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Article

"I Know I Should, But I Don't": A Case Study of Vietnamese Students' Reluctance to Engage in IDLE

Cuong Huy Nguyen
Ho Chi Minh City Open University, Vietnam

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Abstract
Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) refers to self-directed English language activities conducted in informal digital environments, driven by learners' interests and goals. Although IDLE is recognized as a valuable supplement to formal language education, its potential remains underexploited by many Vietnamese students, including those majoring in English linguistics (EL). This multiple case study investigates the underlying factors contributing to their reluctance to engage in IDLE among EL students at two English-Medium-Instruction (EMI) universities in Vietnam. A preliminary online questionnaire was distributed to 300 EL students to recruit participants for this study. Using the purposive sampling method, seven students were selected for in-depth semi-structured interviews, each lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. Findings indicate that although all participants acknowledged the benefits of IDLE, they engaged only at a relatively limited level, and they favored receptive over productive skills. More importantly, their reluctance was primarily attributed to two interrelated factors: an unsupportive learning environment and low motivation. These factors were further influenced by other elements such as learner identity, learner autonomy, and peer judgment. To some extent, this study offers a nuanced understanding of the possible hidden barriers to IDLE engagement and provides potential practical implications for curriculum development, pedagogical practices, and assessment reforms in Vietnamese EL programs.

Keywords
Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), learning environment, learner motivation, peer pressure, judgment

1 Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has revolutionized language education in significant ways (Goto Butler, 2022; Lai, 2017). Language learning now occurs not only within the classroom but increasingly beyond it. With the assistance of social media and other digital tools, students have greater exposure to the English language than ever, fostering what is known as Informal Digital Learning of

Email: cuong.nh@ou.edu.vn

English (IDLE). IDLE is commonly defined as "self-directed English activities in informal digital settings, motivated by personal interests and undertaken independently without being assessed by a teacher" (Lee & Lee, 2021, p. 359).

Research has demonstrated that IDLE provides significant benefits for English language learners. From a theoretical perspective, IDLE offers numerous opportunities for language learners in countries where English is not widely spoken, including Vietnam. With a stable Wi-Fi connection, a device, and just a few clicks, Vietnamese students can easily engage in meaningful conversations with native English speakers across the globe. Given the accessibility and authenticity of the English language afforded by IDLE, a bridge is easily made between formal instruction in class and real-world language use, giving students more control of their personalized learning and enabling them to develop communicative competence that was unimagined before (Liu, Ng, & Gonzales, 2024).

This is, however, not always the case. Many English language learners in Vietnam, including many of the author's EL students, do not make full use of IDLE activities to enhance their language skills. This reluctance is worrisome, since it indicates that they are missing valuable learning opportunities made possible by the digital technologies that were unimaginable to previous generations. The reluctance is even more worrisome in English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) university settings, where students are expected to actively engage in the English-speaking environment.

A lot of research has been conducted to evaluate the effects of IDLE on learners' performance (e.g., Lee, 2018; Lee, 2019; Almohesh & Altamimi, 2024) and the correlation between IDLE, cognition, and emotion (e.g., Rezai et al., 2025; Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2024). However, little is known about the underlying factors that make them avoid participating in IDLE, particularly in Vietnamese contexts. Understanding these barriers is essential for teachers, program managers, curriculum designers, and digital tool developers, as it can inform the construction of more supportive environments that address students' genuine needs and concerns.

The paper first of all reviews the concepts of IDLE, language learning environment, learner motivation, learner autonomy, and learner identity, and related research on IDLE in the literature. It then outlines the methodology, including participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, it presents the study's results, discussion, and implications.

This study does not seek to prove the effects of IDLE on students' English proficiency or discover the reasons behind their preferences for certain IDLE activities. Instead, it is focused on identifying key factors that prevent them from engaging more fully in IDLE. Additionally, this study does not target all Vietnamese learners of English, but seeks to obtain in-depth insights from only seven Vietnamese EL students who claimed that they did not engage in IDLE as much as they should. While most previous studies explore learner motivation as a result of IDLE engagement, the current study positions learner motivation and other factors as preconditions of IDLE engagement. This makes the study's distinct contribution to the literature on IDLE.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Informal digital learning of English (IDLE)

