-Garawi, 2019).

In a similar vein, Wang and Chen (2020) explored self-regulated language learning among Taiwanese EFL university students who use YouTube outside the classroom. This study included twenty university students' experiences of watching English-teaching videos on YouTube and aimed to understand their perceptions of this self-directed learning approach through individual interviews. The results revealed that students

used YouTube for three main purposes: to discover additional learning resources, to find motivation for learning English, and to gain cultural insights. These students often turned to videos by English-teaching YouTubers to supplement their formal education, citing the close relation of these videos to their daily lives, which made learning English less intimidating. Furthermore, they appreciated the cultural aspects presented in the videos, which allowed them to expand their understanding of other cultures.

Regarding the limitations of instructional-oriented experiences, these may not always accommodate individual learning styles or needs. Lightbown and Spada (2013) have pointed out that learners vary widely in their preferences and abilities, and one-size-fits-all resources may not be optimal for all users. Moreover, despite the vast array of materials offered by digital tools such as YouTube channels or vocabulary apps, the content may lack context, potentially leading to difficulties in understanding and applying the language in real-world situations (Chapelle, 2007). For instance, while a mobile flashcard app might help learners memorise vocabulary, it might not provide sufficient context for the learners to understand the variations in the use of those words across different settings. Additionally, learners who rely heavily on these resources might miss out on authentic communication and social interaction, which are fundamental for developing communicative competence in a new language (Canale and Swain, 1980). Critics also question the pedagogical underpinnings of language learning apps and language learning pages. Kim and Kwon (2012) argue that these platforms predominantly encourage passive learning, neglecting socio-constructive aspects. Supporting this view, Burston (2014) and Rosell-Aguilar (2017) note that most language apps are reduced to vocabulary drills and flashcards, questioning their educational validity and balance.

2.3.4 Assistive

In addition to the above three primary types of technological experiences, there is a further experience that is linked with these types and that can assist with their use and also with non-technologically mediated language learning and communication activities (Lai et al., 2018). Assistive technological experiences include the use of online translators and dictionaries. Notably, Lai et al. (2018) overlooked the importance of assistive technology use in their study as it was not considered a standalone learning

experience. However, in my study, I recognise the critical role of assistive technology in supporting independent language learning. By exploring how learners engage with assistive technology, we can gain insight into the challenges they face and how they overcome them. This understanding is essential for improving the effectiveness of technology in language learning and helping learners achieve their goals.

Google Translate has emerged as the preferred translation tool among EFL learners, as supported by extensive research dedicated to exploring its usefulness. Alhaisoni and Alhaysony (2017) provide a foundational understanding of how students engage with Google Translate for language learning purposes. Their findings suggest that the tool is frequently used for various language-related tasks, such as vocabulary acquisition, writing and reading comprehension. Students particularly value Google Translate for its no-cost access, ease of use and the rapidity with which it can provide translations. Despite these benefits, the study also brings to light certain drawbacks of Google Translate, including its occasional failure to deliver accurate translations and the provision of inappropriate word meanings. This has led students to adopt a cautious approach, often verifying translations through dictionaries or consulting with teachers or peers to ensure accuracy.

Similarly, Bin Dahmash's study (2019) delves into the use of Google Translate as a linguistic tool among Saudi university students. This research stands out for its focus on spell checking, revealing that students often rely on Google Translate to confirm the spelling of English words, leveraging the feature that a word, if translated back to Arabic, indicates correct spelling in English. This inventive use of Google Translate points to its broader application beyond simple text translation. It is a bridge to understanding and using English on digital platforms, such as social media. The current study expands on the previous research by examining how learners navigate and overcome these limitations, verifying the accuracy of translations and enhancing their linguistic competence in the process.

In addition to translation applications, dictionaries can also be a valuable tool for language learners. Examples of digital dictionaries include Merriam-Webster and the Oxford English Dictionary (See Section 2.2.3.4). Several studies have investigated how learners use dictionaries to enhance their language learning experience and the specific

features they find beneficial. For example, Ma and Yan (2022) conducted a study to explore the use of dictionary apps among language learners and their influence on learner autonomy. The research involved over 200 university students and revealed the crucial role that dictionary apps play in the language learning achievements of students. The study found that learners appreciate the autonomy to select and employ dictionary apps tailored to their individual needs and preferences. The researchers classified dictionary functions into four overarching categories: lexical information, supplementary resources, lexical tutors and lexical tools. They advocated for the incorporation of a broader spectrum of functions, including personalised vocabulary lists and advanced grammar and pronunciation checks, to better accommodate the diverse requirements of learners.

Moreover, Levy and Steel (2015) expanded their inquiry into how language learners employ dictionaries outside the classroom. This study highlighted that learners predominantly make use of these digital resources to expand their lexicon and acquire insight into word selection and contextual usage. Additionally, learners highly valued extra functionalities such as multimodal capabilities and additional learning supports like flashcards and quizzes. Overall, these studies demonstrate the importance of mobile dictionary apps in language learning, emphasising the need for developers to incorporate more tailored and comprehensive functionalities to meet the diverse needs of learners.

Despite their numerous advantages (presented in Section 2.2.3.4), there are constraints and potential drawbacks in using online dictionaries and translators. For instance, an over-reliance on these tools can hinder learners' development of vital language skills such as inferring meaning from context (Nation, 2013). Additionally, in the case of translation apps like Google Translate, the resulting translations may be too literal or may not accurately capture the cultural aspects of the language (Aiken, 2019). Another potential limitation is related to a lack of guidance on how to use these tools effectively. Without appropriate strategies, students may misuse these tools, leading to misunderstanding or misuse of words (Garcia and Pena, 2011).

Furthermore, the accessibility of translations can discourage deeper engagement with the target language, as learners may opt for ease of translation rather than grappling

with the complexities of the language (Niño, 2020). The convenience they offer might be a double-edged sword: language learners could become overly reliant on these platforms, potentially lessening their ability to remember vocabulary or discern grammatical structures without digital assistance (Gevorgyan, 2022).

2.4 Highlighting the Gaps and the Emergence of the Research Questions

It is important to note that previous studies exhibit some limitations in their exploration of learners' specific app usage patterns, preferences and activities. First, while these studies have identified broad categories of experience, they have not delved deeply into learners' engagement with language learning apps and their effectiveness as tools. For instance, as pointed out above, Mindog's (2016) study on Japanese students' use of smartphones focused on quantitative analysis to the detriment of exploring students' experiences in depth. Thus, my study seeks to fill this gap by examining the specific ways in which learners engage with digital tools for language learning, and it will employ qualitative methods of data collection and analysis to provide more in-depth information about and analysis of learners' experiences.

Studies on MALL should investigate how learners engage in self-monitoring throughout the process, the strategies they employ to monitor their progress, and how the use of digital tools influences these strategies. Such studies have the potential to provide valuable insights into how technology can support and enhance learners' self-monitoring, ultimately leading to improved language learning outcomes. It is crucial to understand how learners cope with the challenges and potential frustrations of independent learning. As learners assume the responsibility of maintaining their own interest and motivation, examining the affective aspects of MALL becomes essential. This study can provide valuable insights into learners' emotional experiences, such as their levels of motivation, perseverance and resilience in the face of difficulties. Understanding these affective factors can lead to practical recommendations for learners and educators on how to foster and sustain motivation, enhance engagement and effectively support learners throughout the independent learning process.

Second, although the shift of focus from categorising technology types to understanding learners' experiences, as recommended by Lai et al. (2018), is valuable

in improving comprehension of how learners use smartphones for language learning, this shift alone is not sufficient, as it lacks a theoretical framework that specifically addresses this type of independent learning. For instance, the focus remains primarily on learners' low levels of engagement with socially oriented learning experiences, but it does not sufficiently acknowledge and explore the wider context of how this problem may be connected with the intrinsic difficulties associated with independent learning itself. To address this limitation in relation to using smartphones, my study proposes a conceptual framework for Independent Mobile Learning of English (IMLE) that will provide a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of learners' independent mobile-assisted language learning experiences. The proposed framework draws inspiration from established theoretical dimensions. IMLE refers to language learning experiences outside the classroom, within virtual environments, spanning various learning contexts and intertwining deliberate and naturalistic learning situations – all with the intention of developing English language proficiency.

The IMLE framework outlines a comprehensive approach to the independent mobile learning of English, dividing the learning journey into three interconnected phases. The first phase, planning learning, serves as the groundwork where learners identify what they need to improve, such as reading skills or vocabulary expansion. They set both long- and short-term goals, often aided by the capabilities of their smartphones. This sets the stage for the second phase, managing learning, where learners take actionable steps. They choose relevant digital tools, learning materials and resources that align with their goals. Here, the study places emphasis on understanding how smartphones influence learners' choices and experiences. Then in the third phase, monitoring and evaluating learning, learners actively engage in tracking their progress while also monitoring their emotional and motivational states. The importance of self-assessment is highlighted, as learners make informed decisions to adjust their learning strategies to better achieve their goals. Evaluation at this stage is not just about assessing how well one has done, but rather serves as the crucial link that ties the learning experience into a continuous cycle. By engaging in this reflective practice, learners adapt and refine their goals and approaches, ensuring ongoing development. Further details on the IMLE framework will be provided in Chapter 3.

Third, in addition to proposing a framework to address the independent mobile learning of English, my study will explore the context of Saudi Arabia, which has been largely neglected in the literature, despite its significance. Considering the factors that influence independent language learning mediated by mobile technologies, such as learner motivation, strategic knowledge, learning beliefs, study discipline, learning styles and strategies, and personal interests (Ma, 2017), it becomes evident that user experiences of mobile learning are highly subjective and dependent on various individual factors, including age, education, cultural background and gender. Therefore, to comprehensively examine the effectiveness of mobile-assisted language learning, it is crucial to consider relevant variables such as context, first language and field of study.

This stresses the importance of conducting research in diverse contexts, including Saudi Arabia, to gain insights into learners' experiences and preferences specific to this setting. It is important to note that little is known about how Saudi Arabian learners use their smartphones for language learning outside the classroom, as previous studies have focused predominantly on learners in countries such as France, Austria, Japan, Hong Kong and Korea. My research aims to address this gap and provide an understanding of Saudi female university students' experiences with mobile independent language learning.

The literature review has identified important concepts that this research can build on, as well as limitations in previous research that it will seek to address. However, new technologies and capacities of smartphones have brought new dimensions to autonomous learning, which researchers need to address, as there is a currently very little research into learners' specific engagement with language learning apps and the effectiveness of these tools. Moreover, the literature review has also identified a lack of in-depth qualitative analysis into the ways learners interact with digital tools for language learning, which is necessary to understand their experiences. Most previous studies relied heavily on quantitative analysis, which failed to delve deeply into learners' experiences and overlooked qualitative insights. Therefore, a further contribution of my study will be to use qualitative research methods to provide more comprehensive exploration and understanding of learners' experiences with

smartphone-assisted language learning. My study conducts in-depth analysis of a specific cohort: female university students in Saudi Arabia, for whom the opportunities for autonomous learning provided by smartphones are very valuable, as explained in Section 1.5.

My research questions are therefore as follows:

1. How do Saudi female university students use smartphones for independent language learning?
2. What challenges do Saudi university students encounter when using smartphones for independent English language learning, and how do they address them?

By exploring these questions, this study seeks to gain insights into the specific ways in which Saudi female university students engage with smartphones for independent language learning. It aims to understand their perspectives on the opportunities provided by smartphones and the challenges they face when directing their own learning.

2.5 Main Points from the Literature Review Chapter

This chapter has reviewed the major benefits and challenges associated with using smartphones for independent language learning, and it has also critically analysed some of the existing studies in the field. For a summary of the main studies presented in this chapter, see Appendix 2. Despite the increasing interest in this area of research and the growing number of studies that have been published on this topic, there is still limited understanding of how people use mobile devices in their language learning experiences and how they perceive the effectiveness of smartphones in their learning processes. These gaps in the literature have implications for my research.

Taking account of the literature review presented above and the areas for further investigation that it has identified, this study aims to address the gaps and contribute to existing knowledge. The following research questions guided the study, focusing specifically on the experiences of female university students in Saudi Arabia:

3. How do Saudi female university students use smartphones for independent language learning?

4. What challenges do Saudi university students encounter when using smartphones for independent English language learning, and how do they address them?

By exploring these research questions, this study seeks to gain insights into the specific ways in which Saudi female university students engage with smartphones for independent language learning. It aims to understand their perspectives on the opportunities provided by smartphones and the challenges they face when directing their own learning.

In the following chapter, I explain the framework that guided this study.

3 IMLE and the IMLE Framework

3.1 Introduction

As discussed in the literature review above (see Section 2.4), there is currently a need for a theoretical framework to address the use of smartphones in independent language learning. In this chapter, I present details of the Independent Mobile Learning of English (IMLE) concept and framework, followed by a discussion of its advantages and limitations. Despite a rich body of literature on independent learning models, such as those proposed by Reinders (2010) and Song and Hill (2007), existing frameworks fail to fully address the unique characteristics and challenges associated with independent mobile learning. Consequently, the IMLE framework was designed to cater to mobile environments, incorporating three key phases: planning, managing, monitoring and evaluating learning.

This framework is tailored for learners who are interested in leveraging the capabilities of mobile devices to improve their English language skills independently. Additionally, it serves as a guide for educators and researchers aiming to understand or facilitate mobile-based independent language learning. The IMLE framework offers a structured yet flexible approach to learning English, blending the advantages of mobility with digital resources. By following it, learners can understand how to set goals, manage their learning pathways and evaluate their progress effectively. Meanwhile, educators and researchers can gain valuable insights into the behavioural patterns and preferences of independent mobile learners.

3.2 Independent Mobile Learning of English (IMLE)

IMLE can be conceptualised in terms of Benson's (2011a) dimensions of language learning beyond the classroom (LBC). The LBC framework comprises four key dimensions: location, formality, pedagogy and locus of control. These dimensions can be used to highlight the various possibilities and interpretations of English language learning outside the classroom, affecting the nature and outcome of learning. In this section, I investigate how the LBC framework's four dimensions can usefully be applied to IMLE and how they distinguish IMLE from the other available concepts.

3.2.1 Location

The first dimension of the LBC framework is learning location, which refers to the physical and temporal settings where learning takes place (Reinders and Benson, 2017). IMLE specifically examines language learning in virtual environments through the use of digital tools on smartphones at any time. Various terms and acronyms are used to describe this field. Two notable concepts that contribute to the concept of IMLE are online informal learning of English (OILE) introduced by Sockett (2014) and informal digital learning of English (IDLE) created by (Lee, 2018).

Sockett's OILE concept encompasses the idea of accessing technology and using the expanding resources available for English language learning in an online and informal context. It recognises the significance of online platforms in facilitating language acquisition outside educational settings and provides a broader perspective on the use of technology for informal English language learning. However, it does not specifically address the type of digital device employed in the learning process. By contrast, Lee uses the concept of IDLE to describe informal English learning using a range of digital devices, such as smartphones and desktop computers. It is noteworthy that the definition and inclusion of technological devices within the concept of IDLE varies across Lee's studies. Some studies focus on computer-assisted language learning (i.e. the use of computers) (e.g. Lee and Dressman, 2018; Lee, 2020), while others encompass all types of devices (e.g. Lee, 2017).

Given the specific orientations and limitations of both the OILE and IDLE frameworks, this study proposes the IMLE framework as an approach that facilitates the analysis of language learning in virtual environments using digital tools on smartphones. By emphasising the mobile nature of learning, IMLE highlights the flexibility and convenience offered by smartphones as a medium for language acquisition. This approach foregrounds the unique affordances and opportunities that smartphones provide for language learners, enabling them to engage in immersive language experiences and to access language resources whenever and wherever they choose. Portability and accessibility take centre stage in IMLE. Learners can access language learning tools anytime, anywhere, as smartphones are easily carried in pockets or held in hands. This integration of language acquisition into daily activities and surroundings

creates an immersive learning experience that transcends physical boundaries. Therefore, while OILE and IDLE encompass the broader notion of informal language learning with technology, IMLE differentiates itself by focusing on the use of smartphones.

3.2.2 Formality

The second dimension of the LBC framework is formality, which refers to the degree of formality involved in the learning process and its connection to formal qualifications (Reinders and Benson, 2017). Formality can be classified into three categories: formal, non-formal and informal learning. Formal learning typically occurs within educational institutions and follows a structured course or curriculum aimed at providing learners with a formal qualification. In this setting, teachers assign tasks and activities for students to complete both inside and outside the classroom. By contrast, non-formal and informal learning activities are not directly linked to formal qualifications and are self-initiated by learners. The key difference between non-formal and informal learning pertains to the level of structure. Non-formal learning is typically structured for language learning, as seen in language learning apps. Informal learning, on the other hand, is unstructured and takes place in everyday settings, involving the use of resources not specifically designed as educational tools, such as films, songs, and social networking sites (SNS). IMLE revolves around independent learning without the involvement of teachers or formal institutions and places its main emphasis on both non-formal and informal learning.

Concerning formality, the IMLE framework distinguishes itself from other similar concepts in the realm of language learning outside the classroom with technology, such as OILE and IDLE. OILE, as described by Toffoli and Sockett (2015), aligns with the notion of informal learning, emphasising that language learning is primarily a by-product of communication. From this perspective, the main focus is on engaging in meaningful interactions where language learning occurs naturally. The IMLE framework takes a different perspective in that it focuses on how learners actively seek language learning opportunities based on their individual desire to learn, without strictly adhering to Sockett's conception of OILE.

The concept of IDLE further expands on the understanding of language learning outside the classroom by distinguishing between two types: extracurricular and extramural IDLE. Extramural L2 engagement is voluntary and is not bound to an educational context, but is rather initiated by students themselves. It refers to learners actively seeking language learning opportunities outside formal educational settings, such as through online communities, language exchange programmes or self-study materials. At the same time, extracurricular L2 engagement is tied to formal educational contexts, where learners participate in language learning activities that complement their formal language education.

While both OILE and IDLE contribute valuable insights to the field of language learning outside the classroom, the IMLE framework provides a more focused perspective. Unlike studies centred primarily on formal learning and incidental learning, the IMLE framework specifically examines non-formal and informal learning experiences, both with the intention to learn. Moreover, it zooms in on the use of digital tools via smartphones, acknowledging the significant role that these devices play in shaping learners' language learning activities.

3.2.3 Pedagogy

The third dimension of the LBC framework is pedagogy, which refers to the degree to which teaching is involved. In non-formal learning activities, such as using language apps, learners may engage with professionals and receive instruction and feedback that allows them to direct their own learning with support. However, Benson (2011b) proposes a continuum of informal learning activities that range from self-instructed learning to self-directed naturalistic learning and finally to naturalistic learning.

Self-instructed learning involves any deliberate effort by the learner to acquire language content or skills, while self-directed naturalistic learning involves learners creating naturalistic learning situations for themselves with the intention of learning the language, even though their attention may be focused on communication or other aspects of the learning event. Finally, naturalistic learning occurs when learners engage in interactions with speakers or texts of the target language without any intention to learn. For the present study on IMLE, which specifically focuses on intentional learning activities, learners are asked to report their learning activities, indicating their

awareness and intentional initiation of the learning process. This study therefore excludes naturalistic learning, as the learning is not intentional.

3.2.4 Locus of Control

The last dimension of LBC is locus of control, which refers to the individual or group that determines the direction of learning, such as subject matter and pace. In self-directed learning, the process is guided by the students (internal locus of control) rather than by teachers or researchers (external locus of control).

In IMLE, learners adopt a self-directed approach, setting their own goals and pacing, which aligns with an internal locus of control – essentially, taking full responsibility for their own educational journey. Likewise, Sockett’s (2014) OILE also emphasises learner internal locus of control. By contrast, as previously detailed in Section 3.2.2, the IDLE model allows for either self-directed or teacher-directed learning, accommodating an external locus of control. This means that in IDLE, learners might depend on external factors, such as guidance from teachers or researchers. However, this external locus of control is irrelevant in the context of IMLE, where learning occurs outside the bounds of formal educational settings.

3.2.5 Summary and Definition of IMLE

As summarised in Table 3.1, IMLE is defined based on Benson’s (2011a) four LBC dimensions. IMLE refers to language learning experiences that occur outside the classroom setting, within virtual environments. It encompasses a wide spectrum of learning contexts, ranging from non-formal to informal, and it involves a combination of deliberate learning and naturalistic learning situations, all with the intention of developing English language.

Central to the concept of IMLE is the notion of learner autonomy. Learners have control over their own learning process, making numerous decisions independently. They have the freedom to choose learning materials, select appropriate digital tools, and determine the pace and direction of their language learning journey. However, it is important to note that while learners possess autonomy, they may still seek guidance or support in certain aspects of their learning, such as accessing relevant resources or receiving feedback on their progress.

IMLE represents a dynamic and learner-centred approach to language learning. It acknowledges the significance of virtual environments and the use of mobile devices, particularly smartphones, in enabling learners to take charge of their own learning experiences. By embracing IMLE, learners engage in self-directed language learning, leveraging digital tools and resources to enhance their language proficiency in a flexible and personalised manner.

Table 3.1: Classification of IMLE using Benson's (2011a) LBC framework

Dimensions	Description	IMLE	OILE	IDLE
Location	Where and when the learning takes place	Virtual, anytime	Virtual, anytime	Virtual, anytime
Formality	The degree to which learning is linked to educational qualifications or structured by educational institutions	Informal and non-formal	Non-formal	Formal and informal
Pedagogy	The degree to which teaching is involved	Self-instructed or self-directed naturalistic	Naturalistic	Self-instructed or naturalistic
Locus of control	How decisions are distributed between the learner and others	Self-directed	Self-directed	Self-directed or teacher-directed

3.3 To IMLE or Not to IMLE

While IMLE opens up promising opportunities for language learners, it also introduces certain challenges. This section will explore both the opportunities offered by IMLE and the potential obstacles that learners might encounter.

3.3.1 IMLE as a Means to Enhance Language Learning

Smartphones have become a popular tool for independent language learning due to their portability, social connectivity, multimedia support and personalisation features which appeal to users (Kacetyl and Klimova, 2019; Rosell-Aguilar, 2014; Sawin, 2017). These features offer learners greater control over key aspects of the learning process, wider access to authentic target language sources and learning experiences, and

connections with proficient speakers and peer learners (Benson, 2011a; Lai and Zheng, 2018). This section will discuss these benefits in more detail.

3.3.1.1 Empowering Learners to Take Charge of Their Learning

One way in which smartphones can assist students in independent learning is by empowering them to take control of their educational journey (Benson, 2011b). Referred to in the literature as learner agency, this term signifies the sense of ownership and control individuals possess over their educational experience (Driver et al., 2021). The setting in which learning occurs has a significant impact on the degree to which learners can manage their own education. Smartphones offer students a sense of control over their educational experience, thereby enhancing their motivation and engagement. Those studying a foreign language particularly benefit from the portability of smartphones, as they can readily access relevant materials at any time and in any place. Activities such as reading books in the target language, listening to audio recordings, watching videos and engaging with native speakers on social networking sites are examples of how learners can immerse themselves in a foreign language. The flexibility and adaptability of smartphones render them an invaluable educational tool, aiding students in persevering through challenging content by affording them the freedom to learn in a manner that aligns with their individual needs (Song and Hill, 2007).

Smartphones can support learners to engage in independent learning practices, as they help to make them responsible for their learning (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Sharples et al. (2007) point out that smartphones' portability allows users to learn outside their usual study environment, and in turn, to have better control over their learning. Portable learning devices enable students to learn new and exciting aspects of language through participating in valuable activities. Such technology-based learning increases opportunities for autonomous decision-making, as it offers ubiquitous and instantaneous access to information and provides features for saving and curating preferred information (Darmi and Albion, 2014).

Ushioda (2013) further confirms that personalisation of MALL offers autonomy and choice, transforming the language learning process into an engaging, interactive and learner-controlled experience. Learners can focus on their individual language needs

and adjust the pace of their learning. Smartphones also enable students to exert more agency in their interactions, facilitating independent language study (Benson, 2011a). With the availability of numerous learning apps and online platforms, students can choose what to learn, when to learn and how to approach their studies. They can follow a learning path tailored to their needs and interests, engaging with materials that resonate with them. Furthermore, smartphones foster collaborative learning by connecting students with other learners and educators worldwide, giving them an active role in their learning community.

In addition to facilitating greater agency, smartphones simplify the process of studying languages independently. Immediate access to various language-learning apps, online dictionaries and tools allows students to engage in language studies without the need for a physical tutor or classes. Interactive exercises, quizzes and games make learning more engaging and effective. Many apps offer real-time feedback and corrections, allowing students to learn from their mistakes at their own pace. Some platforms even connect learners with proficient speakers, offering opportunities for authentic interaction in the target language, thereby enhancing listening and speaking skills and providing cultural insights.

3.3.1.2 Multimodality

Smartphones are becoming invaluable instruments for language learning due to their capacity to facilitate multimodal learning experiences. As defined by Moreno and Mayer (2007), multimodal learning encompasses the acquisition of knowledge through multiple senses, such as hearing, seeing and touching. Paivio's (1991) dual-coding theory posits that learners absorb information more effectively when visual and auditory cues are combined, engaging two separate but interacting cognitive pathways: verbal and non-verbal (See Figure 3.1). In support of this, both Paivio's theory and Mayer's (2005) cognitive theory of multimedia learning suggest that the use of dual modes of stimuli – verbal and visual – enhances overall comprehension. For example, captioned videos offer a dual-coding experience; the on-screen text and accompanying soundtrack enable learners to process the material more deeply, thereby improving both their recall and listening fluency.

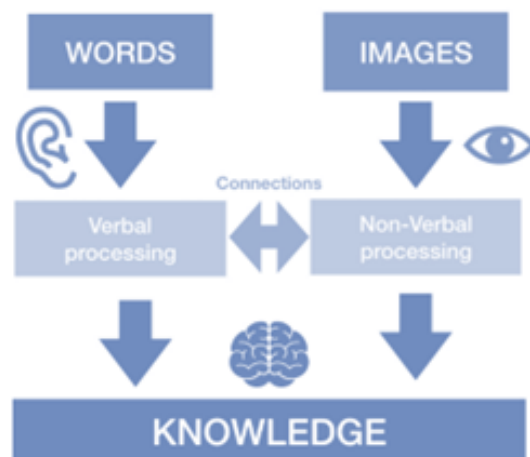


Figure 3.1: Processing of information (based on Paivio, 1991)

Incorporating both reading and listening through methods such as audiobooks can help language learners identify new words and differentiate between known and unknown ones. Additionally, multimedia presentations, including graphics and video clips, have been shown to have a positive impact on vocabulary acquisition (Li, 2017). The combination of text and visuals provides learners with two distinct representations of the same information, which enhances understanding and retention. Exposure to text, audio and video through captioned films creates an immersive language learning environment that significantly impacts vocabulary acquisition (Al-Seghayer, 2001). Research by Birules and Soto-Faraco (2016) on the effect of subtitling in language acquisition found that participants' skills improved to a significantly greater extent when they watched English films with closed captions, rather than versions with subtitles (closed captions are in the original language, and subtitles are translations) or no subtitles. Additional studies by Chang and Millett (2014) and Kartal and Simsek (2017) demonstrate that using multimodal digital tools has positive effects on students' comprehension. Rodgers and Webb (2017) also found that providing English language learners with captions alongside spoken dialogue improves comprehension, particularly when the language is challenging.

Furthermore, closed captions notably support language development by bringing attention to speech that may otherwise be missed, helping learners to notice and learn unfamiliar vocabulary (Vanderplank, 1988; Zanon, 2006). According to Canning-Wilson

and Wallace (2000), captions also help learners consciously notice vocabulary and idioms, which facilitates intake. The presence of captions makes it easier for learners to follow dialogue, especially when dealing with fast, authentic speech and unfamiliar accents (Vanderplank, 1988). However, based on the existing literature, it is impossible to draw firm conclusions about the effectiveness of video captioning since captions were found to have no significant effect on listening comprehension in some circumstances. The reasons for this might include concentration on reading the text rather than listening to the audio, heavy reliance on the text, overloaded working memory and learner perception of captions as a source of distraction (Hui, 2005; Zanon, 2006; Diao et al., 2007; Montero Perez et al., 2013).

3.3.1.3 Connectivity

Connectivity is considered one of the main affordances of the smartphone, encouraging learning based on interactions with other individuals online. Learners can engage socially with other learners from different countries by using the target language as a medium of interaction (Walker and White, 2013). Digital tools can create a shared conversational learning environment for individual and group learners, enabling them to engage in authentic dialogues, test hypotheses, ask questions, receive feedback and generate meanings through conversation (Naismith et al., 2004). SNS, such as Instagram and Twitter, can facilitate these learning activities.

Different types of social interaction can benefit language learning. Synchronous or real-time interaction can promote social presence, facilitating language learning through negotiation of meaning, feedback and collaboration. Video conferencing, chat tools or SNS can enable such interaction. By contrast, asynchronous interaction takes place over an extended period without the need for an immediate response (Song and Wang, 2008). Online discussion forums, email exchanges or SNS groups are examples of asynchronous interaction that provide learners with more time to reflect on their language production, practise written communication skills and develop a sense of online community. Delayed social interaction, facilitated by various SNS, can be particularly beneficial for language learning. Learners have more time to reflect on their communication, practise their writing skills and develop their metacognitive awareness. They can think about their responses and improve their language skills

without the pressure of responding immediately. Both synchronous and asynchronous interactions can benefit MALL by promoting social interaction and language learning outside the classroom (Shank, 2020). These interactions provide learners with opportunities to communicate with others in authentic contexts and to develop their communicative competence.

3.3.1.4 Authenticity

Smartphones facilitate the participation of learners in authentic experiences involving proficient speakers without adaptations devised for language learners. By accessing SNS platforms and other online resources like films and songs, learners expose themselves to a variety of genres, authentic contexts and accents, all of which are valuable input for language learning. These authentic experiences include the use of SNS platforms like Snapchat's 'Explore' feature, or they can be accessed through hashtags on Twitter and Instagram, where learners may familiarise themselves with the content posted by proficient speakers of the foreign language. Learners can thereby broaden their knowledge of a country's culture and the pragmatics of the target language as it is spoken (Nunan and Richards, 2015).

According to Clavel-Arroitia and Fuster-Márquez (2014), in English learning, 'authentic materials' are English texts that are not designed for learning purposes, or as Morrow (1977) defines it, an authentic text is a 'stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort' (p.13). The language of these texts is not simplified or concentrated on developing learners' language skills. Authentic texts expose students to diverse sentence structures and idiomatic expressions. Students exposed to a broader range of sentence structures and terminology demonstrate enhanced writing abilities, experience fewer difficulties with grammar and exhibit more vital reading comprehension skills. In contrast with the slow, scripted recordings that come with coursebooks, exposure to authentic input outside the classroom allows students to learn about aspects of the foreign language in realistic situations at a natural pace (Long, 2020).

Engaging with authentic texts exposes learners to real-life situations and topics, creating the potential to develop proficiency in speaking, to expand vocabulary and to acquire specialised terminology. For instance, reading news articles or scientific

journals introduces domain-specific vocabulary. Authentic materials also provide opportunities to understand cultural aspects connected with language. Exploring literature, films or online content created by proficient speakers offers insights into cultural norms, values and perspectives, thereby enhancing overall language proficiency and intercultural competence (Lee et al., 2023).

Additionally, authentic materials expose learners to natural language variations, colloquialisms and evolving linguistic elements. Increased familiarity with regional dialects, slang and informal expressions through engagement with authentic texts enables effective communication with proficient speakers in real-life scenarios (Gilmore, 2007). Exposure to authentic materials cultivates the ability to comprehend and produce both formal and informal language and to adapt to diverse social contexts. Consistent exposure to a wide range of authentic materials over time nurtures learners' reading and listening skills. Engaging with different text types enhances the ability to grasp main ideas, identify supporting details and infer meaning from context. Listening to authentic spoken language improves comprehension of natural speech patterns, intonation and pronunciation, contributing to overall fluency and proficiency (Gilmore, 2007).

3.3.2 Challenges Associated with IMLE

The previous section presented the literature demonstrating that smartphones facilitate language learning and support independent learning. Nevertheless, some studies have identified challenges that could limit their use in language learning. These limitations will be summarised here, and they should be taken into consideration when seeking to understand the challenges learners face during their learning process. Some of the frequently mentioned barriers to using smartphones for language learning are technical, financial and cognitive, as will be explained in the following sections.

3.3.2.1 Small Screen Size

One of the principal technical issues with using smartphones for language learning is their small screen size. Although smartphone screens have become larger over the years, they are still relatively small compared to other devices such as tablets or computers. This can make it difficult for learners to view and interact with certain types of resources such as films and TV series, as found in Jurkovič's (2019) study. The study

examined how Slovenian undergraduate students used their smartphones for informal English learning and found that fewer than half of the participants reported using them to watch foreign films and television series with different subtitling modes. The main limiting factor was small screen size. Tablet computers were preferred because of their larger size and the ability to place them anywhere, meaning that they provide a similar experience to using a laptop or small television screen.

Smartphones' small screens might also limit learners' ability to practise language skills such as writing and reading. Some studies have found that typing on small smartphone screens can be problematic for language learners, which may limit their ability to develop writing skills (Lai and Zheng, 2018; B.J. Lee, 2020). Lai and Zheng (2018) found that participants preferred to use a laptop for online writing when dealing with longer paragraphs, as it allowed for multitasking in one screen, such as writing while checking an online dictionary. On the other hand, smartphones were commonly used for casual and short postings related to social communication and connection. The use of smartphones for language learning may have limitations not only for writing but also for reading, mainly due to the small screen size. According to Lai and Zheng's (2018) study, almost half of the university student participants preferred to read longer texts on laptops instead of on smartphones because of difficulties in switching between screens and the small screen size, which hindered their ability to look up words. The participants also reported feeling fatigued while watching videos or reading long passages on smartphones, which made it difficult for them to concentrate for extended periods of time.

Despite these limitations, the issue may not be as significant as it once was. Smartphone screens have become larger and more high-resolution, which has helped to mitigate some of the limitations of small screen size for language learning. For example, smartphones like the iPhone Plus now have larger screens that are more conducive to reading longer texts and viewing multimedia content. Furthermore, given the widespread use of smartphones, with people frequently checking their emails and SNS on their phones, learners may be more accustomed to reading on smartphones and less likely to experience difficulties with concentration or screen size. Moreover, some smartphone manufacturers have developed features to make it easier to read on

smaller screens. Smartphones now allow users to adjust the font size and zoom in on text to make it easier to read. However, more research is needed to explore learners' experiences in using smartphones for language learning and to investigate whether screen size still poses a challenge.

3.3.2.2 The Cost Barrier of Digital Tools for Language Learning

In 2023, Statista reported that the global number of smartphone users had reached 6.92 billion; in other words, approximately 86.11% of the world's population owned a smartphone. However, while it is undeniable that smartphone ownership has become widespread, the affordability of certain digital language learning tools remains a challenge for some learners. Although many language learning apps offer free basic versions, premium features or additional content often require payment, potentially restricting access for some learners due to cost constraints. For example, Rosell-Aguilar (2018a) points out that some learners in the UK who had intended to enhance their speaking abilities through Busuu.² were put off by the cost of subscribing, which may have hindered their ability to participate in IMLE.

Moreover, in some countries, the cost of network access can still be a barrier for learners. In countries where mobile data plans are expensive or where network coverage is poor, learners may not be able to engage in IMLE effectively. In such situations, they may be limited to using mobile devices only when they have access to free Wi-Fi networks. However, in the context of this study, which focuses on Saudi Arabia, the issue of network access may not be as significant compared to other regions due to the country's infrastructure. Saudi Arabia has one of the highest smartphone penetration rates in the world, with most of the population owning a smartphone and having access to mobile data plans. Therefore, the cost of digital tools and apps for language learning is likely to be a more pressing concern for learners in Saudi Arabia than the cost of network access. While the expenses of owning a smartphone and network access may not be significant issues for learners in Saudi Arabia, it is not known

² Busuu is an online language learning platform with courses, exercises and a community of proficient speakers.

whether the cost of digital tools and apps for language learning is a factor that limits independent language learning there.

3.4 Towards a Model for IMLE

In this section, I explain two of the key frameworks for investigating independent language learning: Reinders's (2010) cyclical nature of the independent learning process, and Song and Hill's (2007) conceptual model for understanding self-directed learning in online environments.

Inspired by Knowles's (1975) influential work on self-directed learning, Reinders (2010) suggests that independent learning involves analysing needs, setting goals, planning a route to reach those goals, choosing resources and strategies, practising, monitoring progress and evaluating outcomes. The cyclical nature of the independent learning process is shown in Figure 3.2, which illustrates that motivation provides the affective backbone. These skills constitute a sort of 'survival kit' required for learners to continue studying language outside the classroom and to develop their language abilities to the desired level (Reinders, 2020).

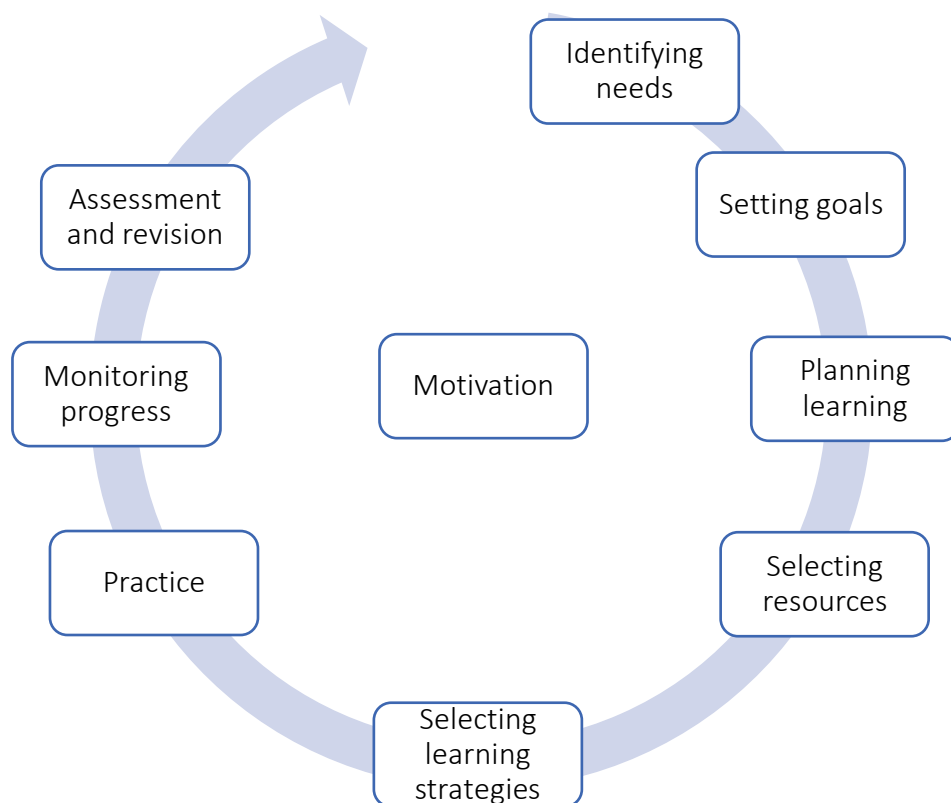


Figure 3.2: Cyclical nature of the independent learning process, Reinders (2010)

While Reinders's (2010) cycle of independent learning process is a useful starting point to understand the learning process of participants in this study, it may not fully capture the students' language learning experiences with smartphones (i.e. the use of digital tools), as it does not address the learning environment and whether it is traditional or online.

To indicate the impact of the learning environment on independent language learning, Song and Hill (2007) proposed a model for understanding self-directed learning (SDL) in the context of online education (see Figure 3.3). This model takes account of three key dimensions: personal attributes, learning processes, and the learning context. Personal attributes in learning include learners' motivation, their ability to take responsibility and their choice of resources and strategies. Processes in learning refer to planning, monitoring and evaluating learning. Song and Hill (2007) point out that the level of independence in the learning process varies, ranging from instructor-led classes with minimal learner control to independent studies where the learner has almost complete control.

The learning context recognises the impact of environmental factors on independent learning. In an online learning context, SDL is influenced by personal attributes like motivation and choices of resources and strategies, offering both opportunities and challenges. Resources in online learning range from human to informational, with the availability of online communication facilitating access to instructors and peers. Effective strategy use is crucial in online learning due to unique challenges, such as the predominance of written communication and the potential for misinterpretations.

To thrive in an online learning environment, learners must control their learning pace, understand and use resources effectively, and develop strategies to overcome challenges. They also need motivation to engage meaningfully in online interactions. This includes planning, which offers flexibility in scheduling and pacing but requires self-discipline, and monitoring, where learners face the challenge of lacking physical cues from instructors, increasing the need for self-monitoring. Evaluating learning is also more complex due to instructor time constraints and learners' doubts about peers' knowledge, which means that a proactive approach in seeking feedback and evaluating progress is required.