As a component of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), IDLE refers to "self-directed English activities in informal digital settings, motivated by personal interests and undertaken independently without being assessed by a teacher" (Lee & Lee, 2021, p. 359). IDLE is classified into two primary forms: extracurricular and extramural (Lee, 2022; Dressman, 2020). Extracurricular IDLE refers to language learning activities assigned by instructors that take place outside the classroom. For instance, a teacher may require her students to watch YouTube videos on a specific topic as part of an

assignment, with subsequent evaluation from her. By contrast, extramural IDLE involves learners' self-directed engagement with the target language on digital platforms without instructor supervision or assessment. Unlike extracurricular IDLE, extramural engagement is not necessarily driven by language learning objectives, but learners may participate for purposes such as entertainment, skill acquisition, or communication in real-world contexts.

While the distinction between extracurricular and extramural IDLE is conceptually useful, it is not always clear-cut in practice. Many learners engage in both forms simultaneously or participate in a single IDLE activity for multiple purposes, such as learning and entertainment. Notably, most existing studies tend to conceptualize IDLE in its extramural form—a perspective also adopted in the present study.

Alternatively, IDLE can be categorized into two sub-groups: receptive and productive (Lee, 2018; Lee, 2022). Receptive IDLE involves the development of listening and reading skills through activities such as listening to English-language music online, reading news articles in English, engaging with social media content, watching English-language films on streaming platforms, etc. In contrast, productive IDLE focuses on speaking and writing skills, with such activities as posting comments in English on social media, corresponding in English via email, participating in video calls, engaging in text-based chat discussions, publishing blog posts, creating video content on platforms like YouTube, etc.

According to existing literature, language learners tend to prefer receptive over productive IDLE activities because the former are perceived as less cognitively demanding and more convenient (Zhang et al., 2021). Furthermore, the distinction between receptive and productive IDLE may be less clear-cut than it appears, as learners may begin with a receptive activity (e.g., listening to a podcast) and subsequently engage in productive tasks such as speaking or writing about it. Researchers and practitioners should take the inherent interaction between receptive and productive IDLE into account.

2.2 Language learning environment

In language education, learning environments typically include factors like infrastructure, institutional policies, native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) versus non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), class sizes, and teacher–student relationships (Lasagabaster et al., 2005; Richards, 2015). Research generally indicates that language learners tend to develop language proficiency more rapidly when taught by qualified, supportive NESTs, particularly in listening and speaking, and qualified, supportive NNESTs, particularly in reading, writing, and grammar, especially with smaller class sizes and modern infrastructure, and within institutions that support second language development (Medgyes, 1994; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). More recent scholarship has also covered online learning environments, with a disproportionate emphasis on learner autonomy and informal learning (Benson, 2011; Lai, 2017; Reinders & White, 2016).

In particular, research on language learning environments is typically grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems Theory, which theorizes how the dynamic interaction of multiple environmental systems contributes to human development in general. These systems may include immediate contexts (microsystem), broader institutional and sociocultural structures (macrosystem), life changes over time (chronosystem), and so on. In the light of this theory, language development is shaped by a range of interconnected factors, such as individual learner characteristics, peer dynamics, classroom dynamics, teacher-student relationships, institutional policies, and broader sociocultural contexts.

While existing research has provided valuable insights into how various broader environmental factors facilitate language learning, there remains a need to critically examine how more immediate and subtle ones, such as power relations, learner emotion, and learner identity, are negotiated and shape learners' experiences, especially in informal, digital learning environments.

2.3 Learner motivation

Building on the significance of language learning environments, learner motivation represents another critical dimension in understanding second language acquisition. While environments create the conditions for learning, motivation determines the degree to which learners engage with those external conditions.

In language education, research on motivation is primarily informed by two major theories: Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the L2 Motivational Self System (LMSS; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). SDT distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, while LMSS represents three components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the learning experience. These two frameworks are considered complementary, offering a more comprehensive understanding of learner motivation in language education (Ushioda, 2011; Henry, 2014). For example, when the author wants to become an ideal professor, this aspiration could be traced back to both his intrinsic and extrinsic motivations.