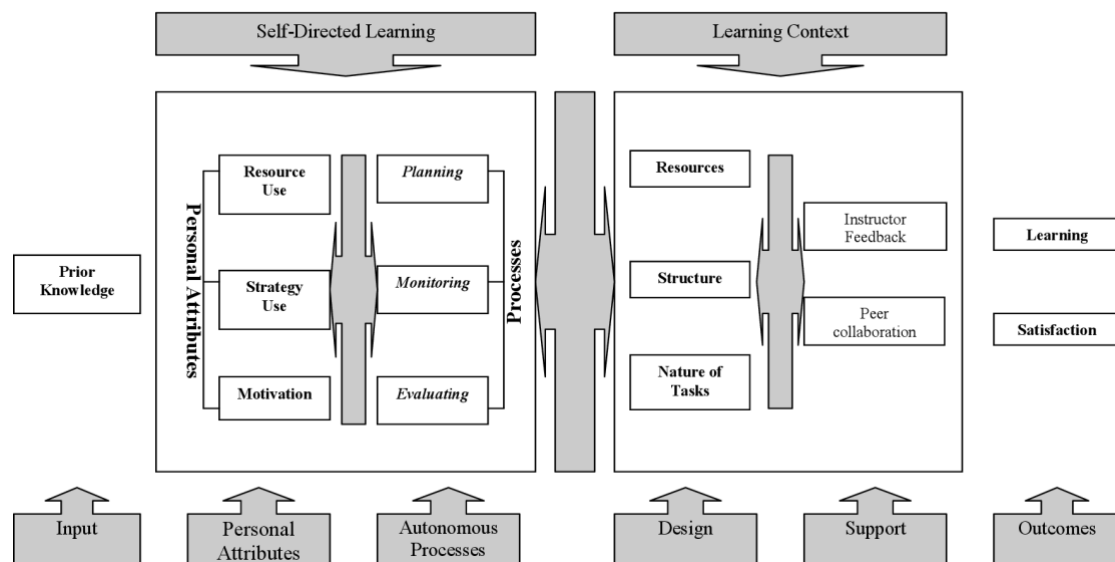


Figure 3.3: A conceptual model for understanding self-directed learning, Song and Hill (2007)

The Song and Hill (2007) model offers valuable insights into key factors of online independent language learning and its processes. However, there are notable differences between this model and the current study's specific aims, which highlights the need for a developed adapted framework. Firstly, Song and Hill's (2007) framework was developed with educators in mind, serving as a guide to promote independent learning within a classroom setting. It is particularly geared towards distance learning, which is typically a component of formal education. By contrast, the focus of the current study is on learners' independent use of smartphones for language learning outside formal classroom environments. This shift from a teacher-centric, formal educational setting to a learner-centric, informal learning context requires a different framework that addresses the subtleties of self-guided learning in everyday settings.

Secondly, the Song and Hill (2007) model presents a conceptual framework that seeks to understand self-directed learning in an online context, whereas this study specifically focuses on independent mobile learning of English. Online learning, as conceptualised in the Song and Hill model, typically involves structured courses accessed through internet-based platforms, often engaged with on computers or laptops. This environment is conducive to longer, more immersive learning sessions and generally requires a stable internet connection and a dedicated learning space. In contrast, mobile learning, the focus of my study, takes place on mobile devices like smartphones. This mode of learning is distinguished by its inherent flexibility and convenience. It supports learning in a variety of environments, not limited by the need for a stationary setup. The sessions in mobile learning tend to be shorter and more focused, tailored to the on-the-go nature of mobile usage. Moreover, mobile learning interfaces are designed for smaller screens and touch-based interactions, accommodating the diverse, multimedia content and interactive features that are particularly effective in language learning.

Thirdly, the Song and Hill (2007) framework does not provide detailed guidance on each phase of the learning process for learners to use as a tool for planning or reflecting on their learning. It lacks explicit instructions or steps that learners can follow independently, which is crucial for independent learning outside the classroom. The current study aims to fill this gap by developing a framework that clearly articulates

each stage of the learning process, offering learners a structured path to follow and reflect upon.

By incorporating three distinct phases and integrating technology use, the proposed framework aims to provide a practical tool for capturing learners' experiences and perceptions in the context of independent mobile language learning. In addition, breaking down the learning process into stages can facilitate data analysis for researchers. Typically, learners report their learning in fewer steps than the Reinders (2010a) and Song and Hill (2007) models show, so combining certain actions can make the process more manageable. For instance, learners may indicate that they recognise a need to improve their reading skills and subsequently set a goal to achieve this. Therefore, identifying needs and goal setting can be combined into the planning phase. Furthermore, learners often manage their learning strategies and select appropriate resources concurrently, condensing the managing phase into a single stage.

In addition to the frameworks proposed by Reinders (2010) and Song and Hill (2007), as discussed in section 2.2.1, the Independent Mobile Learning of English (IMLE) framework is developed from foundational concepts such as learner autonomy, self-directed learning (SDL), and self-regulated learning (SRL). This development illustrates a thoughtful adaptation to the mobile learning context, recognising the transformative role of mobile technologies in language learning and tailoring these core educational theories to harness the unique opportunities mobile devices present.

Learner autonomy, a principle that underscores the learner's capacity to direct their own educational journey, is expanded within the IMLE framework to include mobile-specific aspects of autonomy. It acknowledges that mobile learning facilitates a personalised approach, allowing learners to make informed decisions about when, where, and how to engage with language learning materials. This adaptation shifts the focus to what is learned and seamlessly integrates learning into daily life through mobile technology, thus broadening the traditional scope of autonomy.

Similarly, SDL involves learners setting their objectives, choosing their learning paths, and assessing their progress. SDL is refined within the IMLE framework to suit the specifics of the mobile learning environment. It guides learners through many apps and

digital resources, assisting them to select those that align with their learning goals. This refinement ensures that the principles of SDL are effectively applied within the mobile context, making full use of the varied functionalities offered by mobile technologies.

Furthermore, the concept of SRL, which emphasises metacognition, motivation, and behavioural strategies, is adapted within the IMLE framework to incorporate a mobile-specific strategy. This framework encourages the use of mobile applications for planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning process, thus supporting the cyclical nature of SRL in an increasingly mobile context. This process includes setting reminders, tracking progress, and obtaining feedback through mobile platforms, thereby enhancing learners' capacity to regulate their learning more effectively.

The IMLE framework also advances these foundational theories by emphasising integration and personalisation, critical features of mobile learning. It provides a model that not only supports independent goal setting and resource selection but also adapts to each learner's individual learning styles and contexts. This is made possible through mobile devices' inherent flexibility and connectivity, which can offer personalised, context-sensitive learning experiences not typically available in traditional learning environments. Moreover, the framework focuses strongly on continuous feedback and reflection, essential elements of the SRL process. By enabling immediate feedback through interactive mobile applications and facilitating ongoing reflection on learning achievements and areas for improvement, the IMLE framework ensures that the learning process is both responsive and reflective. This approach allows learners to promptly adjust their learning strategies, promoting a proactive and engaged approach to language learning.

In summary, the IMLE framework represents a refined development from learner autonomy, SDL, and SRL principles, strategically adapted for the mobile learning context. It utilises the distinctive characteristics of mobile technology to enhance autonomous, self-directed, and self-regulated learning, offering a comprehensive and dynamic framework for independent language learning in the digital era.

3.5 The IMLE Framework

The IMLE framework outlines the different phases involved in independent mobile learning of English. The framework as presented in Figure 3.4 consists of three phases: planning learning, managing learning, and monitoring and evaluating learning. In the planning learning phase, learners identify their needs and set goals for their learning. This involves reflecting on their language abilities and pinpointing areas of difficulty they want to improve. During the managing learning phase, learners select the digital tools and learning approaches they will use to achieve their goals. This includes selecting appropriate resources and learning strategies. Finally, the monitoring and evaluating phase involves learners regulating the learning process, as well as regulating their emotions and motivation. Learners monitor their progress towards their goals and make adjustments to their learning strategies as necessary. They also manage their emotions and motivation to ensure that they remain engaged and motivated throughout the learning process. Learners assess their progress towards their goals and identify areas where they need further improvement. They then adjust their goals and plans accordingly to continue their language learning journey.

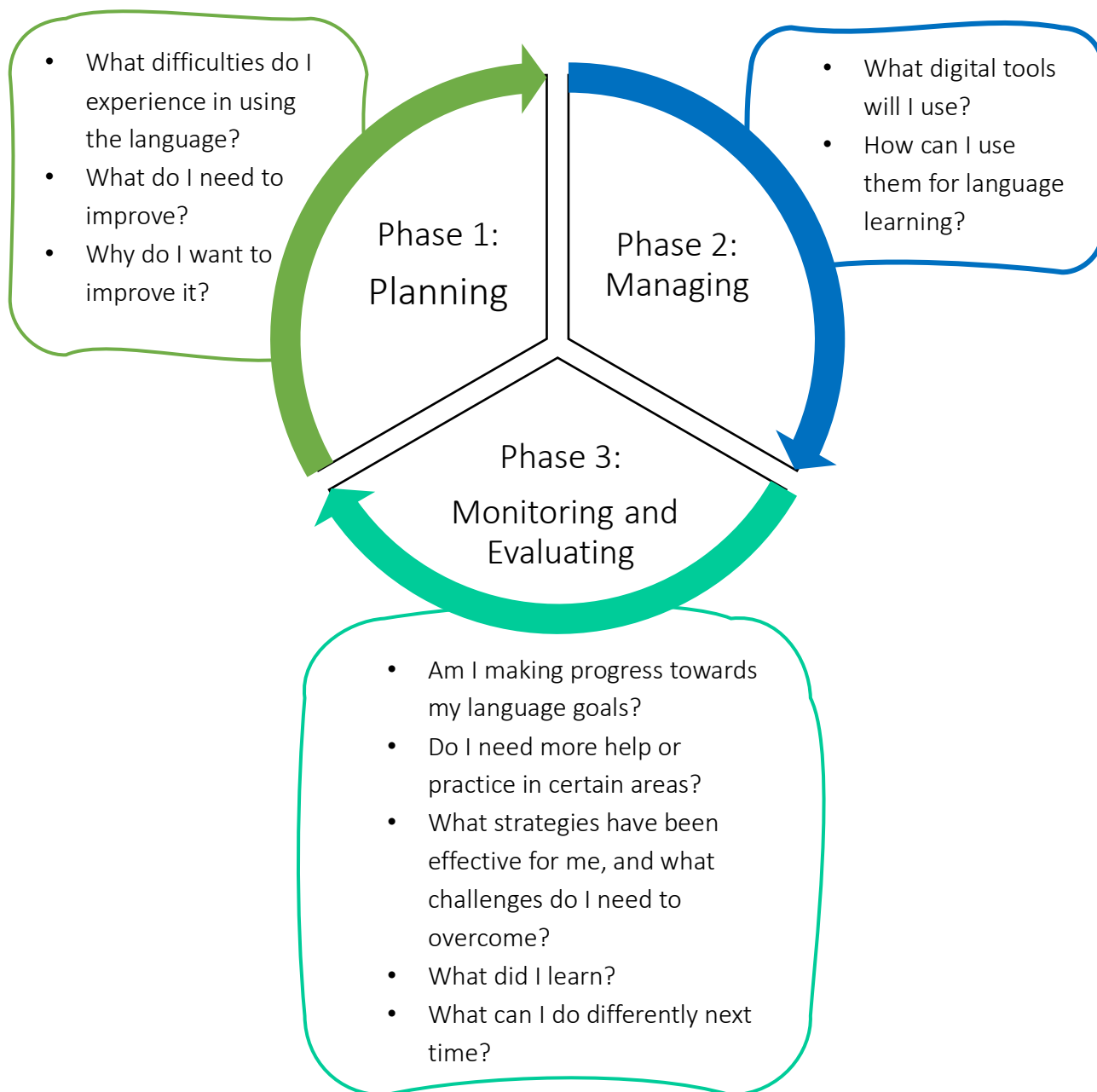


Figure 3.4: IMLE Framework

3.5.1 Phase 1: Planning Learning

The initial phase of the proposed framework is the planning phase, which takes place before the actual learning process begins. At this phase, as suggested by Zimmerman (2002), learners need to consider their goals and motivation. A crucial stage in independent learning is identifying one's learning needs. Learners need to assess which areas they need to develop or improve. For instance, they may identify a need to enhance their reading skills or expand their vocabulary. By analysing their current skill level and understanding their own learning context, learners can prioritise their areas of focus and establish specific goals for their independent learning journey. Setting goals enables learners to concentrate their efforts and break down their study into manageable tasks.

The concept of motivation is multifaceted, and several models aim to clarify its complexities. For instance, the self-regulation of motivation (SRM) model by Sansone and Thoman (2005) categorises motivation into two essential types: goal-defined and experience-defined. The model emphasises that both the type and level of motivation can fluctuate over the course of the learning journey. Similarly, Garrison (1997) distinguishes between entry motivation and task motivation. Entry motivation is the initial commitment and intent to start learning. This strongly influences how much effort learners will put into tasks. Task motivation, on the other hand, relates to the focus and ongoing effort during the learning process. When students choose their learning goals and decide to participate, they establish a level of motivation that remains with them as they continue learning. To maintain motivation, students need to be active participants in their own learning; this will be further discussed in the third phase.

In-depth interviews can be conducted to gain insights into how learners use their smartphones to identify their language learning needs and motivations, and plan their studies. By understanding how learners use their smartphones to identify their needs, set goals and plan their learning, we can gain a deeper understanding of how they use these tools to enhance their language proficiency. This research approach allows us to explore the ways in which learners leverage the capabilities of their smartphones in the

pre-learning phase, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the role of technology in supporting independent language learning.

3.5.2 Phase 2: Managing Learning

The second phase of the learning framework involves the actual learning process, where strategies come into play to help learners achieve their goals. Once learners have identified their individual needs and articulated their objectives, the next step involves tactical decision-making about the 'what', 'when', and 'how' of the learning process. The selection of learning resources is a key element in this phase. Resources can be broadly classified into two types: non-formal resources specifically designed for language learning, like dictionaries and language apps, and authentic informal resources, such as newspapers, radio or TV programmes, podcasts and films. Examples and explanations of some of these resources is in Section 2.2.3.

Resource selection is particularly important when smartphones are being used for independent language learning, which is the focus of this study. Given the ubiquitous nature of smartphones, learners have many resources at their fingertips, making the decision-making process regarding resource selection critical. Understanding how learners navigate through these choices can offer valuable insights into their experiences and perceptions. Examining the strategies they employ in selecting and using these resources on their smartphones can help us discern patterns and trends in how technology is used for language learning.

After choosing suitable materials, learners must strategise how best to use them. When leveraging resources that are not explicitly designed for language learning, the challenge becomes greater (Conole and Dyke, 2004). Learners must think creatively about how to extract linguistic value from these materials. For instance, while watching a foreign film, one might pause and replay dialogues to better understand sentence structure and vocabulary. Similarly, listening to podcasts could be coupled with note-taking to improve comprehension and retention. The strategies may also involve using selected language apps for grammar drills, while turning to authentic sources like social networking sites for practical applications. In addition, learners need to develop motivational strategies to sustain their learning.

IMLE enables learners to approach learning differently, in ways that can be illuminated by the learning theories of behaviourism, constructivism and social constructivism discussed in Section 2.2.2. For instance, when learners benefit from digital tools that provide immediate feedback to assist with monitoring learning, such as language learning apps that use gamification techniques to reward correct answers, this can be linked with the emphasis in behaviourism on the importance of stimulus-response associations and reinforcement in shaping behaviour. Constructivism, on the other hand, emphasises the active construction of knowledge through learner-centred activities, exploration and reflection. This is relevant to how learners can benefit from digital tools that encourage inquiry-based learning where students set their own goals, such as multimedia resources that allow them to explore English language and culture in context, including through films and songs. Social constructivism builds upon constructivism by emphasising the role of social interaction and collaboration in the construction of knowledge. This can be linked with how learners derive benefit from digital tools that enable them to manage their learning by connecting with other learners and proficient speakers of English, such as SNS or language exchange apps.

3.5.3 Phase 3: Monitoring and Evaluating Learning

Once learners have selected their resources and strategies and are actively engaged in the learning process, it becomes essential for them to monitor their learning progress and emotions. Self-monitoring plays a crucial role during this phase, as learners actively track their progress and employ specific strategies to maintain cognitive engagement and motivation. Through self-monitoring, learners continuously evaluate their own performance, ensuring that they stay on track towards their goals and avoid unproductive activities or resources. By regularly assessing their progress, learners can make informed decisions about their learning strategies and adjust them accordingly. This active monitoring enables students to effectively achieve their language learning goals with the aid of digital tools.

Mese and Sevilen (2021) note that while intrinsic motivation springs from deeply personal internal drivers such as individual passion or curiosity, digital tools can universally enrich the language learning experience for all learners. The integration of gamification elements, such as achievement badges, leader boards and various

rewards, can introduce a layer of fun and competition to language learning, thus heightening engagement (Sailer et al., 2017). These mechanisms appeal to both types of motivation by offering tangible rewards and fostering a sense of intrinsic satisfaction. Similarly, online interactions can provide learners with valuable support and opportunities for language development. While certain digital tools may initially appear more aligned with one form of motivation, they have the potential to contribute to learners' overall motivation and engagement.

Learner engagement serves as a crucial motivational factor in self-directed, informal online learning. Engagement is required to effectively regulate motivation (Wolters, 2011). It is a multidimensional construct, encompassing both observable (external) and non-observable (internal) factors (Wolters and Taylor, 2012). Engagement drives learners to seek materials that satisfy their curiosity (Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2012). This satisfaction, in turn, escalates to higher motivation and more intensive engagement. Consequently, interest and engagement are indispensable for independent learning. Moreover, various motivational factors, such as the pursuit of interesting and enjoyable resources, help learners sustain their activities, maintain motivation, and counteract demotivation (Wolters, 2011; Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2012).

While monitoring strategies focus primarily on the learning process, evaluation is more concerned with the product of that process. The final phase of IMLE involves reflecting on one's progress and achievements and using this reflection to revise goals and plans for future learning. Learners need to consider which aspects of their learning went well, which did not go as planned, and why. By examining the reasons behind both successes and challenges, learners can gain valuable insights into their learning strategies, preferences and areas for growth. They can identify specific areas that require improvement and explore alternative approaches that may better align with their objectives. Evaluation serves as the glue that holds the independent learning process together, creating a continuous cycle of learning where previous experiences serve as building blocks for future growth. By engaging in thoughtful self-evaluation and reflection, learners can make informed decisions about their learning journey, refine their goals and adapt their strategies to ensure ongoing progress and development.

By arguing for the importance of self-evaluation, reflection and the investigation of affective aspects, this study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the IMLE process. It seeks to provide learners with the tools and knowledge to assess their own progress, make informed decisions and continuously improve their language learning outcomes. Moreover, educators can benefit from the findings by gaining insights into effective strategies for supporting learners in their independent learning journeys and fostering a positive and conducive learning environment.

3.6 Main Points from the Conceptual Framework Chapter

This chapter first introduced IMLE, discussing the benefits for independent language learners of using smartphones and also the challenges this presents. The second part moved on to introduce the concept of the IMLE framework and provided the context for this development. The third part examined the details of the IMLE framework, explaining that it is divided into three core phases: planning learning, managing learning, and monitoring and evaluating learning. The planning learning phase is the starting point where learners identify their language learning needs and set tailored goals. Following this, the managing learning phase focuses on selecting both resources and strategies. The monitoring and evaluating learning phase brings the framework full circle, incorporating continuous self-monitoring and evaluation. This ensures that learners are not only staying on track but also have the tools to adapt their strategies and manage their motivation effectively. The following chapter will provide detailed information about the research methodology and design.

4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a detailed account of the methodology chosen and justify its appropriateness. I start by restating the research aims and questions, then I explain the research paradigm and design. Next, I describe the procedures used for the pilot and the main study. I then clarify how I used the pilot study to reflect on and edit the methods for the main study and I discuss the criteria for selecting participants and introduce their background. I present the data collection methods and describe how my data collection was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Next, I explain how I managed and analysed the data. The chapter concludes by addressing the reliability of the research and discussing the ethical concerns associated with it. Finally, the summary section brings together key elements from the chapter.

4.2 Research Questions

Informed by the contextual and theoretical background discussed in the first three chapters, this study aims to describe how female university students in Saudi Arabia use smartphones to facilitate their English language learning. It explores their views on the opportunities afforded by smartphones and the challenges they face in directing their own learning. The following questions guided my research:

1. How do Saudi female university students use smartphones for independent language learning?
2. What challenges do Saudi female university students encounter when using smartphones for independent English language learning, and how do they address them?

In Sections 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7, I will describe in detail the steps I took to address the research questions. First, in Sections 4.3 and 4.4 below, I explain the philosophical underpinnings of the research which guided the methodological approach adopted in this study.

4.3 Research Paradigm

Before elaborating on the research design and methods, I will explain the beliefs that guided my investigation. Since the current study aims to explore and understand individual learners' experiences of using smartphones for independent English learning and their perceptions of the challenges they face when doing this, I found the constructivist paradigm to be the most appropriate because it is concerned with understanding individual experiences (Hennink et al., 2011; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Cohen et al., 2018). The constructivist paradigm holds that the world is a human construct that can only be understood from the perspective of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated (Cohen et al., 2018). This viewpoint holds that there are multiple realities that can be explored and that can be given meaning or reconstructed through human interactions between the researcher and the research subjects (Hennink et al., 2011; Creswell and Poth, 2018). As a result, this study has no predetermined hypotheses but attempts to throw light on students' learning experiences in a specific setting by interpreting data results.

This study used qualitative methodology to understand Saudi female university students' experiences of using smartphones to facilitate English language learning. Creswell and Poth (2018) and Hennink et al. (2011) report that qualitative approaches are ideal for researchers who seek to gather detailed and contextualised data. Qualitative research interprets phenomena by exploring participants' perceptions and by describing their contexts. Also, using multiple data collection methods and engaging in detailed descriptions of findings (Hennink et al., 2011; Assalahi, 2015) enables more comprehensive results to emerge.

The choice of a qualitative research design for this investigation into the experiences of Saudi female university students using smartphones for English language learning is fundamental to the study's aims. This approach can produce rich, detailed insights essential for comprehensively understanding the dynamics of digital language learning. The strength of qualitative research lies in its depth of exploration, allowing for an intimate examination of the subjective experiences, perceptions, and strategies of learners. Such depth is crucial in capturing the participants' complex narratives and personal accounts, illuminating the multifaceted nature of learning and using English

through smartphones. Moreover, the qualitative approach provides invaluable insights into how learners interact with technology, going beyond mere usage patterns to delve into the meanings, preferences, and motivations behind their engagement with digital platforms. This exploration is critical for developing a refined digital language learning pedagogy that can be responsive to learners' needs and preferences.

Common approaches to conducting qualitative studies include narrative research, phenomenological research, grounded theory research, ethnographic research and case study research (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This study adopted the case study design as explained below.

4.4 Case Study Design

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a contemporary phenomenon in depth (Thomas, 2016). Case studies are commonly used by constructivists in small-scale studies that focus on individual cases and that are studied in depth and in detail in their natural contexts (Assalahi, 2015). Here, using case studies suited the research objectives, as it helped in answering the 'how' and 'why' of the research questions (Yin, 2018). Therefore, in order to reveal and interpret Saudi female learners' experiences of using smartphones in language learning, I used a case study approach that engaged with participants' perceptions and described their practices. A multiple-case study approach allowed for more analysis within and across the chosen cases (Yin, 2018). When using case studies, data collection involves multiple sources of information (e.g. observations, interviews and documents) to understand real-world scenarios (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Consequently, I used two qualitative methods: a) semi-structured interviews, and b) media such as screenshots and video recordings from the participants during and after the interviews. (Details on the data collection methods can be found in Section 4.8).

I designed a plan for my fieldwork by contacting stakeholders (see Section 4.5) and developing an online survey for participant recruitment, and I identified the participants who would answer the research questions by using purposeful sampling (see Section 4.7). Also, as I describe in Section 4.7, before starting the extensive data collection, I prepared the semi-structured interview guide and tested and modified it.

In Section 4.9, I explain the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the data collection process and methods. As I collected data, I transcribed the interviews and started thinking about analysing them with a view to formulating questions for the second interviews. After completing all the interviews, I prepared the data for thematic analysis by writing a detailed description of the results, drafting answers to the research questions and reflecting on lessons learned from the cases.

4.5 Pilot and Main Study Procedures

The pilot study took place over four weeks in October and November 2019, followed by the main research, which spanned ten months starting in January 2020. The research involved two trips to Saudi Arabia, during which I met with the Head of Graduate Studies and Academic Research Unit at the English Language Institute (ELI) of King Abdulaziz University (KAU). In this meeting, I discussed the data collection process and the students' involvement in the research. Subsequently, I obtained data collection approval from the ELI by completing the necessary forms.

I specifically recruited intermediate language learners from level 104 in the ELI, which corresponds to B1 on the CEFR scale.³ The decision to focus on intermediate language learners was based on their possession of sufficient language resources for independent learning, making them suitable participants. To gain access to potential participants, the ELI administration provided me with a list of teachers who were instructing intermediate language learners. I sought permission from these teachers to visit their classrooms and recruit students for interviews. During the classroom visits, I explained the research aims and the students' role in the project. Subsequently, I asked the students to complete an online survey (see Section 4.7.1) shared by their teachers through the class WhatsApp group.⁴

³The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an international standard for describing language ability (Little, 2006).

⁴ In Saudi Arabia, WhatsApp is commonly used in education and other forms of formal contact. Teachers usually join a class WhatsApp group during the course or there is a student group leader in that group. Therefore, it was more convenient than emails.

Once the students had completed the online survey and agreed to participate in the interviews, I contacted each participant via WhatsApp to arrange the interview sessions. To ensure convenience and comfort for the students, I booked a meeting room in the university building where they attended preparatory classes. The meeting room provided a quiet and appropriate voice recording space, offering a less formal atmosphere than a classroom with fixed chairs. On the day of the interviews, water and snacks were provided to ensure the students' refreshment and comfort. The interviews typically lasted between 40 minutes and one hour.

4.6 Pilot and Adjustment of Methods

Before starting the main data collection, I asked for feedback from individuals with different backgrounds. I shared the online survey and interview guide with my two supervisors, two of my PhD colleagues and two family members. In addition, I carried out a pre-pilot study where I tested the interview questions with three learners as the targeted participants and asked them to comment on the clarity of the questions.

Hearing feedback from experts, people outside the field and students helped me modify my online survey and interview guide. For example, in the online survey, I changed the format of some questions to multiple choice instead of short answers, and I changed the wording of some other questions. In addition, watching participants read and fill in the questions gave me a lot to think about, such as how easy it was to answer some of the questions. I was keen that some of the participants in the pre-pilot study should speak both Arabic and English, so they could give me general comments on the translation of the survey and the interviews. Testing the interview guide helped me notice repetitions in the questions and limitations in the interview design and allowed me to make any necessary revisions.

After editing the tools, in November 2019 I made the first of the two scheduled trips to Saudi Arabia for the purpose of conducting a pilot study. In the pilot, I tested the procedure planned for the main study by recruiting participants through an online survey and then meeting with them on campus for the interviews. Piloting the interview guide with three Saudi female foundation year students helped me to practise

interviewing participants and to understand any flaws or lack of clarity in my questions, as well as to reflect on how the questions might be perceived by the participants.

The interview guide helped me to ensure that the same general areas of information were collected from each interviewee and that the format also provided a degree of freedom in how the information was obtained, enabling me to follow the flow of the conversation according to the answers I received. This balance was an important aspect for me to reflect on as I tested my interview questions. With some students, I did not need to ask about specific usage or examples, as they had explained this while answering the general questions, whereas with others I needed to use prompts to elucidate some answers, for example, the names of apps or how they were being used. This emphasised the importance of having headings in my interview guide to remind me what I needed to cover.

4.7 Research Recruitment and Sample

I adopted purposive sampling to select participants who could offer valuable insights into the research problem at hand. Purposive sampling is a commonly used method in qualitative research to enable choice of individuals who can inform understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Merriam (2002) states that to begin purposive sampling, the researcher must first determine the selection criteria for the study participants. To establish clear criteria for participant selection, I considered three key factors. First, the participants were limited to females. This decision was informed by the local context of Saudi Arabia (for further details, refer to Section 1.5.1). By selecting female participants, the study aimed to ensure better access and engagement, as it aligned with the cultural norms and customs of the educational environment, where males and females are segregated. Second, for consistency, the participants had to be enrolled in the preparatory year programme at ELI level 104. Lastly, the study sought participants who actively used their smartphones for English language learning outside the classroom. To meet this criterion, I explained the research purpose during classroom visits and directly asked

the participants in an online survey about their smartphone usage for language learning.

4.7.1 Online Survey for Recruitment

As a tool for collecting specific information, such as background details (Dörnyei, 2007), surveys can provide a useful complement to qualitative research. In this study, an online survey was used to collect information about participants' educational backgrounds, their language-learning experiences in general and their use of smartphones for language learning. The survey responses played a crucial role in the selection and recruitment of participants, as they allowed for the inclusion of individuals with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Additionally, the survey served as a means to gather contact information from potential participants. I created the survey using the website previously known as the Bristol Online Survey (<https://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk>). The survey link was shared via class WhatsApp groups during the classroom visits. It was sent to 90 students across three classrooms, and 30 responded to all the questions and agreed to participate in the interviews. The survey link remained open for two weeks after the classroom visits.

The survey began with an information sheet detailing the research, followed by a consent form, the signing of which was required to access the survey questions (see Appendix 3). All survey pages were available in English and Arabic to ensure correct understanding of the questions and accurate findings. The survey was a mix of multiple choice questions and short answers. It aimed to gather information about the participants' background and learning experiences. For example, it asked them when they started learning English and about their plans for future studies, which helped to identify a variety of experiences and allowed me to recruit a diverse sample of participants. Those who wished to continue participating in the study via an in-person interview were asked to provide their name and contact information. A 'thank you' message then appeared at the end of the survey.

The decision to choose only seven participants for the study was based on several factors and considerations. First, the research design itself was small-scale and qualitative in nature, aiming for in-depth analysis. In qualitative research, it is common to have a smaller sample size compared to quantitative studies in order to focus on the

richness and depth of data collected from each participant (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Second, the participant selection process was influenced both by the answers provided in the online survey and by the depth of responses received in the first interview, as well as the participants' willingness to cooperate in arranging a second interview. The online survey functioned as a key tool, gathering information about the participants' educational backgrounds, language-learning experiences and use of smartphones for English learning. This step was essential to identify individuals actively engaging with their smartphones in language learning, as they detailed in response to open-ended questions. The diversity of the participants was also a consideration, encompassing varied future aspirations and family English backgrounds, as outlined in Table 4.1. Moving to the interview phase, the number of participants was further reduced to align with the project's time constraints and the requirements of the data analysis process. Those who failed to provide detailed answers in the first interview or did not respond to arrangements for the second interview were excluded. This was a critical step to ensure that the study focused on participants who could offer rich, detailed insights into their independent mobile language learning experiences.

4.7.2 Participants' Profiles

When they were recruited, the participants in this study were all in the science sector and were enrolled in the preparatory year programme at CEFR B1-intermediate. Since 2006, all newly enrolled students in Saudi universities have been required to complete this one-year orientation programme prior to enrolling in an undergraduate degree. Students need to develop the requisite English abilities for undergraduate studies and to develop other academic skills during this year. Apart from English, students are required to study various subjects depending on their area of specialisation (science or arts and humanities). At KAU, before beginning their intended courses, students must pass assessments to successfully finish four language levels at the ELI. The institute administers the teaching of four different levels of general English to students in their foundation year: beginner, elementary, pre-intermediate and intermediate. The Cambridge English Placement Test is administered each academic year. Students are assigned to the appropriate level based on their placement exam results (ELI, 2021).

Using a smartphone for English language learning and being a Saudi female preparatory year student were the main factors in selecting participants, but in other respects there were differences between them. Table 4.1 provides demographic characteristics for each participant: age, major, English language learning experiences and English expertise in the family. Understanding the learners' backgrounds and English language learning experiences provides a context for their decision to use smartphones to improve their English independently. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 22 years old. All participants were attending Saudi universities⁵ as undergraduate students in different majors. Although all were in level four in the English Language Institute at KAU (CEFR B1-intermediate), three of them considered their English proficiency to be intermediate (Ameera, Ghadeer, Sara), and the other four considered themselves beginners (Aram, Razan, Leena, Asmahan). All participants except Ghadeer had someone in the family who spoke English fluently.

Table 4.1: Demographic information for participants

#	Pseudonym	Age	Major	English Learning Experiences	English in the Family
1	Ameera	19	Medical physics	Dissatisfied with formal English learning and English private course in Jeddah	Brothers were fluent English speakers, studied in the USA
2	Ghadeer	20	Nursing	Had attended helpful private English lessons since primary school	No one in the family spoke English
3	Sara	21	Information communication technology	Dissatisfied with formal English learning in school as it was repetitive and focused on grammar	Father (deceased) wished her to speak English fluently
4	Leena	19	Information communication technology	Dissatisfied with formal English learning in general	Father and sister majored in English

⁵ All the participants were attending KAU except Ghadeer, as she moved to another university after the preparatory year.

5	Aram	20	Law	Dissatisfied with formal English learning in school; found English Language Institute course helpful	Father was fluent English speaker, studied abroad
6	Razan	22	Mathematics	Dissatisfied with formal English learning and felt that she did not learn English in school	Father and brothers had studied abroad
7	Asmahan	19	Medicine	Good experiences with formal English learning	Sisters were fluent English speakers, studied abroad

4.8 Data Collection Methods

This section describes the choice of interviews as a method and justifies their use for data generation. It also discusses how the interview guide was prepared and how it helped in answering the research questions. Additionally, this section presents the inclusion of media as a part of the data collection process.

4.8.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews can provide insights and perspectives that allow the researcher to meet the research objectives (Cohen et al., 2018). They are an essential source of case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs or experiences or activities into which informed interviewees can provide important insights (Yin, 2018). Yin (2018) indicates that to corroborate the interviewees' stated views, the researcher could ask questions in more than one way or on more than a single occasion in the hope of eventually receiving a consistent set of responses.

In this study, participants were invited to take part in individual semi-structured interviews, where a sequence of two interviews with each participant (14 interviews in total) was conducted to achieve sufficient depth and breadth (Dörnyei, 2007). The participants were interviewed on more than one occasion, as it was helpful to understand each interviewee's life experiences in context, get details about how they approached language learning, and explore their intellectual and emotional reflections

(Seidman, 2006). I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each participant, which helped me to gain valuable insights into participants' experiences with independent mobile-assisted language learning.

Before the interviews, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the research and decline to answer questions. I stressed that there was no right or wrong answer or perspective, as suggested by Glesne and Peshkin (1992). Participants were also reminded that the interviews were recorded and that only the researcher would have access to these recordings. They were asked to elaborate on how they engaged in each activity and why they had chosen certain mobile apps, websites or methods to learn English via their smartphones. With the aid of an interview guide (see Appendix 4. Interview Guide, the interviews also aimed to find details about how the students perceived the value of smartphones in supporting the different aspects of English learning. The interview guide was based on the IMLE framework (see Section 3.4). The first interviews covered planning and managing learning, then the second interviews focused more on monitoring and evaluating IMLE.

In the first set of interviews, the focus was on uncovering demographic information and general English learning practices, while also exploring how participants used their smartphones as part of their language learning process. During the first interview, I explained the research plan and the areas of investigation in detail. At the beginning, to break the ice, I asked the participants about their day. The interview schedule involved three types of questions. First, I asked opening questions about participants' demographic information and general English learning to gather their background information. Second, I moved to on-topic questions, including questions about their experiences, such as: 'How do you use your smartphone to learn English by yourself?' Third, I asked opinion questions, for instance: 'How do you feel about using smartphones for English language learning?' Participants were required to have access to their smartphone, as I asked them to demonstrate how they used them as part of the interview questions. For example, I asked, 'What smartphone resources have you been using most frequently and/or recently?' (Here, I was thinking of resources such as Duolingo or YouTube.) Participants were given the opportunity to discuss their use of

the device for learning English, their choices of mobile apps and websites, how they used apps and sites, and for what purposes.

The second phase moved on to follow-up, in-depth interviews. Building upon the insights obtained from the first phase, these interviews aimed to fill any gaps in the data, clarify aspects of smartphone usage and encourage participants to reflect more profoundly on their language learning experiences. Probing, detail-oriented questions were used to increase the richness and depth of the responses and to provide clarification, along with questions about participants' use of mobile language learning resources and how helpful they found them in achieving language-learning goals and pursuing independent learning. For instance, I asked: 'If I took your smartphone away right now, how would your English learning process change? What would you lose? Would you gain anything?' Finally, there were closing questions such as: 'Is there anything else that you would like to add?' These questions relate to different aspects of the participants' overall views and experiences of using a smartphone for EFL (Dörnyei, 2007). Based on the data collected and how informative the first interviews were, further interviews were conducted, and further demonstrations were requested.

As planned, the first five interviews were conducted face-to-face on campus. As Yin (2018) suggests, the benefits of the face-to-face interview are that participants can be more easily observed, and that non-verbal communication can come into play. However, due to the Covid-19 lockdown, all the second interviews and two of the first interviews were online via Facetime audio. The interviews could be conducted either in Arabic or English, depending on each participant's preference in terms of what made them feel more comfortable. All were in Arabic, except for two of the participants (Ameera and Sara), who were excited to use English to answer the questions.

4.8.2 Visual Media Collected from Learners

Visual media, such as images and videos, are an additional facet that captures comprehensive multidimensional data and provides valuable insights into the participants' activities (Barbour, 2014). The use of photographs has been found to add richness and depth to interview content, exposing more than would have been revealed if only an interview had been conducted. This enables a deeper and broader

knowledge, as well as a richer, more comprehensive, profound and multifaceted approach to creating meaning (Pink, 2007).

During all the interviews, I asked the participants to show me how they used their smartphones to facilitate English learning. For example, they demonstrated how they used an app on their smartphones. Such demonstrations helped me to obtain much richer data than the interview questions alone. For instance, showing me how they used a website to find the definition of a word or how they used language learning apps was easier than describing the process. After asking for the participants' consents, I captured their use of the digital tools through short videos or pictures (taken only of their hands and smartphone screens).

These photos and recordings were obtained from learners during the semi-structured interviews with their consent and included screenshots of their English posts on Twitter, Instagram accounts they followed, and videos of how they used various language learning websites and applications. During each interview, I asked the participants to show me what they did on their smartphones in relation to English learning. Some participants were pleased to share directly, while others shared this with me later via WhatsApp, either because of internet connection problems or because the interview was online. For instance, Aram's interviews were held online during the Covid-19 lockdown, so she shared via WhatsApp a video (screen recording) of her practising reading with the Dalilk4IELTS website (see Image 4.1). In her face-to-face interview, Razan showed me her phone home screen, which contained many apps for language learning, and then she opened a couple to show me how she used them; one such app was the iSub app, where she read short stories (see Image 4.2). Ameera showed me one of the accounts that she followed and their posts, as illustrated in Image 4.3. Image 4.3 shows the Twitter account Millionaire Mindset, which posts quotes and book recommendations.

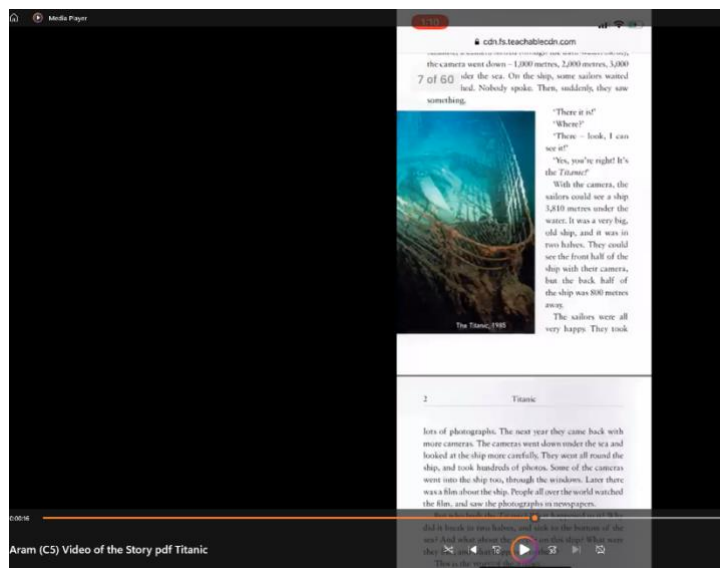


Image 4.1: Aram sharing a video of how she accessed the reading passages via Dalilk4IELTS website

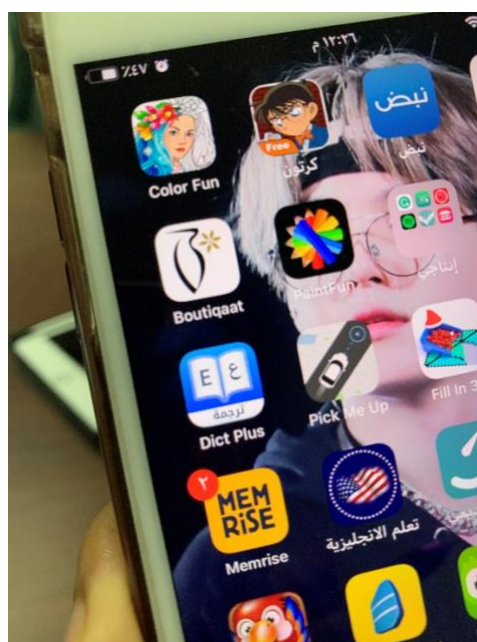


Image 4.2: Razan sharing the language apps on her phone



Image 4.3: Ameera showing me one of the accounts she followed on Twitter

By including these documents as a source of data, I was able to gain a better understanding of the participants' activities, analyse them, and add greater complexity and depth to the data. Collecting such data required obtaining additional ethical approvals. However, reviewing the media I collected helped me to reach a better understanding of the learning process. For example, I was able to understand what the Dalilk4IELTS website is and how Leena and Aram used it and benefitted from it. I would not have been able to access this website and see how the participants used it unless they showed it to me, as it is only accessible to users who pay for it.

4.9 Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Data Collection Procedures

In the first few weeks of my fieldwork, I contacted potential participants and conducted five interviews. However, in the middle of my data collection process, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic forced the university to close, and the country entered a period of lockdown. Consequently, I could not carry on with my fieldwork for four months, as these unprecedented circumstances revealed themselves to be particularly challenging and affected research participation, methods and timeline. Some participants withdrew or did not respond, so I had to recruit two new participants (Ghadeer and Aram). Conveniently, I was able to share the online survey after making a few

adjustments (see Appendix 3. Online Survey) in consultation with my colleagues, as I asked them to send it to the WhatsApp groups for their classes. However, online interviews had to be arranged differently from face-to-face interviews. For the latter, I had booked a meeting room and conducted interviews during the students' breaks. Online interviews were arranged personally via WhatsApp messages, and in order to adapt the interviews to an online format, I had to adjust the structure and questions. For example, in the face-to-face interviews, I had asked the participants to demonstrate how they used their smartphones for learning, and I captured videos and screenshots to understand which tools they used and how. This was not possible in online interviews, and instead, I asked participants to describe in detail what tools they were using on their smartphones. I also asked them to share the platforms they referred to in the interviews, either while we were talking or immediately upon completion of the interviews.