Previous studies consistently highlight the importance of fostering students' intrinsic motivation, developing a strong ideal L2 self, and facilitating positive learning experiences (Noels, 2001; Papi, 2010; You & Dörnyei, 2016; Liu et al., 2024c). To this end, various strategies have been proposed, including creating a supportive and respectful learning environment in which students are provided with choices, encouraged to take ownership of their learning (i.e., learner autonomy), and offered opportunities to engage in real-world language use (Reeve et al., 2012; Lamb, 2017).

While the two dominant motivation frameworks above offer valuable insights into learner engagement and learner autonomy, they seem to underemphasize the complex sociocultural, institutional, and interpersonal forces (e.g., peer pressure) that shape learners' aspirations and emotions, suggesting the need for more context-sensitive approaches to motivation in second language education, especially in the informal, digital environments.

2.4 Learner autonomy

Closely related to learner motivation is learner autonomy, which provides the foundation for sustained engagement and self-directed learning in language education. While motivation drives initial participation, autonomy sustains learning beyond the formal classroom.

Learner autonomy has been defined in slightly different ways by different scholars over the past four decades. Holec (1981), often regarded as the 'father' of the concept of learner autonomy, defined it as the ability of learners to take charge of their own learning. Little (2022) expanded on this by emphasizing that autonomous learners must be capable of critical reflection, informed decision-making, and independent action. Building on these perspectives, Benson (2001) conceptualized learner autonomy as the capacity to control the management, cognitive processes, and content of one's own learning. In adult and lifelong learning, the term learner autonomy is frequently used interchangeably with self-directed learning (SDL; Candy, 1991). Overall, existing research consistently shows that learner autonomy is highly beneficial for second language development, particularly in enhancing learner motivation and learner engagement, especially in informal and digital learning environments (Balcıkanlı, 2010; Lai, 2015; Nguyen & Gu, 2013; Reinders & Benson, 2017; Teng, 2019).

Despite widespread recognition of its benefits, the concept of learner autonomy is often treated as a universally attainable ideal, with limited attention to how cultural norms, institutional constraints, and power dynamics (e.g., teacher-student relationships) may enable or restrict it. This gap should be taken into consideration in future research.

2.5 Learner identity

In addition to motivation and autonomy, learner identity offers a sociocultural lens through which to understand how language learners position themselves and are positioned by others within the learning process. Identity intersects with motivation and autonomy by shaping learners' sense of self, agency, and belonging within certain language learning environments (Teng, 2019).

Learner identity is a significant yet often underexplored dimension in second language education. Contemporary research frequently examines learner identity in bilingual and multilingual contexts, where identity is viewed not as fixed or binary but as a fluid and continuously negotiated process shaped by sociocultural and institutional factors (Norton, 2013; Menard-Warwick, 2020; Utley & Roe, 2022; Liao et al., 2025). A positive sense of identity has been shown to enhance learners' engagement in language learning, while identity conflicts—particularly those related to race, class, gender, or migration status—can hinder participation and achievement (Guo & Gu, 2016; Darvin & Norton, 2015; Teng & Yip, 2025).

In critical applied linguistics, learner identity is approached through a more political lens, contrasting it with the notion of language user identity. Scholars such as Pennycook (2001, 2010) argue that dominant ideologies, like native-speakerism and the global spread of English, can confine learners to a perpetual 'deficit' identity. To counter this, these scholars call for presuming language students as legitimate language users with agency to act in diverse, globalized contexts, rather than 'perpetual language learners' (Cook, 2016; Larsen-Freeman, 2015).

While the distinction between language learners and language users has been indirectly addressed in the literature, it has not been examined in depth within specific contexts, including the Vietnamese context. More critical work is needed to challenge deficit narratives and to reframe learners as empowered language users in a more context-sensitive manner.

2.6 Previous studies on IDLE

First, previous research suggests that language learners engage in receptive IDLE more frequently than productive IDLE (Zhang et al., 2021; Nguyen, 2023). This is probably because the former is perceived as less cognitively demanding and more convenient than the latter. More importantly, previous studies have also highlighted the positive impact of IDLE on learner's language proficiency (Lee, 2018; Lee, 2019; Almohesh & Altamimi, 2024; Rezai et al., 2024; Lai & Wang, 2025), their appreciation of English as an International Language (EIL) (Lee et al., 2024a; Lee & Lee, 2019), and their intercultural competence (Rezai, 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2024b). However, research on the effects of IDLE on language proficiency has primarily focused on vocabulary acquisition, with relatively little attention given to its influence on the four core language skills, grammar, and pronunciation. Grammar and pronunciation are often neglected, possibly due to the difficulty in measuring them in informal settings.

In addition, with the increasing influence of positive psychology in second language education, a growing body of research has explored the relationship between IDLE and learners' emotions, including motivation, willingness to communicate (WTC), foreign language anxiety (FLA), foreign language enjoyment (FLE), foreign language boredom (FLB), and student engagement. Specifically, studies have identified positive correlations between IDLE and motivation (e.g., Liu et al., 2024a; Liu et al., 2024b; Rezai et al., 2025), IDLE and WTC (e.g., Lee & Sylvén, 2021; Rezai, 2023; Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2024), IDLE and FLE (e.g., Rezai et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2024b), as well as IDLE and student engagement (Zadorozhnyy & Lee, 2024). Conversely, negative correlations have been reported between IDLE and FLA (Rezai et al., 2025) and between IDLE and FLB (Taherian, 2024).

Overall, most previous studies on IDLE are quantitatively oriented, with a few exceptions of qualitative ones, such as Toffoli (2020) and Toffoli et al. (2023). Previous scholarship tends to prove how IDLE supports language learning in terms of language development and learners' emotions. In other

words, most scholars view IDLE through a positive lens, leaving the potential challenges encountered by English language learners, especially in the digital, informal environments, unaddressed.

2.7 Research gaps

Extensive research has explored IDLE and its positive impact on language performance and emotional engagement. Little attention has been paid to the factors that influence learners' initial decisions to engage in or disengage from IDLE. This gap is particularly significant in contexts like Vietnam, where digital technologies are increasingly accessible, yet student participation in IDLE remains limited. Few studies investigate the sociocultural, psychological, and contextual barriers that may hinder Vietnamese language learners from fully utilizing digital platforms for language learning. Furthermore, the predominant reliance on quantitative methods in IDLE research may constrain our understanding of the lived experiences and internal struggles that shape students' learning behaviors.

To address this research gap, the present study investigates the underlying factors contributing to Vietnamese EL students' reluctance to engage in IDLE. It not only identifies key barriers to participation but also reconceptualizes IDLE engagement as a complex, context-dependent decision-making process rather than a straightforward or self-evident behavior. Specifically, two research questions are addressed in this study:

RQ1. How do Vietnamese EL students perceive the roles of IDLE in their language learning?

RQ2. What key factors drive their reluctance to engage in IDLE?

3 Methodology

3.1 Study design

This study adopted the qualitative multiple case study method to investigate the complex underlying factors that hinder EL students from engaging in IDLE. The case study method was selected because the research questions necessitated in-depth interviews that can generate detailed and profound insights into the matter. The anticipated responses could be concerned with subtle elements such as emotions, motivations, perceptions, etc. This research problem might not be adequately addressed by designs other than a case study.

3.2 Participants

The participants include seven undergraduate students (6 females and 1 male) majoring in English linguistics at two EMI universities in Vietnam. They were recruited on a voluntary basis. They were provided with a consent form, which was signed if they agreed to participate in the interviews. Initially, a 5-item questionnaire had been sent to a pool of 300 EL students at two EMI universities in the south of Vietnam—X and Y. The first question focused on their English proficiency level, the second on their year of study, the third on key factors driving their disengagement in IDLE, the fourth on their willingness to participate in an in-depth follow-up interview, and finally the fifth one on their contact information (if they said yes to the fourth question). 56 responses were received after two weeks, of which 24 expressed their willingness to participate in the interviews. The researchers only contacted 10 students with survey responses indicating their commitment and thoughtfulness, and ended up interviewing seven of them. The other three could not participate in the interviews due to schedule conflicts.