Most importantly, I had to be patient, as the process of planning and conducting online interviews was more time consuming than I had expected. Instead of being completed in three months as originally planned, the data collection process took nine months (see Appendix 5 for dates and media of the interviews). It was sometimes challenging to talk to participants when they had an unstable internet connection or did not offer as much information as they would have in a face-to-face meeting. Conducting both forms of interviews was beneficial because each method has its benefits and drawbacks. The face-to-face interviews allowed me to interact with the participants personally, whereas the online audio conversations provided anonymity to the participants, which may have encouraged them to speak more freely and honestly (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Adjusting the data collection instruments and using the online interviews while keeping the research aims in mind helped me to focus more closely on the research questions, and the data were not affected.

Due to the time constraints and because Covid-19 was not the focus of this study, I chose not to highlight the impact of Covid-19 on students' use of smartphones for language learning as part of the thesis. Nevertheless, I published a paper on this topic, titled 'Smartphone Use for Language Learning Before and After the Covid-19 Lockdown' (Basheikh, 2021). This paper examined two cases of smartphone language learning

before and after the Covid-19 lockdown. The results showed that the lockdown influenced smartphone usage in general, as well as language learning activities. Both participants reported that their increased smartphone usage during the lockdown period had a negative physical effect (e.g. screen fatigue) and also an emotional impact (e.g. excessive attachment to smartphones). Furthermore, they opposed the shift to online education, believing that technology should support learning rather than serving as the primary learning medium.

Impacted by the pandemic-induced stress, these two students abandoned many smartphone language learning activities, such as browsing SNS language pages and interacting online in English. However, case one began reading e-books, and after realising the importance of maintaining and improving her language skills, case two started to watch YouTube videos. These findings show how EFL students in Saudi Arabia benefitted from their devices when learning a language. Furthermore, the study highlights factors that can influence the use of technology for learning, such as learners' relationships with their devices, the environment and the nature of formal education. It also provides intriguing insights into how participants' self-initiated use of technology for learning changed due to the Covid-19 lockdown.

4.10 Data Analysis

Data analysis is 'the process of giving meaning to raw, inexpressive data' (Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p. 217). Analysis transforms data into findings; however, there is no formula for the transformation, only direction, and the destination is unique for each inquirer (Patton, 2015; Cohen et al., 2018). Because the main aims of this study were to explore the use of smartphones for independent English language learning by female Saudi university students and to describe the learners' experiences and the challenges they faced, I chose to use thematic analysis to draw out these themes from my data. Thematic analysis allowed me to identify issues associated with the use of smartphones for independent language learning and to develop detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), one of the most valuable aspects of thematic analysis is that it gives the researcher the freedom to select the method that best suits

their needs. Both inductive ‘bottom-up’ and deductive ‘top-down’ approaches can be used to identify themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2012). ‘Bottom-up’ approaches ensure that the themes identified are strongly related to the data. By contrast, ‘top-down’ approaches mean that the themes identified are driven by the researcher’s theoretical interest in the area (Patton, 2015) and are directly related to their research questions. Given the study’s goals and the need for a deeper understanding of the topic, I mainly followed the inductive approach, whereby I attempted to build meaning from the participants’ experiences and perceptions of using smartphones for independent language learning. However, I also used a deductive approach that drew on theories of mobile-assisted language learning and independent learning skills to inform how I addressed my research questions and to deepen my understanding of learners’ activities and challenges.

This study used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis model as a well-defined, well-organised and detailed model. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest six steps: 1) familiarising oneself with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) evaluating themes; 5) defining and naming themes; and 6) producing a report. The study was divided into three phases, as shown in the subsections below.

4.10.1 Preparing and Organising the Data

Data management was the first stage in the analysis process. The interviews were audio-recorded on a digital recorder. Following each interview, I downloaded the recording and saved it on my M: drive. As mentioned before, data collection methods were presented in both English and Arabic (the participants’ native language). Therefore, the interview data was transcribed word-for-word in either English or Arabic, and the data in Arabic was later translated into English. As I am an EFL teacher and native Arabic speaker, I did the translations myself, which involved listening to the recordings several times. Listening to the interviews more than three times helped me to reflect on the participants’ different experiences and to ensure that I chose accurate translations of their answers. However, some parts were monitored for quality and accuracy by fellow doctoral students in Translation Studies in the UK. I chose to preserve inaccurate uses of English, editing only hesitations and repetitions. The symbols below indicate the editing decisions made for the transcripts:

Table 4.2: Symbols used in the transcripts

Symbol	Meaning
...	Pause
(...)	Words omitted
XXX	Proper name omitted
[text]	My notes

All the data were organised into digital files following a file naming system such as 'Leena (C4). Interview 1. Original Arabic Transcription' and 'Leena (C4) Media – Instagram account screenshot'. Using a consistent file naming system ensured that materials could easily be retrieved from a large database of text and other materials for analysis. These files (see sample of interview transcription in Appendix 6) were then uploaded to MAXQDA.

4.10.2 Coding and Categorising the Data

Coding is an essential step in qualitative analysis. Codes are tags or labels used to assign units of meaning to data gathered during a study. This entails identifying and recording one or more text passages or other data items, such as images, that exemplify the same theoretical or descriptive idea (Gibbs, 2018). My coding process started by adding labels to the transcribed interviews using MAXQDA software (see Appendix 7). The initial codes were very broad and consisted of one or two words. Then I reread the interview segments for each code and checked that they were coded correctly. Meanwhile, I looked for connections between the codes. As a result, I renamed some codes, merged similar codes and deleted repeated codes. For example, the 'Translation' code was transformed into specific themes, expressed in phrases ('Use translation tools to check clarity'; 'Use translation tools to understand meaning'; 'Use translation tools to check pronunciation') to answer the first research question on the uses of smartphones for independent language learning.

I then organised the codes into different categories and themes. One key consideration in developing a particular theme was 'whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Therefore, I developed themes that captured meaning patterns in relation to the research questions. While categories are a straightforward representation of the participants' accounts, themes call for interpretation, as they capture the core of their experiences (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2003; Morse, 2008).

This cycle of categorising codes and finalising the themes was a long and complex process for me. Throughout this process, I analysed each code and its links to other codes, and I reflected on how I might integrate them under different themes. At the start, I categorised them according to students' goals, for example, 'increase language exposure', 'practise reading', 'learn vocabulary'. Then, after revising the themes against the research questions and discussing with my supervisors, it seemed that by using this approach, I had overlooked many of the interesting findings in my study, such as how the individual participants used the same tools differently and exercised agency. Using colours when coding in MAXQDA software helped to show common themes (see Appendix 8. Interview Colour Coding). MAXQDA was useful for creating categories and themes that involved several codes, moving codes from one theme to another or breaking a theme down into several codes. Using computer software for the data analysis provided me with the means to sort the data and made it easier to access the coded segments of data, to search through the database for all text segments with the same code label, to form categories, edit them and identify themes (See Appendix 7).

The data were grouped under three major themes: using smartphones for independent learning activities, benefits of using smartphones for independent language learning, and challenges in doing so. The codes from the transcribed interviews were inserted into a table to show how they clustered into categories and how the categories became the final themes. A sample of one theme is presented in Table 4.3, with the full theme presented in Appendix 9. Developing Codes

Table 4.3: Sample of the coding procedure

Extract from interview	Codes	Categories	Theme
Case: Razan Turn: 182 If I had found someone who could guide me when I first started learning English, I would have become a professional in a year or two. Guidance is needed, like 1 2 3 4, I was 1 then 5 10 11. I need guidance.	Lack of expertise in how to plan learning	Difficulty in planning and managing learning	Challenges of using smartphones for independent English learning
Case: Razan Turn: 136–138 I downloaded some books in my phone, but only read like two pages. I didn't understand, I felt like their level was too advanced for me.	Selecting materials in accordance with language proficiency		

4.10.3 Interpreting the Data and Reporting the Findings

The final part of the study entails interpreting data and producing a report, which will be presented in my Findings and Discussion chapters. Interpretation brings meaning to the data and displays this meaning to the reader through written reporting (Marshall and Rossman, 2016, p. 217). It includes giving meaning to findings, explaining them, and drawing conclusions and implications (Patton, 2015).

Stake (2013) proposes two ways to derive meanings from cases: direct interpretation of individual cases recognising their uniqueness and grouping cases together. During the analysis, I grappled with these two approaches, aiming to establish relationships between different aspects of the data. Ultimately, I opted to organise the findings around key themes identified within the cases. This approach is in line with Mackey and Gass's (2005) argument that combining findings from multiple-case studies enhances the robustness of conclusions. By presenting the main themes that interconnect all the cases, my intention was to provide a deeper understanding of smartphone use for language learning and the associated challenges.

Having conducted the analysis as outlined above, I used the three phases of the IMLE (planning; managing; monitoring and evaluating) to organise and present the findings. In relation to the first research question and the initial two phases of the IMLE (planning and managing learning), I categorised the themes that emerged from the interview material according to the four types of IMLE experience (entertainment, social, instructional, assistive) outlined in Section 2.2.4. As for the second research question, the process of thematic categorisation proved to be more complicated. It revolved around learners' reflective experiences within the IMLE, specifically during the third phase – monitoring and evaluating. This categorisation process emerged through an inductive analysis of the data.

4.11 Research Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness helps to establish research quality in qualitative studies. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness in qualitative studies can be judged according to four criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. These criteria ensure the applicability and consistency of the research and could help provide a framework for quality assurance that fits the constructivist paradigm of this study.

4.11.1 Credibility

Credibility refers to the trustworthiness and believability of the research findings (Tobin and Begley, 2004). Credibility is established when the researcher's representation of the participants' experiences aligns with the participants' own views. I used member checking as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), by giving the participants opportunities to check and evaluate my interpretation of their responses. In the second interviews, I shared the themes that emerged from the first interviews with the participants so they could give feedback. This helped to make member checking more interactive, as Birt et al. (2016) suggest. I knew students were busy with their assignments and online classes and would not have had the time to review the transcripts. The interviews were held at a stressful time for the world owing to the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic. For this reason, I chose not to share the interview transcripts with the participants, and instead, I only asked them to confirm a few parts to validate the data, as proposed by Thomas (2017). For example, I was unsure about the translation when Leena used some words from a different dialect,

and I wanted to check my understanding of the reasons behind Razan's restricted use of social networking sites.

4.11.2 Dependability

Dependability involves ensuring the consistency and reliability of the research process. A well-documented and logical process allows readers to assess the dependability of the research (Tobin and Begley, 2004). Therefore, in this chapter, I have carefully documented the research design and the data collection methods and analysis (see Sections 4.5, 4.6, 4.7, 4.8, 4.9 and 4.10).

4.11.3 Transferability

Transferability concerns the extent to which research findings can be applied to other contexts (Tobin and Begley, 2004). Thick descriptions of the research context and participants' experiences allow others to judge the potential applicability of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Findings from qualitative case studies cannot claim general validity and may not be representative of other case studies (Heigham and Croker, 2009). On reasons for choosing qualitative design, refer to Section 4.3. Thus, I provide details and descriptions of the context and the participants' experiences, which may support transferring the findings to similar contexts.

4.11.4 Confirmability

Confirmability involves demonstrating that the research findings and interpretations are derived directly from the data (Tobin and Begley, 2004). In order to establish the confirmability of my research, the research questions were addressed by providing accurate, clear and detailed descriptions of the participants' experiences, opinions and thoughts. In the interviews, I informed the participants that I was not there to judge their learning experiences or to assess them, but to understand their learning stories and challenges so that we (as educators) could support them more effectively. In addition, all the interview transcripts were checked more than four times for typing errors and for coding. I took great care when translating the interview questions and transcripts to ensure that they correctly described the phenomena under study.

Furthermore, reflexivity assists qualitative researchers in reducing the amount of subjectivity in their research (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Reflecting on data is an ongoing

process at various stages of research. In this study, I began reflecting before the data collection stage and continued reflecting throughout the data collection and data analysis steps, as shown in the preceding sections.

4.12 Positionality

Understanding my positionality in this study is important, as emphasised by Letherby et al. (2013), who assert that researchers cannot maintain complete neutrality. As I delve into the distinct and diverse experiences of language learners, I am aware of the potential impact my biases, personal perspectives and beliefs may have on the research outcomes. Instead of striving for an unattainable state of absolute objectivity, I believe in the significance of transparency and self-reflection as integral components of the research process. In this section, I aim to provide an exploration of my own positionality in this study and its influence on my approach to understanding the experiences of independent language learners.

My decision to undertake this research was inspired by the impact of my own educational journey and my encounters with fellow learners. Having personally experienced the challenges and triumphs that learners encounter while embarking on the path of independent learning, I developed a profound curiosity about their experiences and wanted to provide a meaningful platform for these learners to share their narratives and experiences of language learning.

As a researcher, I am conscious of my presence and recognise the positioning I adopt in this study. The introductory chapter delves into my personal interest in and experiences of the Saudi context, as a citizen of Saudi Arabia. This contextual background serves as a crucial backdrop for selecting this topic, as I seek to understand the experiences of language learners in this specific cultural setting. By actively engaging with a group to which I belong, I deliberately position myself as an insider, aligning with the perspective advocated by Saidin and Yaacob (2016). This insider knowledge grants me a level of personal expertise in the field, enabling me not only to comprehend but also to critically challenge various perspectives brought forth by the participants.

Moreover, being of the same gender as the participants in a conservative society like Saudi Arabia has undeniable implications for this research. It established a sense of trust and comfort during our interactions, fostering an environment where participants felt at ease to candidly share their stories and challenges. As an educator, my passion for supporting learners' language learning endeavours extends beyond the confines of the classroom. This dedication motivates me to explore innovative approaches, such as the use of mobile devices, to enhance language learning experiences. The learners were excited to share their stories and challenges, knowing that I am an educator, and that I am trying to make a difference and support future learners with my research. My insider position also enabled me to gain more rapid and complete acceptance by the participants, as pointed out by Dwyer and Buckle (2009).

4.13 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are acknowledged in this research as outlined below, through obtaining informed consent and reviewing confidentiality and anonymity. Before the start of the data collection process, ethical approval for the pilot and main study data collection was granted by the University of Leeds AREA Faculty Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 10. Ethical Approval from the University of Leeds) and the English Language Institute at King Abdulaziz University.

Each participant was fully informed of the research aims and objectives via an information sheet that was provided to them (see Appendix 11). The sheet included details about the data collection process, the nature of participation in the study, associated risks, and how participants' identities and data would be protected. I also made it clear that participation was voluntary and that participants had the right to refuse to continue and withdraw from the study for up to a month after the last data was collected. The participants had to read the information sheet and sign the consent form (see Appendix 12) before the research process could begin. Both documents were first written in English for ethical approval and were then translated into Arabic, the participants' native language, to ensure their full understanding.

Any information provided during the research was held in the strictest confidence, and all data collected were anonymised using assigned pseudonyms. To ensure the safety

of their data, files were saved on the University of Leeds M: drive and participants' names were anonymised. Any hard copy, media data and audio materials were stored in a locked filing cabinet on university premises and later, due to the lockdown, in the researcher's private home desk. In addition to the privacy promised to participants, they were never pressured to provide information, and they were reminded that all data collected would be used solely for academic purposes, such as conference papers, books and journal publications (Thomas, 2016).

4.14 Main Points from the Methodology Chapter

This methodology chapter presented a detailed account of the research design and data collection methods used in my study. I began by restating the research questions that guided my investigation, establishing a clear focus. I explained the process of selecting the seven Saudi female university students as participants for my study. I emphasised selecting a qualitative research methodology and explained its rationale, highlighting the value of interviews as the primary method for generating data. I used an interview guide derived from relevant literature to steer the interviews and gather information on participants' experiences and approaches to smartphone-based language learning. I also discussed the incorporation of media collection, such as videos and pictures, to enrich the data collection process. Additionally, I addressed the shift from face-to-face to online interviews in response to the Covid-19 lockdown.

Thematic analysis, based on Braun and Clarke's six-step model, was the chosen method for data analysis. I outlined the process of transcribing interviews, organising files, and implementing a consistent file naming system to manage the collected data effectively. I explained that special attention was given to translating transcripts when necessary and preserving participants' language use during the analysis. Throughout the chapter, I placed significant emphasis on ethical considerations, which included ensuring participants' right to withdraw and maintaining confidentiality. While briefly discussing the trustworthiness of my research and ethical considerations, I emphasised my commitment to ensuring the reliability and credibility of the study. The next chapter will present the findings.

5 Findings

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I first present the seven learners' backgrounds and learning plans. Then, I discuss nine main themes that emerged from the data analysis, providing insights that directly address the research questions. The first four themes relate to the first research question: How do Saudi female university students use smartphones for independent language learning? The themes categorise the learners' IMLE experiences with different digital tools under the following headings: entertainment, social, instructional and assistive. Further themes that emerged from the analysis relate to the second research question: What challenges do Saudi female university students encounter when using smartphones for independent English language learning, and how do they address them? These themes concern the limitations of using various digital smartphone tools for independent language learning as experienced and perceived by learners, such as feeling lost in IMLE, difficulties in choosing appropriate language partners, and restrictions owing to financial considerations. Through monitoring their learning, the learners highlighted the importance of following their interests in sustaining their motivation and the effects of learning independently but not in isolation. Discussion of these themes shows that the effectiveness of using smartphones can vary greatly, either helping learners or posing challenges, depending on how smartphones are used.

5.2 Learners' Backgrounds and Planning Learning

Each of the seven learners had her own unique language learning journey, with different English proficiency levels and motivations. In this section, I present the learners' diverse backgrounds and learning plans. Each learner's story sheds light on her individual experiences of formal English education and family influences, which impacted her language learning goals and independent mobile learning of English.

5.2.1 Learner 1: Ameera

Ameera chose to carry out the interviews in English and did not switch to Arabic at any point, which suggested that she was confident in her English-speaking ability. She also talked about how she was sociable and did not have issues interacting with others,

either in Arabic or in English: 'I am an outgoing person and I love talking to people in my country or not in my country' (T38). This explains some of her language learning practices with her smartphone, such as posting and commenting in English using a public account on SNS (as described in Section 5.3.2.1). Ameera perceived herself as an intermediate English language learner. She commented: 'I am not advanced at all, I'm in the middle' (T48). However, she said that one of her brothers, who had studied in the USA, had told her that her English was not good and commented negatively on her language level, and she wished she could be as fluent as him and her other brothers:

Well, because I have three of my brothers study in America, one of them graduated this year so he is now in Saudi, I almost all the time try to talk to him in English ... Even he knows that I am ... he says, 'you are sooo bad in English' because he's professional now in English because he spent seven years there. (T46)

Influenced by her brother's comments on her English and her ambition to be a fluent English speaker, Ameera took two English courses at different levels in a private language institute in Jeddah. However, she did not like the classes and believed that they did not develop her language in any way because the teachers talked all the time without giving her a chance to speak and practise her language. Moreover, she noted that they did not teach her how to improve her language or work on her speaking skills. She explained:

It is expensive, it costs a lot of money. And the class was crowded, there were a lot of girls, and they did not mmm they just talk mmm they did not give us grammar they did not give us any things like help us improve our language and speaking. The teacher was just talking. She just asks us one question in the whole class. (T20)

This highlights one of the limitations of classroom teaching, where students are not given sufficient time in class to practise speaking, which led to Ameera's desire to practise her English via social networking sites. Ameera also pointed out that these private courses did not help her to understand how to improve different language skills.

5.2.2 Learner 2: Ghadeer

Unlike Ameera, Ghadeer was the only member of her family who spoke English, and she did not have opportunities to practise speaking English at home. She commented: 'Actually, nobody speaks English in my family. My brothers are at the same level as me or lower' (T16). Ghadeer rated her English proficiency level as intermediate based on her result in the IELTS exam: 'I took the IELTS exam before and my total was 5, in some levels I got 5.5, so I'd say my level is intermediate' (T10).

Ghadeer thought that her weakest point was speaking. She stated that she only had a few opportunities to practise speaking English in her daily life, which caused her difficulty in responding when talking to someone. She explained: 'In speaking, I feel that I need to respond quickly, and I feel that it takes me a long time to reply because I have to think about the words and see if they're appropriate, which requires a lot of training and confidence too' (T104). Therefore, using her smartphone, Ghadeer tried using different tools to practise English conversation skills.

5.2.3 Learner 3: Sara

Sara's father loved the English language and encouraged her to learn English; it was one of his wishes for her to be a proficient English speaker. So when he passed away, she felt pressure to achieve his dream for her and to work on developing her English:

My dad (May Allah rest his soul in peace). He was very loving ... he loved the English language so much and he brought me a lot of books. And then I remember he told me just to study English, study English, so I am following that order. (T144)

After graduating from high school, Sara had to stay home for two years due to university administration issues and a limited number of places in the science sector of the preparatory year programme. During these two years, Sara created a daily English language learning routine by engaging in many language learning activities with her smartphone. She set aside time for studying and continued until the time of her interview (i.e., during university studies).

When Sara talked about her experience of learning English outside the classroom, she mentioned choosing materials featuring a British accent. This was reflected in her use of a British accent when she chose to use English in her interviews. This is despite having no overseas experiences (educational or recreational) and learning English at a state school. When I asked her about the reason for this preference, she expressed her admiration of the accent and added: ‘They [British English speakers] are clear... I can understand them, but in America, they talk very fast.’ Sara’s goal was to speak fluently with a British accent. This was emphasised in her use of smartphones for language learning, like watching British TV shows and language-teaching videos on YouTube and following English speakers on SNS, with a particular focus on British celebrities.

5.2.4 Learner 4: Leena

Unlike the previous three learners, who believed that they were intermediate English learners, Leena believed that she was a beginner. She noted that she understood what others said but that she had difficulty speaking because she was shy. Leena’s father was a language teacher, and her sister was in her final year at university, majoring in English. Leena said that she wanted to be at the same language level as them, and she had been trying for a long time. She shared her experience when practising speaking English with her sister (T134–136):

Leena: I tried to speak with my sister since her major is English, but I feel that I don’t want to make mistakes. Because it is her major, she is very precise.

Amal: Does that bother you?

Leena: It’s not bothering me, but it doesn’t help me to speak. Because every word that I speak I make sure that I say it correctly because I know that she will correct me, so I don’t talk anymore.

Leena explained that her sister would make many comments on her language accuracy whenever she spoke, and she stopped speaking English with her as she felt that this made her overthink the accuracy of what she said. In addition, according to Leena, her state school’s English classes were not helpful as they were mainly based on grammar. She elaborated:

Learning grammar is not helpful. All the people around me that I asked about learning English said that learning English in school was not useful – no one became professional in English language from school. They learned by using their phones and from movies and so on. No one said that my language developed from school. (T10)

Therefore, Leena decided to improve her English by herself using her smartphone, as she noted: ‘Mostly I tried to learn by myself using my phone. I’m trying to use technology to improve my language’ (T8). She aimed to understand how to learn English independently and develop confidence to practise speaking using her smartphone.

5.2.5 Learner 5: Aram

Like Leena, Aram saw herself as a beginner language learner. When she enrolled at university, she took the placement test and was Level 1 (i.e. A1). Therefore, she decided to withdraw from the university for a year to work on her English. Aram explained:

To be honest, English in school wasn’t helpful. I knew my English was not good, and I also took the English placement test, and I was placed in Level 1, which is very low, especially that all the science modules are in English. So I dropped the first academic year. And I enrolled in an English centre. (T10)

Aram explained that she wanted to develop her English to help herself and boost her confidence because ‘everything is in English now’ (T30). Aram’s father and her brothers and sister had studied abroad, and all spoke English well. Aram’s family encouraged her all the time to practise English. She reported: ‘In the beginning, my father wanted me to practise speaking English with him. I told him no, I couldn’t. I feel nervous doing so, but it’s ok if I talk with someone that I don’t know’ (T36). Aram felt more comfortable speaking with people she did not know in online spaces. Thus, Aram used her smartphone to improve her English generally, and particularly to develop confidence in speaking.

5.2.6 Learner 6: Razan

Razan came from an educated and strict family; her two brothers and her father were doctors, and she wanted to follow in their footsteps. In her first interview, Razan shared that she planned to study medicine, but she had enrolled in the Mathematics School at the time of the second interview. When asked about this major change, she did not say much, other than that she was the oldest girl in the house, so things were different for her. Because this was not the purpose of the current study, and I did not want to make her feel uncomfortable, I did not linger on this point. Nevertheless, I chose to share this brief family background about Razan here as it helps to clarify her use of smartphones for language learning. For example, Razan was the only participant who did not use SNS.

Razan said that her family was 'old-fashioned' (T152) and believed that SNS such as Twitter and Instagram were harmful, and therefore, they did not allow her to use them. If she wanted to check something on Instagram or Twitter, she used her mother's phone. She commented:

For them, these apps are not acceptable. You know how some families think, so as they wish, I don't bother... Honestly it makes no difference to me, and if I needed to check something in Instagram, I do that from my mom's phone. But for me, YouTube and Google are the essentials. (I2.T82–86)

Razan believed that not using SNS had a positive impact on her as it helped prevent procrastination and led her to focus on learning languages. However, YouTube and Google were acceptable uses of the internet as they were perceived as educational tools. Razan's father was also keen for her to improve her English, and he sent her WhatsApp messages recommending apps and supported her by registering her for paid language courses. This explains why Razan used many language apps, both paid and free.

In her two interviews, Razan talked about how she was not 'passionate' about learning English, unlike other languages like Korean. However, when she enrolled at university, she realised that English proficiency was essential, primarily since all science subjects

were taught in English. She reported: 'When I enrolled in university, I understood how English is everything as all the subjects (maths, physics...) were in English. I was shocked because my English is not that good' (T24). After attending the first few classes in the preparatory year programme (PYP), she decided to withdraw and take some time to work on her English. She turned to her smartphone for this purpose. She did not have a specific goal and believed she needed to work on her language in general and find ways to motivate herself to learn English.

5.2.7 Learner 7: Asmahan

Like Razan, Asmahan loved learning languages and could speak Turkish and Korean. She reported that she had learned these two languages independently through watching television series. Of the three languages she had learned, Asmahan had the most confidence in speaking Turkish and believed that she could be classified as a fluent speaker. By contrast, she was usually hesitant about speaking in English. When asked why, she said: 'Because I watch Turkish series and movies more than English. English movies are not my thing; I don't really like them' (T20). Asmahan tried to transfer her Turkish learning experience to English, but it did not work as she was less interested in English than in Turkish drama.

Asmahan perceived herself to be a low-intermediate English learner. She believed that she had difficulties forming sentences and responding in conversations, saying: 'My sentences are sometimes correct, but I hesitate like when I want to order in English in restaurants. I don't, because I am not sure if the sentence format is correct' (T18). Therefore, as will be explained in Section 5.3.4.2, Asmahan used translation and writing referencing tools on her smartphone to support her in using English.

Asmahan's sister, a proficient English speaker who had studied abroad, always encouraged her to improve her English. Asmahan commented: 'I don't really like learning English, but my sister pushes me as she wants me to learn English' (T56). Later in the interview, Asmahan told me that she practised speaking English with her niece: 'You remember my sister, the one I told you about, her daughter is very close to my age and she is really good at English, so I love talking with her to practise and improve my English' (T52). Consequently, Asmahan did not need to practise speaking using her smartphone. However, she used it for many other activities, mainly following language

learning pages on different SNS to enhance her language knowledge, and using Google Translate and CorrectMe to check the accuracy and clarity of her sentences.

5.2.8 Summary of the Seven Cases Backgrounds and Learning Plans

From the backgrounds and learning goals presented in this section, it is evident why these students turned to independent mobile learning of English. The primary reasons included dissatisfaction with classroom settings, limited speaking practice opportunities and lack of self-confidence. Ameera and Leena articulated their reservations about traditional teaching techniques, perceiving them as less engaging, providing inadequate opportunities for speaking and overly focused on grammar. The educational context often interacted with personal situations, intensifying the obstacles faced. Practical speaking opportunities were scarce and fraught with challenges. Ameera, whose family was fluent in English, encountered mockery concerning her proficiency. Ghadeer's situation stood in contrast: her family did not communicate in English, depriving her of vital conversational exposure. For Leena, practising with her sister proved counterproductive; the constant critique of her language accuracy deterred her from speaking. Aram's family was supportive, urging her to practise speaking English with them. However, her fear of making mistakes in front of loved ones pushed her to prefer interactions with strangers. An overarching issue for many was confidence, or rather the lack of it. Aram's apprehension was evident; she hesitated to converse in English, whether with family or classmates. Similarly, Asmahan grappled with frequent hesitations when speaking in English, indicative of an internal struggle with self-assurance. The following section will explore the learners' IMLE experiences and how they managed their learning.

5.3 Learners' Experiences of Managing IMLE

This section explores the experiences of Saudi female university students who use smartphones for independent language learning, focusing on the first research question: How do they use smartphones for language learning?

1. Entertainment-related IMLE experiences, highlighting how learners leverage resources related to entertainment for language learning.

2. Socially oriented IMLE experiences, delving into how learners use social networking sites, language learning apps and tutoring platforms to practise the language and connect with proficient speakers.
3. Instructional-oriented IMLE experiences, shedding light on learners' engagement with digital resources that are designed for language learning to enhance their understanding of grammar, expand their vocabulary and practise their language skills.
4. Assistive-oriented IMLE experiences, exploring how learners employ smartphones to complement their language learning activities.

In the following subsections, I address each theme and explain the experiences of the seven participants.

5.3.1 Entertainment-related IMLE Experiences

One of the participants' most frequently reported IMLE experiences was entertainment-related IMLE. This involves learners using digital tools to access resources in the target language for everyday life activities, particularly entertainment-related ones. I categorise IMLE experiences somewhat differently than Lai's et al. (2018) technology-oriented experiences. For instance, I categorise the addition of closed captions to films as entertainment-related since they integrate with learners' routine activities. (Closed captions means the transcription of spoken dialogue into written text that is displayed during video playing.) By contrast, Lai et al. (2018) view such acts as instructional-oriented, emphasising their language learning function. I argue that all these varied IMLE experiences aim at enhancing learners' English proficiency. Thus, I do not distinguish between adding captions to films as an instructional IMLE experience and browsing SNS as purely entertainment related IMLE. In my view, both fall under entertainment-related activities, as they serve dual purposes of language learning and entertainment.

Within the realm of entertainment-related IMLE, two main activities were examined. The first activity revolved around the use of social networking sites (SNS) such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube to engage with posts by proficient English speakers. The second activity focused on the use of films and songs to immerse oneself in the target language, notably making use of video streaming sites like YouTube,

incorporating captions or adjusting the audio playback speed. In the following subsections, I will elaborate on these two activities, exploring their significance and impact within the context of entertainment-related IMLE.

5.3.1.1 Using Proficient English Speakers' SNS Posts to Achieve Language Goals

Sara, Ameera, Aram and Ghadeer used SNS such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube to increase their exposure to English. However, depending on her language goals and interests, each participant engaged with these platforms differently.

Sara used YouTube, Instagram and Twitter to improve her English by increasing her exposure to the language. She wanted to 'speak like a native' (T28), and as explained in Section 5.2.3, she admired the British accent; therefore, she watched British TV shows on YouTube and followed British influencers and actors on Twitter and Instagram. Sara watched Nigella's cooking show and clips from Gordon Ramsay's show on YouTube. She believed that they helped her learn vocabulary and idioms and colloquial expressions, which she viewed as essential to learning how the language is actually spoken. She listened to these two presenters frequently because she liked their English accents. She said she learned a lot of vocabulary relating to food, restaurants and kitchens from them.

Similarly, Sara used other SNS like Instagram and Twitter to learn English by following accounts whose owners posted in the target language. She commented: 'In each application in social media, I love to follow native speakers, just British people. I like their phrasal verbs. They are very helpful to me' (T50). Sara described how this helped her develop her reading and listening skills:

... when I have a lot of social media, I read, I read, I read and then I improve my reading. And my listening, when I listen to someone from social media who is famous and speaks in English, I improve my listening a lot. (T182)

This example indicates how Sara was aware of the importance of language exposure to improve English proficiency and how her use of SNS was central to her strategy.

Likewise, Ameera and Aram followed users who posted in English on Twitter to practise reading as they were browsing. Ameera followed different accounts on Twitter, such as foreign influencers and quote-sharing accounts. She explained:

I follow some people because they always, always tweet positive, positive things. And I know every time I open Twitter, I see English words and English sentences, so I keep reading English every day.
(T154)

Ameera used accounts that posted in English on Twitter as a space to practise reading English and to learn new phrases and vocabulary.

Similarly, Aram also followed English speakers on Twitter. One benefit of Twitter for Aram was that she learned colloquial language by following users who posted in English: 'They all post in English. It was useful for me to know more words to use in posts or real life by reading their tweets' (T206). Aram found these English tweets helpful as they provided her with language resources that she could use in her daily life.

Unlike the other learners (Ameera, Aram, Leena and Sara), Ghadeer liked watching environmental videos on YouTube as she felt that the language was appropriate for learning academic English, which was part of her language learning goals. Furthermore, she found it motivating to watch something that she enjoyed:

I'm very interested in environmental issues, so I watch videos promoting a green lifestyle and presenting ideas about how to use less plastic or alternatives to plastic, for example. When I watch things that I'm interested in, I mean when the videos are about such interesting subjects, the language they use is also fluent and clear, not like clothes or make-up videos, not all of them, of course. I mean videos about scientific subjects that allow you to learn a more formal language and grammar rules; I think that their language is better.
(T78)

Ghadeer also emphasised that she learned more by watching documentaries and videos with informative content as they use formal English and are useful. Ghadeer actively sought content that would contain high-level vocabulary and almost always

used English captions to check whether she had heard correctly, to ‘pick out a few words’ (T182) and to improve her reading skills.

Ghadeer found this form of audio-visual content to be a valuable resource for her language learning. By selecting documentaries relevant to her interests, Ghadeer explored various topics while immersing herself in the target language. Similar to the other participants, she used the video options on YouTube, such as adjusting the playback speed, to accommodate her comprehension level. Ghadeer explained: ‘If the person is speaking too fast, I slow the video speed’ (T182). Additionally, she took advantage of the pause and repeat functions on her smartphone, allowing her to fully comprehend the content, revisit challenging sections and capture new vocabulary.

5.3.1.2 Using Films and Songs to Enhance Listening Skills and Learn Vocabulary

Ameera, Sara and Leena talked about watching films on their smartphones for language learning. Their motivations for doing so were very similar to their reasons for using SNS. They highlighted that watching films helped them maintain contact with the language and practise listening. Notably, none of the participants in this study used a specific platform to watch films. Ameera commented: ‘I just go in Safari and search anything like horror or romantic comedy movies’ (T30).

Ameera believed in the importance of maintaining contact with the English language. She emphasised: ‘I must continue working on my language.’ Therefore, she extended her exposure to the target language through films. Like Ameera, Leena recognised the value of watching English films, specifically to enhance her listening skills. She expressed her focus on listening rather than the content itself, remarking: ‘I just look for films not caring what they are as long as they are in English because I wanted to listen’ (T150).

In addition to watching films, Ameera explored English songs to enhance her language skills. She listened to songs and tried to learn useful sentences by paying close attention to the lyrics. Ameera occasionally challenged herself, attempting to understand the lyrics without relying on written words. However, she would refer to the lyrics when necessary. Ameera found that following the lyrics helped her keep up with the songs, comprehend their meaning, and learn new vocabulary. She shared her experience,

saying: 'I try to find what that singer says because you know they talk too much and I do not understand. Sometimes I challenge myself that I get what they say without seeing the lyrics. And if I don't, I just see the lyrics' (T190).

Ameera found films to be an effective tool not only for improving her language skills but also for acquiring new vocabulary. Consequently, she made it a daily habit to watch films on her phone before going to bed. Ameera explained:

Well, I tried different ways to learn English, but the good way that I found good for me is that I watch TV, well I don't watch TV, I do it on my phone with English subtitles it really help me to improve my language especially when I see a word that I don't really know but I know what is it about, so I search and look for the meaning and what's the difference, it really helps me. (T24)

Adding captions while watching English films allowed Ameera to notice new words, learn their spellings, and easily look them up using the Reverso app for further understanding (details on Ameera's use of the Reverso app is in Section 5.3.4.1). Sara also shared a similar experience with closed captions,⁶ mentioning that her choice of subtitle language shifted from Arabic to English when she decided to prioritise improving her English skills: 'At first, I used subtitles in Arabic and then when I realised that I have to improve my English, I haven't used it in Arabic lately. I use English subtitles' (T164).

Songs and films were used by Ameera, Sara, Leena and Ghadeer as valuable tools for language learning and skill improvement. Ameera and Leena frequently watched films on their smartphones to maintain contact with the English language, practise listening and expand their vocabulary. Ameera also explored English songs and learned useful sentences by paying attention to the lyrics. Sara used captions while watching films and shifted from Arabic subtitles to prioritise improving her English. Ghadeer, on the other hand, focused on documentaries available on YouTube, selecting topics of interest to immerse herself in the language and further develop her comprehension skills. All

⁶ In this study, I use the term 'closed captions' for the transcription of spoken dialogue into written text that is displayed during video playing, and I use the term 'subtitles' for translation of the spoken dialogue.

participants made use of various features on their smartphones, such as adjusting playback speed, pausing and repeating, to enhance their understanding of the content and learn new vocabulary.

5.3.1.3 Summary

The participants in this study used different digital tools, including YouTube, Twitter and film streaming sites, to support their language learning. Despite the variations in tools, they reported similar experiences and outcomes. Their primary goals were maintaining language exposure, enhancing language comprehension and expanding their vocabulary. Notably, these activities were already part of their daily routines, such as watching films and browsing SNS. However, the crucial difference was their intention to engage in these activities to develop their English language.

5.3.2 Socially Oriented IMLE Experiences

Other IMLE experiences were social in that learners used digital tools to practise the language and to connect with proficient speakers of the language. In this study, learners in Saudi Arabia faced limited opportunities to speak English and connect with proficient English speakers. To overcome these challenges, they turned to SNS, language learning apps and tutoring platforms.

Twitter served as a platform for language practice and informal interactions, fostering connections and friendships. HelloTalk, a language exchange app, facilitated connections with language partners and provided insights into different cultures. Cambly, a social language learning platform, connected learners with qualified tutors for focused conversational practice. These socially oriented IMLE experiences played a significant role in language learning and social interaction. In the following sections, I will explore the significance and impact of these socially oriented IMLE experiences in greater detail, examining the specific activities and their contributions within the context of language learning and social interaction.

5.3.2.1 Using Twitter to Practise English and to Make Friends

Two of the participants, Ameera and Aram, reported using Twitter to practise using the target language by posting in English. Ameera created opportunities for herself to interact in English on different social platforms (e.g. Instagram and Twitter) with proficient English speakers. She found that Twitter provided chances for meaningful informal interactions.

She recalled an experience where, after she posted a film review on Twitter, a Canadian user messaged her, agreeing with her tweet. Their relationship developed, and they discovered many commonalities; at the time of the interviews, they were talking regularly on Facetime (audio/video call) and texting on WhatsApp. Ameera explained how she met her Canadian friend:

It was in 2017, I don't remember, but I guess I added a tweet and then she talked to me via direct message. I talked about one of the movies, my opinion about the movie, and she actually agreed with my opinion, so we started to talk, and she told me about the movies that she likes, and I told her. We have a lot of things in common, that's why we keep talking. (T40)

As Ameera and her new friend had similar interests, including films, their conversations were enjoyable and intriguing. Ameera believed that her English fluency, accent and word choices were enhanced by talking to her Canadian friend because she encouraged Ameera to correct her mistakes. This helped to improve her English:

Well, yes, I used to talk with a native speaker, and she was very good, of course, it's her language, but she actually helped me improve my language. She talked to me every day, and she knows that I'm not perfect in English, so she helps me when I say a bad... mmm not bad... when I say a wrong sentence, she corrects me and then helps me out. (T34)

Twitter offered Ameera valuable opportunities for English production and development. Interacting on Twitter seemed to capture her attention and motivate her to produce English. Ameera's activities on Twitter were for social purposes as well as for improving her English language ability.

Aram used to avoid talking in English face-to-face as she was worried about making mistakes and being embarrassed. Therefore, she chose to create an account on Twitter using a nickname to practise English without being judged by anyone she knew. She commented: 'On Twitter, I have a different account where I tweet in English. I try to express my feelings or something in English' (T200), adding: 'Whenever I learn something new, I usually try to post it on Twitter' (T208). Aram perceived Twitter to be a safe space to practise her English and use new vocabulary.

5.3.2.2 Using the HelloTalk App to Practise Conversation Skills with Proficient English Speakers

Ghadeer used the *HelloTalk* app, which enables users to find language exchange partners, to find people who spoke English and wanted to learn Arabic. She liked that in this app, unlike other social apps, she could define the age, nationality and gender of the individuals she chatted with. Ghadeer became friends with a nurse via HelloTalk. She commented:

It's called the HelloTalk app; you can teach people Arabic, and they can teach you English, so it is very interesting. I like it because I met a friend on that app, she is a nurse too, but she's older than me. So, I learnt not only the English language from her but also things related to my studies. So, it was very interesting. You can define the age, nationality and sex of the people you want to chat with; it was very good. (T46)

For Ghadeer, HelloTalk emerged as a superior choice for finding a language partner because it primarily focuses on language learning, offering an engaging and interactive experience. This contrasts with SNS, where the emphasis is more on social interaction rather than language exchange. After meeting her new friend, Ghadeer followed her on Instagram and deleted HelloTalk; she stayed in touch with her partner through Instagram. She explained:

It's basically one person that I'm still in contact with; she's English. It's not only about the language, we also share things about the speciality. When I decided to study nursing, I discussed it with her, and we talked about how nursing can provide many job opportunities and so on... (T64)

Here Ghadeer highlighted how a common interest in nursing kept the conversation and connection going.

5.3.2.3 Using the Cambly App to Practise Speaking with English Tutors

Aram and Razan used a social language learning digital tool called Cambly. Cambly is a commercial digital social platform founded in 2013, focusing on assisting English language learners to practise speaking skills with qualified English tutors (Cambly, 2022).

Aram reported: 'I registered on the Cambly mobile app. It focused on conversations and speaking; it enhanced my conversational skills' (T4). She subscribed to Cambly for six months and had 30-minute sessions every day with the same tutor. She liked that she could choose tutors based on their profiles, as shown in Image 5.1.

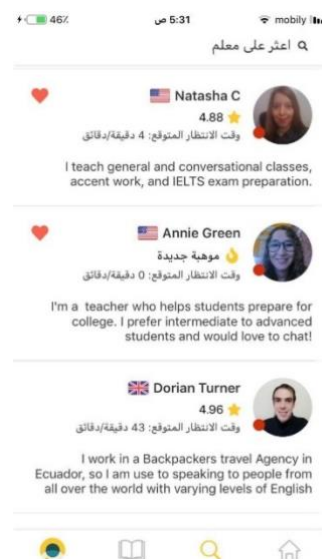


Image 5.1: Aram shared the teachers' profiles on Cambly

When Razan withdrew from the preparatory year programme (PYP) to improve her English (details in Section 5.2.6), she committed herself to daily hour-long sessions on Cambly for three months. Razan described how she used Cambly:

I had two teachers, one who focused on grammar and corrected me if I made a mistake and the other on talking. So whenever I use the app, I can change the teacher, but in those three months, I dealt with two teachers, one was American. She knew some Arabic and sometimes translated for me, the other teacher taught beginners, so she chooses simple words and that's why I understand what she says.
(T42)

She worked with the two tutors and focused on a specific goal with each of them. Tutor A helped her with language accuracy as she taught her grammar and corrected her when she made mistakes. Tutor B wanted to focus on fluency; she picked a young teacher with whom she enjoyed conversing, and they talked about Korean drama and songs.

Confidence plays a fundamental role in language learning, and both Aram and Razan experienced a significant boost in their confidence through the use of language-learning tools. Both felt that Cambly played a transformative role in their language development and self-assurance. Aram, initially apprehensive about speaking English, found that her fear gradually diminished as she interacted with her Cambly tutor. She expressed how Cambly helped her overcome her phobia and enabled her to communicate with others, leading to a remarkable increase in her confidence. She explained:

I had a phobia that I couldn't talk to anyone in English. Cambly helped me communicate with others, and, gradually, I was able to speak. In the beginning, I used to enter my room; if someone was in my room, I'd go upstairs to the office. It was vital for me to be alone, but later this changed, and I started talking whenever and wherever, even if someone was around. Then, later, at the university, I participated in conversations in class and spoke English without making mistakes.
(T18)

Cambly changed Aram's language learning mindset and shifted her focus to interacting and communicating ideas, rather than grammar, which reduced her fear of making mistakes. Likewise, Razan believed that the tutors on Cambly helped her practise her English-speaking skills and boosted her self-confidence. She commented: 'With Cambly, the fear of making mistakes was overcome, so it was okay for me to speak and make mistakes because I am a beginner' (T168). She highlighted how the tutors on the platform played a crucial role in helping her practise her English-speaking skills and overcome her fear of making mistakes. Recognising that she was still in the early stages of her language learning journey, Razan felt empowered to speak freely and make errors without judgement. The supportive and non-judgemental environment created by the Cambly tutors allowed her to let go of the fear of being incorrect and instead focus on improving her language skills through active engagement.

The transformation in mindset experienced by both Aram and Razan through Cambly demonstrates the immense power of a supportive learning environment in building learners' confidence. By shifting the emphasis from perfectionistic grammar correctness to effective communication, Cambly enabled them to embrace their mistakes as opportunities for growth. This shift in perspective not only alleviated their fears but also created a safe space for experimentation and improvement. As a result, their self-assurance grew, allowing them to participate in conversations, express their ideas, and ultimately make substantial progress with their language skills.

5.3.2.4 Summary

In the Saudi Arabian context, the learners interviewed faced limited English-speaking opportunities and hesitated to express themselves due to fear of making mistakes. To overcome these challenges, they turned to platforms like Twitter, HelloTalk and Cambly. Twitter provided a space to practise English, engage with proficient speakers, and improve fluency, accent and word choice. HelloTalk facilitated language exchange and cultural insights through connecting with language partners. Cambly connected learners with tutors for focused conversational practice, improving speaking skills, grammar and fluency. Learners found these socially oriented IMLE experiences valuable for language improvement and confidence. Different tools offered varying levels of support and ease in finding language partners. Social networking language

sites like HelloTalk and Cambly were particularly valuable in enhancing language skills and confidence.

5.3.3 Instructional-oriented IMLE Experiences

The third type of IMLE experience reported by participants is instructional-oriented. Participants engaged in these experiences primarily to improve their understanding of grammar, expand their vocabulary, practice language skills and foster independent learning skills. The digital tools associated with these experiences were designed for language learning and included Instagram language pages, YouTube language learning videos and the Dailik4IELTS website.

Instagram language learning pages presented interactive language learning posts, YouTube videos provided diverse perspectives and explanations for challenging grammar concepts, while the Dailik4IELTS website offered comprehensive IELTS preparation and general language learning resources. These instructional-oriented IMLE experiences demonstrate participants' strategic use of digital resources to achieve their specific language learning goals. In the following subsections, I elaborate on the different activities participants engaged in when using the instructional-oriented IMLE resources.

5.3.3.1 Using Instagram Language Pages to Learn and Revise Vocabulary

All seven participants mentioned using language learning pages and groups on different SNS such as WhatsApp, Telegram and Instagram. Among these platforms, Instagram language pages were mentioned the most (see Figure 5.1). Asmahan believed that Instagram is suitable for language learning, unlike other SNS such as Twitter and Snapchat, as Twitter mainly supports text and Snapchat is built on the concept of 24-hour snapshot images. Instagram, on the other hand, illustrates images or videos with captions that remain until the user removes them. This distinctive feature of Instagram allows learners to revisit the content multiple times. Such repetition was instrumental in consolidating their grasp of the language used in those posts, making Instagram an effective tool for consistent and meaningful language exposure.

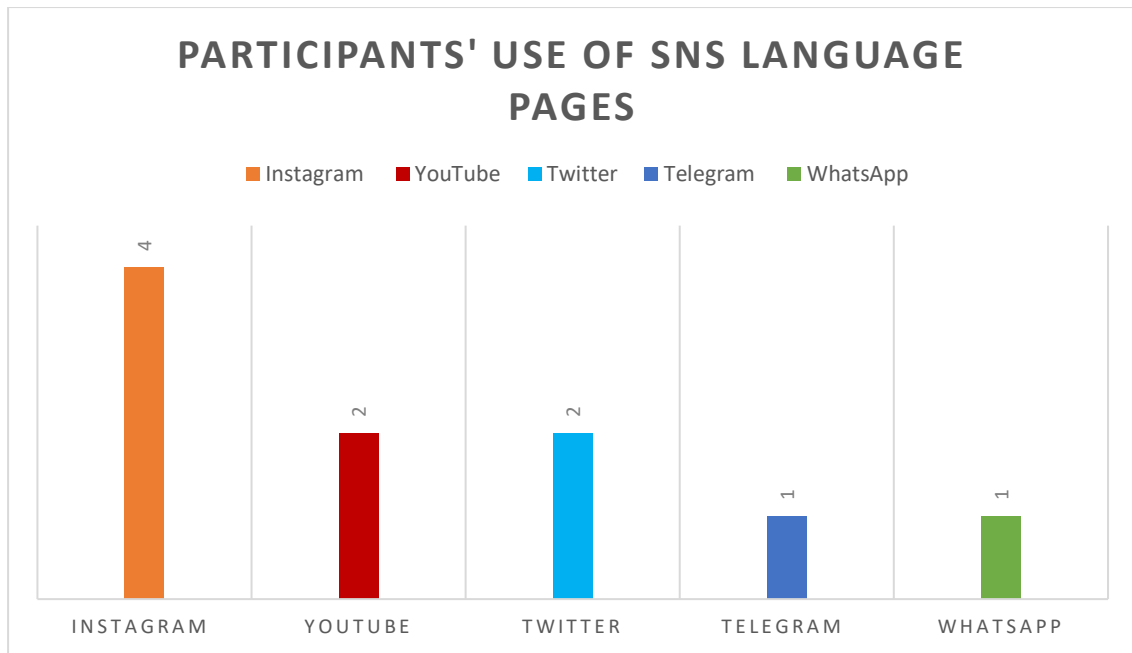


Figure 5.1: Popularity of Instagram language pages

In the screenshot of @englishfeenglish shared by Asmahan (Image 5.2), there are three different types of posts: in the middle, ‘replace “very” with these words’; top left, ‘choose the correct translation for “leave me alone” and “leave it to me”’; and top right, ‘how do you say “what a shame” in English?’



Image 5.2: @englishfeenglish screenshot on Instagram

Asmahan also subscribed to a Telegram channel, which is similar to Instagram. The channel sends weekly broadcasts on different topics, such as going to a restaurant. She liked that they shared words, sentences, meaning, homophone (words that sound the same) and homographs (words with the same spelling), and how and when to use them. She explained:

It is almost like Instagram; they translate the words and sentences and show you how and when to use them such as going to restaurants. They also share words with the same meaning or spelling and so on. (T40)

Sara also followed Instagram accounts created by Arabic speakers for English language learning, such as *Speak English @abdulamri2* and *Englishista @englishista_q8*. From these accounts, she believed that she learned vocabulary, pronunciation and the meanings and usage of words. She commented: ‘I follow them on Instagram. I don’t know the username, but they post new vocabulary or how you say a word and its translation’ (T90). To demonstrate how she learned from Instagram, after the first interview, Sara shared a screenshot (Image 5.3) of an example of one of the Instagram posts, which was a video of an English speaker with the comment ‘learn how to say “I don’t like/I hate” in more than one way’. This enabled Sara to enrich her vocabulary.



Image 5.3: Example of a post by an Arabic speaker on an English teaching account

Ameera also said that she used Instagram language learning pages to better understand and revise vocabulary. She enjoyed interacting with some of these accounts, as she explained:

There is this one, which I like. It gives you a part of a movie and asks you, what does it mean? This sentence in the movie. So, it's like a game, you know, I took it as a game, because it's English. (T144)

Here Ameera was talking about *Cinema Education* (@emadanwar). Ameera liked this account because 'it's like a game' (T144). It posts clips from films and asks followers to guess the meaning of highlighted sentences. Ameera believed that these accounts helped her not only to gain new knowledge but also to revise in a fun way what she knew or had studied in class. In addition to offering fun approaches to deepen her knowledge of language, Ameera explained why she specifically liked these Arabic–English accounts:

Sometimes they give a phrase that has a different meaning if you translate it into Arabic. This is one of the things that I really like because sometimes you understand something, but it means other things, you know... (T172)

These language pages helped Ameera understand the difference between Arabic and English and how literal translation might change the meaning, thereby teaching her how to use new words correctly in sentences.

5.3.3.2 Using YouTube Language Learning Videos to Understand Grammar and Learn Vocabulary

Using the same digital tool that was discussed in the entertainment and socially oriented IMLE experiences, the learners once again turned to YouTube, but this time with an instructional focus. Asmahan, Ghadeer and Sara found value in watching language learning videos. Sara subscribed to a channel and persistently watched its videos to enhance her skills and expand her vocabulary. For Asmahan and Ghadeer, their intention behind watching these videos was primarily to improve specific areas, such as gaining a better understanding of grammar.

When Asmahan was facing difficulties understanding some grammar rules, she searched *YouTube* for explanations. She explained: 'Before an exam there was a grammar rule that I didn't understand and I found a YouTuber, he is famous, his name is Ahmad, I think, and he explains in Arabic' (T118). Similarly, Ghadeer commented: 'I mean, when I don't understand something from my teacher, I can understand it from other teachers [language teachers on YouTube]' (T252).

Sara subscribed to a YouTube channel for English learners called *English with Lucy*, which teaches vocabulary, pronunciation (British English, specifically, modern RP) and British culture. She enjoyed listening to Lucy's British accent and believed that this channel helped develop her vocabulary and pronunciation. She said:

Usually, I go to YouTube. I like to listen to it; I think it's the Lucy Bella channel. She is an English woman, and her channel is very useful to me because I listen to English... her accent is really good, and she gives us a lot of vocabulary, like a native speaker, and I can learn from her. (T28)

Sara gave an example of some the expressions and idioms that she learned from watching this channel's videos:

From Lucy I can learn English. Like I take from her a lot of expressions that a native speaker uses, like 'burning the midnight oil', 'every cloud has a silver lining'. I learned that from her. (T328)

Watching these language learning channel videos helped her to develop her English and learn idioms and vocabulary. When Sara and Ghadeer watched these videos, they mentioned adding closed captions (the transcription of spoken dialogue into written text that is displayed during video playing).

During her first face-to-face interview, Sara shared how she added captions when watching *English with Lucy* videos on YouTube (see Image 5.4).

In her videos, when she speaks the words in the video, I can... listen, and seeing the words has helped me to... if I listen to a word as I read it, my brain starts to make a connection. So, when I say that word, I know how to spell it and when I spell it, I know how to translate and understand. (T110)

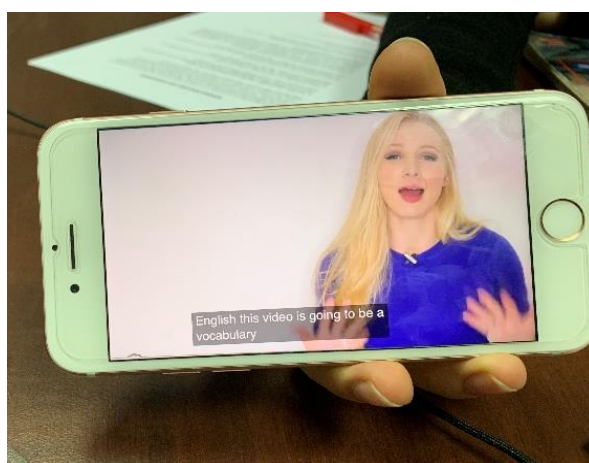


Image 5.4: Screenshot of Sara using captions when watching English with Lucy videos

Sara found that adding video captions was an excellent way to learn and remember new words because it helped her associate pronunciation with spelling. It also aided her in practising reading, which she considered a weakness. She commented: ‘Reading. So that’s why I read the word when I am listening to it [videos with captions]’ (T184).

5.3.3.3 Using the Dailik4IELTS Website to Learn How to Learn and Practise Language Skills

Leena and Aram used a language learning website called Dalilk4IELTS. Dalilk4IELTS translates to ‘your guide to IELTS’; it is a commercial website for English language learning. This website, a partnership with Cambridge University Press (Educational Partner) and idp IELTS (co-owner of IELTS), offers subscribers wide-ranging language materials for all the skills and strategies for studying each component of the IELTS exam. Dalilk4IELTS owner Abdulrahman Hijazi offers an online course on his website and posts on SNS, mainly on IELTS preparation and general language learning tips. After

students have finished the general language course, the website provides tips and exercises for IELTS exam preparation.

Leena noted that Abdulrahman Hijazi and his website were a turning point in her language learning journey. She was enthusiastic when talking about Abdulrahman and how he helped her discover the best way to learn a language. She first explained that through the Dalilk4IELTS website, she understood that in order to develop her English, she needed to increase language input through listening and reading:

When I first started my plan to learn English, I tried the traditional way by studying grammar and memorising words. But not all of this was useful and didn't make a huge difference, until I came to know Abdulrahman Hijazi. He told us that learning is not like this. If you want to learn, you need to listen and read. Literally, he said to try it for a week or two and see the difference, and this is what happened with me. In a short period, I benefitted, and I feel that I understand more from listening and reading simple things. This is the plan that I will be following, so I read and listen. (T76)

Leena said Abdulrahman helped her understand how to learn English in a short period and empowered her to learn by herself. She pointed out that Dalilk4IELTS supported her in studying the different language skills. She clarified: 'He organised it so that I have a [language] skill for an hour every day, like listening; he sets the time to listen, which makes me disciplined to listen for those two hours' (T164). Leena added: 'Because I like to rely on myself, he [Abdulrahman] just gave us the tips and resources and you learn by yourself...' (T118). She elaborated:

I take words and the quizzes and other things from his website. But for the listening, I like to look for listening resources from YouTube and websites myself along with his website, so I don't get bored. (I2.T20)

Leena gave an example of practising listening using the British Council website on her phone, which she had learned about from the Dalilk4IELTS website. She explained: 'It's called British... It has all the skills; you choose the one you like, and it gives you your level and then starts to give you more than the one topic' (T144). She also used

YouTube to practise listening by looking for different materials. As she explained: ‘I explore YouTube; for example, I write “Learning English lessons”, and I see what appears then’ (T78).

Moreover, to practise reading, Leena downloaded and read books from Dailik4IELTS, and she entered ‘reading B2’ in search engines and accessed reading materials for her level from language learning websites such as Cambridge English (T98). So the Dalilk4IELTS website not only guided her on how to develop different skills and learn independently, but it also shared recommendations and gave her access to well-known sites for language learning.

Like Leena, Aram was a great admirer of the Dalilk4IELTS website. She shared Image 5.5, which shows examples of lessons and of her progress in the course. The image indicates listening resources for beginners and next to it, a semicircle, flagging up that Aram had not yet finished the ten-minute listening activity but could go back to it later and track her progress. This activity was followed by listening resources for intermediate level, reading short stories and, finally, a freewriting activity.



Image 5.5: Aram’s screenshot of her lessons and planned language resources

Aram downloaded stories from the Dalilk4IELTS website. She commented: 'I try to read by myself as I have stories that I downloaded from Abdulrahman Hijazi's website. I printed them and now I'm reading them' (T82). Aram noted that 'many books are available online for free, and they are from great publishers such as Oxford University Press' (T232). She first read these stories on her phone, then printed them. She felt that she concentrated better by reading the stories on paper, so she reread stories to check the parts she might have missed. Aram tried to set a 15-minute timer to read the stories or to read at least a page, depending on her free time. She started by reading simple stories, which were suggested to her by Dalilk4IELTS, then moved on to intermediate level. The more advanced levels had 'new vocabulary, which includes some academic vocabulary' (T164). The fact that she was able to read texts that were classified as intermediate by Dalilk4IELTS gave her objective confirmation that her level had improved.

The Dalilk4IELTS website also helped Aram to manage her learning. She commented on how Dalilk4IELTS influenced her language study skills: 'I also learned how to manage my study time, how to estimate the required time to study something, like that part should take 15 minutes, and how to commit to that time' (T218).

5.3.3.4 Summary

From the participants' language learning activities with apps and websites, it can be observed that they used these resources mainly when they had specific goals, such as improving reading skills or developing independent learning abilities. YouTube language learning videos were valuable for comprehending grammar rules and idiomatic expressions. The Dalilk4IELTS website provided comprehensive materials and guidance. Overall, these instructional-oriented IMLE experiences showcased learners' strategic use of digital resources to achieve specific language learning goals and improve their overall language proficiency.

5.3.4 Assistive-oriented IMLE Experiences

Participants in this study also engaged in assistive IMLE experiences, which supported and complemented other forms of IMLE and non-technology-mediated language learning activities. These experiences involved using tools like Google Translate and writing support apps such as CorrectMe to check grammar and spelling accuracy. Participants used these tools to overcome language barriers, clarify unfamiliar words or phrases, and ensure the correctness of their written communication. Within the assistive-oriented IMLE experiences, two main activities and functions emerged: using the translation apps to understand new words and using translation apps and writing support apps to check the clarity of sentences.

5.3.4.1 Using Translation Apps to Understand New Words

All seven participants in the study relied on translation apps to aid their understanding of new words, with six participants specifically using Google Translate and one participant using the Reverso app. This use of translation apps was particularly evident when participants encountered unfamiliar words or phrases. For instance, when Asmahan encountered something she did not understand, she would promptly look it up using a translation app, thereby solidifying her knowledge of the word and its meaning. Asmahan explained: 'I use Translate [Google] app; it gives me the word in Arabic and the explanation in English and similar words [synonyms]' (T110). By leveraging the Google Translate app, she was able to grasp the meaning of unfamiliar words and expand her vocabulary. However, Asmahan also acknowledged that there were instances where the app was not entirely reliable. She recalled a specific example when the literal translation of the idiom 'not my cup of tea' was confusing, prompting her to seek clarification from her teacher. She explained: 'Google Translate has lots of examples of literal translation and if I depended on it, that would be wrong. I remember an example 'not my cup of tea' and it translated it as ليس كوبي من الشاي , whereas it means not my major ليس مجالي أو اختصاصي That's confusing...' (T148). This highlights the limitations of relying solely on literal translations provided by Google Translate and emphasises the importance of seeking additional clarification when encountering idiomatic expressions or subtle language.

Ameera also described instances where she encountered misinterpretations by Google Translate, leading her to prefer the English–English option available in translation apps like Reverso. Ameera remarked, ‘When I translate to Arabic, it’s a different, different meaning’ (T104). Here, she pointed out the challenges of online translation from English to Arabic, where literal translations can often lead to misunderstandings. Ameera further praised the Reverso app, stating that it outperformed Google Translate due to its provision of sample sentences that illustrate how word meanings are dependent on their context and usage, unlike Google Translate, which just gives several translations of words without sample sentences. She noted: ‘Reverso app is much better than Google Translate app.’ This preference for Reverso highlights the significance of contextual understanding in language learning and the importance of having access to tools that provide comprehensive and accurate translations.

Whenever Ameera encountered an unfamiliar word that she could grasp the general context of, she would search for its meaning, synonyms, antonyms and even model sentences. This method provided her with a deeper understanding of the word’s usage and allowed her to explore its various aspects. Ameera commented, ‘When I see a word that I don’t really know, but I know what it is about, I search and look for the meaning and what’s the difference; it really helps me’ (T24). Ameera emphasised the usefulness of this approach, stating that it greatly aided her knowledge of new vocabulary.

5.3.4.2 Using Google Translate and CorrectMe Apps to Check the Clarity of Sentences

In addition to using Google Translate to ensure the accuracy of their sentences, Aram and Asmahan relied on the app to enhance the clarity of their language before engaging in spoken or written communication. Aram, in particular, found it crucial to verify the correctness of her sentences by using Google Translate, even when she felt confident in her writing skills. She explained, ‘When I first started working on my language, even when I was sure that what I wrote was correct, I had to double-check using Google. Later, I decided to get used to writing by myself without going back to a translator’ (T208). This illustrates Aram’s initial reliance on the translation app as a means of reassurance and validation, but she eventually transitioned to independent writing without constant reliance on the tool.

Aram also employed Google Translate to check her language before speaking. She stated: 'I use it [Google Translate] when I speak to the teacher, and when I want to check a word or a sentence, I translate it' (T262). By typing her intended message in English and examining the Arabic translation, Aram could ensure that her language was clear and effectively conveyed her intended meaning (T264). This practice allowed her to refine her spoken English, providing a safety net to verify her language choices and avoid potential miscommunications with her English teacher and other interlocutors.

Similarly, Asmahan acknowledged her dependence on a translator, admitting, 'I always need to use the translator as I can't do it myself. I am not proficient in English: I understand but can't form sentences' (T12). With her language proficiency limitations, Asmahan found herself in a position where she could comprehend English but struggled to construct sentences fluently. As reported above, she had difficulty ordering in restaurants because she was unsure about her sentence structure. Consequently, she relied on Google Translate as a supportive tool to assist her in generating her intended message accurately when ordering food: 'because I am not sure if the sentence format is correct, I check it first' (T18).

To check her grammar and the accuracy of her intended meaning, Asmahan turned to an app called CorrectMe. She shared an example, saying: 'Yesterday... I had an English assignment. I wrote it then wanted to check the grammar, spelling and punctuation [on CorrectMe] before submitting it on Blackboard' (T88). CorrectMe provided her with an additional layer of support, allowing her to review her written work and ensure its grammatical accuracy before submitting it for assessment.

Aram and Asmahan used translation and writing tools such as Google Translate and CorrectMe to enhance their language skills and boost their confidence, as discussed in Section 5.2.4.2. Aram, despite her growing writing skills, initially relied on Google Translate to verify the correctness of her sentences, as she was seeking reassurance and validation. However, as she gained more confidence, she transitioned to independent writing without constantly relying on the translation tool. Moreover, both Aram and Asmahan used Google Translate as a pre-conversation measure to ensure the clarity of their language before engaging in spoken communication. By using these tools, they were able to refine their spoken English, verify their language choices and

avoid potential miscommunications, ultimately bolstering their confidence in their language abilities.

5.3.4.3 Summary

Participants in the study utilised assistive-oriented IMLE experiences, employing tools such as Google Translate, Reverso and CorrectMe. These tools supported and complemented their language learning activities. Despite their reliance on translation apps like Google Translate to grasp new words and phrases, participants acknowledged the limitations of machine translation. They stressed the significance of seeking clarification and using apps with contextual examples for accurate understanding. Additionally, participants used Google Translate and CorrectMe to ensure clarity and correctness in their sentences. Google Translate verified the accuracy of their written language before communication, boosting their confidence, while CorrectMe helped with reviewing and ensuring grammatical accuracy. These tools facilitated quick access to translations and definitions, expanding vocabulary and bridging language gaps. Furthermore, they provided valuable feedback on grammar and sentence structure, enhancing written communication. Ultimately, these assistive IMLE experiences played a crucial role in participants' language learning journey by providing practical resources to overcome language barriers and improve proficiency.

5.3.5 Summary of the IMLE Experiences

Based on the reported learning activities, it is evident that these Saudi female university students actively use smartphones for independent language learning. Their experiences across various types of IMLE activities showcase their resourcefulness, adaptability and commitment to leveraging digital tools to enhance their language skills. In addition, it shows how the same digital tools are used across the four types of IMLE experiences. For example, SNS are used in entertainment, social and instructional experiences.

The entertainment-related IMLE experiences of Saudi female students demonstrate their engagement with popular forms of media and social platforms. By listening to songs, watching films and YouTube videos, and browsing SNS platforms like Twitter and Instagram, they not only find enjoyment but also immerse themselves in authentic language content. These activities provide an effective way to learn a wide range of

skills in the target language, from vocabulary and grammar to natural language usage and cultural references. Connecting language learning with real-life situations motivates students by showing the relevance of their language studies.

The socially oriented IMLE experiences of Saudi female students highlight the importance of connecting with proficient speakers of the target language. Platforms like Twitter, HelloTalk and Cambly offer opportunities for language practice and meaningful interactions. Given the limited availability of English speakers in their immediate environment, these digital tools provide learners with a valuable means of accessing authentic language practice and cultural exchange. Through Twitter, students can post in the target language, interact with others, and establish connections. HelloTalk, a language exchange app, enables them to connect with language partners who are interested in practising the target language. This not only improves their language skills but also allows them to gain insights into different cultures and establish lasting connections. Additionally, the Cambly app provides focused conversational practice with qualified tutors, offering opportunities for personalised language learning.

The instructional-oriented IMLE experiences of Saudi female students reflect their proactive approach to language learning. By using resources such as YouTube language learning videos, language learning websites like Dailik4IELTS, and language learning apps like iSub and dictionary apps, they seek to enhance their vocabulary and grammar knowledge. YouTube language learning videos serve as valuable resources for understanding grammar rules, expanding vocabulary and linking pronunciation to written words. The access to various teachers and explanations on YouTube is particularly valuable when students encounter difficulties in comprehending certain grammar concepts. Language learning websites like Dailik4IELTS provide comprehensive guidance for IELTS preparation and general language learning, transforming students' approach to language acquisition. The availability of reliable language learning platforms recommended on these websites facilitates independent learning. Through these resources, students are able to expand their vocabulary, practise language skills and deepen their understanding of grammar structures.

Furthermore, assistive-oriented IMLE experiences play a supportive role in the language learning journey of Saudi female students. Students rely on tools such as Google Translate and writing support apps like Grammarly to overcome language barriers, to check grammar and spelling accuracy, and to clarify unfamiliar words or phrases. These assistive tools offer speed, efficiency and convenience, enabling students to navigate language challenges effectively. By using these tools, students gain access to immediate translations, grammar suggestions and language explanations, enhancing their language comprehension, communication skills and overall proficiency. The convenience and practicality of these assistive tools make them invaluable resources in students' language learning process. Some limitations arising from different IMLE experiences will be discussed in Section 5.4 below.

5.4 Learners' Experiences of Monitoring and Evaluating IMLE

Smartphones are powerful tools for language learning, offering learners a wide range of resources and opportunities, as addressed in Section 5.3. However, as learners monitor and evaluate their independent English language learning using smartphones, they noticed the challenges. This section examines these challenges and their impact on students' language learning journeys. These themes encompass feeling lost in IMLE, finding a language partner, sustaining motivation and the role of interest, learning independently but not in isolation, and financial considerations. All these themes relate directly to the second research question, which explores the challenges faced by Saudi female university students when using smartphones for independent English language learning.

5.4.1 Feeling Lost in IMLE Planning and Managing

While the flexibility and accessibility of mobile platforms offer much promise, learners highlighted a critical challenge: feeling lost when planning and managing IMLE.

Razan expressed her disappointment with the absence of guidance, which resulted in delays in her language progress. She believed that not being sufficiently trained to plan her independent learning hindered her ability to develop a systematic approach. When seeking assistance, Razan looked to language teachers and fellow learners to provide

information on how to structure her English learning and effectively make use of available resources. She commented:

Because I am a beginner in English, I need a plan. 1 2 3, now I don't have a plan, so I jump from 1 to 4 to 10. I need someone to guide me. As for the apps and websites, my father always sends me recommendations via WhatsApp. But like most of the students, I need help in knowing how to learn using the resources available. (T82)

While her father would frequently send her recommendations for language learning apps and websites via WhatsApp, Razan stressed that she needed support in understanding how to strategically use these resources and create a well-structured learning plan. Razan also struggled with the challenge of choosing materials that were aligned with her language level. Despite downloading several books on her smartphone with the intention of reading them, she found herself able to read only a few pages before abandoning them. Razan believed that these books were beyond her current language proficiency, meaning that it was difficult for her to comprehend the content effectively. This experience highlights the struggle faced by language learners like Razan, who desire to engage with authentic materials but often find them too challenging to fully grasp at their current proficiency level. It underscores the importance of finding resources that strike the right balance between providing a learning challenge and ensuring comprehension and progress.

On a similar note, Ghadeer noticed a significant gap when it came to developing her reading skills. She recognised that reading required specific strategies and techniques that she aimed to develop further. Ghadeer acknowledged the importance of expert guidance and targeted resources in enhancing her language skills, particularly in areas where independent learning might present challenges. When seeking recommendations from language teachers, Ghadeer hoped to discover apps and websites that could serve as valuable tools, with a role resembling that of a supportive teacher in terms of helping her to master specific skills such as reading and writing. She believed that having access to recommended resources and expert guidance would enable her to overcome challenges and make progress in her language learning journey.

Furthermore, some participants highlighted the difficulties they encountered in identifying appropriate resources, such as deciding who to follow on SNS. For instance, Leena followed a 'native' speaker on Snapchat 'to listen to English language' (T124) spoken by 'people not from Saudi Arabia' (T126). However, she soon realised that the language used by this speaker was not suitable for her learning needs: 'her language was not suitable for me to learn because her register [language used] is not at the level where I can learn from as she uses inappropriate words...' (T126). Reflecting on this experience, Leena recognised the importance of considering people's backgrounds and content before deciding to follow them. She realised the need for more judgement and intentionality in selecting resources that aligned with her language learning goals, rather than randomly encountering influencers on SNS.

Leena's and Aram's experiences showed that there might be an alternative to teachers' guidance. They found a solution to the lack of guidance by subscribing to an online language course called Dalilk4IELTS (As presented in Section 5.3.3.3). This comprehensive language platform equipped them with the necessary tools and techniques to take control of their learning journey. By subscribing to Dalilk4IELTS, they gained access to structured lessons, study materials and study time management strategies. Leena remarked on how Dalilk4IELTS positively influenced her language study skills, stating: 'I also learned how to manage my study time, estimate the required time for each task, and commit to that schedule' (T218). Aram also found that subscribing to Dalilk4IELTS provided her with a structured framework and a clear path for language development.

5.4.2 Finding a Language Partner

The challenges of finding a language partner illustrate the difficulties faced by Ghadeer and Aram when seeking interactive language learning opportunities outside the classroom. Ghadeer's exploration of social chatting apps like Ablo and InterPals initially seemed promising, as these platforms provided her with the chance to connect with people from different cultures and work on her language skills. She commented:

I used a chat app where you can chat with people from different countries, from Costa Rica and other countries that I've never heard

of before. So, the good thing is that you get to know people from different cultures and work on your language. (T40)

Ghadeer's experience shows the affordances of smartphones in connecting people across cultures and promoting opportunities for language use. However, as Ghadeer shared details about her experience with these social tools, it became apparent that locating a reliable language partner was difficult. She noted that although it was a pleasant experience, she was sometimes uncomfortable talking to others due to the differences in cultural values and the language used, which was occasionally inappropriate. Below is an extract from the interview in which Ghadeer discussed her experience with chatting apps.

Ghadeer: I was interested in meeting new people and talking to people from other cultures. So, it was a pleasant and useful experience because you can meet people from totally different cultures and with different values; some are rude, so I wouldn't say it was perfect, but I met some good people. However, there were some disrespectful people too. I mean, some people who don't respect your values or culture and believe that they know best. I am a religious person, and I get really upset when someone disrespects the concepts and rituals of my religion and culture.

Amal: Can you give me an example of a situation?

Ghadeer: I met a Canadian girl, originally from Russia; we were the same age, so we chatted. She started talking about women's rights and said that we have limited rights and things like that; she also used to write many inappropriate words and ideas.

Amal: Inappropriate?

Ghadeer: Yes, I mean, she talked about what we regard as sensitive topics; maybe it is okay in her culture to talk about such topics, but it is totally unacceptable here.

Ghadeer's experience indicates how other cultures can clash with the students' culture and beliefs. Cultural differences seem to have pushed this student away from using social networking sites for EFL learning. As the main purpose of these apps is social

interaction, she pointed out that she was not able to choose who to interact with in order to learn English:

You can chat with someone from another country... but the goal is not to learn a language but to talk to people from other cultures and so. Because you cannot specify the country, you can choose the continent, like Europe, for example. But you cannot select England, for instance. (T70)

In addition to cultural differences, Ghadeer highlighted the importance of having conversation partners with a high level of English proficiency who could provide constructive feedback. She expressed frustration when conversing with individuals who did not possess a good command of English themselves, as it hindered her ability to practise the language effectively. Ghadeer recognised the need for proficient English speakers who could engage in formal conversations aligned with her academic goals. She explained:

Well, when I started, I remember I was talking about pizza, so it was not related to language. I didn't feel that I benefitted from it because most of the people I chatted with didn't have a good level of English either. To practise the language, I need to talk to someone who is very good at English and speaks formal English as I mentioned, otherwise, I'd be lost and wouldn't learn. (T72)

Here Ghadeer pointed out the importance of choosing a proficient language partner to practise speaking. People who use English online may not be proficient speakers, which might negatively affect the learners by frustrating them or influencing their language. Additionally, Ghadeer pointed out a few other issues, such as the limited benefits of conversations with other young students in achieving her goal to improve academic English:

The main goal was to practise the language, but I didn't know how. Then, when I thought about it, I found that if I talked with people as young as me, they would mostly be talking like informally, which was not what I needed for university as I'll have to use formal English. However, if I talk to educated people or English students I would

benefit more. Besides, there was the time difference issue, so, it was not practical. (T66)

As these social interactions did not benefit her, Ghadeer decided to delete these social apps and she started using HelloTalk, an app for language learners (details are in Section 5.3.2.2).

Similarly, Aram faced challenges in finding English-speaking partners who were willing to interact with low-level English learners. Despite her attempts to connect with English speakers on Twitter, she found such opportunities to be rare. Aram's disappointment stemmed from her desire to practise English through typing and engaging in meaningful language exchanges. While she found an online community of language learners on Twitter, the lack of a suitable language partner left her unsatisfied. As a result, she resorted to using Cambly conversation skills (details in Section 5.3.2.3) and continued posting in English on Twitter to enhance her language skills.

Ghadeer and Aram's experiences highlight the significant challenges faced by individuals seeking language partners outside traditional learning environments. One of the primary obstacles is cultural clashes. When engaging with language partners from different cultural backgrounds, misunderstandings and miscommunications can arise due to differences in customs, values and communication styles. These clashes can hinder the language learning process and create discomfort for both parties.

Another challenge is the limited proficiency of potential language partners. It can be difficult to find partners who are at a similar language level, which may lead to unbalanced conversations where one person dominates the conversation, or where both partners struggle to communicate effectively. This limitation can hinder the language learning process, as learners may not receive the feedback and corrections they need to improve their skills. Furthermore, there can be a mismatch between informal conversations with language partners and the academic English requirements that learners often need to meet for exams or formal settings. Casual language partners may not provide the structured practice needed to excel in academic or professional environments, leading to frustration for learners.

To address these challenges, Ghadeer switched to using the language learner app HelloTalk, while Aram relied on Cambly for conversational practice. Online platforms like these can indeed offer some solutions to the difficulties encountered in other language exchange environments.

5.4.3 Sustaining Motivation through Personal Interest

Sustaining motivation in language learning emerged as a crucial factor that influences the success of independent learners. The participants in the study highlighted the importance of personal interest in selecting materials of IMLE to sustain motivation. For instance, Ghadeer emphasised the importance of following her personal interests and identifying engaging materials, such as documentaries, to maintain her motivation.

Ghadeer interest in specific subjects played a vital role in sustaining her motivation. For example, when she watched English-language documentaries on topics like the environment or nutrition, she found herself engaged in the content for extended periods. Her desire to understand what was being said drove her to develop her English skills without consciously realising it. Ghadeer pointed out the importance of being interested in the material:

... when I watch a documentary about the environment or something related to nutrition or similar topics, I may spend a long time watching and enjoying it without realising that I'm actually learning. I learn because I want to understand what they are saying. (T88)

By contrast, when she tried using language learning materials such as language apps, she quickly abandoned them because she found them boring. For instance, when she tried using the Duolingo app, she did not like it because it 'gives the same information over and over' (T178).

Likewise, Aram loved watching make-up tutorials on YouTube and preferred English to local Arabic videos. She believed that English-speaking videos were more exciting and informative and were also very helpful for improving listening skills and learning vocabulary. When watching make-up tutorials, Aram said: 'I prefer English speakers because they pronounce words correctly, and during the tutorial they might joke or talk about something else – all of that is useful for me to improve my English' (T190).

She gave the example of pronouncing 'mascara'. Aram also noted: 'I worry I might forget my language [English]' (T82), so SNS helped sustain her connection with the English language and enabled her to learn make-up techniques simultaneously.

5.4.4 Learning Independently, Not in Isolation

The findings illustrated that learners are not learning in isolation. Instead, they are part of a supportive network that includes teachers, family, peers and online communities, each playing a distinct role in their learning journey.

Teachers serve as a bridge to valuable resources, guiding learners. This can be seen in Sara's experience, who received recommendations for specific tools for language development like the Mariam dictionary app. She highlighted the value of these suggestions, stating, 'There is a very good application. It's called Mariam dictionary. My English teacher in level 2 told me about it' (T5). Further, Sara emphasised the convenience and multifaceted benefits of e-books, saying, 'There's a lot of books I found it in Amazon because Teacher XXX told me about it. I bought it. It's not that high price, it's cheap, like 30, like that. And you can listen and read at the same time' (T334).

Family support emerged as a crucial element, with Razan and Aram benefitting from the active involvement of their fathers in their language learning process. Their familial environment fosters a culture of learning, with recommendations and financial support for educational websites, creating a nurturing atmosphere that encourages language practice. Razan described her father's active role in her language learning by sending her app and website recommendations through WhatsApp: 'As for the apps and websites, my father always sends me recommendations via WhatsApp' (T82). Similarly, Aram's recalls, 'In the beginning, I used to read simple stories from a website that my father shared with me' (T152).

Asmahan's learning experience also illustrates the vital role that family, particularly siblings, can play in supporting and fostering language learning. Her sisters' influence is evident in several instances. Despite an initial disinterest in the multitude of advertised applications, Asmahan was persuaded by her sister's enthusiasm: 'There were many ads, but I was never excited about it then my sister tried it and she loved it and encouraged me to download it' (T48).

Her sisters' proactive approach went beyond mere suggestions; they actively engaged with her in language learning activities. As Asmahan recalls about an interactive app, 'There is also this old app like three years ago, it was fun they held competitions and challenges in English. My sister wanted us to join in together, so we play and benefit at the same time' (T48). This shared engagement made the process enjoyable.

The encouragement extended to reading as well, an activity Asmahan admitted she did not inherently enjoy. However, the persistent encouragement from her sisters played a critical role in her continued effort to learn English: 'I don't really like reading, but my sisters insist on me and encourage me to complete the books, they really want me to learn English' (T56). Their insistence and support were instrumental in her perseverance and progress in language acquisition.

These anecdotes from Asmahan's experience highlight the personal and motivational support that siblings can provide in the language learning process. In this case, they not only recommended resources but also participated alongside the learner, creating a supportive and engaging learning environment that extended beyond traditional educational settings.

Furthermore, Leena's insights into her language learning journey reveal a significant shift in her approach to acquiring English, influenced by the collective experiences and opinions of her peers. She explained, 'All the people around me that I asked about learning English said that learning English in school was not useful – no one became professional in English language from school. They learned by using their phones and from movies and so on. No one said that my language developed from school' (T10). The advice and shared experiences from her social circle acted as a form of support, offering her alternative pathways to language proficiency that ultimately proved more relevant and beneficial for her personal language learning process.

Moreover, learners referred to social networking sites for inspiration. Razan, who had not previously allocated dedicated time to studying English before university, initially lacked a sense of passion for the language. However, she found a source of inspiration by watching YouTube vloggers who were fluent in multiple languages. Razan particularly enjoyed subscribing to channels of vloggers who spoke more than one

language, including English. She said: 'When I hear about someone like this who is my age or younger and knows more than one language, it inspires me to learn as well' (I2.T63). She explained that hearing about individuals of her age or younger who possessed multilingual skills served as a motivation for her own language learning journey.

Similarly, Ameera found motivation by following language learners on Twitter who shared app recommendations and language learning tips. Being an active Twitter user, she came across people living in various countries, such as the US or the UK, who provided valuable insights about language learning apps. She commented:

I am always in my Twitter mm... hmm... so a lot of people who live in other countries like the US or UK or wherever, they give recommendation about these apps and they say what would the good of this app and stuff like that and whatever I see good I download the app. (T148)

Ameera mentioned that whenever she found an app recommendation that seemed beneficial, she would download it based on the positive feedback she received from these individuals. It is possible that Ameera's choice of whom to follow for language learning advice was influenced by her admiration for her brothers' English language skills, although she did not explicitly state this.