Of the seven participating students, four were juniors, two were sophomores, and one was a freshman. All of them, except for one, were at the C1 level in English proficiency according to the CEFR framework. Their demographic information, with their names de-identified, is summarized in the table below:

Table 1
A Summary of Participants' Demographics

Pseudonyms	Gender	English Proficiency Level	Year of Study	Educational Institution
D	Female	C1	Sophomore	Y
M	Female	C1	Freshman	Y
T	Female	C1	Junior	X
N	Female	C1	Junior	X
C	Female	C1	Junior	X
Q	Female	C1	Junior	X
MD	Male	B2	Sophomore	X

3.3 Research settings

Five of the participants are from X, a Vietnamese public EMI university where all academic programs are conducted in English. The EL program at X is relatively new but steadily expanding, with an entry English requirement of CEFR B2. As a young institution following the philosophy of liberal education, X offers a wide range of extracurricular activities and clubs intended to foster active and innovative students. At this university, about 99% of students and lecturers are Vietnamese, although most faculty members obtain their degrees from English-speaking countries. Most international students are exchange students who are visiting for only a few months. The EL program organizes 3-4 academic and professional workshops every year, featuring both Vietnamese and international speakers. Additionally, this program hosts an English-speaking club open to both English and non-English major students. While English is the official language of instruction, translanguaging is common inside and outside the classroom. Vietnamese remains the dominant language in public spaces on campus, such as cafeterias and libraries, and is frequently used in official communications with students.

In contrast, Y is a private EMI university in Vietnam. Although approximately 90% of its students are Vietnamese, about 40% of its faculty and staff are non-Vietnamese, coming from about 30 countries. All academic programs are delivered in English, which is the official language both inside and outside the classroom, though students also use Vietnamese in their informal interactions. All signage, correspondence, and official documents are in English. Lecturers and staff members, including the Vietnamese ones, are supposed to speak English with the students and with one another, inside and outside the classroom. Y also provides numerous extracurricular activities and hosts a variety of academic and hobby-based student clubs, including a debate club open to students from all programs. It also organizes a range of academic and professional workshops, featuring Vietnamese and international speakers. The EL program at Y is relatively new and small, but continues to grow. Students at Y typically complete their degree programs within three years, after completing an internship placement and a capstone project.

3.4 Data collection

As mentioned above, the potential participants were recruited through a five-item questionnaire. Based on their responses, the participants were finalized and invited to take part in an in-depth, semi-structured interview lasting 30 to 45 minutes each. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and audio-recorded. The participants could choose to speak English, Vietnamese, or both at the interviews. The interview schedule for each participating student was tailored based on their written responses to Question 3 in the questionnaire (What prevents you from engaging in informal digital learning of English (IDLE) as much as you think you should?). The primary purpose of the interviews was to have the students confirm

certain ideas, elaborate on others, and, most importantly, answer additional questions. As anticipated, most of the students did not provide profound and detailed reasons for their IDLE disengagement in the questionnaire. With the prompts and encouragement of the researcher during the interviews, they provided much more intensive, in-depth responses. The interviews served as the primary data collection instrument for this study, whereas the questionnaire only functioned as a recruitment tool and a preparation for the in-depth interviews. As a result, data from the questionnaire are not reported in this paper.

3.5 Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as recommended by Creswell (2013). The analysis followed a three-stage coding process—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, as proposed by Corbin and Strauss (2008). First of all, the recordings were transcribed on TurboScribe using the clean verbatim transcription option, which captures the essence of spoken dialogue while omitting non-essential elements such as filler words, repetitions, and non-verbal sounds (McMullin, 2023). Then, transcripts were entered into Dedoose 9.0. The researcher reviewed all seven transcripts to develop a general understanding of the responses, keeping the two research questions in mind. The transcripts were then repeatedly examined, with memos written along the way, and codes assigned to emerging ideas. Finally, these codes were grouped into major themes relevant to the two research questions. These two research questions served as a guiding framework throughout data analysis, ensuring that this process was aligned with the research problem. The codes and themes can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2
The Coding System

Codes	Themes
• Swimming upstream • Cognitively demanding • Input > output • Insecurity • Environment & cultural background • Judgment & self-judgment • Global citizenship • Feeling of enjoyment • Immediate results • Feeling of 'weirdness' • Vietnamese identity • Bonding • Enriching cultural capital	• Receptive IDLE > Productive IDLE • Environment • Motivation • Language learner vs language user

4 Findings and Discussion

Overall, the findings indicate that engaging in IDLE was not a straightforward task for most participants. While they were fully aware of its potential benefits for language development, they did not engage in it as much as they believed they should. When they did, they generally favored receptive over productive IDLE activities. Most notably, participants consistently identified the academic environment and their own learning motivation as key factors that limited their full engagement in IDLE.