5.4.5 Financial Considerations

It is important to acknowledge that accessing certain language platforms, such as Dalilk4IELTS and Cambly, could be a financial burden for some learners. Razan, for instance, expressed her desire to benefit from platforms like Cambly, as she believed it would have improved her language skills. However, the cost associated with such platforms prevented her from subscribing, underscoring the financial constraints that learners may face in accessing certain resources. Razan noted: 'Cambly is really beneficial. If I had continued using it, it would have improved my language. But it's costly, so I couldn't' (T32).

5.4.6 Summary of the Advantages and Constraints of IMLE

IMLE, as experienced by the participants, presents both advantages and constraints. Participants shared their experiences of using online platforms to practise spoken English. They found that leveraging online spaces boosted their confidence and provided valuable opportunities for speaking practice. However, learners also encountered challenges, such as interacting with unwelcoming individuals and navigating cultural differences. Finding reliable language partners and engaging with proficient English speakers were identified as key challenges when using online spaces for speaking practice.

Sustaining motivation emerged as another crucial challenge discussed by the participants. Independent learners often lack the structured environment and external accountability provided by formal language courses, which makes it vital to discover ways to stay engaged and enthusiastic throughout their learning journey. Participants employed various strategies, such as seeking inspiration from multilingual YouTube vloggers, seeking advice and recommendations from fellow language learners on SNS and engaging with materials aligned with their personal interests. Nevertheless, they also recognised that distractions from SNS and encountering repetitive or uninteresting language learning materials could be demotivating factors.

One notable advantage of using smartphones is the abundance of resources available through them, which enables learners to tailor their learning experiences to their individual interests and learning styles. However, Leena and Razan encountered a limitation as they struggled to identify resources that matched their language proficiency levels. Some participants highlighted the importance of in-class learning and teacher support in their language learning journeys. Some expressed concerns about the lack of guidance for their independent language learning and emphasised the need for structured approaches and assistance with using available resources effectively. Seeking support from language teachers and fellow learners, they aimed to develop well-structured learning plans. Additionally, participants acknowledged the necessity of expert guidance in developing specific language skills, such as reading, and sought recommendations for targeted resources. Some participants found solutions by subscribing to online language courses that provided structured lessons and study

materials. However, financial constraints were identified as a limitation that hindered access to certain language platforms.

5.5 Main Points from the Findings Chapter

The findings chapter presents an understanding of the role of smartphones in independent English language learning based on the experiences presented by the research participants, which provided valuable insights and takeaways. The learners' IMLE is directly linked to their previous experiences of English learning, their motivations for wanting to improve their proficiency, and the areas where they most wanted to improve. Through the study, seven distinct themes were identified, which collectively encompassed the experiences of learners in this context.

One of the prominent themes that emerged was the incorporation of language learning into learners' daily routines through entertainment-related experiences. This involved activities such as watching films, engaging with English-language content on social networking sites and exploring popular culture in English. By integrating language learning into their everyday lives, learners found an enjoyable and engaging way to enhance their skills. Additionally, learners in the study made effective use of social-oriented experiences to overcome limited English-speaking opportunities. Platforms like Twitter, HelloTalk and Cambly played a significant role in facilitating language practice and interaction with proficient speakers or other learners. The findings also highlighted differences in using social networking sites and social language learning sites when engaging in online interactions for language learning.

Another crucial theme that emerged was instructional-oriented experiences. Learners used digital resources available on their smartphones strategically to support their language acquisition process. These resources included language learning apps, online courses, educational websites and interactive language exchange platforms. By using these tools, learners found effective ways to improve their language skills, access relevant learning materials and receive guidance in their self-directed language learning journey. Furthermore, the study highlighted the benefits of assistive-oriented experiences, where learners used smartphone tools such as Google Translate and CorrectMe to enhance their language skills. These assistive technologies provided

immediate language support, allowing learners to quickly look up unfamiliar words, check grammar and receive instant feedback on their writing or pronunciation.

However, the study also shed light on the challenges faced by learners in selecting suitable resources, as the abundance of options could be overwhelming. Strategies for evaluating and selecting resources and language partners emerged as crucial considerations for learners. Moreover, sustaining motivation was identified as a critical factor. Subscribing to online language websites and seeking peer support were highlighted as effective ways to stay motivated and connected within the digital language learning landscape. The findings emphasised the need for learners to develop effective learning strategies, set realistic goals and maintain their enthusiasm over time. In the following chapter, I discuss these findings in relation to the literature and the IMLE framework, and I consider their implications.

6 Discussion of Findings

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I continue my exploration of the findings of this study and their relation to the broader literature. I explicitly highlight the IMLE framework phases in two main sections. The first section elaborates on the first two phases of the IMLE framework: planning and managing. It discusses how the learners planned to increase their language exposure and enhance their vocabulary acquisition through daily entertaining activities, such as watching films and browsing SNS. Then it looks at the next phase, where learners sought to improve their speaking abilities. Given the scarcity of opportunities for practice in their local environment, they selected language partners on various social platforms, tailoring their choices to their objectives. Third, I look at how learners made use of a diverse array of digital tools to meet specific requirements, such as achieving specific language goals or acquiring general learning skills, like agency. Fourthly, I discuss how they integrated assistive digital tools to enhance English language proficiency and build confidence.

The second section focuses on the final phase of the IMLE framework, emphasising the monitoring and evaluation of the learning process. It addresses many challenges learners face in IMLE and proposes practical solutions to overcome them. The first part of this section underlines the role of personal interest in materials for sustained IMLE. The second part of the section spotlights the indispensable need for community support in IMLE, arguing that independent learning does not occur in isolation.

6.2 Planning and Managing Experiences of IMLE

Phase 1 (planning) and Phase 2 (managing) of my IMLE framework relate to the learners' reported experiences of using their smartphones for independent language learning. The participants clearly demonstrate their goals and motivations and the relevance of managing their learning through selecting resources. As it is not possible to entirely separate the three phases, this section also contains some references to monitoring and evaluation. More general reflection on their learning overall is included in Section 6.3.

6.2.1 Using Daily Digital Entertaining Activities to Improve English Language

Living in Saudi Arabia, where English is considered a foreign language, participants encountered limited opportunities for authentic English interactions in their everyday lives. Therefore, they turned to digital activities to improve their language, of which two were the most prominent. First, they selectively followed English-speaking individuals on SNS like Twitter, ensuring regular exposure to English content, and they watched English films. Second, they enhanced their comprehension by enabling captions while watching videos on platforms such as YouTube. This reflects the two phases of IMLE: planning and managing. The participants acknowledged the critical importance of sustained engagement for maintaining proficiency as they aimed to deepen their exposure to English through immersion in language-rich environments. This objective was further enriched by a focused desire to broaden their vocabulary and a recognition of the need for consistent practice in reading and listening skills.

Learners' reports of their daily digital activities to improve their English that involved entertainment can be linked to many language learning theories. First, participants' engagement with SNS and films for language learning aligns with Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that learners progress optimally when exposed to content slightly above their current proficiency level. The findings of this study support this perspective, indicating that engaging with English material slightly more advanced than a learner's current level can notably enhance proficiency. For example, Ameera shared that she planned to listen to songs she did not fully understand in order to challenge herself. She then managed her learning by referring to the lyrics to verify her comprehension. Similarly, Ghadeer mentioned that she sometimes found the language in YouTube videos to be challenging. To tackle this, she made use of YouTube's features by rewinding certain sections, adjusting the audio playback speed, and adding captions to aid her understanding. These strategies reflect Krashen's principles, highlighting that immersion in somewhat challenging content serves as a key driver for language progression. As reported by participants, continuous interaction with English content on SNS benefited their learning. This suggests that they understood a significant portion of the English they encountered. This is consistent with research by Gonulal (2019), who found that learners' use of Instagram for language learning generally improved

their language skills. It also aligns with Alghasab and Alfadley (2018), who highlighted the potential of SNS in promoting English fluency, and Trinder (2017), who noted that learners improved their listening comprehension by viewing TV series and films.

Building upon Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982), which highlights the significance of interacting with content just beyond one's current proficiency level, and the constructivist perspective on language learning, which asserts that knowledge is constructed rather than passively absorbed emphasising the learner's active role in their language learning, their true efficacy becomes apparent when combined with the autonomy that digital platforms provide. This freedom allows learners to dictate both their learning pace and environment. With apps like YouTube, learners such as Ghadeer can selectively access challenging content and become active constructors of knowledge. This strategy facilitates a deeper understanding and ensures that vocabulary and language skills are acquired in a context that is both relevant and meaningful. Through smartphones, learners are not just exposed to advanced linguistic content; they actively dissect, comprehend and apply it, significantly enhancing the efficacy and personalisation of their language learning experience.

Another planning and managing tactic used by the participants was to incorporate closed captions in video-based English language learning, which has substantial benefits. Ghadeer, Sara and Ameera reported encountering challenges in interpreting colloquial expressions or regional accents in films and SNS content. Amidst these complexities, certain strategies can facilitate comprehension. One such method is using captions in videos, a technique that is increasingly used to improve listening skills and vocabulary. The positive experiences of study participants identified in this research corroborate the well-documented immediate benefits of using closed captions for language learning. This research goes a step further (thereby contributing to the existing literature) through its particular focus on the concept of 'noticing', where active and conscious attention is paid to new vocabulary and idioms. The dual coding theory further validates the effectiveness of combining text and visuals in language learning, emphasising the importance of multimodal approaches.

By employing closed captions, learners were able to capture words that might otherwise have been lost in the rapid flow of speech. The participants emphasised the

importance of noticing new vocabulary through captions, which subsequently contributed to their vocabulary acquisition and retention. Ameera specifically highlighted how captions improved her English by enabling her to notice unfamiliar words. Once identified, the closed captions provided her with the opportunity to observe the spelling of the words, leading her to further explore their meanings, synonyms, antonyms and usage through online dictionaries and translators. This aligns with the notion that closed captions play a significant role in drawing learners' attention to speech that would otherwise be challenging to comprehend, thereby facilitating the learning of unknown vocabulary (Vanderplank, 1988; Zanon, 2006). Vanderplank (1988) highlights that captions enable learners to follow a TV programme's videotext easily, especially with 'fast, authentic speech and unfamiliar accent' (p.278).

Moreover, the participants stated that using captions and audio-visual content not only enhanced their vocabulary but also improved various language skills, such as listening comprehension. Sara and Ghadeer reported experiencing better listening comprehension and grammar competence compared to their classmates, attributing this to their constant exposure to English through the use of captions on their devices. These findings are consistent with the study by Birules and Soto-Faraco (2016), which explored the effect on language acquisition of watching English films with different types of subtitling. The authors observed that participants' skills improved significantly when closed captions were present, surpassing the improvements seen with subtitled or non-subtitled versions.

Korucu Kış (2021) pointed out that the presence of captions helps learners to notice vocabulary and idioms and hence facilitates intake. As explained in the literature by Badger (2018), intake is what the learners notice and understand. Drawing from theoretical frameworks like Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis and Krashen's (1982) theories on input and affective filters, we can gain a clearer understanding of the instrumental role of captions and lyrics in language learning. Schmidt's hypothesis emphasises the learner's conscious attention or 'noticing' of specific linguistic aspects, positing that it is this active engagement that transforms mere input into intake. In the context of language learning, captions, particularly for L2 listeners, serve as essential

guides. They channel the learner's focus, bridging the gap between unfamiliar content and attainable comprehension, thus enriching their listening skills.

As summarised in Figure 6.1 below, participants in Saudi Arabia leveraged digital activities to enhance their English language skills as a way of compensating for their limited opportunities for authentic English interactions. They selectively engaged with challenging content on social media and in films, aligning with the input hypothesis. Their use of closed captions was instrumental in aiding vocabulary acquisition and practising language receptive skills. This study highlights the effectiveness of these strategies in digital language learning and offers valuable insights into language learning practices in multimedia-rich environments.

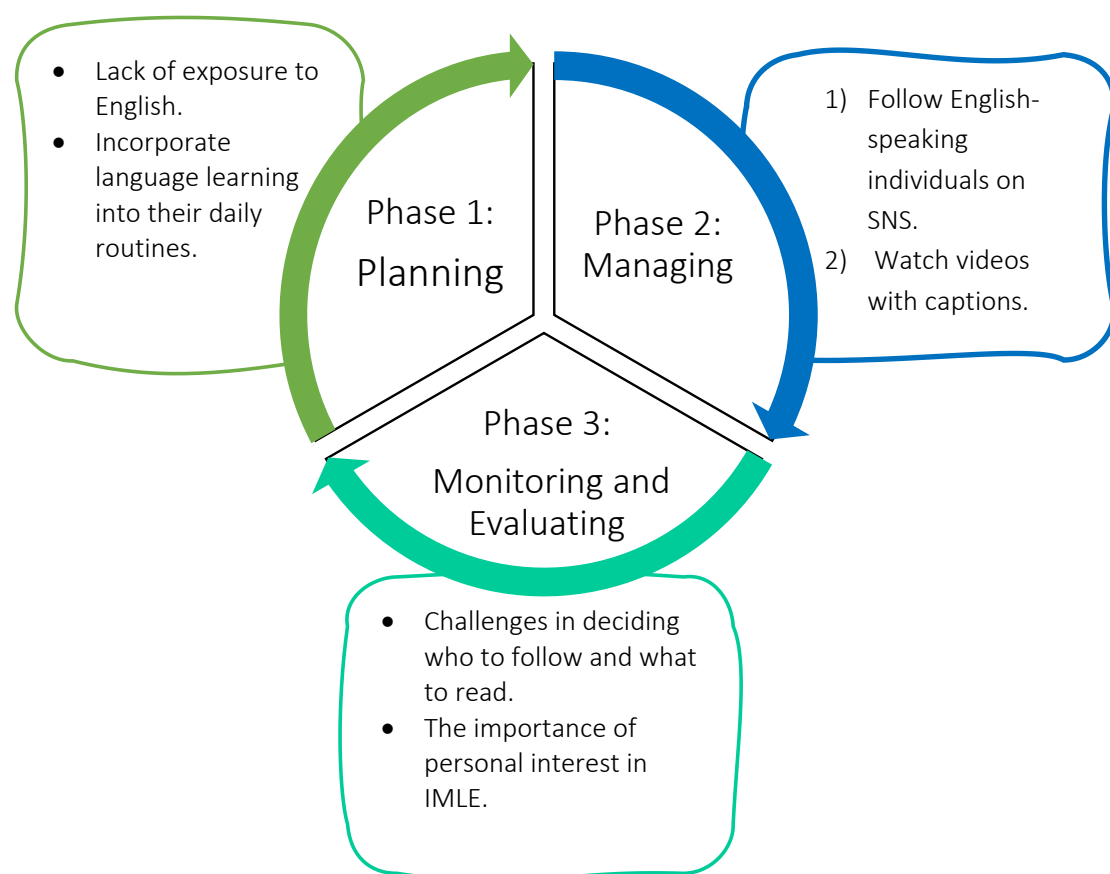


Figure 6.1: Entertainment-related IMLE experiences

6.2.2 Choosing English Language Partners across Different Social Digital Tools

This section discusses the learners' engagement in social language learning experiences via their smartphones and highlights the importance of choosing English language partners carefully in such experiences. Building on the previous section, which described how participants immersed themselves in English through multimedia, it further explores how they practised the language they had previously learned. The participants engaged in socially oriented IMLE experiences as an additional method for managing their IMLE. As outlined in the participants' backgrounds (see Section 5.2), the context of Saudi Arabia, where English is not the primary language, offers limited opportunities for practising spoken English. Consequently, it was common for participants to seek English language learning partners through various digital tools like Twitter, Cambly and HelloTalk, resulting in a range of experiences and challenges (as detailed in Sections 5.3.2 and 5.4.2). With all three digital tools, the learners reported applying strategies to find language partners with common interests. On Twitter, Ameera posted in English and used hashtags when sharing her views about films and other topics. On Cambly, Razan chose to practise her language with a young tutor who was a fan of the same Korean drama and musical band. On HelloTalk, Ghadeer decided to interact with a British nurse as she was planning to study nursing.

Unlike broader social networking sites, Cambly⁷ and HelloTalk⁸ are specifically designed for language learning (i.e. language learning social networking sites). Participants who have used Cambly and HelloTalk mentioned that one of its most salient features is that it provides profiles of proficient speakers. Through these profiles, learners can learn about the professional and educational backgrounds as well as the hobbies and interests of a potential conversation partner or tutor. This feature not only supports learners in choosing teachers with similar interests for smoother conversations but is also particularly relevant in contexts like Saudi Arabia, where gender segregation and cultural norms can influence the choice of a language partner. For example, in the

⁷ Cambly is a language social networking site that gives learners instant access to proficient English speakers over live video chats.

⁸ HelloTalk is a language exchange app.

conservative cultural landscape of Saudi Arabia, the option to select a language partner of the same gender may be crucial for some learners like Razan.

Razan's experience also illustrates the importance of finding language partners with shared interests. Razan chose a young Cambly tutor who enjoyed watching anime and was a fan of BTS (a popular Korean band). These shared interests served as conversation starters and made the language-learning experience more engaging. These findings differ from previous studies such as Lai et al. (2018), which characterised social-oriented language learning experiences as inauthentic and boring. The difference may be attributable to the manner in which learners engage in these activities: selecting language partners with common interests leads to more meaningful conversations and genuine interactions. This confirms Pinner's (2014) argument that authenticity in communication is context-dependent and varies among learners.

Cambly was one of the popular tools mentioned to find language partners and practise speaking English. Razan and Aram liked that it enabled them to browse the tutors' profiles to find relevant information about their experience or interests from a wide range of disciplines and professions. Although it claims that it connects learners with qualified English tutors, upon checking the employment requirement, I found that they require no qualifications or prior experience in education or language learning, thus, they are merely English speakers: 'No teaching certificate, bachelor's degree or prior teaching experience needed' (Cambly, 2022). This may result in learners engaging in more casual conversations rather than structured, guided learning sessions. Nonetheless, learners still have the opportunity to speak with proficient English speakers who are committed to engaging in conversation during the paid session time, which sets it apart from other social platforms that lack such commitment.

Similar to Cambly, HelloTalk is an app for practising language by interacting with other people. HelloTalk connects people who speak a language fluently with those who are trying to learn the same language, and vice versa. For example, as a proficient Arabic speaker studying English, Ghadeer was looking for English-speaking individuals who were learning Arabic. Conversation partners can communicate through written text, speech-to-text, recorded audio messages, video chats and doodling, among other methods (Rivera, 2017).

Using such an app might not be appealing over a long time period. However, it could be a source to find language partners. Ghadeer's experience in language learning exemplifies a common pattern observed among users of social language learning platforms. Initially engaging with HelloTalk, a language exchange app, she sought to enhance her language skills. However, the enduring appeal of such apps can diminish over time. The real value for Ghadeer came from connecting with a language partner, specifically a British nurse, through the app. This connection marked a key shift, as they exchanged contact details and subsequently continued their interactions on Instagram, leading Ghadeer to delete HelloTalk.

Ghadeer's connection with a British nurse was related to her nursing background. Their interaction extended beyond language learning, illustrating the potential for real relationships to form. In contrast, when Ghadeer tried using chatting apps with randomly assigned partners, she found the experiences disappointing and limited, often resulting in conversations about mundane topics like pizza, which offered little value to her. This outcome is contrary to that of Stevenson and Liu (2010), who reported that learners find relationships on language learning social networking sites to be superficial and prefer to integrate language learning on existing social networks rather than adopting a new platform.

Language learning social networking sites have the capacity to pair learners with fluent speakers, language educators or more experienced learners in a supportive environment. This form of pairing is invaluable because it enables the less-experienced learner to benefit from the guidance, corrections and feedback provided by their more skilled counterpart. Consequently, the learner does not just practise speaking in a vacuum but does so under conditions that facilitate more effective and efficient skill development. This interactive framework of guided practice resonates well with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD), which was introduced in Chapter 2 of this study. According to Vygotsky, the ZPD represents the difference between what learners can do on their own and what they can accomplish with the aid of a 'mediator', or in this case, a more proficient speaker and a mobile device. Within this zone, learners perform tasks that they could not manage alone, thereby expanding their skill set and stretching their capabilities. Cambly and similar platforms effectively

place the learner in this zone by providing them with the necessary mediation through its network of proficient speakers.

Before using Cambly, Aram and Razan had low self-confidence in their English-speaking abilities and often avoided participating actively in English classes or face-to-face conversations. However, their experience with Cambly led to significant improvements, not only in English proficiency but also in self-confidence. The platform's approach, which emphasises learning through making mistakes, proved transformative for these participants. As a result, both participants reported increased classroom engagement and greater comfort in public speaking situations. This finding was also reported by Alshammary (2020), who examined the effectiveness of Cambly in improving the English-speaking skills of Saudi female university foreign language learners. Over four weeks, the experimental group in Alshammary's study engaged in audio calls with English speakers via Cambly. Although the research did not find significant differences in speaking competence between the experimental and control groups, it did underscore Cambly's positive impact on speaking abilities, motivation and psychological well-being.

Within the vast array of SNS, Twitter stands out as the primary tool for interactional language learning, finding language partners and fostering friendships. Notably, the contrast in language behaviours on Snapchat and Twitter provides valuable insights into the relationship between SNS and language use. For instance, learners primarily use their native language on Snapchat, viewing it as a private space mainly for bonding with friends. At the same time, they gravitate towards English on Twitter due to its public microblogging nature. This is evident in the research, as many studies (e.g. Allam et al., 2017; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018b; Alsharidi, 2018; Aladsani, 2019) tend to focus exclusively on Twitter for language practice, neglecting a comparison with other SNS platforms.

Furthermore, participants like Ameera explained their strategies on Twitter, such as employing hashtags to boost the visibility of her tweets, thereby facilitating interactions with English speakers. In the existing literature, the majority of research concentrates on the benefits of using Twitter for language learning (e.g. Fewell, 2014; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018) and explores the various activities in which learners engage when using Twitter for this purpose (e.g. Alsharidi, 2018; Alshabeb and Almaqrn, 2018), as outlined in

Chapter 2. However, to the best of my knowledge, no study has specifically examined how learners initiate communicative language learning on Twitter, which is one contribution made by my research.

One potential challenge that arises when interacting with strangers online is the possibility of experiencing social discomfort, particularly when engaging with individuals from different cultures who may hold differing values or engage in discussions on sensitive topics, such as religion. For instance, Ghadeer encountered discomfort during a conversation with a Russian woman who messaged her about women's rights in Saudi Arabia and Islam. Learners may feel uneasy when conversing with strangers on online platforms where there are no restrictions on topics or word choice. As Ghadeer's experience highlighted, it is imperative for both the learner and the language partner to approach these exchanges with an open mind and a healthy dose of cultural sensitivity. Platforms could consider integrating cultural sensitivity guidelines to ensure that interactions remain respectful and enriching.

Furthermore, to address concerns of judgement and evaluation, learners in the present study devised strategies such as creating anonymous online accounts to engage in English language interactions and ensuring language clarity and accuracy before posting. Twitter offers privacy to learners, as they feel less likely to be scrutinised or criticised, thereby enabling them to write in English more freely and without fear of judgement. The use of anonymous accounts on SNS helps ease learners' anxiety, as it eliminates the fear of being observed by family or peers. As learners grow more confident in their English writing skills and become more comfortable conversing on online platforms, the level of anxiety tends to decrease. Aram exemplified this by avoiding English conversations with her family and seeking opportunities to practise with strangers while maintaining her anonymity on Twitter. Choosing a nickname on Twitter to practise English without the judgement of acquaintances further substantiates the notion of learners safeguarding their self-image when using the target language, freely expressing themselves and preserving their online identities. Similar findings were reported in Alshabeb's (2020) study, where participants, particularly female participants, preferred to communicate anonymously with others, using photos and nicknames obtained from the internet. It is evident that learners

employ online nicknames as a means of safeguarding their self-image, freely using the target language, and protecting their identities in the digital realm. These findings contradict studies suggesting that learners refrain from using English on SNS due to the fear of losing face among their followers (Lai et al., 2018; Lai and Zheng, 2018; Lamb and Arisandy, 2019).

In summary, prior knowledge of the conversation partners' profiles can be instrumental in establishing a smooth flow of conversation, aiding in selecting suitable language partners and facilitating a more meaningful learning experience. Platforms like Cambly and HelloTalk offer structured learning environments beyond casual conversations, where guided practice can lead to significant skill development. Meanwhile, Twitter serves as an alternative for learners, albeit with its own challenges and opportunities. The study also identifies potential concerns related to social discomfort and judgement when interacting online, highlighting the value of cultural sensitivity and anonymity in these platforms. Overall, the section confirms that when used thoughtfully, digital platforms can offer effective avenues for English language practice, particularly in settings where opportunities for such practice are limited. See Figure 6.2 below for a summary of how the learners engaged in social IMLE experiences.

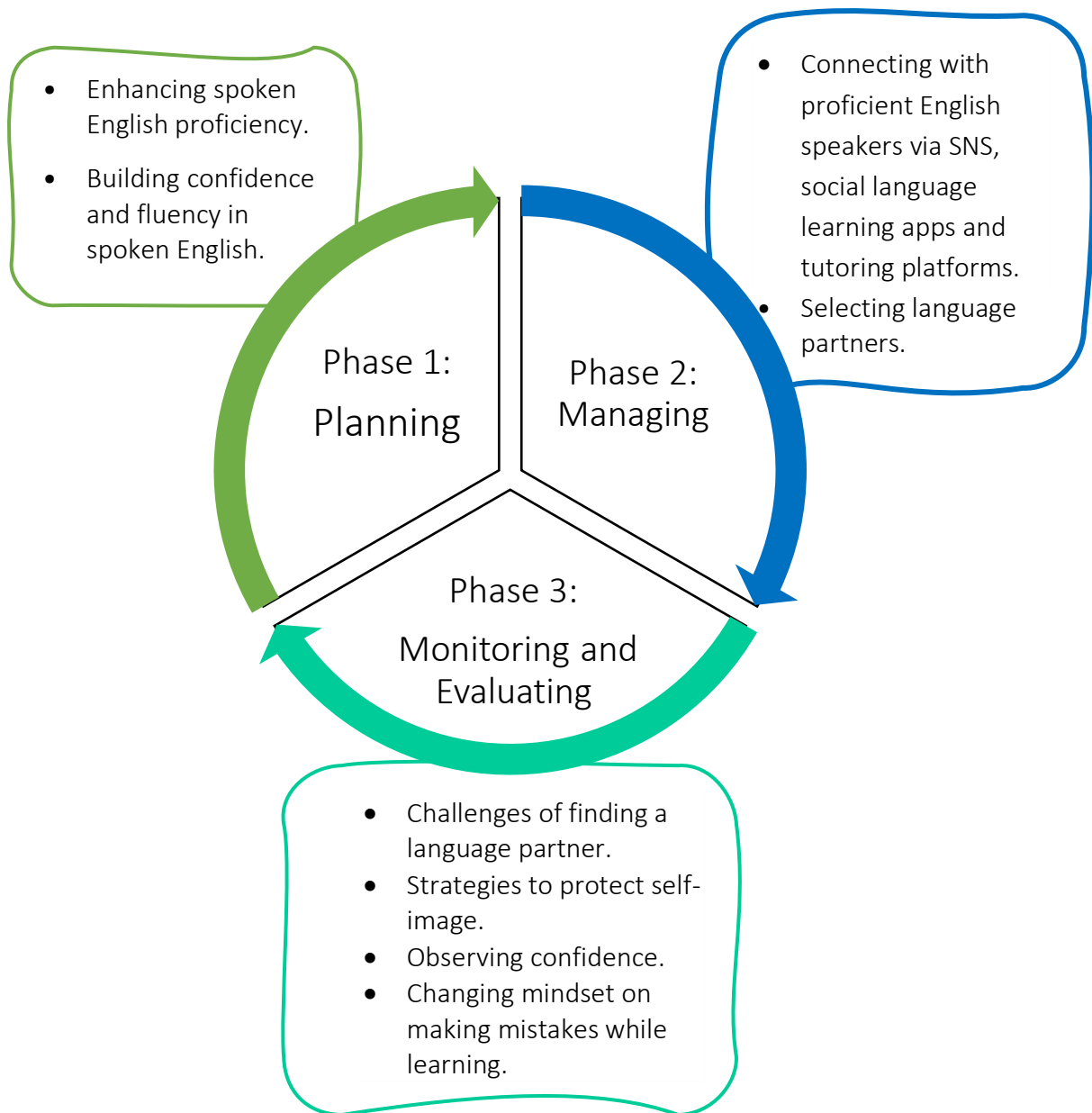


Figure 6.2: Social IMLE experiences

6.2.3 Utilising Platform Diversity to Meet Learners' Needs

Moving on from the need for exposure to English and opportunities to practise it, learners turned to various digital tools to meet distinct educational objectives, such as improving specific language skills, acquiring knowledge and learning how to learn independently. This section features the critical importance of strategically employing diverse language learning platforms to address the multifaceted needs of English language learners, an approach integral to effective learning management.

This study highlights the value of SNS platforms, particularly Instagram, for vocabulary learning. Instagram has emerged here as a favourite among SNS for following language learning pages and for offering visual content (both photos and videos), combined with textual captions. These features provide learners with an engaging means of instruction. As Asmahan noted, Snapchat is temporary, and Twitter is predominantly text focused. By contrast, Instagram offers learners the opportunity to revisit content, allowing them to reinforce their understanding through repetition. However, Instagram is not the only platform leveraged by language learners; YouTube also plays a significant role, especially for those seeking detailed grammar instruction.

Learners chose Instagram as a platform to follow accounts dedicated to learning English, created by language teachers or fellow language learners. These accounts offer valuable language learning tips for expressing oneself and engaging in conversations. One notable preference among the participants was their inclination to follow learning pages specifically designed for Arabic speakers. These pages primarily focus on teaching simple concepts and vocabulary rather than grammar. The participants found these accounts to be highly beneficial for their language acquisition journey. The accounts explain and provide examples in Arabic, making it easier for learners to understand and use English phrases and words. Moreover, the information is presented in a fun and interactive manner, enhancing the overall learning experience. Notably, the study highlights two frequently mentioned accounts, @englishfeenglish and @learn_english_with_us2016, both of which have significant followings of 2.2 million and 1.2 million, respectively.

These accounts offer a unique approach to language learning compared to other platforms. Their emphasis on vocabulary, on comparisons between learners' first and target language, and on cultural differences sets them apart. Learners gain an understanding of the language's variations by seeing the distinctions between formal and informal English and the differences between American and British English. These accounts are particularly valuable for learners in countries like Saudi Arabia, where English is a foreign language. They provide tailored content that addresses the challenges EFL learners face in that region. By explaining language differences in Arabic, learners can easily grasp concepts and apply them effectively. Posts on these accounts also enhance learners' language skills and empower learners to engage in meaningful conversations, establish connections and build confidence in their English-speaking abilities as they become more proficient in navigating conversations and interacting with English speakers from different backgrounds.

The participants expressed their enjoyment and satisfaction in engaging with language learning pages on social networking sites (SNS), particularly Instagram. This observation aligns with Gonulal's (2019) findings, where he reports that learners find Instagram can make the English language learning experience more interesting and enjoyable. In contrast to the findings of Lai et al. (2018), who concluded that instructional language activities often induce boredom, the learners in this study found Instagram language pages to be interactive and highly beneficial for their learning. Instagram language learning pages are updated daily or frequently, providing students with regular opportunities to practise English. On these pages, students can interact with other English language learners and engage in enjoyable language activities. This suggests that not all materials designed for language learning are inherently boring or repetitive; each digital resource should be evaluated on its own merits.

Furthermore, the present study highlights the value of exploring different approaches, such as the 'quick-fix' approach offered by Instagram language learning pages, which resonates with Arab learners of English. The simplicity and straightforwardness of the presentation align with the demands and preferences of Arabic learners seeking language learning content on Instagram. This finding is consistent with that of AlGhamdi (2018), who created an account on Instagram and produced content

specifically for Arabic speakers. Based on learners' interactions with his posts, he identified the daily need for simple lessons as the most significant factor in boosting participants' motivation to learn. The presentation is straightforward and clear, which appears to meet the demands of Arabic learners on Instagram.

Moreover, it is worth mentioning that Instagram language learning pages typically do not provide detailed explanations or in-depth information. As a result, learners often turn to YouTube for additional knowledge to supplement their formal education or overcome learning difficulties. In this study, the participants reported turning to YouTube for explanations of grammar rules. They expressed a preference for YouTube due to the variety of teaching styles available in video format. These results reflect those of Wang and Chen, (2020) who also observed that learners frequently turn to videos from English-teaching YouTubers to obtain supplementary information for their formal education.

By providing access to diverse language learning materials and strategies, instructional resources such as Dalilk4IELTS website enabled learners like Leena and Aram to discover appropriate tools and techniques for enhancing their language skills. In addition, they serve as guides, equipping learners with the knowledge and confidence to take control of their learning journey. Contrary to the unstructured, informal learning explored in Section 6.2.1, this investigation brings to light the value of structured instructional resources and activities within IMLE contexts. There has been debate and criticism in the existing literature advocating the use of more 'authentic' resources, as addressed in the literature review chapter (see Section 3.3.1.4).

This study challenges that perspective by arguing that structured language learning materials serve a key role. They assist learners in selecting content that aligns with their proficiency levels, furnish a means to monitor progress supporting them in monitoring and evaluating their learning (Phase 3 of the IMLE framework), and offer support that is often vital for those who are new to either language acquisition or the journey of independent learning. Language-learning platforms like Dalilk4IELTS play a significant role in shaping learners' habits and narrowing their perceptions of language study. Leena's and Aram's testimonies demonstrate how Dalilk4IELTS equipped them with the essential skills and strategies to learn independently, particularly in finding suitable

reading materials aligned with their English proficiency levels. This finding highlights the effectiveness of guiding learners to resources that match their abilities, enabling them to make the most of the abundance of online materials available.

In summary, the common practice of treating all language learning platforms as interchangeable overlooks their different, unique strengths. Though these platforms share a commitment to language education, their methods are distinctly tailored to different learning preferences and objectives. Therefore, it is crucial for educators, researchers, and the learners to acknowledge and utilise the unique advantages of each platform, promoting a more rounded and informed approach to language learning. Instagram language pages, for example, excel in making vocabulary and everyday conversations accessible and engaging. Their visually stimulating and interactive nature makes them particularly appealing to younger learners looking for quick, digestible language insights. YouTube channels, by contrast, delve deeply into the complexities of grammar, offering rich visual and textual explanations that benefit a more diverse age group. YouTube's video format also allows viewers to pause or revisit certain sections, making the platform ideal for tackling complicated linguistic elements. Specialised websites like Dallik4IELTS take a more academic route, offering a structured learning environment. They carefully categorise resources according to language proficiency levels and provide learners with specific strategies to address a variety of language aspects to meet diverse learning objectives, from reading comprehension to spoken fluency. Figure 6.3: Instructional IMLE experiences below illustrates how learners engage in instructional IMLE experiences across the three IMLE phases.

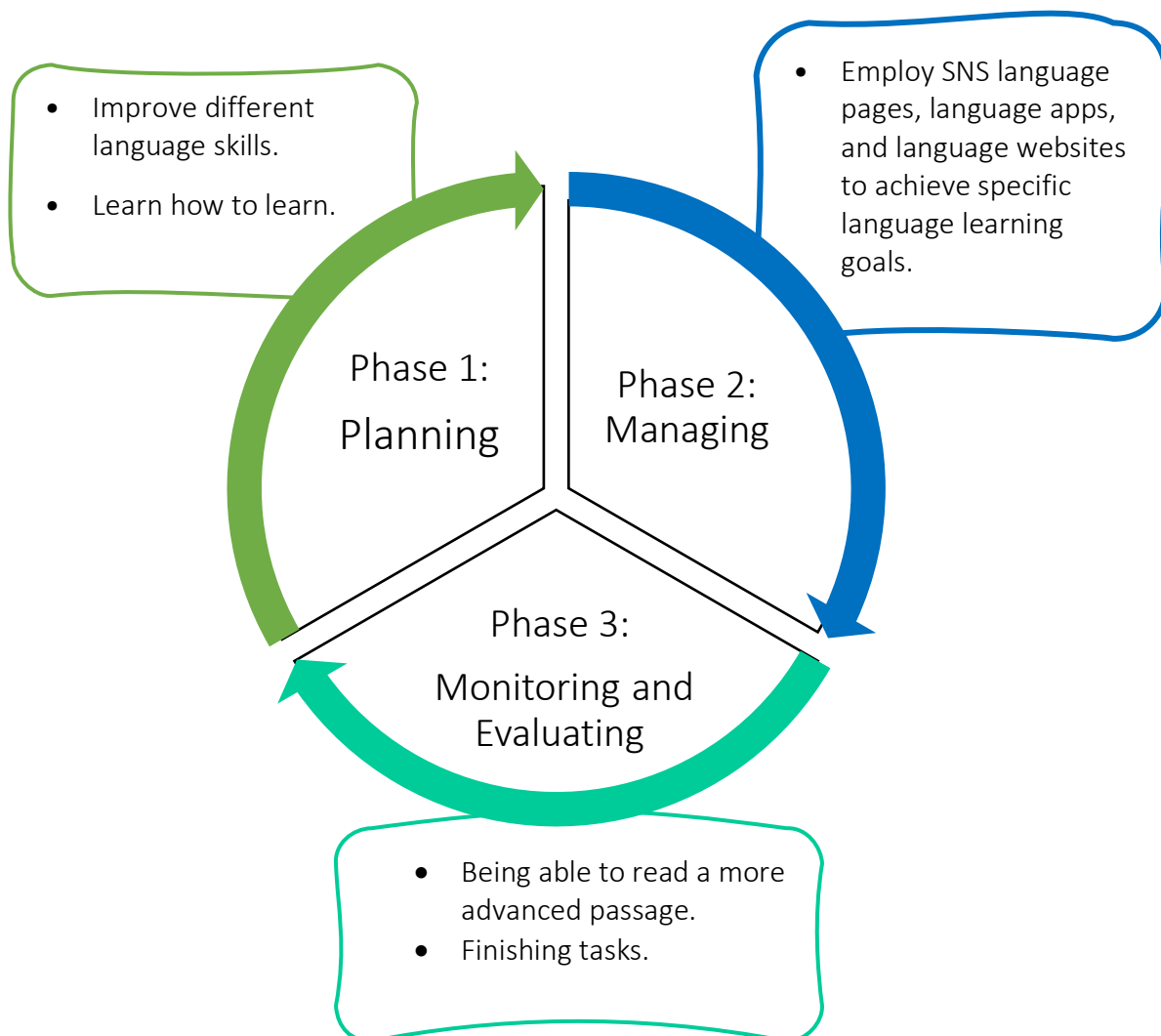


Figure 6.3: Instructional IMLE experiences

6.2.4 Assisting IMLE Experiences through Translation Apps

The findings of this study identify specific examples where translation apps have proven beneficial for learners in various ways, such as by boosting confidence and reducing anxiety. Interestingly, the learners were also aware of the limitations of these apps, emphasising the need for a critical approach when relying on translations for language learning. Strategies to mitigate these shortcomings, such as cross-referencing with dictionaries or other language-support platforms, are discussed.

Translation tools can be used to support learners' written and spoken language. While writing demands greater focus on accuracy and correctness, speaking prioritises clarity and effective communication. Speaking involves real-time interaction, where the immediate understanding of meaning takes precedence over linguistic perfection. Therefore, translation tools serve different purposes in each mode of communication: as a tool for ensuring accuracy in writing and as a means of verifying clear communication in speaking.

The distinction between using translation tools for writing and speaking, as illustrated by Aram's experiences, highlights different priorities and concerns in language use. In writing, Aram initially used Google Translate to double-check her work, even when she was confident in her writing skills. This reflects a concern for absolute accuracy in written language, where there is more emphasis on correct grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Written communication allows time for reflection and revision, and therefore a higher standard of precision is often sought. For speaking, however, Aram used Google Translate to ensure clear and effective communication. Using a translation tool in this context serves as a safety net, helping to confirm that the intended message is clear and understandable, which is crucial in avoiding miscommunications, especially in interactions with her English teacher and others. The use of translation apps to support written and oral language is consistent with the findings of Niño (2020), who discovered that Google Translate seems to help as a quick language checker for small (written or oral) utterances. This highlights their role in enhancing comprehension and serving as a quick means of checking for language accuracy. The distinction between using Google Translate for written versus oral communication not only reflects the

diverse needs of language learners but also speaks to the adaptability of these tools in diverse learning scenarios.

Furthermore, learners might prefer other online translation tools over Google Translate. Ameera's choice of Reverso, particularly for English-to-Arabic translations, underlines the efficacy of translation tools. This preference underscores several key factors that contribute to the effectiveness of a translation tool. Learners value the contextual translation provided by Reverso. Unlike Google Translate, which tends to offer literal translations, Reverso enhances understanding by presenting sample sentences. This feature becomes crucial in Arabic translations, where context significantly influences the meaning of words. Such contextual insights are critical for users like Ameera, who seek a deeper grasp of language subtleties rather than mere word-to-word translation. Additionally, Ameera's approach to learning a new language aligns perfectly with the capabilities of Reverso. She actively searched for meanings, synonyms, antonyms and model sentences to fully comprehend new vocabulary. Reverso facilitates this approach by providing a comprehensive language learning experience, going beyond basic translation to offer a holistic understanding of words in various contexts.

The data also revealed that translating with translation apps was not only beneficial from a linguistic perspective but also from an affective perspective. The participants reported using Google Translate when writing short sentences, such as before posting on SNS or checking their language before engaging in online or face-to-face interactions. Verifying sentences and phrases through translation contributed to an enhanced sense of confidence and reduced anxiety when using the language. This finding aligns with Lee's (2020) study, which found that using Google Translate for English writing improves students' confidence and proficiency in English writing. It also supports Kliffer's (2005) study, which found that students feel more at ease and less stressed when they check their language with the help of translation apps before using it. Similarly, learners in Bahri and Mahadi's (2016) study expressed feeling more prepared and less worried about speaking English after using Google Translate.

As learners gain proficiency and confidence in their language abilities, there is a notable shift in their reliance on translation apps. Increased language proficiency and confidence lead to a decreased need for constant translation support. Learners like Aram, who initially depended heavily on translation apps, begin to trust their language skills more, gradually moving towards more independent language use. This transition is supported by the development of independent learning strategies, regular feedback, increased real-life language exposure and a deeper understanding of the language, reducing their dependency on translation tools.

While these apps are invaluable for enhancing comprehension, sentence clarity and pronunciation, they should be used cautiously to avoid potential inaccuracies. It is important to be aware of potential inaccuracies in online translation and actively employ strategies to mitigate them. This study's findings highlight the fact that many participants relied on translation apps such as Google Translate to comprehend and produce the target language. This is not surprising, considering that translation is a commonly used strategy in language learning. However, what is interesting is that some learners also used translation to support their language production, specifically for expressing thoughts in English, ensuring clarity of meaning and verifying word pronunciation. The findings provided specific examples of how learners employed translation apps in various situations. For instance, Aram would write her questions in English, translate them to Arabic, and then translate them back to English to ensure clarity. Leena used Google Translate to check word pronunciation. Asmahan, who struggled with formulating English sentences and lacked confidence in public speaking, used translation to write her desired sentence in Arabic and then translate it into English for accuracy. These learners reported that translation boosted their self-confidence and enabled them to speak English.

The students also demonstrated awareness of the limitations of online translation, noting that these may not always be accurate or grammatically correct. This aligns with concerns raised in other research studies. Ducar and Schocket (2018) warned against relying solely on Google Translate, as it frequently produces sentences with grammatical errors in English. Therefore, while translation can be a valuable tool, learners must approach it critically and remain vigilant about potential errors. This

represents an interesting shift in the conversation, as learners no longer require educators and researchers to caution them about the limitations of translation tools. They embody the third phase of the IMLE framework, wherein they monitor and evaluate their learning and the digital resources they use. In managing translation inaccuracy, learners engage in various monitoring and evaluation activities. They cross-reference translations with dictionaries, use additional language tools like Grammarly and CorrectMe and engage in reflective practices to review and learn from their translations. Seeking feedback from teachers or peers and tracking their progress over time are also crucial for evaluating the accuracy and effectiveness of their language use. By actively using the target language and applying what they have learned in real-life scenarios, learners not only enhance their language skills but also develop critical thinking and self-assessment abilities, which are essential for independent language learning.

Contrary to the assumption of naïve reliance on these tools, learners demonstrated an understanding of potential inaccuracies and engaged in critical evaluation of the translations they obtained. Their response to the limitations of online translation indicates a more autonomous and reflective attitude toward the editing process. Rather than accepting translations blindly, they actively reviewed and revised errors, recognising the importance of language accuracy. This finding contradicts previous studies suggesting that translation is often considered taboo in language learning settings, particularly in writing classes, as it may hinder language learning by encouraging a mindset of minimal effort (Giannetti, 2016).

The finding also contrasts with the landscape presented in Alhaisoni and Alhaysony's (2017) study, which highlighted a notable gap in language learning pedagogy: the lack of formal training in using translation tools. Their research showed that only a small fraction of students received any guidance on effectively employing Google Translate, despite its widespread use. Alhaisoni and Alhaysony (2017) advocated for integrating such training into EFL teaching methods, stressing the importance of instructors being well versed in Google Translate's functionalities to guide students more effectively. This need was based on observations that students often overestimated the accuracy and reliability of Google Translate and associated certain uses with academic dishonesty,

while also looking to instructors for direction. However, the awareness and self-regulatory approaches exhibited by learners in my study suggest that we should re-evaluate this need for formal training. It appears that learners today may not require such extensive instruction in the use of translation apps as was previously thought.

In summary, this section has delved into the multifaceted role of translation apps in language learning. As shown in Figure 6.4 below, assistive IMLE experiences offer valuable support in enhancing language learners' levels of comprehension and clarity, and they also boost their confidence. However, it has also underscored the need for caution due to the potential inaccuracies of online translations. Importantly, learners are taking a more proactive and reflective approach by cross-referencing translations with other resources and addressing errors independently. Next, I highlight some of the main challenges that language learners may face when engaging in IMLE and how they can be overcome.

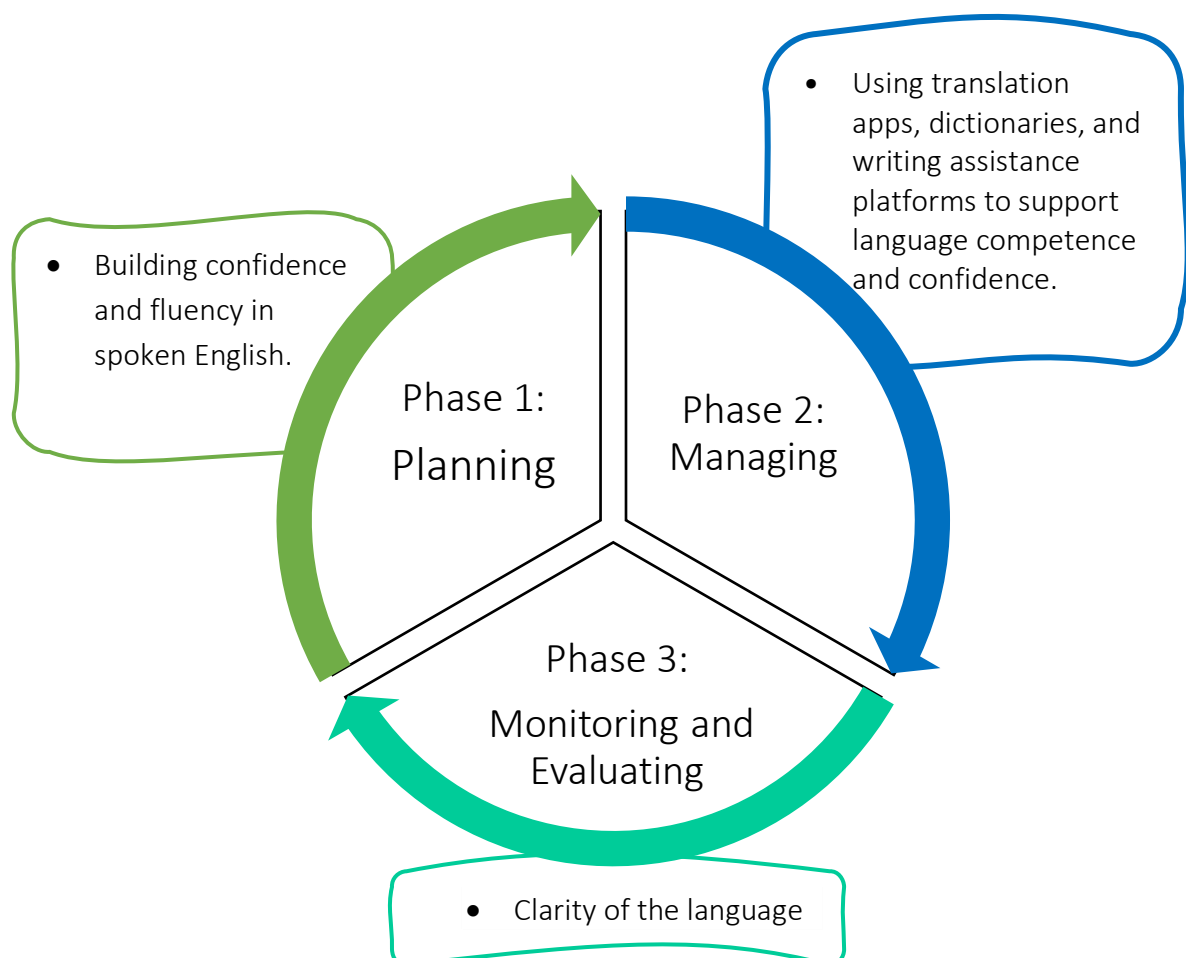


Figure 6.4: Assistive IMLE experiences

6.3 Monitoring and Evaluating Experiences of IMLE

This section marks the transition into phase three of the IMLE framework, where participants acknowledge and tackle the challenges encountered in their independent mobile English learning. It represents a crucial strategy in monitoring and evaluating their English language learning experiences. Here, the focus is on the learners' reflections on their independent mobile learning experiences, specifically highlighting the main challenges learners face and the methods they employ to overcome them.

6.3.1 The Role of Personal Interest in IMLE

Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) offers students a wide range of tools and resources to improve their language skills. Amidst this abundance of options, students' selection of one tool or resource over another is often driven by various elements such as usability, effectiveness or recommendations. However, a consistent theme across all participants is the significant role played by personal interest. In the context of language learning, the concept of interest, defined by Sansone et al. (2012) as a basic positive emotion comprising cognitive and affective components, is vividly exemplified in the findings of this study. Participants, including Sara, Ameera, Aram and Ghadeer, expressed the significant role of personal interest in their engagement with English through various SNS such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube.

This emphasis on the role of interest in language learning for sustained engagement in IMLE aligns with the principles outlined in the self-Regulation of Motivation (SRM) model developed by Sansone and Thoman (2005). The model differentiates between goal-defined motivation and experience-defined motivation. Goal-defined motivation is driven by the pursuit of specific outcomes and is related to the first phase of the IMLE (planning). On the other hand, experience-defined motivation relates to the second and third phases of the IMLE (managing, and monitoring and evaluating) and stems from the intrinsic pleasure of the learning activity itself and is reflected in the level of engagement and interest an individual has in the learning experience. This distinction is crucial in understanding the dynamics of language learning in the digital age.

When considering the practical applications of the SRM model in the context of MALL, it becomes apparent that personal interest serves a dual function. First, it guides learners towards selecting tools and resources that resonate with their personal preferences and learning objectives. For example, a learner like Sara, who was deeply fascinated by British culture and aspired to master a British accent, naturally gravitates towards British TV shows and social media influencers from the UK. This selection is a reflection of her interest, a core element of experience-defined motivation. Similarly, Aram's preference for English make-up tutorials over Arabic ones and Ghadeer's keen interest in environmental documentaries are further examples of how personal interests can shape and direct the learning pathway, ensuring sustained engagement.

Moreover, personal interest extends its influence beyond mere content selection; it significantly impacts the choice of platforms and tools within MALL. Platforms like Cambly and HelloTalk, which allow learners to connect with tutors based on shared interests, exemplify this. Such features facilitate not just language practice but also the creation of authentic, interest-driven conversations, enhancing both engagement and learning outcomes, as discussed in Section 6.2.2.

Zimmerman (2000) suggests that successful self-regulated learners are those who set goals, monitor their progress, seek assistance when needed and persist in their learning efforts. The participants in this study demonstrated these traits by consciously selecting and engaging with content that aligned with their interests. This is consistent with existing literature that highlights the importance of personal interest in language learning for a motivated and successful learning experience such as Mynard and McLoughlin (2020) and Trinder (2017). Mynard and McLoughlin's (2020) study was a longitudinal investigation into how nine Japanese university students maintained their motivation for English language learning outside class. Results indicated that over the years, students self-regulated their motivation through personal interest. Trinder (2017) adds to this by illustrating how Austrian students use smartphones for language learning activities that align with their interests, like reading news or watching series and films. This preference for engaging content is a practical application of how personal interest can drive language learning, echoing the importance of interest in maintaining motivation and engagement.

It is imperative to recognise the necessity of reflecting upon motivational factors within the context of independent language learning and self-monitoring. Beyond evaluating educational strategies and measurable outcomes, learners must also consider the underlying motivations that drive their engagement with specific activities and materials. Understanding these motivational factors is not merely a reflective exercise; instead, it has a substantive impact on the efficacy of the learning process. By assessing what intrinsically motivates them, learners can align their educational resources and strategies more closely with their long-term objectives, thereby enhancing the coherence and meaningfulness of their educational journey. This level of reflection serves as a vital component, reinforcing current efforts and future engagements in language learning.

6.3.2 The Need for Community Support for IMLE

The need for community support was demonstrated in the participants feeling lost in IMLE as illustrated through their experiences (see Section 5.4.4) and the benefits of learning with others (see Section 5.4.3). One of the core arguments of this study is that independent learning, although facilitated by individual initiative, does not occur in isolation. The findings suggest that learners often require community support to navigate the vast array of resources and strategies available to them. In the context of this study, community support refers to a collective network of individuals and resources that supplement the efforts of learners involved in IMLE. This network extends beyond the traditional understanding of community, encompassing instructors, peers and online platforms, forming a robust support structure that can effectively address the varying needs of independent learners. Moreover, this community acts as a source of inspiration, encouraging learners to explore new digital tools, persevere through challenges and continually engage with their learning journey.

Instructors might be the first significant support in developing students' independent learning skills. Some participants found it challenging to plan independently and expressed their disappointment and frustration over the lack of instructional guidance they received from their teachers in class, which would have improved their learning process. For example, Razan noted that she and other learners knew how to use

technology and knew the different materials used for language learning. However, they did not know how to use them to improve specific skills, and most importantly, they were not trained in planning the learning process. In accordance with the present results, previous studies have stressed that although independent learning takes place outside educational authority, lecturers can assist students in regulating their learning without reducing their control (Reinders, 2014). Viberg et al. (2020) further highlight the importance of instructional scaffolding in supporting cognitive and affective processes in language learning. They argue that a shift in support and guidance is necessary for independent learning and fostering learners' control over the learning process. As Godwin-Jones (2011) argued, this does not mean providing materials and information, but rather helping students develop required skills for independent learning.

In addition to the influence of teachers, the role of parents has also been highlighted as a significant factor affecting learners' behaviours. For example, Razan and Aram mentioned that their fathers regularly sent them app recommendations, leading them to use multiple language-learning apps. This finding aligns with that of Lai et al. (2015), who found that learners indicated that parental influence was crucial in shaping their engagement in interactive IMLE. Those participants stated that their parents guided their learning approaches by sharing English-language strategies and by encouraging or discouraging certain activities. However, a key difference emerged in my study: parents tended to share resources rather than strategies. The findings of my study underscore the evolving nature of parental involvement in language education, shifting from prescriptive guidance to the facilitation of resource discovery. This suggests that modern parental roles may be more about enabling access to tools and less about dictating learning methods, which reflects broader changes in educational paradigms towards learner autonomy and technology integration. Moreover, it points to the importance of considering familial influence with IMLE, as family dynamics can significantly enhance or hinder the adoption and effective use of such educational technologies.

An aspect of familial influence that emerged from my study is that in addition to parents, siblings played a role in some of the participants' motivations and experiences in relation to IMLE. For instance, Leena's transition to online language practice via her smartphone was significantly motivated by her desire to escape the pressure and judgement she felt when speaking with her sister, who was very precise owing to her English major. In her face-to-face interactions with her sister, Leena constantly worried about making mistakes, which hindered her ability to speak freely and practise effectively. This anxiety stemmed from her fear of being corrected on every word, leading to a decrease in her confidence and willingness to engage in spoken English.

By contrast, the online environment presented a less intimidating and more supportive space for language practice. Digital platforms often offer a degree of anonymity or detachment from personal relationships, which can reduce the fear of judgement and allow learners like Leena to experiment with language without the pressure of immediate correction or criticism. Moreover, many online learning communities and applications are designed to encourage language practice through positive reinforcement, constructive feedback and a focus on practical usage rather than just accuracy.

Furthermore, the online context provided by her smartphone enabled Leena to access a variety of resources and to connect with a diverse community of learners and speakers. This not only broadened her exposure to different aspects of the English language but also allowed her to learn in a more relaxed and self-directed manner. The flexibility to choose her learning materials and the ability to control the pace and focus of her practice likely contributed to a more positive and effective learning experience.

On the other hand, Asmahan's experience with her sisters presents a more positive example of sibling influence on language learning. Her sisters not only recommended useful applications but also actively participated with her in language learning activities. This cooperative approach transformed learning into an enjoyable and engaging experience, which is essential for sustained motivation in independent learning environments. Their encouragement and support in reading, despite Asmahan's initial disinterest, further exemplify the positive influence siblings can have on language learning. These findings suggest that while siblings can be instrumental in motivating

and supporting language learning, their approach to involvement is key. Active participation, encouragement and the creation of a positive and supportive learning atmosphere are more effective than merely providing resources or correction. This aligns with broader research on social learning, emphasising the importance of a supportive environment for effective learning. Thus, when discussing IMLE, it is essential to consider not just the availability of learning resources and technology but also the social and familial context in which the learning occurs. The role of siblings, as seen in these cases, can be a double-edged sword: they can either foster an encouraging and supportive environment for language learning or create a space that hinders the learner's confidence and willingness to engage.

Peer support also emerged as a crucial element in independent learning. For example, Leena reported that she had learned about using films for language learning from her friends and classmates. The influence of peers, including classmates and online acquaintances, serves a dual function – motivating learners and sharing valuable resources. This study confirms the importance of a peer network, as highlighted by Godwin-Jones (2011) and Lai et al. (2015). Similar to the university foreign language learners in the study by Lai et al. (2015), who reported that their peers helped them become aware of potentially useful resources, learners in my study also gained valuable insights from their classmates.

The students reported being influenced not only by their immediate peer circle but also by virtual communities. Platforms like Twitter and YouTube amplify this support system, offering expansive, interactive spaces where learners can connect, share and grow together. The importance of support from others is evidenced by students building good experiences of independent learning. Participants argued that receiving good support led them to gain meaningful learning experiences, enabling them to learn independently. Learners like Ameera and Razan used online communities such as Twitter language learners, pages and YouTube multilingual vloggers videos for tips and motivation. This can be linked to the concept of peer support in independent learning. By engaging with social learning, they emphasise the role of social interactions in cognitive development and the acquisition of knowledge. Bandura's social learning theory (1977) posits that observation and imitation play as a significant role in how

individuals learn from one another. Therefore, the participants' experience of having a community to support themselves and others with their learning is a beneficial reminder of how IMLE can be improved and its success enhanced.

The use of platforms like Dalilk4IELTS in language learning emphasises the need for community support and human-like guidance in online language learning environments. These platforms provide a structure that mimics the support system traditionally found in classroom settings but with the added benefits of flexibility and accessibility that come with digital learning. Organised lesson plans and materials on platforms like Dalilk4IELTS offer a structured approach to language learning, which is essential for learners who may not have the guidance of a traditional teacher. This structure helps learners like Aram and Leena to approach the language systematically, building their skills step by step. For example, Aram's excitement about reading intermediate-level stories and monitoring her progress reflects the benefits of having a clear learning path and resources that match her proficiency level. Such organised content not only aids in gradual skills development but also provides a sense of achievement and progression, which is crucial for maintaining motivation.

By contrast, other participants, notably Razan and Ameera, did not have the same level of support as Aram and Leena from Dalilk4IELTS. They found English books challenging to comprehend, indicating concerns among students regarding the appropriateness of their selected materials. These learners often attribute their perception of the complexity of the English materials to their own difficulties, suggesting that they may have chosen resources that exceed their current level of understanding. Their experience shows the importance of platforms like Dalilk4IELTS, which help guide learners to resources that match their abilities, thereby enabling them to manage independent learning more effectively. Therefore, structured language learning materials serve a key role as they assist learners in selecting content that aligns with their proficiency levels. They furnish a means to monitor progress, which supports them in Phase 3 of the IMLE framework and offers support that is often vital for those who are new to either language acquisition or to the journey of independent learning.

In summary, this study emphasises the importance of community support in IMLE. While traditionally considered an individual activity, the research shows that learners

benefit significantly from a wide network that includes instructors, parents, peers, and online platforms. Teachers are key for providing instructional scaffolding, while parents and peers contribute by sharing resources and motivational support. Online platforms like Dalilk4IELTS further assist by offering tailored resources that align with learners' abilities. A community network is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness and maintenance of IMLE.

6.3.3 General Considerations

Two further potential challenges to IMLE that were identified in the study, cost and screen size, did not prove to be insurmountable. The rapid evolution of technology has had a profound impact on the accessibility and affordability of digital tools in language learning. Cost, for instance, emerges as a consideration. Despite the widespread availability of smartphones in regions like Saudi Arabia, financial barriers often impede learners' access to premium digital language learning tools. This is the experience of learners like Razan from Saudi Arabia, who despite having access to the necessary technology, find the cost of platforms like Cambly prohibitively high. Such situations underline the gap between the aspirations of learners and their actual capacity to leverage these resources. This scenario is echoed by Rosell-Aguilar (2018a), who highlights this issue in the UK context, where the high subscription costs of apps like Busuu deter many users.

The factor of screen size, commonly perceived as a hindrance in earlier studies (e.g. Lai and Zheng, 2018; Jurkovič, 2019; J.S. Lee, 2020), did not emerge as a significant issue in my study. This divergence may be attributed to the advancements in smartphone technology, leading to larger and higher-resolution screens, or to a shift in user adaptability and preferences. The modern smartphone, exemplified by models like the iPhone Plus series, offers improved readability and multimedia engagement capabilities. The prevalent use of smartphones for various activities has potentially accustomed users to smaller screens, diminishing concerns related to concentration or screen size. These insights suggest that while screen size and cost are integral aspects of the mobile language learning experience, they should be viewed more as considerations to be navigated than as undefeatable challenges.

6.4 Main Points from the Discussion Chapter

In this chapter, I have interpreted and discussed the principal findings that emerged from the data analysis, guided theoretically by the IMLE framework. The discussion was organised into two sections, corresponding to the key elements of the IMLE framework: planning and managing, and monitoring and evaluating. Each section elaborated on several important points.

Within the planning and managing phase, learners devise strategies to amplify their language exposure and vocabulary acquisition by integrating entertaining daily activities such as film-watching and social media browsing. Furthermore, they confront the challenge of limited local speaking practice by seeking out language partners on various social platforms to match their specific communicative goals. In addition, they employ a diverse range of digital tools, each selected to serve specific language goals or to enhance general learning competencies, including self-agency. The role of assistive digital tools is also highlighted for their efficacy in advancing English language proficiency and fostering learner confidence.

Transitioning to the monitoring and evaluation phase, the study acknowledges the hurdles that learners encounter within IMLE settings. It proposes actionable strategies to navigate these challenges effectively. A significant emphasis is placed on the role of personal interest in the learning materials, which is deemed essential for persistent engagement with IMLE. Finally, the study highlights the vital and indispensable role of community support in the realm of IMLE, illustrating that while the learning journey may be embarked upon independently, it thrives on the sustenance provided by community interaction and collaborative support.

In the final chapter, I will summarise the study's key findings, contributions, implications, and limitations. I will also provide recommendations for future research and suggest potential improvements to the IMLE framework.

7 Conclusions and Future Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the conclusions drawn from my research, starting with a summary of the study and its key findings. It then discusses the study's contributions to existing knowledge and its limitations. Following this, recommendations are provided for teachers and learners interested in independent language learning supported by smartphones, along with recommendations for future research in this area. The chapter concludes with a personal reflection on the journey undertaken in the preparation of this thesis.

7.2 Summary of the Study and Key Findings

The focus of my PhD thesis is to explore how learners use smartphones for independent language learning, particularly in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia. My study aims to identify the challenges that learners face during the language learning process and investigate ways to support them and other learners in advancing their language skills independently. Two research questions guided my study:

1. How do Saudi female university students use smartphones for independent language learning?
2. What challenges do Saudi female university students encounter when using smartphones for independent English language learning, and how do they address them?

To achieve my research objectives, I began by defining independent learning. Independent learning involves students directing their own education outside the classroom, actively planning, managing and evaluating their learning experiences without direct teacher involvement. Additionally, I explored language learning theories to enhance understanding of language acquisition activities. Key theories include behaviourism, which is rooted in psychology and emphasises repetition and reinforcement, viewing learners as blank slates (Skinner, 1974). Constructivism, proposed by Piaget (1964), focuses on knowledge construction through experiences, blending innate capacities with environmental information. This is further supported

by Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis and Schmidt's (1990) noticing hypothesis, underscoring the importance of comprehensible input and conscious attention in language learning. Moreover, social constructivism, influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) work, highlights the critical role of social interaction in developmental processes. Then I introduced the various digital tools learners could use for language learning, such as language learning apps, films, songs, social networking sites, online dictionaries and translators, and I examined how they embody different language learning theories.

Following that, I investigated the diverse experiences and challenges encountered in using smartphones for language learning. This exploration revealed four main categories of technology-assisted language learning experiences: entertainment, social, instructional, and assistive. These categories encompass a wide range of activities and tools that learners use to enhance their language skills independently.

First, instructional experiences involve the use of digital tools such as YouTube channels, language teachers' Facebook pages, podcasts and vocabulary apps. These tools provide structured and guided learning materials, helping learners acquire vocabulary, grammar rules and general language skills. It highlighted that while some language learning apps like Duolingo can be engaging, they may suffer from poor sustainability and lack key features like communication opportunities. Second, entertainment or information-oriented experiences revolve around everyday activities like listening to songs, news and podcasts, watching films and videos, playing digital games, and reading online news. These activities provide learners with authentic language input, improving their listening and reading comprehension skills and expanding their vocabulary and cultural knowledge. Third, socially oriented experiences focus on using platforms like Twitter and language learning social networking sites to connect with proficient speakers and engage in daily communication and social exchange. Learners can practise speaking and writing skills, receive feedback from proficient speakers and immerse themselves in authentic communicative situations. However, some learners may face emotional barriers, such as a fear of making mistakes in public, which can hinder their participation in socially oriented experiences. Fourth, assistive experiences involve the use of online translators and dictionaries such as Google Translate and digital dictionaries like Merriam-Webster

and Oxford English Dictionary. These tools are valuable for language learners but can lead to over-reliance and potential drawbacks, such as hindering the development of language skills.

My review of the literature revealed the need to address limitations in previous research related to the use of smartphones for independent language learning. This includes the lack of in-depth exploration of learners' engagement with language learning apps, the absence of a specific theoretical framework and the need to investigate this context in diverse settings, notably in Saudi Arabia, to understand learners' experiences, especially among female university students.

Consequently, I introduced the Independent Mobile Learning of English (IMLE) framework. The IMLE framework is a model designed to guide learners through the process of independent English language learning using mobile devices, specifically smartphones. Although there is a rich body of literature on independent learning models, such as those proposed by Reinders (2010) and Song and Hill (2007), existing frameworks fall short in that they fail to account for the unique characteristics and challenges associated with independent mobile learning. Therefore, the IMLE framework was conceived to deal explicitly with mobile environments, encapsulating three key phases: planning, managing, and monitoring and evaluating learning. This framework is tailored for learners who are interested in leveraging the capabilities of mobile devices to improve their English language skills independently. Additionally, it serves as a guide for educators and researchers aiming to understand or facilitate mobile-based independent language learning. IMLE offers a structured yet flexible approach to learning English, blending the advantages of mobility with digital resources. By following this framework, learners can understand how to set goals, manage their learning pathways and evaluate their progress effectively. Meanwhile, educators and researchers can gain valuable insights into the behavioural patterns and preferences of independent mobile learners.

The study employed a qualitative case study methodology, with methods including semi-structured interviews and media resources such as screenshots and video recordings, which were captured by the participants both during and after the interview sessions. Using the IMLE framework as a guide for this study (see Figures 7.1

and 7.2), I found that the first stage of learning for Saudi female university students was to strategically plan their language learning, using smartphones to maximise language exposure. By incorporating language learning into their daily routines, learners planned to make the most of their time for language learning. They employed two main strategies using their smartphones: 1) they followed English-speaking individuals on SNS like Twitter to gain regular exposure to English; and 2) they watched English-language videos. Participants used smartphone features like adjusting video playback speed and enabling closed captions to manage their learning actively. These captions were crucial in aiding comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. They facilitated noticing new words and made it easier to understand complex or fast speech, thereby reducing learners' anxiety and creating a more effective learning environment.

Second, learners looked for language partners to practise English on different digital platforms like Twitter, Cambly and HelloTalk. On Twitter, learners actively employed strategies such as using hashtags to increase the visibility of their tweets and connect with proficient speakers. However, the open nature of this microblogging site also meant that finding a committed language partner could be challenging. On the other hand, Cambly and HelloTalk offer a more structured learning experience. These platforms allow learners to select partners based on detailed profiles that include professional background and mutual interests.

Third, the study findings illustrated the value of using different platforms for varying language learning needs. Instagram was particularly popular for vocabulary learning due to its visually engaging and interactive content. On the other hand, YouTube was preferred for more detailed grammar instructions, offering a variety of teaching styles. Specialised websites like Dalilk4IELTS provided a structured learning approach that helped learners find resources tailored to their proficiency levels. This shows that the participants recognised the unique advantages of each platform and actively managed their learning by selecting the most appropriate platform to cater to their specific language learning needs.

Fourth, the study underscores the importance of translation apps like Google Translate in supporting language learners' comprehension, clarity and pronunciation. These apps enhanced self-confidence, mainly when learners were posting on social networking sites or engaging in online interactions. Furthermore, the study reveals that learners engaged in strategies to mitigate inaccuracies. They double-checked translations and consulted other resources like dictionaries and language-support platforms. This approach demonstrates their independence and awareness of the inaccuracies of translation apps.

As part of monitoring and evaluating their learning, participants identified several challenges they encountered while engaging in IMLE and solutions to address them. They highlighted two main areas: personal interest and the importance of community support. First, independent language learning requires sustained interest and dedication, a complex undertaking that participants in the study were aware of. To mitigate this challenge, learners intentionally aligned their selection of digital tools and resources with their personal interests and their language proficiency, creating a meaningful connection between their personal and educational lives. This alignment enhanced engagement and served as a significant motivator in the learning journey.

Second, the necessity for a community support system was stressed. The findings have shown that learners often seek a strong support network, including parents, teachers, and peers, and online platforms. For example, parents were cited as sources of app recommendations, while teachers were instrumental in directing students to helpful learning strategies. Furthermore, peers offer both emotional and educational support, often introducing each other to new resources and learning strategies. Online platforms like Twitter and YouTube extend these support networks by providing additional spaces where learners can share learning tips and app recommendations.

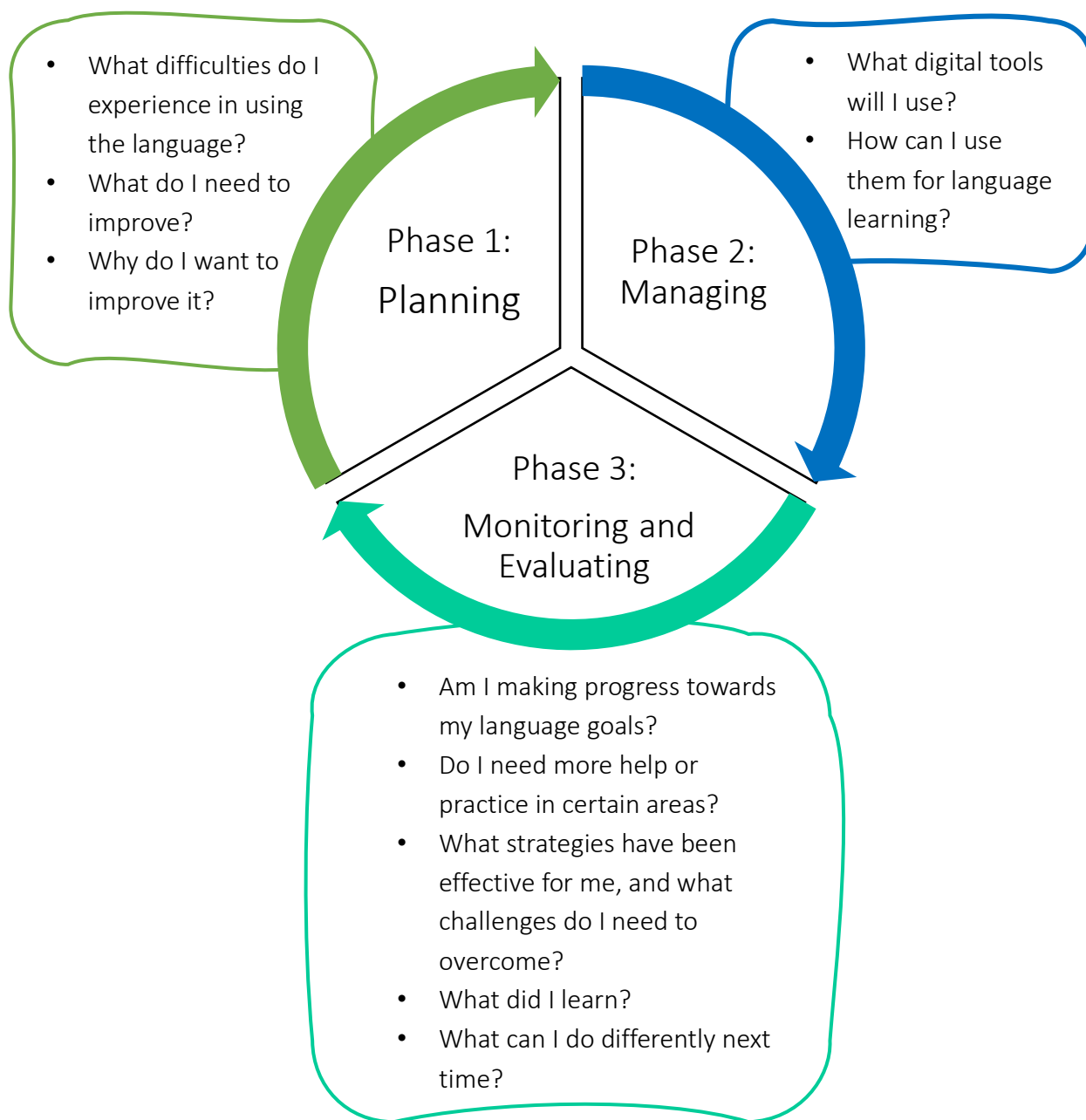


Figure 7.1: The IMLE framework

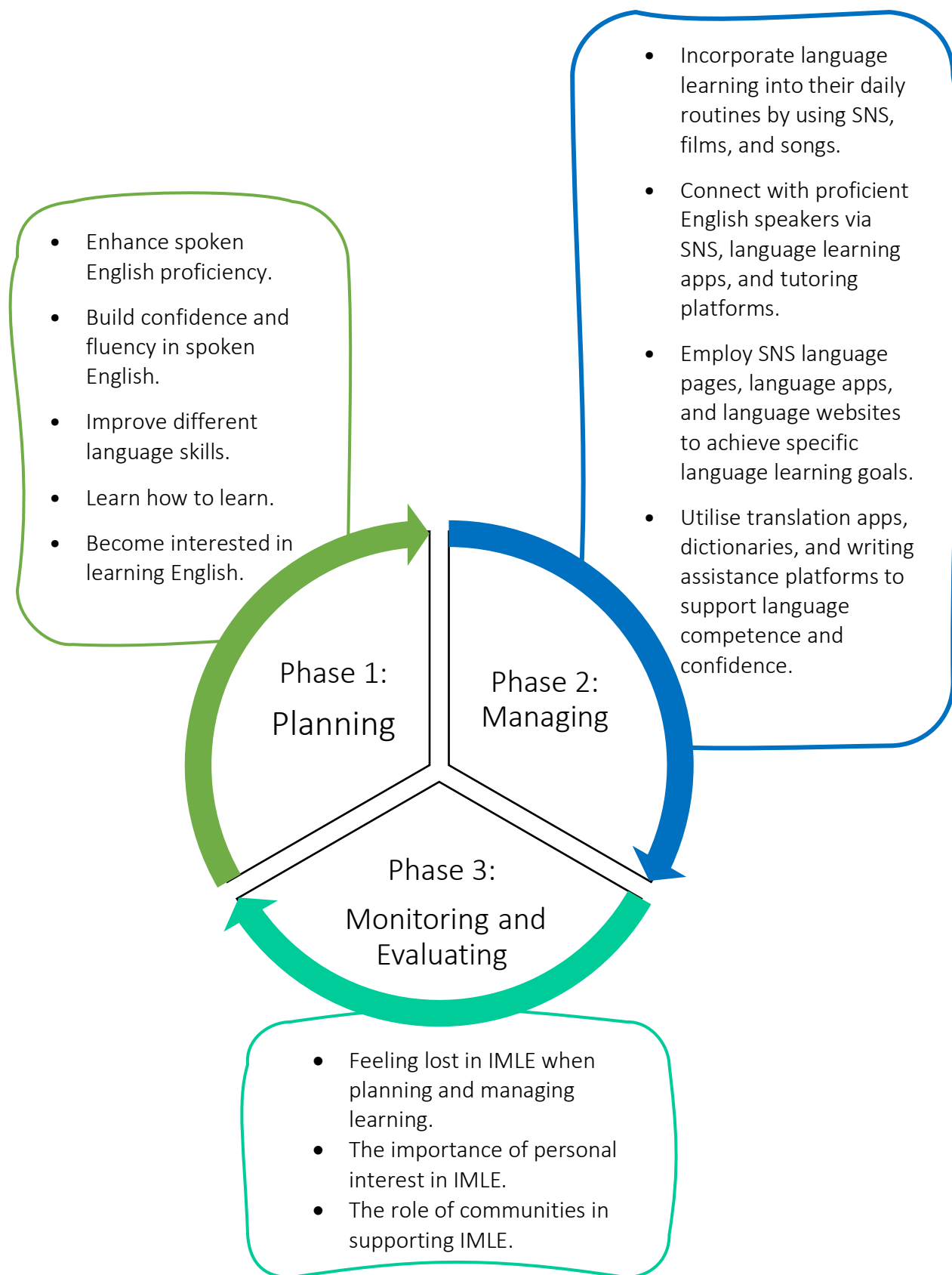


Figure 7.2: The IMLE framework including the participants' experiences

The findings of this study serve as evidence that Saudi female university students engage in thoughtful planning to maximise language exposure. Furthermore, they actively seek out suitable language partners across various digital platforms. Building upon this, students also purposefully use different platforms tailored to meet specific language learning objectives. Notably, the study brings attention to the roles of personal interest and self-confidence, illustrating how these elements are instrumental in shaping choices related to tools. Additionally, the study underscores the indispensable role that community support plays, enveloping familial, educational and peer networks as key facilitators in the independent language learning process. In synthesising these key findings, it becomes clear that the study significantly contributes to existing literature. Moreover, it creates rich ground for further research in the field. The learners' reported challenges, especially in planning and managing learning, indicate the need for further development of the IMLE framework. The next section will delve into the contributions of this study in greater detail, exploring its implications for educational theory and practice.

7.3 Contributions of the Study

This study offers multiple contributions to knowledge. First, it introduces the IMLE framework. This framework serves as a unique analytical and reflective lens for understanding students' independent mobile language learning experiences. The creation of this framework itself constitutes a theoretical and methodological contribution, providing a structured approach to mobile independent language learning. Second, the research methodology broadens the qualitative research methods by incorporating media resources, such as screenshots as data collection methods. This innovation significantly enhances our understanding of learners' activities and interactions, offering a more detailed view of their experiences. Third, the study challenges existing assumptions about the autonomy of Saudi learners and differentiates between language websites and apps in terms of their usefulness. Together, these contributions deepen the current understanding of mobile language learning and offer insights and practical guidance for learners, educators and researchers.

7.3.1 The IMLE Framework

This study's main contribution is developing and using the Independent Mobile Learning of English (IMLE) framework as an analytical tool, comprising three phases: planning, managing, and monitoring and evaluating (refer to Chapter 3 for details). By structuring the research around these IMLE phases, the study was able to achieve a more systematic and detailed understanding of how learners engage with smartphones for independent language learning. The framework was instrumental in shaping the interview questions and guiding the research toward areas that would yield the most relevant insights.

What sets the IMLE framework apart from earlier models, such as those developed by Reinders (2010) and Song and Hill (2007) (refer to Section 3.4 for details), is its targeted focus on the unique characteristics of independent learning in mobile digital settings. Another distinguishing feature is its simplified structure, articulated in the form of questions, which makes it highly accessible for learners and educators. The framework acted as a reflective tool for participants in this study. It enabled them to thoroughly report and assess their learning experiences, contributing valuable data to the research. Additionally, the IMLE framework benefits from a design that breaks down the learning process into manageable phases. For example, the planning phase aligns well with how learners naturally conceive their language-learning journey, thus permitting a more thorough examination of behavioural patterns among mobile learners.

In particular, the IMLE framework's emphasis on planning, managing, monitoring, and evaluating phases provides a comprehensive toolkit for learners to engage in self-directed and self-regulated learning activities, as outlined in the literature. By incorporating the principles of self-regulated learning and self-directed learning, the framework encourages learners to take ownership of their learning process, from setting goals and selecting resources to evaluating outcomes. This holistic approach is a clear departure from earlier models, which often focused on isolated aspects of language learning without fully integrating the learner's active role in managing their learning journey.

Further, this study enriches the discourse on autonomy in language learning by demonstrating how the IMLE framework facilitates a learner-centred approach that empowers individuals to take control of their learning process. The framework's emphasis on planning, managing, monitoring, and evaluating reflects vital principles of autonomy, allowing learners to set their objectives, manage their learning activities, and assess their progress. This approach aligns with contemporary understandings of autonomy as self-direction and a sophisticated interplay of learner agency, motivation, and reflective practice. By enabling learners to articulate and navigate their learning journeys within the mobile context, the IMLE framework acts as a channel for autonomy. It offers insights into how independence in language use and learning can be fostered through targeted, reflective practice using smartphones.

The study's focus on the IMLE framework also draws heavily on the concepts of learner autonomy, a key theme in the provided text. Autonomy in language learning is not just about the absence of a teacher; it encompasses a learner's capacity to take charge of their learning, as defined by Holec (1981). The IMLE framework operationalizes this definition by enabling learners to develop the skills and strategies necessary for effective independent learning. Through its phases, the framework mirrors the progression from dependence to independence, guiding learners in cultivating the abilities to plan, implement, and evaluate their learning autonomously.

Moreover, by examining how learners self-regulate their motivation and direct their learning activities within a mobile context, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of autonomy in language use and learning. This dual focus addresses the cognitive, metacognitive, and motivational aspects of SRL (see questions in phase 3 of the IMLE framework in 3.5), as well as SDL's initiative and goal-setting characteristics (see questions in phase 2 of the IMLE in 3.5), demonstrating how mobile technology can support autonomous learning practices in real-world settings.