4.1 Vietnamese EL students' perception of IDLE's roles

The participants recognized the important role that IDLE played in enhancing their English proficiency, based on their first-hand experiences. However, they also acknowledged their limited engagement and expressed a desire to participate more actively. Among the various forms of IDLE, they showed a clear preference for receptive activities, particularly English listening, due to its convenience, accessibility, and flexibility. For example, C, a junior from X, shared that when she thought of IDLE, she immediately recalled the podcasts she routinely listened to while cooking or commuting to school. Similarly, T (from X) and M (from Y) also reported engaging more frequently in receptive rather than productive IDLE activities. This finding aligns with previous research. For example, in their review study, Zhang et al. (2021) found that language learners—across both high school and university levels—tend to engage more in extramural receptive skills than in productive ones, not only in English but also in other languages such as Chinese, Japanese, German, and French. Likewise, Nguyen (2023) reported a strong preference among Vietnamese EL students for receptive skills in out-of-class language learning. Confirmed by the present study, these findings strengthen the conclusion that language learners, particularly at the university level, consistently prioritize receptive over productive forms of IDLE.

Despite their limited engagement in IDLE, EL students' preference for receptive skills may suggest that universities could better support their language development by placing greater emphasis on productive skills such as speaking and writing within formal learning environments. For example, a faculty-led book club could be organized, with weekly discussion sessions held outside the classroom, potentially on a digital platform. These regular meetings would offer EL students valuable opportunities to cultivate reading habits and express themselves in English. Although such initiatives are well-established in Western universities, they remain relatively uncommon in Vietnam, where extensive reading programs seem to be more popular (Tran et al., 2024). While extensive reading contributes meaningfully to language acquisition, it does not emphasize the integration of receptive and productive skills to the same extent as book clubs, bridging formal with informal learning. Book clubs may be particularly beneficial for students with higher English proficiency levels, especially in EMI settings such as those reported in the present study.

4.2 Key factors contributing to students' reluctance to engage in IDLE

4.2.1 The learning environment

The primary factor behind Vietnamese EL students' reluctance to engage in IDLE appeared to be the unfavorable academic environment. To begin with, there was the lack of meaningful intercultural interaction in their immediate environments. The participants reported having very few, if any, international friends. For instance, D shared that despite studying at University Y for two years, she had not been able to form genuine friendships with non-Vietnamese peers, even though she was eager to use English in both online and offline interactions. Notably, University Y hosts students from over 50 countries, with international students making up approximately 9% of its total student population. D described her international classmates as acquaintances rather than close friends, noting that her conversations with them rarely lasted beyond 15 minutes before tapering off. She attributed this not to linguistic limitations, but to cultural differences. As she put it, "We simply did not know what else to discuss other than our studies." Consequently, like most participants, D routinely socialized with her Vietnamese peers outside the classroom, reinforcing a pattern of limited English use in informal settings.

These Vietnamese peer groups, as described by D and M, predominantly preferred to communicate in Vietnamese. Over time, speaking English among themselves—particularly outside the classroom—came to feel 'unnatural' or even socially inappropriate. Similarly, N (from X) noted that while using English in the classroom felt normal, doing so in informal, unsupervised settings felt 'unusual.' She recalled that

although she was once enthusiastic about practicing English with her Vietnamese classmates, a turning point occurred during an on-campus gathering the previous year when a peer questioned her: "Why English now?" Since that moment, she had avoided using English in social contexts with her Vietnamese peers, both offline and online, perceiving it as unwelcome. This reluctance highlights a deeper social dynamic: speaking Vietnamese was perceived as a marker of in-group solidarity, while using English—particularly among fellow Vietnamese and outside formal learning spaces—was subtly construed as a rejection of shared cultural identity. As one student from X put it succinctly, "We find it weird to speak English among us. When speaking English, we feel as if we are no longer Vietnamese people." In short, the second environmental factor is that Vietnamese EL students experienced significant peer pressure to avoid communicating in English.

Numerous studies have highlighted the concern that Vietnamese students often lack sufficient opportunities to practice spoken English, thereby pointing to an unfavorable language learning environment (e.g., Duong & Pham, 2022; Huyen, 2022). While this may hold true for many universities, particularly non-EMI institutions where English plays a limited role, this study offers a more nuanced perspective. The participants, who attend an EMI university and possess advanced English proficiency, are situated in a context where opportunities to engage in English—especially through social media and other digital platforms—are increasingly available. However, these opportunities remain largely untapped. Their realization depends not only on learners' willingness and autonomy, but also on the presence of a socially supportive environment that encourages English use beyond the classroom.

Regarding learner autonomy, commonly defined as the ability to take ownership of one's learning (Holec, 1981; Little, 2022; Benson, 2001), it has been shown to play a significant role in language development (Little, 2022; Chong & Reinders, 2025). The findings of the present study further reinforce this claim. It becomes evident that the mere availability of learning opportunities, enabled by the rapid advancement of digital technologies, does not automatically translate into meaningful language development in the absence of strong learner autonomy. Without it, these opportunities often remain underutilized. Nonetheless, the underlying factors contributing to learners' limited autonomy remain insufficiently understood and necessitate further investigation in the future.

In particular, regarding the language learning environment, the presence of international faculty and students at X and Y, as noted by participants, constitutes only a minor element within the broader ecological system conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner (1977). More immediate contextual factors—such as peer dynamics and student–teacher interactions—appear to exert equally, if not more, significant influence on students' language learning experiences. A key distinction between the present study and previous research on favorable learning environments (e.g., Ibna Seraj & Hadina, 2021; Tran & Truong, 2024) lies in its focus on these proximal factors. While earlier studies tend to emphasize macro-level conditions—such as class size, institutional policies, or the presence of NESTs—the current study foregrounds the nuanced dynamics of peer pressure, at least among the participating students. This shift in focus represents one of the study's central contributions to the literature on language learning environments.

4.2.2 Learner motivation

Student motivation, which is closely intertwined with the learning environment, emerged as another significant factor contributing to participants' disengagement from IDLE. The interviews revealed various ways in which motivation influenced their levels of engagement in IDLE. Most participants described communicating in English as "cognitively demanding". For example, Q admitted feeling too exhausted to consistently speak English—both in face-to-face and online interactions. Similarly, N recounted that while she had been enthusiastic about using English during high school, when it was just one subject among many, her motivation waned after entering University X as an English major, where she was expected to use English almost constantly. This expectation led to mental fatigue and a sense

of monotony, prompting her to revert to Vietnamese outside the classroom to regain a sense of comfort and balance. Strikingly, only one out of seven participants used positive terms such as "pleasure" or "enjoyment" when describing their experiences with English, suggesting that positive affect was largely absent from their accounts—an issue that will be further analyzed later in this paper.

In addition, some participants reported avoiding IDLE due to more immediate academic priorities, such as test preparation and coursework. While they acknowledged the long-term benefits of IDLE, they viewed it as less urgent than tasks directly tied to their academic performance. As N explained, "I care more about my immediate results. My scores determine my academic standing and scholarship opportunities." This pragmatic mindset led her to deprioritize broader goals such as becoming a global citizen or engaging in authentic intercultural communication.

Most importantly, judgment by others and self-judgment emerged as the most critical aspects of student motivation and were commonly cited by participants as major barriers to sustained IDLE engagement. Unlike Q and N, T maintained a strong passion for English but acknowledged feeling demotivated when interacting with peers who were perceived to judge her language use, despite her CEFR C1 proficiency level. Similarly, MD shared T's sensitivity to external judgment, including that from teachers. Although MD appeared confident and self-motivated during the interview—choosing to respond entirely in English—he admitted that negative feedback received in the past, particularly from teachers, continued to undermine his motivation. He recalled one comment from a high school teacher: "OMG, why don't you know that word? It is so easy!"—a remark that lingered and shaped his self-perception.

T and M also spoke about their ongoing self-consciousness that limited their IDLE participation, despite acknowledging its benefits. M, for instance, was preoccupied with her perceived "weird" English accent, while T repeatedly referred to long-standing feelings of insecurity dating back to high school. This insecurity persisted even though both students had made substantial progress in using English as a tool to expand their cultural and intellectual horizons. As T explained, "I am determined to use English as a tool to learn other subjects like world politics and psychology. I would like to become a global citizen. However, I am still faced with self-judgment." These findings suggest that both external and internal forms of judgment may act as hidden deterrents to learner autonomy and motivation, even among high-proficiency students in EMI contexts.