By bridging the gap between theoretical constructs of autonomy and practical strategies for independent language learning, the study provides valuable insights for educators, learners, and researchers alike, highlighting the potential of smartphones as tools for fostering autonomous language learning experiences. In language use, autonomy empowers learners to apply their language skills confidently and creatively

in diverse contexts. It involves navigating through various communicative situations, adapting language use to different audiences, and employing language for specific purposes, such as information exchange or social interaction. The IMLE framework supports autonomy in language use by encouraging learners to engage with authentic language content and real-life communication scenarios through their smartphones. This exposure helps learners to contextualize their language skills, moving beyond theoretical knowledge to practical application. It fosters a sense of ownership over the language learning process, motivating learners to explore language in its natural settings and to use it as a tool for real-world problem-solving and interaction.

Autonomy in language learning focuses on the self-directed acquisition of language skills and knowledge. It involves setting personal learning goals, choosing appropriate learning resources and strategies, and evaluating progress. Through the IMLE framework emphasis on planning, managing, monitoring and evaluating, the framework guides learners in identifying their learning objectives, selecting the most effective tools and methods for achieving these goals, and assessing their development over time. This process not only cultivates independent learning skills but also encourages metacognitive awareness, allowing learners to reflect on their learning strategies, understand their strengths and weaknesses, and make informed decisions about their language learning journey.

The IMLE framework, along with the shared experiences of participants, can be a valuable resource for learners like Razan. It can help them navigate through the confusing maze of deciding where to start and what steps to follow when it comes to independent language learning with smartphones. With a well-defined outline of the learning phases and key considerations, learners can approach their language learning with more confidence and clarity.

Moreover, its role as a reflective instrument for the researcher helped deepen the analysis and enriched the overall quality and depth of interpretation of the research findings. The framework also helped identify where challenges arose and connected learners' stories to elements within the framework. Looking ahead to future research, there are several ways the IMLE framework could be further developed and used; these will be discussed in Section 7.5.8.

After collecting, analysing and discussing data obtained from seven female Saudi university students, I discovered that the IMLE framework could be further refined. Based on the experiences of the participants, several suggestions have emerged from this study. Firstly, more questions can be incorporated into the second phase of the framework, which deals with managing learning. These additional questions can aid learners in selecting appropriate tools and strategies for their language learning journey. Furthermore, learners can benefit from being equipped with language learning strategies and practical demonstrations of each language skill. Another valuable proposal would be the establishment of supportive learning communities within the classroom, where learners can assist and encourage one another in their language learning endeavours.

7.3.2 Enhancing Qualitative Methodology with Media

In highlighting the contributions of this study, it is crucial to point out that the innovative, multifaceted methodological approach has significantly deepened the understanding of how smartphones facilitate English language learning. Integrating semi-structured interviews with real-time demonstrations and multimedia elements affords several advantages that distinguish this study.

Firstly, this approach offers operational insights by directly observing participants using language-learning apps and websites, which is particularly significant given the presence of platforms behind paywalls. Secondly, incorporating visual and interactive elements offers a more textured context, providing invaluable insights into the educational ecosystems that learners engage with. This additional layer of information complements the spoken or written data, resulting in a more detailed and thorough analysis.

Moreover, the study delves into the specifics of tools and platforms, offering targeted analyses that enrich our understanding of how English learners engage with these digital resources. Some of the apps that were used were paid for by the participants, but because they showed me on their devices how they used these tools, I was able to see how they work. Therefore, the study sheds light on the characteristics of paid websites, exploring the motivations that drive students to utilise these platforms and the particular ways in which they do so. This level of detail offers a more refined

perspective that can inform future educational strategies and technological innovations in the field of language learning.

7.3.3 Developing IMLE with Qualitative Research

In addition to the contributions previously outlined, the qualitative nature of this research offers unique insights that are not readily available through mixed or quantitative methods. For instance, while a majority of quantitative studies provide statistical data suggesting that Saudi learners lack autonomy, this qualitative research presents a different narrative. Through open dialogue with participants, it became evident that many were actively participating in independent learning. This difference in outcomes highlights the value of qualitative methodologies for a more complete understanding of learner behaviour, especially in complex areas like independent language learning. Hence, the qualitative approach adds depth to the study's methodological rigour, offering a more thorough view that challenges existing beliefs and introduces fresh viewpoints into the academic dialogue.

The research shows that Saudi learners actively participate in independent learning, counteracting passive, teacher-dependent learning stereotypes (see Section 1.6.2 for an overview of these stereotypes). The data demonstrates that these learners are not merely passive recipients but are active participants in their education. Specifically, the research reveals that Saudi learners are skilled at formulating plans, such as identifying their learning needs and setting specific goals like improving their speaking abilities or increasing their exposure to the English language. They are also effective at managing their learning, opting for digital resources that meet their needs and selecting language partners based on mutual interests. Moreover, they routinely assess their progress, reflecting on the efficacy of various digital tools and strategies for language learning and language use. These elements are all indicative of independent learning, reinforcing the concept of learner autonomy within the Saudi educational landscape.

Furthermore, the qualitative nature of this research enabled a closer examination of the techniques that learners use to transform input into meaningful learning, including methods for facilitating noticing and learning new vocabulary. This is exemplified in the exploration of the role of captions in video-based language learning. While previous studies have acknowledged the efficacy of video as a learning tool (Lai and Gu, 2011;

Ma, 2017a; Lai et al., 2018; Lai and Zheng, 2018; Lamb and Arisandy, 2019), they have largely overlooked the impact of captions. The qualitative approach allowed me to address this gap, emphasising the value of adding captions to video content. This observation suggests that the absence of such details in previous research may be attributed to the limitations of mixed or quantitative methods, which may not fully capture how learners interact with digital resources.

Another example is Ta'amneh's (2021) study, which investigated the challenges students may face when using smartphones for learning English. The study found that, generally, students do not perceive using smartphones for independent learning as difficult. However, this quantitative study has several limitations. First, the survey questions predefined the challenges, leaving no room for students to report issues based on their actual experiences, which could overlook other potential difficulties. Second, the quantitative approach lacks the depth that qualitative data can provide, failing to capture the attitudes or perspectives of students. In contrast, the qualitative nature of my study allows for a more comprehensive understanding of these challenges. Using methods such as in-depth interviews, my research identifies both overt and subtle obstacles that learners may face. In this way, my study serves as a complement to existing research, offering a more thorough understanding of learners' challenges.

In addition, the depth of analysis provided by this qualitative study offers an enriched perspective on the strategies employed by Saudi EFL learners in navigating social networking sites for English language practice. Contrary to existing research that suggests learners are hesitant to use their target language in digital social circles, predominantly using their native language (e.g. Ma, 2017a; Lai et al., 2018; Lamb and Arisandy, 2019; Ariantini et al., 2021), this study uncovers a different narrative. The in-depth interviews reveal that these learners distinguish between platforms based on their characteristics. For instance, Snapchat is considered more private and best suited for connections with friends, whereas Twitter allows for a more public expression of language skills. This contrast in findings offers several important insights. First, it indicates the adaptive learning strategies employed by Saudi EFL learners. Engaging in English practice on SNS, even where their native language is prevalent, resourceful

approach to language acquisition. They strategically select platforms like Snapchat for private interactions and Twitter for public expressions, demonstrating an understanding of each platform's unique environment. Furthermore, this behaviour challenges the prevailing notion that learners are reluctant to use a second language in native-language-dominated digital spaces. It suggests a greater willingness among learners to overcome language barriers. This may reflect broader cultural shifts in Saudi Arabia towards English proficiency, signifying increased motivation to practise English in informal settings like SNS. These insights are crucial for language learning pedagogy. They highlight the need to adapt language learning theories and digital tools to diverse learning environments. Understanding learners' preferences in different digital contexts becomes essential in designing engaging language learning experiences. This emphasis on diversity also opens avenues for further research into how language learning strategies vary across cultures and digital platforms, recognising language learning as a dynamic process influenced by social and technological factors.

Furthermore, one important contribution that arises from learners' experiences is the imperative to differentiate the evaluation of language courses and materials from that of language apps. Language courses, such as Dalilk4IELTS, offer a more comprehensive approach by equipping learners with valuable learning strategies and teaching them how to effectively use a wide array of materials. Language websites offer learners a higher level of autonomy and agency, allowing them to choose the topics they want to learn and engage with materials that best suit their individual preferences. This freedom of choice empowers learners and enables them to take ownership of their language learning journey. On the other hand, language apps often provide users with a limited set of predetermined tasks, resulting in potential monotony, repetitiveness and a lack of adaptability⁹. This limitation is reinforced by Heil et al.'s (2016) review, which highlights the limited adaptation of current language apps to individual learners' needs.

⁹ They often have a limited number of types of tasks they can ask students to perform, e.g. multiple choice, drag + drop, true/false, etc.

The implementation of a qualitative research design in this investigation has notably enhanced the understanding of the dynamics of independent language learning among Saudi learners. By emphasising in-depth exploration over broad generalisations, this approach facilitates an examination of learner experiences, attitudes, and behaviours that could be overlooked by quantitative methodologies.

Through its engagement with detailed narratives and personal accounts, qualitative research illuminates the intricate and multifaceted nature of learner autonomy. It demonstrates that autonomy extends beyond the capacity for independent study to encompass a suite of skills such as goal setting, strategic planning, self-assessment, and effective utilisation of digital resources. These findings indicate that learner autonomy is a dynamic, context-sensitive phenomenon, with the strategies identified among Saudi learners enriching our comprehension of its variability across diverse learning environments and cultural contexts.

Moreover, the study's qualitative design has deepened the understanding of learner interactions with technology in language education. Unlike quantitative research, which may primarily focus on measuring usage patterns or satisfaction levels, this inquiry delves into the subjective meanings and preferences underlying these technological engagements. It explores why specific digital platforms are favoured over others, providing a more layered perspective on digital learning. This analysis not only pinpoints which digital tools and resources are deemed most beneficial for language learning but also elucidates the reasons behind their effectiveness, thereby contributing to digital language learning pedagogy.

Additionally, this research methodology has facilitated an investigation into the social facets of language learning, especially within Social Networking Sites (SNS). Analysing learner narratives regarding their SNS usage for language practice reveals the social strategies employed, such as the selective use of platforms for varying interaction types. These observations challenge the conventional belief in the passive use of SNS for language learning, suggesting that learners are actively crafting their linguistic identities and practices in these digital arenas instead. Such insights call for a reassessment of social media's role in language education, underscoring its potential as a venue for dynamic and engaged language practice.

Lastly, adopting qualitative methods has prompted a conceptual re-evaluation of language learning resources. The study underscores the critical roles of adaptability, personalisation, and learner agency by distinguishing the diverse experiences provided by language courses, websites, and apps. This differentiation encourages a more thorough critique of the design and application of language learning tools, advocating for strategies more attuned to learners' individual needs and circumstances.

7.4 Limitations of the Study

While the methodology was thoughtfully and carefully conceptualised, unforeseen limitations emerged, as is often the case with any research approach (Creswell et al., 2007). These limitations could potentially affect the trustworthiness of the research and arise from various factors such as the researcher, research design, setting or participants. In this section, I will discuss some of the limitations of the current study.

7.4.1 Limited Scope

First, it is important to acknowledge the limited scope of this study, which focused solely on seven Saudi EFL female higher education students who participated voluntarily. Due to the qualitative research methods used, the findings may not be generalisable to a larger or more diverse population. Another significant limitation is the gender-specific nature of the sample. The educational system in Saudi Arabia traditionally segregates students based on gender, and this, along with the conservative cultural context and my position as a female researcher, confined data collection to female university students. However, the study's goal, as outlined in the methodology section, was not to draw broad conclusions but rather to deepen the understanding of how and why learners employ smartphones for independent language learning, and the challenges they face during this process. As such, the findings should be interpreted within this specific framework.

7.4.2 Limited Interviewing Skills

During the study, I made concerted efforts to improve my interviewing skills. This involved engaging with relevant literature, conducting pilot interviews, reflecting on and analysing the interview data and seeking input from my supervisors. Despite these efforts, upon reflection, it became evident that there was potential for gathering more

detailed information and addressing specific questions more comprehensively. My relative inexperience as a researcher might have restricted the depth of the interviews, a limitation exacerbated by the challenging circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. Additionally, I remained conscious of avoiding questions or statements that could be perceived as judgemental, which may have further constrained the richness of the data collected. In Section 7.6, I will outline recommendations for future research that aim to address the limitations identified in this study.

7.5 Recommendations for Learners and Teachers: Practices Going Forward

Opening Thoughts:

I am acutely aware of time constraints and the demands on teachers, and I therefore want to stress that the recommendations are intended to benefit the teachers' classroom experience through incorporating time-efficient independent learning skills that can help with their students' IMLE. These recommendations could also be used to design a training programme for learners who want to learn independently.

This section is written so that it directly addresses the learners and teachers, and the recommendations are based on the findings of my study.

This research project set out to be a guide for both teachers and learners. I present below my recommendations for each group emerging from the findings, participants' experiences, the literature and my experiences as a language educator, under the following headings: regular exposure; multimodal learning; practising English online; anonymity for confidence; language learning platforms; translation; community building; and using the IMLE framework.

7.5.1 Regular Exposure

- Learners

Ensure that your daily routine includes regular interaction with the English language. Follow English-speaking influencers on social networking sites, watch English films and listen to English songs. This consistent exposure to the language in different contexts will help you adopt structures and expressions naturally.

- Teachers

Encourage your students to find enjoyable ways to incorporate English into their daily lives. This could include assignments that require them to follow English-speaking public figures or report on content from English media. The goal is to make English a part of their everyday experience, rather than just a subject studied in the classroom.

7.5.2 Multimodal Learning

- Learners

Combine your learning materials; do not just listen to a podcast, but also read along with a transcript. Watch videos with captions first, then challenge yourself to watch without them.

Use features like captions, adjustable playback speeds and interactive transcripts when using digital platforms. These tools can significantly enhance your understanding and allow you to engage with English at a deeper level.

- Teachers

Instruct students on how to effectively use these digital features. Consider demonstrating these tools in class and discussing how they can be used outside the classroom to support independent learning.

Remind the learners that while they can aid understanding, over-reliance on these tools may hinder the development of listening skills. Educators need to stress that captions should be used as a supplementary aid rather than a dependency. From a pedagogical viewpoint, the central concern is that over-reliance on captions can have broader educational consequences. Diao et al. (2007) highlight the potential to disrupt language learners' listening development, as managing multiple stimuli can strain memory capacity. In addition, both Hui (2005) and Danan (2004) discuss potential downsides of caption reliance: learners may become excessively dependent on the text, or their listening skills might not develop as intended. Such findings underline the need to evaluate how tools, initially designed as aids, might pose challenges if not used carefully. Emphasising this point, it is crucial to recall that the original purpose of captions was to cater to those with hearing impairments. Their integration into language learning, while beneficial, should be approached with caution. As such, a call

to action for educators and learners is to critically evaluate the use of captions, balancing their advantages against potential pitfalls.

7.5.3 Practise English Online (Partners and Sensitivity)

- Learners

When selecting language exchange partners or tutors, look for those with shared interests or professional backgrounds. This has the potential to make conversations more natural and relevant to your life, which can be more motivating and enjoyable.

Choosing the right platform is also crucial. The study suggests that different platforms serve different educational purposes. Learners must identify what they specifically need – be it vocabulary, grammar or conversation practice – and choose platforms that cater to those needs. Learners can engage in thorough research and exploration, delving into various platforms to understand their unique features and how they align with specific learning objectives. This process can be supplemented by trial and error, allowing learners to personally test different platforms and evaluate their effectiveness. Learners can benefit from the experiences of others who have already navigated these digital resources. By joining language learning communities (further discussed in Section 7.5.7), they can access a wealth of shared knowledge and insights about effective platforms. The study suggests that as learners become more confident, they can progress naturally from language-specific platforms to more general social platforms, enriching the overall language-learning experience.

Approach language exchanges with an open mind and respect for cultural differences. Being culturally sensitive can deepen your understanding of the language and the people who speak it. Moreover, navigate these digital interactions with cultural sensitivity, understanding that respectful and constructive exchanges are the foundation of meaningful language practice.

- Teachers

Encourage students to share their interests and hobbies and facilitate language exchange pairings based on these preferences. This can be done within the classroom or through connections with partner schools or online communities.

Incorporate lessons on cultural sensitivity and international etiquette. Role-playing exercises can be particularly effective in preparing students for real-world interactions. Educators, for their part, should encourage a broad spectrum of practice opportunities. They can orchestrate activities that reflect real-life interactions, prompting learners to seek out and converse with English speakers on shared topics of interest. This not only diversifies the learning experience but also underlines the relevance of authenticity in communication.

7.5.4 Anonymity for Confidence

- Learners

If you are nervous about making mistakes, consider using platforms that allow for anonymous interaction. This can lower the stakes of making errors, making the learning process less intimidating.

- Teachers:

Discuss with students the benefits and drawbacks of anonymity in language learning. Encourage them to step out of their comfort zone gradually while providing a safe space for them to make mistakes and learn from them.

7.5.5 Structured Platforms

- Learners

Use language exchange platforms and apps to structure your practice. They can offer a clear framework for improvement and provide access to a broad range of speaking partners and educational resources.

- Teachers

Introduce students to a variety of structured language learning platforms. Show them how to navigate these resources and how these resources can complement the more informal language exposure they get through media and social interaction.

7.5.6 Translation

- Learners

Translation apps serve as a bridge to understanding, allowing you to verify pronunciation, clarify sentence construction and build confidence in your use of English. However, it is crucial to approach these tools with a discerning eye, recognising that the convenience they offer does not come without the risk of inaccuracies.

- Teachers

Encourage learners to adopt a layered approach to translation: use apps to get a general sense of meaning but validate these translations by cross-referencing with reliable dictionaries and language platforms. This practice not only bolsters the learner's linguistic foundations but also cultivates an analytical mindset towards language acquisition.

Instruct students on the benefits and limitations of these tools, stressing the importance of not becoming overly dependent on them. Highlight the importance of error awareness, encouraging students to critically assess the grammatical fidelity of translations.

Encourage students to engage in reflective practices, reviewing and correcting their language use independently. This reflective practice not only reinforces linguistic accuracy but also empowers learners to take ownership of their language learning journey.

7.5.7 Community Building

- Learners

Join a community as a sense of community not only fosters collaboration but also offers emotional and cognitive support, thereby enhancing the overall learning experience.

- Teachers

This study has identified community building as a critical aspect of effective independent language learning. Educators can play a key role in nurturing this sense of community. One practical approach is to allocate specific times during classroom sessions for students to share their personal learning experiences and strategies. This sharing could take various forms, such as short presentations, round-table discussions or even informal chats. By doing so, students are exposed to a variety of learning

techniques and resources that their peers have found beneficial, which can lead to enriched learning opportunities for everyone.

Such discussions can also serve as a valuable feedback mechanism for the educators themselves. Understanding the challenges and successes students encounter in their independent learning journeys can offer insights into how the instructional design can be better tailored to facilitate independent learning.

Students will need support while acquiring these skills. Ask them to work together in teams or pairs and give regular feedback on their learning plans or the resources they have selected. It is important to connect the work students do by themselves with what happens in the rest of the class. You can make this connection by asking students to talk about their experiences, either in public or by sharing their learning diary with you. Encourage students to talk about what worked for them and what did not and help them to identify reasons for this. Share success stories with the other students.

7.5.8 Using the IMLE Framework as a Teaching Tool

- **Learners**

A key recommendation for learners engaging in independent language study via smartphones is to use the IMLE framework. This framework offers a structured approach to navigate the complexities of planning, managing, and evaluating your language learning.

The IMLE framework helps in setting clear objectives, selecting appropriate digital resources, and maintaining motivation and engagement throughout the learning journey. By consistently referring to the IMLE framework, you can ensure that you are on a productive path towards achieving your language learning goals.

- **Teachers**

Use the IMLE framework as a resource to support learners in their independent language learning for improvement on reading, writing and speaking skills. For example, Figure 7.3 illustrates techniques and recommendations for learners for their specific task. This is demonstrated with the teacher initiating the use of the framework with supporting resources, but crucially, to maintain the learners' independence, there is space for the learner to complete the task with the resources that they have found

by themselves. By doing this, the learners are encouraged to use the initial resources as a guideline for what they should be looking for when completing their task.

This is complemented by strategies that could be put into place by the teacher under the managing phase of the IMLE framework. This critically guides the learner to complete their task in ways they may not have been aware of. This would then lead on to the monitoring and evaluating section of the framework, where the learners reflect on strategies and resources. For example, how long did they spend using a particular strategy and with what resources? What worked well? What would they change? What can their support network do to help facilitate their own and each other's learning?

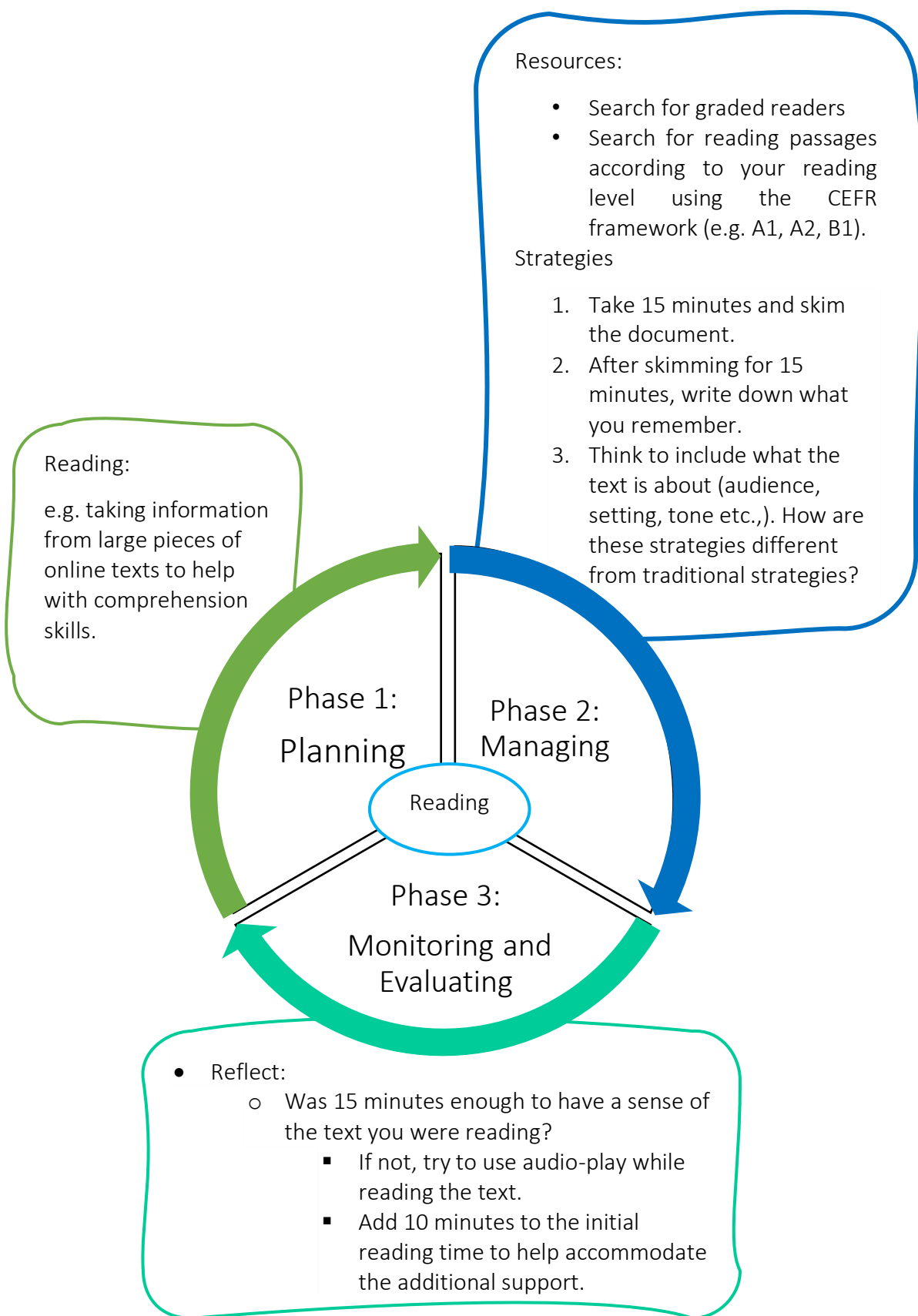


Figure 7.3: The IMLE framework to develop reading (future recommendations example)

7.6 Directions for Future Research

This research contributes to research on independent mobile language learning, as explained in Section 7.3. However, the insights gathered also identify areas that warrant additional investigation. This section aims to outline these key directions, suggesting a trajectory for future studies that could enrich our understanding of independent language learning with smartphones.

7.6.1 Replicating the Study with Males and Postgraduate Learners

The study conducted has provided valuable insights that can pave the way for future research. To further broaden the scope of the study, it could be worth including participants from different EFL contexts or male students within the same context (Saudi Arabia) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of language learners' practices and perceptions. Exploring various educational settings could also be beneficial, such as investigating postgraduate students' experiences to shed light on how independent language learning progresses through the different academic stages. It would also be interesting to explore how individuals learning languages other than English use smartphone technology to support their independent learning and the potential challenges they may encounter. Further qualitative research could also include learners with different language proficiency levels to analyse their choices of activities and digital tools and compare them to the learner's language level.

7.6.2 Conducting Longitudinal Studies

Longitudinal studies would offer another layer of depth, revealing how student behaviours and preferences evolve over time. Such research is essential for tracking the changes in the usage of digital tools and for monitoring shifts in learning strategies, motivation, and engagement levels over extended periods. This approach would enable observation of how students adapt to new technologies and to evolving educational environments. Furthermore, longitudinal research could shed light on the long-term impacts of these learning methods on students' language proficiency and independent learning capabilities. Additionally, such research would significantly enhance our understanding of lifelong learning processes and the sustainability of smartphone-assisted learning approaches.

7.6.3 Artificial Intelligence

A possible recommendation for future research concerns the use of artificial intelligence (AI) for independent language learning. This could involve reviewing the IMLE framework and learners' experiences with new technological tools. Notable examples include the deployment of AI-driven chatbots or virtual conversation partners designed to simulate real-life communication scenarios. Investigating the impact of these AI tools on language learning could offer valuable insights into how they enhance the overall learner experience. It is also crucial to investigate how they might hinder the learning process. For instance, over-reliance on AI could impact the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills in language acquisition, or it could lead to a lack of exposure to the nuanced, unpredictable nature of human language use. Understanding both the positive and negative impacts of AI tools on the learner experience will be vital in assessing their overall efficacy and in guiding the development of more balanced and effective language learning strategies.

7.7 Personal Reflections and Concluding Remarks

Reflecting on my transformative thesis journey, I encountered many challenges that ultimately empowered me to delve deeper into the topic. From the outset, my research focused on unravelling the intricacies of English language learning among Saudi Arabian learners outside the traditional classroom setting, emphasising their use of digital tools and the exercise of their agency. The rapid technological advancements and the ease with which authentic English language materials and activities could be accessed sparked my curiosity. They propelled me to investigate this dynamic field. However, an in-depth examination of the existing literature revealed a profound gap in the research on independent digital learning of English, specifically within Saudi Arabia. Motivated to bridge this gap and shed light on this overlooked area, I embarked on my ambitious PhD thesis journey.

Undertaking this monumental task demanded unwavering focus on refining the aim, shaping research questions, meticulously crafting the methodology and diligently interpreting the resulting data. Little did I know that my journey would be further compounded by the immense personal challenges that awaited me. Throughout my years of dedicated PhD study, the world was engulfed by the devastating Covid-19

pandemic, and I was confronted with the heartbreaking loss of three beloved family members. In 2018, my uncle passed away, followed by the untimely demise of my aunt in 2021 and the tragic loss of my cousin in 2022.

In the face of these profound personal tragedies, it would have been easy to succumb to despair and abandon my academic pursuits. However, buoyed by my supervisors' and family's unwavering encouragement and support, I found the strength and resilience to persist in my journey. Their unwavering belief in me fuelled my determination to overcome adversity and continue contributing to understanding of independent mobile learning of English.

As the global pandemic forced the world into lockdown, I encountered new challenges during my research data collection and analysis stages. Although I had initiated data collection prior to the pandemic, I had to swiftly adapt my approach, taking into account the mental well-being of my participants. Mindful of the trying circumstances, I made necessary adjustments to the medium of data collection to ensure the comfort and engagement of those involved.

The subsequent analysis phase proved to be an intellectually demanding endeavour. As I immersed myself in the wealth of interview data, I grappled with the intricate task of categorising the emergent themes. I aimed to identify the most relevant and significant insights that would effectively address my research questions. Exploring how students harnessed the potential of smartphones for their learning and delving into the wealth of media and resources they shared during the interviews proved fascinating and enlightening.

While this PhD project has ended, my exploration of the independent mobile learning of English will continue. I hope this thesis will inspire other researchers, particularly in Saudi Arabia, to examine further independent mobile learning of English and other foreign languages. As I bring this tough yet rewarding PhD project to a close, I am filled with a profound sense of personal and professional fulfilment. Through this transformative journey, I have gained an intimate understanding of students' IMLE experiences and perspectives, which were largely unfamiliar to me at the outset. My

study has contributed to the field's knowledge base and will inspire further exploration of IMLE, particularly among researchers in Saudi Arabia.

I embark on the next chapter of my academic and personal journey with a renewed passion for exploring the realms of IMLE. With boundless optimism, I hope my thesis serves as a beacon, guiding future researchers towards unlocking the untapped potential in this fascinating field.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Table of Digital Tools

Platform	What is it?
YouTube	Video sharing social networking site
Telegram	Online messaging app
WhatsApp	Online messaging app
Twitter	Microblogging and social networking site
Instagram	Photo and video sharing social networking site
Snapchat	Online messaging app that lets users exchange pictures and videos, which disappear after being viewed or after 24 hours if posted as a story
HelloTalk	Language learning app that connects people who speak a language fluently with those who are trying to learn the same language, and vice versa
Ablo	Chatting app
InterPals	Chatting app that allows users to make new friends and find language partners from all over the world
Cambly	Online English tutoring service
Dalilk4IELTS	Language learning platform that offer a general language course and IELTS preparation intensive course
Duolingo	Language learning platform; delivery method consists of translation exercises at the level of words and sentences
iSub English	Language learning app that provides English videos with subtitles, which run correspondingly with video
English Listening	British Council language learning app that offer English audio and listening activities
Merriam-Webster	Online dictionary
Dict. Plus	Translation app
Google Translate	Translation app
Reverso Translate	Translation app
Grammarly	Digital writing assistance tool
Correct me	Digital writing assistance tool

Appendix 2. Previous Studies

Author and Date	Objectives	Method and Participants	Key Findings	Limitations and Implications for this Study
Demouy et al. (2016)	Understanding learners' motivations and practices in using their mobiles for language learning.	Mixed methods 143 online surveys 8 beginner students: semi-structured interviews. Adult distance students of five languages at different levels.	Preferred activities: listening, grammar, vocabulary and reading. Preferred resources and apps: dictionaries and translators, language learning websites and apps, authentic audiovisual and reading resources. On the other hand, social networking sites and instant messaging scored low.	The participants were from three different levels in five languages, but then answers on their use were selective between the levels. For example, type of activity based on survey from beginners and intermediate then type of apps only beginners, which would presumably result in different answers. In my study, all the data are based on intermediate English learners. The authors did not explain the reasons for the popularity or low use of resources among participants. The participants all studied a language at a distance and were learning languages other than English, making them different from students in my research with possibly different results.

Mindog (2016)	To explore, describes and analyse the use of smartphone apps by learners to support learning English as a Foreign Language.	Qualitative multiple-case studies, interviews. Four Japanese university students learning EFL (intermediate).	Students use apps in: education/content, games, news, videos, SNS, reference categories. They mostly used content and SNS apps. Popularity of SNS: desire to improve communicate ability + the experience of living in an English-speaking country. YouTube app: entertainment + authentic + help in exposure. Use of apps was influenced by three interconnected factors: opportunity, personal preferences, and desire to use an app.	Although the study mentions the location, duration and frequency of apps use, the ways that the learners used these apps were not mentioned. The study dealt with qualitative data as if they were quantitative, focusing on the numbers rather than the details of learners' use and purposes.
Trinder (2017)	To determine frequency of use and perceptions of usefulness of technologies for the	Mixed methods (qualitative data collected along with responses to open-ended questions).	Students had clearly formed conceptions about which technologies promote language learning and used them accordingly.	The study looked at advanced learners' use of technology for language learning; results might vary with intermediate language learners such as participants in my study.

	acquisition of language skills, intentional learning in informal contexts, reasons behind technology choices, and attitudes towards technology use in class.	Austrian university students learning English.		The study only used a questionnaire for the data collection, and interviews give learners more space to share their experiences and views. Gaining insights into how students engage with technology might enable teachers to tap into the motivating potential of preferred technologies and assist learners in making more informed choices.
Ma (2017)	To investigate how mobile technologies mediate students' English language learning.	Survey, interviews. Hong Kong university students.	The results suggest that Hong Kong university students made use of various e-resources and tools for learning their L2; they also tended to combine L2 learning with subject learning, communication, entertainment and personal interests. Results reveal distinctive features and attributes that formed their personalised learning approaches. Factors influencing personalised language learning mediated by mobile technologies:	There is a need for studies in different socio-cultural contexts.

			learner motivation, strategic knowledge, learning beliefs, study discipline, learning styles and strategies, personal interest.	
Lai et al. (2018)	To examine the nature of out-of-classroom language learning with technology experiences and influencing factors.	Mixed methods (Two phases: 1. qualitative, 2. quantitative) University students.	Technological experiences do not correspond with types of technology. Three distinct technological experiences were identified: 1. Instruction-oriented 2. Entertainment- and information-oriented 3. Social-oriented	Learners' different learning experiences with technology might be a more productive angle of categorisation in understanding the nature of out-of-class language learning. Recommendations: examine the phenomenon in different learning contexts and with different populations.
Lai and Zheng (2018)	To understand the nature of mobile language learning experiences that learners engage in autonomously beyond the classroom.	Mixed methods (online survey + semi-structured interviews). Foreign language learners at a university in Hong Kong.	Dimensions of self-directed out-of-class mobile learning experience: 1. personalisation 2. authenticity 3. connectivity	Importance of considering learners' selective use of digital tools.

Appendix 3. Online Survey


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Using Smartphone for English

0% complete

دراسة بحثية

عزيزتي الطالبة الجامعية (عالمية وباحثة المستقبل)
أتمنى منك المشاركة في بحثي والذي يهدف إلى فهم دور الهواتف الذكية في تعزيز تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية والتعلم الذاتي بين طالبات السنة التحضيرية في السعودية. في هذا الاستبيان سيُطلب منك الإجابة على مجموعة من الأسئلة عن تجاربك مع تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية وأن يستغرق أكثر من ١٠ دقيقة لإكماله.

إذا كان لديك أي تساؤل أو عند الرغبة في الحصول على إجابة حول أمور أخرى يرجى مراسلة الباحثة أمل باتنبح
a.basheikh1@leeds.ac.uk
شاكراً ومقدرة لك تعاونك ووقتك

1

فضلاً اختر إحدى الاختيارات التالية

☐ لمطلعت على المعلومات السابقة، وأوافق على اكمال هذا الاستبيان كجزء من مشاركتي في هذه الدراسة البحثية

☐ لا اوافق على المشاركة في هذا الاستبيان

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20% complete

Smartphone

2. Do you use your smartphone in learning English? هل تستخدم جوالك في دعمك لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية؟

☐ Yes نعم

☐ No لا

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Using Smartphone for English

40% complete

General Information

3. What type of high school did you attend? ما نوع المدرسة الثانوية التي التحقت بها ؟

- ☐ Private school مدرسة أهلية
- ☐ State school مدرسة حكومية
- ☐ International school مدرسة دولية
- ☐ Other

4. Did you finish the foundation year? هل انتهيت من السنة التمهيدية؟

- ☐ Yes نعم
- ☐ No لا

5. What do you plan to major in? ماذا تريد أن تخصص في أي تخصص قبلتي؟

- ☐ Business وإدارة الاقتصاد
- ☐ Computing and Information Technology الحاسب ونظم المعلومات
- ☐ Law قانون
- ☐ Media إعلام
- ☐ Medicine/Nursing/Dentistry/Pharmacy طب / تمريض / طب الأسنان / صيدلية
- ☐ Tourism سياحة
- ☐ Other

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60% complete

English Language

6. When did you start to study English? متى بدأت في دراسة اللغة الإنجليزية؟

- ☐ Since kindergarten منذ الحضانة
- ☐ Since first grade منذ الصف الأول الابتدائي
- ☐ Since fourth grade منذ الصف الرابع الابتدائي
- ☐ Since sixth grade منذ الصف السادس الابتدائي
- ☐ Other

7. Have you ever been to an English speaking country? هل زرتي يوماً يتحدث الإنجليزية؟

- ☐ No لا
- ☐ Yes نعم

8. How important is English in your daily life outside the classroom? ما مدى أهمية اللغة الإنجليزية في حياتك اليومية خارج الفصل الدراسي؟

- ☐ Very important: I use it frequently every day in many contexts استخدمها كثيراً في حياتي اليومية
- ☐ Important: I often use it in different situations استخدمها أحياناً في بعض المواقف المختلفة
- ☐ Not very important: I only use it occasionally استخدمها فقط بين الحين والآخر
- ☐ Not important at all: I never use it outside the classroom لا استخدمها خارج نطاق الدراسة

9. What are the most useful, helpful experiences you've had with English language learning? ما هي أكثر التجارب فائدة لك في تطوير لعمك الإنجليزية؟ كيف تعلمت اللغة الإنجليزية إلى هذه المرحلة؟

- ☐ One-on-one tutorials لروس خصوصية
- ☐ Online courses دورات على الإنترنت
- ☐ School English classes حصص اللغة الإنجليزية في المدرسة
- ☐ Foundation year English classes محاضرات اللغة الإنجليزية في السنة التحضيرية
- ☐ Independent learning التعلم الذاتي
- ☐ Language learning mobile apps تطبيقات الجوال لتعلم اللغة
- ☐ Social media وسائل التواصل الاجتماعية
- ☐ Through interacting with people بالتواصل مع أشخاص يتحدثون اللغة
- ☐ Other (please specify) غير ذلك (يرجى التحديد)

- a. If you selected Other, please specify:

- b. Would you like to share more details about your language learning? هل تودى مشاركة تفاصيل أخرى عن كيفية تعلمك للغة؟

10. How much *private* time (i.e. out of school/university) do you spend learning English language? كم من وقتك الخاص تقضين في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية (لا من أجل الجامعة وواجباتها)؟

- ☐ Up to 1 hour a day ساعة في اليوم
- ☐ Up to 1 hour a week ساعة في الأسبوع
- ☐ Every now and then بين الحين و الآخر
- ☐ I do not spend private time learning English لا أضي وقت لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية في وقتي الخاص
- ☐ Other

11. What language(s) can you speak other than Arabic and English? ما هي اللغة (اللغات) التي يمكن أن تحدثها غير العربية والإنجليزية؟

- ☐ Korean الكورية
- ☐ Turkish التركية
- ☐ Japanese اليابانية
- ☐ Other
- ☐ No other languages لا أحدث غير العربية والإنجليزية

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Smartphone for English (In-class Survey) 104

66% complete

المقابلة

11. Would u be willing to talk to me about your use of smartphone? هل يمكنك مشاركة تجربتك في تعلم اللغة واستخدامك للجوال في مقابلة مع الباحثة لا تتجاوز الساعة؟ واستعدادك للجوال في مقابلة مع الباحثة لا تتجاوز الساعة؟

☒ Yes نعم
☐ No لا

a. Name الاسم **Required**

b. WhatsApp Mobile number رقم الجوال **Required**

c. Email البريد الإلكتروني

d. When would you like to meet? (الرجاء اختيار وقتين مختلفتين) **Required**

Please select at least 2 answer(s).

- ☐ Sunday 23/2/2020 at 11:00 يوم الأحد 11 الصباح
☐ Sunday 23/2/2020 at 12:00 يوم الأحد 12 الظهر
☐ Monday 24/2/2020 at 11:00 يوم الاثنين 11 الصباح
☐ Monday 24/2/2020 at 12:00 يوم الاثنين 12 الظهر
☐ Tuesday 25/2/2020 at 11:00 يوم الثلاثاء 11 الصباح
☐ Tuesday 25/2/2020 at 12:00 يوم الثلاثاء 12 الظهر
☐ Wednesday 26/2/2020 at 11:00 يوم الأربعاء 11 الصباح
☐ Wednesday 26/2/2020 at 12:00 يوم الأربعاء 12 الظهر
☐ Thursday 27/2/2020 at 11:00 يوم الخميس 11 الصباح

Agreement and contact information for the interviews before Covid-19 showing students' choices of date and time based on room booking at the university.

Using Smartphone for English

80% complete

المقابلة

12. Would u be willing to talk to me about your use of smartphone for language learning via Zoom? ممتن تشاركي بيساعة من وقتك تتحدثني فيها مع الباحثة عبر برنامج زوم أي اتصال خائفي عن تجربتك في تعلم اللغة واستخدامك للجوال؟

☒ Yes نعم
☐ No لا

a. Name الاسم **Required**

b. WhatsApp Mobile number رقم الجوال **Required**

c. Email البريد الإلكتروني

Agreement and contact information for the interviews after Covid-19. They were contacted later to agree on the time and date leaving it more flexible with changing challenging circumstances.

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Appendix 4. Interview Guide

Interview: Arabic ☐ English ☐

English language overview

- 1) What do you think of your English proficiency level ما هو تقييمك لمستواك في اللغة الإنجليزية؟
 - a) Advanced أستطيع فهم كل ما يقال والتحدث بطلاقة
 - b) Intermediate معظم ما يقال واجراء محادثات بالإنجليزية
 - c) Beginner أستطيع فهم بعض ما يقال واستخدام لغة مبسطة
- 2) How did you learn English? What are the most useful, helpful experiences you've had with English language learning?
كيف تعلمت اللغة الإنجليزية؟ هل يمكنك أن تصفي أكثر التجارب المفيدة لك في تطوير لغتك الإنجليزية؟ هل يمكنك أن تصفي أكثر التجارب المفيدة لك في تطوير لغتك الإنجليزية؟ كيف تستخدمها لتطوير لغتك؟
- Follow-up question:
 - When was this? When did it start? During preparatory /summer/school?
- 3) Do you have a chance to use(speak) English out of university? Please explain.
هل عندك فرصة تمارسي\ تستخدم اللغة الإنجليزية خارج النطاق الدراسي في حياتك اليومية؟
- 4) Who speaks English in your family? من يتحدث اللغة الانجليزية في عائلتك؟
- 5) How do you feel about your English learning progress so far? كيف تشوفي تطور لغتك؟
- 6) Do you do anything special to keep your motivation high? What?
ماذا تفعلين لتبقى دافعيته لتعلم اللغة؟

Smartphones for language learning

- 7) How many mobile devices (smartphones, tables, iPad) do you have? Do you prefer to use one of them for learning and/or playing and watching media?

- 8) How do you feel about using smartphones for English language learning? ما هو رأيك في استخدام الجوال لتعلم الإنجليزية؟
- 9) What do you learn most frequently by means of your smartphone? Why this? (e.g. Vocabulary, reading, listening, ...)

ماذا تتعلم (على ماذا تركز) عند تعلمك اللغة الإنجليزية باستخدام هاتفك؟ ولماذا مع الشرح؟

(على سبيل المثال المفردات، القراءة، التحدث بطلاقة أكثر، الفهم).

- 10) What do you do? How do you use your smartphone to learn English by yourself?
Show me

كيف تستخدم الجوال لتطوير لغتك الإنجليزية؟

Follow-up question:

- Do you have language learning goals (e.g., a skill to develop, ...)? What are they?
أهداف لغوية محددة؟

- 11) Why did you use those digital tools for your language study? لماذا اخترت استخدام هذ
المصادر والأدوات؟

Section added after the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown:

The lockdown possible impact

- 12) How did the lockdown impact your use of smartphone? كيف اثر الحجر بسبب جائحة كورونا على استخدامك للجوال؟
- 13) Do you feel that your usage of smartphone in relation to learning and specifically language learning changed due to the lockdown? How? هل تشعر أن استخدامك للجوال لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية قد تأثر بسبب الجائحة والحجر؟ كيف؟
- 14) How was the formal online learning? Do you feel that due to it you are more excited to learn using digital tools? Or it affected you differently? كيف كان التعلم الإلكتروني؟ هل تشعر أنك بسببه متحمسة أكثر للتعلم باستخدام الأدوات الرقمية؟ أم أنها أثرت عليك بشكل مختلف؟

Perceived usefulness and limitations

- 15) How useful is the use of smartphone in English learning for developing your language skills? (Speaking? Listening? Reading? Writing? Vocab.? Grammar?)
What about its limitations? Can you give me examples (useful/let you down)?

في رأيك ما هي فوائد استخدام الهواتف الذكية في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية داخل الفصل الدراسي؟ ماذا عن خارجه؟
اذكري لي مثلاً ساعدك فيه هاتفك لتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية؟ ومثالاً آخر فشل فيه في مساعدتك لتعلم اللغة؟

16) Can you give me an example of a time your smartphone gave you an answer that confused you, and how you overcame it? (participant show me on their screens)
هل يمكنك اعطائي مثال لم تكون فيه مساعدة الهاتف الذكي مفيدة بما فيه الكفاية (تشتت)؟ كيف تجاوزت هذه المشكلة؟

17) Do you think that your smartphone is helping you to learn by yourself? Why? How?
هل تعتقدي بأن جوالك يدعمك لتتعلمي بنفسك؟ لماذا؟ كيف؟

18) Can you imagine learning English without your smartphone? How would it be?
What would be missing? Would anything be better?
هل يمكنك تخيل تعلم الإنجليزية بدون هاتفك الذكي؟ كيف سيكون تعلمك؟ ،ما الذي سيكون مفقوداً؟ هل هناك شيء أفضل؟

Guidance and support

19) Do you feel that you need guidance on how to use smartphone for English language learning?
تحتاجي دعم من الأستاذة في استخدام الجوال للتعلم؟
Promotes:

- To get resources to learn English using your phone?
كيفية الحصول على المصادر في الجوال
 - To evaluate and extract relevant information from the internet?
تقييم وإيجاد المصادر والأدوات المناسبة ذات الصلة
 - Monitor/evaluate your language progress?
متابعة وتقييم تقدمك في اللغة
- Any other?

20) Do you have any additional thoughts or comments about the use of smartphone as a language learning tool that you'd like to share?
هل لديك أي أفكار أو تعليقات إضافية حول استخدام الهاتف الذكي كأداة لتعلم اللغة تود مشاركتها؟

Table 1 indicates which interview questions were used to answer each of the research questions.

Research questions	Objectives of RQs	Example of interview questions that will answer the RQs
RQ1: 1. How do Saudi female university students use smartphones for independent language learning, and what are their views on this experience?	Q1 seeks to clarify the methods by which female Saudi students use their smartphones to learn English by themselves, the smartphone resources (e.g., language learning platforms, SNS) they use, and for what purpose they use these resources (i.e., their learning goals). It also asks the female Saudi university students for their views on the use of smartphones for language learning, how it smartphones supports their English learning, its and the impact of smartphones on their language development.	What do you do? How do you use your smartphone to learn English by yourself? What do you learn most frequently by means of your smartphone? Why this? How useful is the use of smartphone in English learning for developing your language skills? What about its limitations? Can you give me examples? Can you imagine learning English without your smartphone? How would it be? What would be missing? Would anything be better?
RQ2: What challenges do Saudi female university students face when using smartphones for independent English language learning, and how could they be addressed?	Q2 looks into the challenges learners face during their learning process with smartphones, and what support they need based on the limitations they express.	How useful is the use of smartphone in English learning for developing your language skills? (Speaking? Listening? Reading? Writing? Vocab.? Grammar?) What about its limitations? Can you give me examples (useful/let you down)? Can you give me an example of a time your smartphone gave you an answer that confused you, and how you overcame it? Do you feel that you need guidance on how to use smartphone for English language learning?

Appendix 5. Dates and Media of the Interviews

#	Pseudonym	Date of the interview	Medium of the interview
1	Ameera	Interview 1: February 16, 2020	Interview 1: face-to-face
		Interview 2: September 3, 2020	Interview 2: online
2	Ghadeer	October 12, 2020	Online – Facetime
3	Sara	Interview 1: November 19, 2019	Interview 1: face-to-face
		Interview 2: October 27, 2020	Interview 2: online
4	Leena	Interview 1: March 8, 2020	Interview 1: face-to-face
		Interview 2: August 27, 2020	Interview 2: online
5	Aram	August 23, 2020	Online – Facetime
6	Razan	Interview 1: February 19, 2020	Interview 1: face-to-face
		Interview 2: September 6, 2020	Interview 2: online
7	Asmahan	Interview 1: February 10, 2020	Interview 1: face-to-face
		Interview 2: August 27, 2020	Interview 2: online

Appendix 6. Short Sample of an Interview

Interview Language	The interview was in mostly in Arabic with questions in English
Interview Time	58:40
Date:	Feb 19, 2020

Time	Turn	Speaker	Audio
	37.	A	Nice! Okay you mention in the questionnaire that you learnt English from university and private lessons ... can you tell more details on that?
	38.	R	Yes, Cambly helped to practise and use the language as I don't. I took an hour a day every day for three months.
	39.	A	Was this when you suspended your studies?
	40.	R	Yes, last semester. Instead of staying at home, I planned to improve my English language because I will be studying Biology and you know it is all in English, so at least I improve myself and know terminologies.
	41.	A	So you took Cambly sessions every day?
10:00	42.	R	Yes, an hour daily to practise. It is different; I had two teachers, one who focused on grammar and corrected me if I made a mistake and the other on talking. So whenever I use the app, I can change the teacher, but in those three months, I dealt with two teachers, one was American. She knew some Arabic and sometimes translated for me, the other one teaches taught beginners, so she chooses simple words and that why I understand what she says.
	43.	A	Was it audio or video?
	44.	R	Video, I see her, but I turn off my camera
	45.	A	Does it give you the choice between the different levels and what you want to focus?
	46.	R	Yes, exactly and I choose whether I want female or male
	47.	A	Do you do something special that makes you motivated to learn English and Korean?

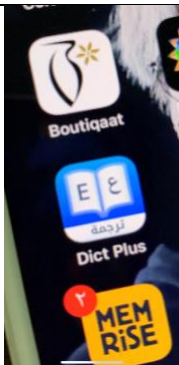
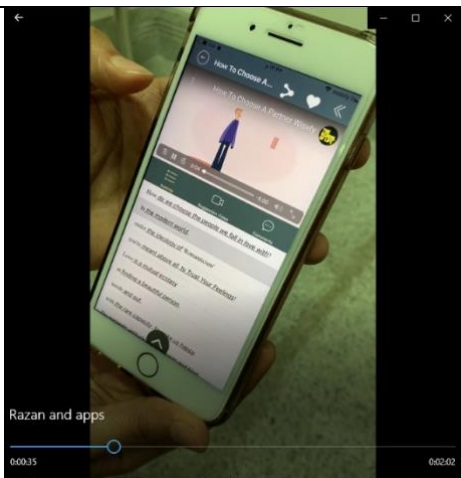
	48.	R	If I was not studying at the university and I know that I must get a high GPA, literally I would not have learned English. But because I saw in statistics and the other subjects, it is crucial, and even if I got a high GPA and I want to enrol in the medical field, English is a must... even in any other majors whether math or any, I need English.
	49.	A	If I told you rate yourself in English (advanced, intermediate, beginner)?
	50.	R	Beginner
	51.	A	Okay...how do you see your development in English?
12:00	52.	R	Every day is better than the day before. Today I am better than yesterday and tomorrow I will be better than today.
	111.	A	What other apps do you use?
30:00	112.	R	For my English language, I have an app for stories. I read a lot although I don't understand. This app was recommended by my Cambly teacher, you learn through stories, and you enjoy it. You choose the story and play the audio and the accent is British.
	113.	A	Do you choose the accent?
	114.	R	No, unfortunately it is British
	115.	A	You don't like the British accent?
	116.	R	It is difficult [She showed me the app and played a story for me, See #3]
	117.	A	Is it like a story in a video?
	118.	R	Yes, exactly
	119.	A	What do you do after watching the video of the story?
	120.	R	I read it again
	121.	A	How often do you read it?
	122.	R	mmm once or twice a week
	123.	A	So you watch the video then read the story, do you do any exercise after that?

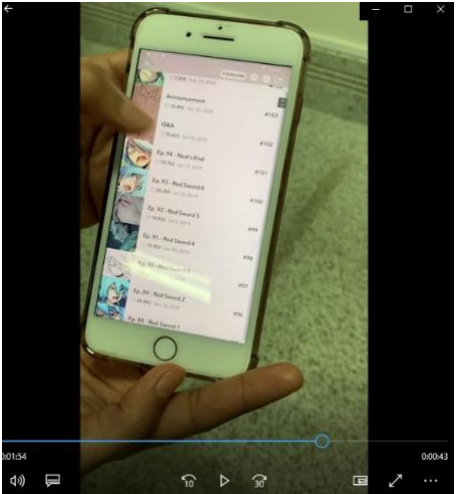
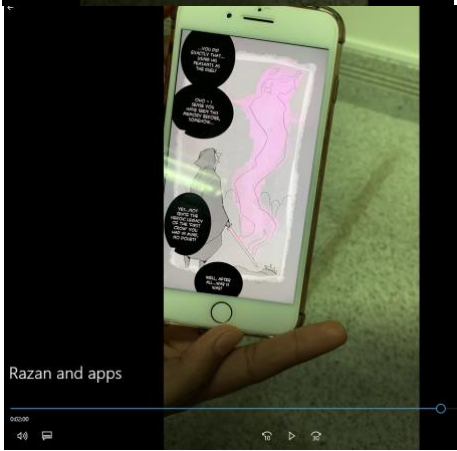
	124.	R	No, it is only videos. But all of the videos are British [in a disappointed tone]
	125.	A	Is your teacher British?
	126.	R	Cambly? No, this was recommended by my friend. My teacher told me about this app where you read stories like Manga (magazines with drawings) for fun instead of buying magazines, you use the website. You know from the stories, you start visualising. [She showed me the app, See #4]
	127.	A	What else?
33:22	128.	R	This part is recorded as a video I have lots of apps [She showed how her phone is filled with apps, See #5] And I have this app [Grammarly] which corrects my English grammar. [she showed me how she added it into her keyboard and use it when writing in in English to correct her grammar, See #6] There is this app where I write in my keyboard and there is this button I click on and it changes to the other language instead of taking a long time by using another app for translation. [She showed me Transliter app and how to use by trying a message in WhatsApp in Arabic and it was sent in English, See #7] This app gives you five words to learn, and you learn how to write and pronounce them. 5 words are the max, so you remember. [MATI MATI STUDIO app, See #7] This app was shared by my dad, it is paid but it is really good. There is also other apps where you learn by playing games. These other app was recommended by my friend [#3] This app reads the story and point at the texts as he is reading, so when you see the word again somewhere else, you'll know how to read it. [See #3]
	129.	A	Do you prefer that are the apps have Arabic?

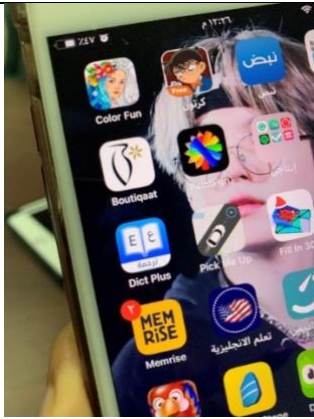
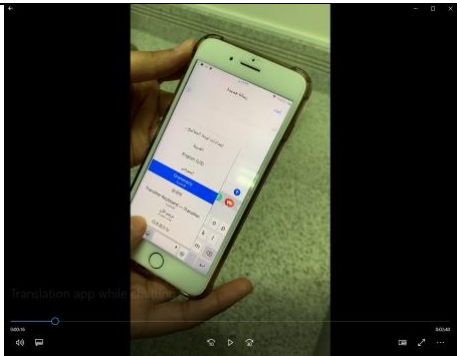
	130.	R	Yes, so I can understand some terminologies
	131.	A	Usually where do you use these apps?
	132.	R	At home, because I have time there
	133.	A	Do watch language learning apps in YouTube?
	134.	R	Yes, but not a lot. Maybe I only watched five clips. I watch others non-educational videos like interviews and other videos that look interesting
	135.	A	Do you read books other than the apps you just show me?
	136.	R	No, I don't have books... I downloaded some books in my phone, but only read like two pages
	137.	A	Why is that?
	138.	R	I didn't understand I felt that their level was more advanced
	139.	A	Do you record yourself speaking English?
	140.	R	While preparing for the Cambly class, I learn and practise some words, so I can speak with my teacher because if I stayed like this a beginner, she will get bored of me and my only basic words. I need to memorise and prepare more words
	141.	A	How do you prepare? Does she give you a topic in advance?
	142.	R	No no, I do it by myself before the class as when I speak to her in class, I feel like my level is lower than talking to someone whose mother tongue is English and won't understand me if I asked for translation as she'll explain in English
	149.	A	What about Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat?
	150.	R	I don't have these apps
	151.	A	Why?
	152.	R	My family is traditional, so they don't like these websites
	153.	A	But you have YouTube?
	154.	R	Yes, I have YouTube
	155.	A	What about WhatsApp do you communicate in English?

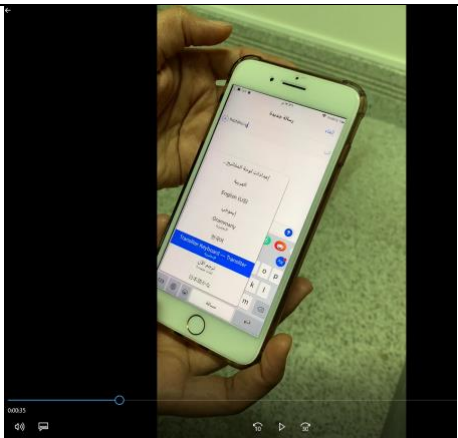
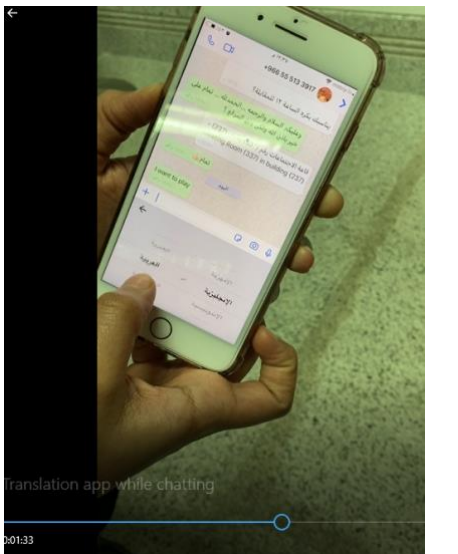
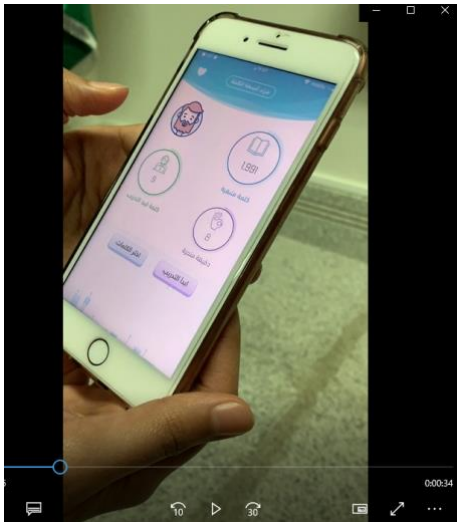
44:49	156.	R	I chat with one of my Cambly teachers, the one that doesn't speak Arabic. She tells me that I need to practise and send me clips and articles.
	157.	A	Do you send her voice messages?
	158.	R	She doesn't, but I did once
	159.	A	Nice... so you don't use SNS?
	160.	R	Twitter, once every four months to check the university page and some of the Korean pages and what they posted about concerts [laughs]
	161.	A	Do you listen to English or Korean songs?
45:50	162.	R	I listen to Korean songs every day. If I didn't, I feel like something is missing in my day. They use some English phrases in their songs. So I know the English words as I always sing it.
48:44	163.	A	What do you feel are the benefits you gain from using your phone for language?
	164.	R	Learning from the apps
	165.	A	How is it helping you?
	166.	R	Vocab, so I can form a correct sentence as I need grammar, but I am really bad at it whether in Arabic or English
	167.	A	What do you feel improved in your English?
	168.	R	Even though I had some language basics, I didn't talk. But with Cambly, the fear barrier of making mistakes was broken, so it was okay for me to speak and make mistakes because I am a beginner.
	169.	A	Can you imagine learning English without phones?
50:10	170.	R	Maybe I would use books and dictionary and watch TV, probably that would help.
	171.	A	What would be missing?
51:00	172.	R	Honestly, if I was not in university, I would ignore English... but maybe I would not learn new vocab and not able to speak and forget the language if I didn't use it daily. I tend to forget when I don't use the language daily.

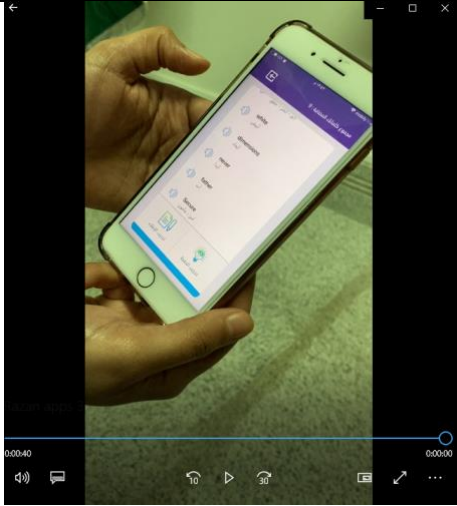
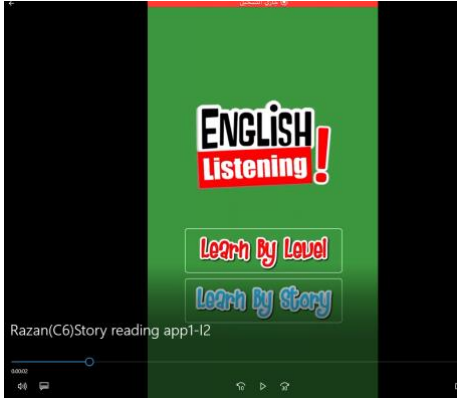
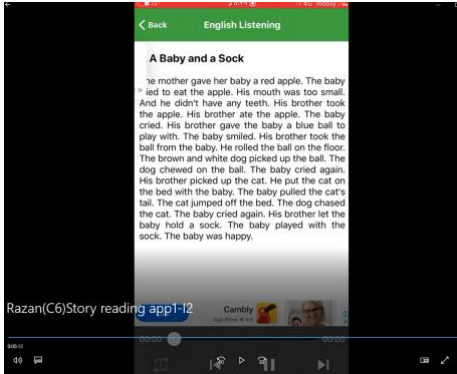
	173.	A	Can you give me an example of a time your smartphone gave you an answer that confused you, and how you overcame it?
	174.	R	In statistic, some words don't have a translation, and if I translate it I have the same words written in Arabic. So I had to go to my teacher or the other students and ask for help, off course they can't give me the literate translation, but they explain the meaning for me so I can understand

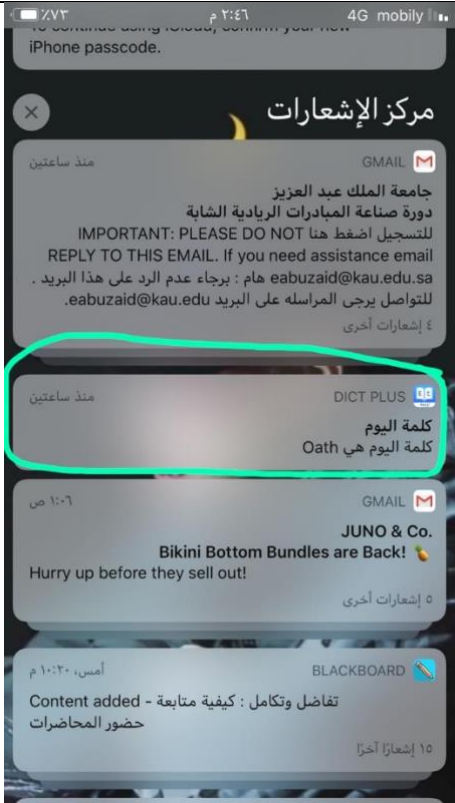
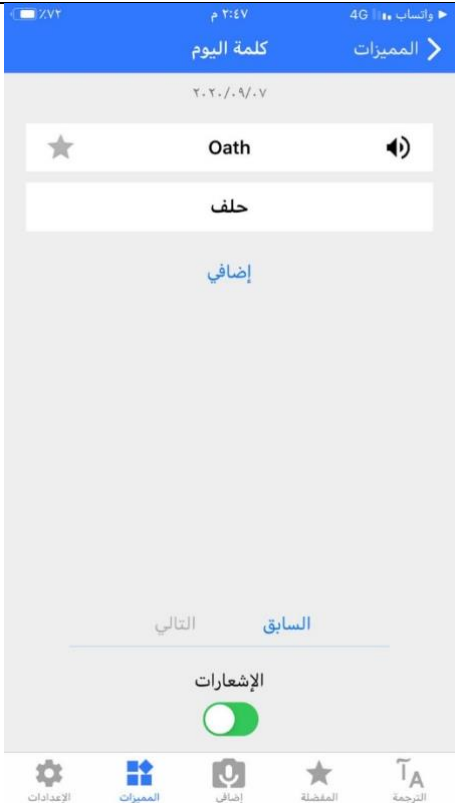
#	Media Type	Razan's explanation and comments	Media shared by Razan (Case 6)
1	Dict App (Translation)	She later in the second interview mentioned it again and talked about how she liked it.	
3	iSub English app	Razan explained in the video that this app has videos and it shows the written scripts with them. After the story she checked the grammar. The audio is in British accent which Razan disliked as she found it hard. She used it once or twice a week. This app was recommended by one of her friends.	

4	WEB TOON app	Razan says: it is learning with fun like this app is for stories. It is Manga [Japanese magazine for stories in English with drawings]. This app was recommended by her Cambly teacher.	  

5	Phone filled with apps for language learning	Video 1 and 2 in the folder recorded in the interview of apps and how Razan used them.	
6	Grammarly Some screenshots of the video using Grammarly keyboard	Razan showed me in a video how she used Grammarly on her keyboard.	

7	Transliter App	Razan showed me how she used Transliter in her iPhone keyboard, but she mentioned that the app made the device slow.	 
8	MATI MATI STUDIO app	'1991 is the number of words in English.' Video recorded in the interview of apps and how Razan used them	'These are the words that I showed you, I can practise maximum five words a day. I learnt these words and their meaning and how to pronounce them and how to use them in a sentence.' 

			
9	English Listening! app	Razan said that it read written texts and she thought it is a good app. There are two videos of Razan using English Listening app	  

12	Screenshot of the notification from Dict Plus (2 nd interview)	Razan received this notification daily at 12:00 pm.	
13	Dict Plus word of the day (2 nd interview)	Word of the day with its translation and pronunciation.	

Appendix 7. Analysis with MAXQDA

The screenshot displays the MAXQDA software interface. On the left, the 'Document System' pane shows a list of documents, including 'Interviews' and 'Aram (Case 11)'. The middle pane shows the 'Code System' with various codes applied to the transcript, such as 'English in School', 'English Language Centre', and 'British accent'. The right pane shows the 'Interview Transcript in English - Aram (Case 11)' with a timeline of the interview. The transcript includes a timeline of the interview with speaker turns and timestamps.

07:46	27	A	Ok, now, we're going to talk about smartphone use outside the classroom. So your own without the teacher.
08:04	28	S	Usually I go to YouTube. I like to listen to I think it's Lucy Bella channel [See #2] if you know it. She is an England woman and she her channel is very useful to me because I listen to English... her accent is really good and she give us a lot of vocabulary like native speaker I can learn from her.
08:43	29	A	Is there a reason why you like British accent?
08:47	30	S	They are clear...I can understand them, but in America they talk very fast
08:56	31	A	How did you know about this YouTube channel?
08:59	32	S	Um, maybe I had a work to make a video for my teacher if she wanted a video in English. And I was just, uh, browsing about anything in English and I found her, um.
09:24	33	A	Ok, uh, can you tell me how you use your smartphone outside the classroom by yourself to learn English or to support you learn English?
09:32	34	S	Just I put my headphones in my ears and then listen to her. And when I feel boring, I go to my... there is a very good application. I use it in the early...it's Reddit [See #3]
	35	A	Can you show me?
09:50	36	S	Yes, it's all about native English people. This is... this one.
10:01	37	A	Ok, how would you use it?
10:05	38	S	Just follow some people whom like sport, cooking, they are using every advanced vocab in English. That's helped me a lot.
10:16	39	A	So it's a video and then what do you do with the video?
10:18	40	S	Just watching, just to expand my vocabulary.
10:24	41	A	And how do you know about this?
10:26	42	S	Actually, from her channel, Lucy. She gave us a lot of applications to use it.
10:37	43	A	What applications or websites do you use?
10:41	44	S	Twitter.
10:42	45	A	How do you use Twitter?
10:44	46	S	I don't use it so much, just waste my time.
10:52	47	A	Do you, like, follow English speaking people?
10:55	48	S	Yeah.
10:57	49	A	On a purpose that you want to familiar yourself with English language?
11:01	50	S	Yeah. In each application in social media, I love to follow native speaker just British people. I like their phrasal verbs. They are very helpful to me.
11:19	51	A	Is it only Twitter or do you follow them in other social media?
11:22	52	S	I follow them in Instagram. Just in Twitter and Instagram.

Appendix 8. Interview Colour Coding

Colour code	Meaning	Example
Yellow	Background	• Other languages (e.g., Turkish) • Non-digital English practice • Views and beliefs
Green	English language profile	• Language proficiency (level, weaknesses) • English learning background (e.g. English language centre, English in school)
Turquoise	Use of smartphone for language learning	• Listen to English songs • Watch movies • Practice speaking with Cambly • Use language learning apps
Light green	SNS	• Use of SNS for language by following, porting or chatting
Orange	Influencing factors on MALL	• Environment (e.g. family, peers and friends) • Language needs • Motivation
Pink	Learner needs	• Guidance • Recommendations
Red	Facilitating independent learning	• Access to resources • Self-reflection
Purple	Benefits	• Language gains • Confidence
Brown	Limitations	• Distraction • Reliability • Discourage deep learning

Appendix 9. Developing Codes

Extract from interview	Code	Category	Theme
'I just look for films not caring what they are as long as they are in English because I wanted to listen' (Leena.T150).	Listen to films	Entertainment-related IMLE experiences	Using daily digital entertaining activities
'I use English subtitles' (Sara.T164).	Watch videos with captions		
'If the person is speaking too fast, I slow the video speed' (Ghadeer.T182).	Change video playback speed		
'I try to find what that singer says because you know they talk too much and I do not understand. Sometimes I challenge myself that I get what they say without seeing the lyrics. And if I don't, I just see the lyrics' (Ameera.T190).	Listen to songs with lyrics		
'I follow some people because they always, always tweet positive, positive things. And I know every time I open Twitter, I see English words and English sentences, so I keep reading English every day.' (Ameera.T154)	Follow English speakers on SNS		
'There's a lot of books I found it in Amazon ... And you can listen and read at the same time' (Sara.T334).	Read e-books		
'...but I guess I added a tweet and then she	Post and comment on SNS (Twitter)	Socially oriented IMLE experiences	Choosing English language

talked to me via direct message.’ (Ameera.T40)			partners across different social digital tools
‘It’s called the HelloTalk app; you can teach people Arabic, and they can teach you English, so it is very interesting.’ (Ghadeer.T46)	Use language exchange app (HelloTalk)		
‘I registered on the Cambly mobile app. It focused on conversations and speaking; it enhanced my conversational skills’ (Aram.T4).	Use tutoring apps (Cambly)		
Sometimes they give a phrase that has a different meaning if you translate it into Arabic. This is one of the things that I really like because sometimes you understand something, but it means other things, you know... (Ameera.T172)	Instagram language pages for vocabulary	Instructional-oriented IMLE experiences	Utilising platform diversity to meeting learning needs
‘I mean, when I don’t understand something from my teacher, I can understand it from other teachers [language teachers on YouTube]’ (Ghadeer.T252).	YouTube language pages for grammar		
‘I have an app for stories.’ (Razan.T112)	Language apps		
‘I try to read by myself as I have stories that I downloaded from Abdulrahman Hijazi’s website. I printed them and now I’m reading them’ (Aram.T82).	Language websites (Dailik4IELTS)		

'...it gives me a new word every day with its pronunciation, meaning and spelling. It sends me a notification at 12:00 pm 'today you will learn this word.''(Razan.T76)	Dictionary apps for vocabulary		
'because I am not sure if the sentence format is correct, I check it first' (Asmahan.T18).	Proofreading and Accuracy Check with Grammarly app/Correct me app	Assistive-oriented IMLE experiences	Assisting IMLE experiences through translation apps
'I use Translate [Google] app; it gives me the word in Arabic and the explanation in English and similar words [synonyms]' (Asmahan.T110).	Check meaning with Translation apps		
'When I translate to Arabic, it's a different, different meaning' (Ameera.T104).	Check meaning with English-English translation		
'I use it [Google Translate] when I speak to the teacher, and when I want to check a word or a sentence ...'(Aram.T262)	Check pronunciation with Dictionary or translation apps		
... when I watch a documentary about the environment or something related to nutrition or similar topics, I may spend a long time watching and enjoying it without realising that I'm actually learning. I learn because I want to understand what they are saying. (Ghadeer.T88)	Choosing content related to interest	Sustaining motivation	The role of personal interest in IMLE
'...because Teacher XXX told me about it.(Sara.T334)	Teacher guidance	Learning independently, not in isolation	The need for community support for IMLE

'In the beginning, I used to read simple stories from a website that my father shared with me' (Aram.T152).	Family support		
I am always in my Twitter mm... hmm... so a lot of people who live in other countries like the US or UK or wherever, they give recommendation about these apps and they say what would the good of this app and stuff like that and whatever I see good I download the app. (Ameera.T148)	Oline learners' recommendations		
'When I hear about someone like this who is my age or younger and knows more than one language, it inspires me to learn as well' (Raza, I2.T63).	Inspiration		
'Google Translate has lots of examples of literal translation and if I depended on it, that would be wrong.'(Asmahan.T148)	Limitations of translation apps	Challenges	General considerations
'Because I am a beginner in English, I need a plan. 1 2 3, now I don't have a plan, so I jump from 1 to 4 to 10. I need someone to guide me. As for the apps and websites, my father always sends me recommendations via WhatsApp. But like most of the students, I need help in knowing how to	Feeling lost		

learn using the resources available' (Razan, T82)			
'always wanted someone to practise English with through typing' but could not find one on Twitter (Aram, T212).	Finding a partner		
'always wanted someone to practise English with through typing' but could not find one on Twitter (Aram, T212).	Financial burden		
'I used Duolingo once, but I did not use it again. I felt like its level was low and I needed something harder.' (Leena, T102)	Boring and repetitive: unadaptable to learners' needs		

Appendix 10. Ethical Approval from the University of Leeds

The Secretariat
University of Leeds
Leeds, LS2 9JT
Tel: 0113 343 4873
Email: ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

Amal Basheikh
School of Education
University of Leeds
Leeds, LS2 9JT

Social Sciences, Environment and LUBS (AREA) Faculty Research Ethics Committee

University of Leeds

28 June 2021

Dear Amal

Title of study Using Smartphones for Language Learning in relation to Self-directed learning: Insights from Saudi EFL Learners

Ethics reference: AREA 18-102

I am pleased to inform you that the above research application has been reviewed by the Social Sciences, Environment and LUBS (AREA) Faculty Research Ethics Committee and following receipt of your response to the Committee's comments, I can confirm a favourable ethical opinion as of the date of this letter. The following documentation was considered:

Document	Version	Date
AREA 18-102 Committee Provisional-June2019.doc	2	19/06/19
AREA 18-102 Ethical Review Form -Amal Basheikh- June2019.doc .doc	2	11/06/19
AREA 18-102 Information Consent-Amal Basheikh	1	22/01/19
AREA 18-102 Information Sheet-Amal Basheikh	1	22/01/19
AREA 18-102 Online Questionnaire Information Sheet and Consent-Amal Basheikh	1	22/01/19

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAmendment>.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation and other documents relating to the study, including any risk assessments. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited. There is a checklist listing examples of documents to be kept which is available at <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsAudits>.

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to ResearchEthics@leeds.ac.uk.

Yours sincerely
Jennifer Blaikie
Senior Research Ethics Administrator, the Secretariat
On behalf of Dr Kahryn Hughes, Chair, [AREA Faculty Research Ethics Committee](#)

Appendix 11. Participants' Information and Arabic Translation

Information sheet for participants

Using Smartphones for Independent Language Learning:

Insights from Female Saudi University Students

1. What is the purpose of the study?

The research study is on how female university students in Saudi Arabia use their smartphones in learning English and the perceived benefits and limitations of the use of smartphone in learning, specifically self-directed language learning. Based on findings from this study, recommendations will be offered on how to promote self-directed language learning and the use of mobile devices, both within and beyond the classroom in the field of higher education.

2. What will you have to do if you agree to take part?

Your participation in the study will be as follows:

- a. You will be asked to complete a **survey** on background information, including education and language learning experiences. This survey will take you approximately 10 minutes to complete.
- b. We will arrange for meetings at a time that is convenient for you.
- c. Interviews will last no longer than 40 minutes each. All interviews will be audio-recorded to capture an accurate record of them.
- d. In the interviews, you will answer a series of questions about your use of smartphones for English language learning and self-directed learning.
- e. You will be asked to sign a consent form to understand your rights and return it to the researcher.

3. Are there any possible risks from participating in this study?

There are no known risks or disadvantages of taking part in this study, as the researcher will strive to protect your confidentiality and anonymity at all times.

4. What if I change my mind during or after the study?

Participation is voluntary. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate without an explanation up to a month after the last data collection contact.

5. What happens at the conclusion of the study?

The findings will form the basis of my PhD thesis. In addition, the results will be published in peer-reviewed journals, academic conferences and other publications.

6. How will my confidentiality and anonymity be maintained?

All information obtained will be anonymised in order to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants in the publication or dissemination of any findings from this research. The data will be saved anonymously on the University of Leeds M-drive, and audiotapes of the recordings will always be stored in a locked, secure location. Your response will be treated with full confidentiality, and anyone who takes part in the research will be identified only by assigned pseudonyms.

6. Who do I contact if I have questions about this study?

There are three contacts for any questions about this study, as listed below:

The researcher: Amal Basheikh

A.Basheikh1@leeds.ac.uk or by Mobile on 0555133917

Supervisors:

Dr S Aisha Walker

s.a.walker@leeds.ac.uk

Dr Huahui Zhao

h.zhao1@leeds.ac.uk

Thank you for your interest in this research.

التعريف بمعلومات البحث

عنوان البحث: دور الهواتف الذكية في تعزيز تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية والتعلم الذاتي

بين طالبات السنة التحضيرية في السعودية

عزيزتي الطالبة

أرجو منك التفضل بالمساهمة في هذه الدراسة البحثية ولكم جزيل الشكر، علماً أن:

الغرض من الدراسة:

حرصاً على دعم متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية وتطوير طرق التعلم والتدريس في الجامعات السعودية، تقوم الباحثة أمل باشيخ بدراسة دور الهاتف الذكي في تعزيز تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية واستقلالية المتعلم. بناءً على النتائج سيتم تقديم اقتراحات لكيفية استخدام الأجهزة المتنقلة في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية داخل وخارج الفصل الدراسي و دعم التعلم الذاتي.

الإجراءات المطلوبة من المشاركة:

تجميع البيانات في هذه الدراسة سيكون عبر استبيان قصير ومقابلات.

في حال موافقتك على المشاركة في المقابلة:

- سيطلب منك تعبئة استبانة إلكترونية قصيرة عن خلفيتك التعليمية واللغوية، لن تستغرق أكثر من ١٠ دقائق.
- في المقابلة سيطلب منك الإجابة على مجموعة من الأسئلة عن نفسك وتجاربك مع تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية واستخدام الهاتف الذكي للتعلم.
- ستكون المقابلات في جامعة الملك عبدالعزيز وفقاً للوقت المتفق عليه.
- ستكون مدة المقابلة حوالي ٣٠ دقيقة إلى ساعه وسيتم تسجيلها.
- سيطلب منك التوقيع على نموذج (مشاركة في البحث) يظهر موافقتك وفهمك لحقوقك.

المخاطر:

لا يوجد مخاطر أو أضرار جانبية للمشاركة في هذه الدراسة.

استخدام البيانات:

الدراسة البحثية لاستكمال متطلبات الحصول على درجة الدكتوراه من جامعة ليدز في بريطانيا، كما سيتم استخدامها في النشر العلمي في المجلات الأكاديمية والمؤتمرات.

حماية خصوصية المشاركة و سرية البيانات:

تحتفظ معلوماتك الشخصية وجميع ما تشاركينه مع الباحثة بالسرية التامة، ولن يتم الإفصاح عن اسمك بل سيتم استخدام اسماء مستعارة عند نشر و عرض نتائج البحث.

الحق في الانسحاب:

تعد مشاركتك تطوعية، وعند الرغبة في الانسحاب تعطي الباحثة فرصة حتى شهر كامل من اخر تواصل لغرض تجميع البيانات.

إذا كان لديك أي تساؤل أو عند الرغبة في الحصول على إجابة حول أمور أخرى يرجى مراسلة الباحثة

a.basheikh1@leeds.ac.uk (أمل باشيخ) على

المشرفات على البحث:

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شكراً لاهتمامك ومشاركتك في البحث.

Appendix 12. Participants' Consent Form (Interview) and Arabic Translation

Consent to take part in: Using Smartphones for Independent Language Learning:
Insights from Female Saudi University Students

	Add your initials next to the statement if you agree
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.	
I agree for my interviews to be audio-recorded and for the data to be used for the purpose of this study.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the study up to a month after last data collection contact.	
I agree for the data collected from me to be stored and used in relevant future research in other names.	
I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study, may be looked at by auditors from the University of Leeds or from regulatory authorities where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records.	
I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change during the project and, if necessary, afterwards.	

Participant's name/ الاسم	Date/ التاريخ	Signature/ التوقيع
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استمارة موافقة للمشاركة في المقابلة

عنوان البحث: دور الهواتف الذكية في تعزيز تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية والتعلم الذاتي بين طالبات السنة التحضيرية في السعودية

اسم الباحثة: أمل باشيخ

في حال الموافقة على الفقرات الآتية، ضعي علامة ✓	
	أؤكد أنني قرأت وفهمت محتوى البحث العلمي جيداً وأتيت لي فرصة للسؤال عن هذا البحث.
	أوافق على تسجيل مقابلاتي وأوافق أيضاً على احتمال حاجة الباحث إلى التقاط صور أو تسجيلات فيديو لشاشة هاتفي الذكي، واستخدام البيانات لغرض هذه الدراسة.
	أدرك أن مشاركتي تمت بملئ إرادتي، وأنه بإمكانني الانسحاب من البحث إلى بعد مضي شهر من آخر تواصل مع الباحثة لجمع البيانات.
	أوافق على استخدام ما أقدمه من بيانات (بدون ذكر أسمى) لأغراض بحثية وللنشر العلمي.
	أفهم أن الأقسام ذات الصلة من البيانات التي تم جمعها أثناء الدراسة، يمكن الاطلاع عليها من قبل مدققين من جامعة ليدز أو من السلطات التنظيمية عندما تكون ذات صلة بمشاركتي في هذا البحث.
	أوافق على المشاركة في هذا المشروع البحثي وسأبلغ الباحثة في حال تحديث معلومات الاتصال الخاصة بي.

Participant's name/ الاسم	Date/ التاريخ	Signature/ التوقيع