Unlike earlier studies on motivation, which have primarily focused on well-established constructs such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and the Ideal L2 Self and Ought-to L2 Self (Dörnyei, 2009), the present study places particular emphasis on the role of learning experience—the third component of Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System. Notably, the emergent themes of "swimming upstream," "judgment," and "self-judgment" reflect participants' complex emotional experiences and appear to be closely tied to the phenomenon of speaking anxiety. While prior research on speaking anxiety has typically focused on learners with lower proficiency levels (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), this study presents a novel contribution: even advanced EL students may experience heightened speaking anxiety, particularly in informal or peer-driven settings, due to perceived social judgment. This insight may expand the current understanding of motivational dynamics in IDLE and highlights the need to consider affective barriers even among high-proficiency language learners.

Moreover, the findings suggest that merely raising students' awareness of IDLE's benefits is probably insufficient to promote meaningful engagement. Although the participants clearly recognized the potential value of IDLE, they still reported lower-than-desired levels of participation. This may point to the need for a more supportive and English-friendly environment. For instance, University X could consider designating English as the official language of communication, at least within its English language programs, both inside and beyond the classroom. Such an institutional policy would likely normalize the use of English in everyday interactions among faculty members, between faculty and students, and among students, reducing the perception that speaking English is a form of self-

promotion or social deviation. In turn, this could help alleviate the peer pressure that currently compels many students, including the participants, to default to Vietnamese, thereby creating more authentic opportunities for English use across social and academic settings.

Additionally, the presence of international faculty and students—as observed at University Y—could be more strategically leveraged to support Vietnamese EL students' language development. One potential approach is probably to implement more structured intercultural programs that bring together Vietnamese and international faculty and students in collaborative, goal-oriented activities. Such initiatives could foster mutual cultural understanding while providing meaningful opportunities for Vietnamese EL students to engage in authentic, real-world communication in English.

Finally, given the students' attention to assessment and their academic standing—as shared by N and some others, EL programs might consider integrating alternative forms of assessment—such as project-based tasks, portfolios, or collaborative assignments with non-Vietnamese English users—as a way to extend language learning beyond traditional classroom boundaries. These forms of assessment can serve as structured, extracurricular IDLE activities and are increasingly embraced in global language education (Lai, 2019). A balanced combination of traditional and alternative assessments may better align with learners' diverse needs and foster greater autonomy, engagement, and communicative competence.

4.2.3 Language learner identity versus language user identity

An unexpected yet significant theme that emerged from the interviews concerns the distinction between language learner identity and language user identity. As noted earlier, positive descriptors such as "pleasant" or "enjoyment" were largely absent from participants' accounts, suggesting that language learning was commonly perceived as a demanding, and at times burdensome, process—an impression shared by most participants except perhaps T and C. While T and C also reported experiences of judgment, self-judgment, and insecurity, these appeared less intense than those expressed by others. More importantly, both participants articulated moments of genuine enjoyment when using English for real-life purposes.

T, in particular, drew a conscious distinction between learning English as a student and using English as a global citizen. Unlike most participants, who remained confined within the identity of a language learner, T actively adopted the stance of a language user—someone who employs English as a medium for acquiring disciplinary knowledge and engaging in meaningful intercultural communication. For example, rather than relying on structured language learning apps like Mochi Mochi, she preferred platforms such as Reddit, where she interacted with people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. T's case illustrates the empowering potential of shifting from a learner-centered to a user-centered identity, which may hold important implications for promoting more autonomous, intrinsically motivated, and identity-affirming forms of IDLE.

Although this emerging theme deserves further investigation, the data suggest a meaningful relationship between EL students' self-positioning, their learning motivation, and their engagement in IDLE. T's reflections offer a compelling illustration of this connection. She remarked, "I don't call IDLE a form of practice because I really enjoy it," and further elaborated, "I am determined to use English as a tool to learn other subjects like world politics and psychology. I want to become a global citizen." This distinction between engaging in English as a means of study versus a means of communication underscores how learners' identity positioning can influence their motivational orientation and language use behaviors.

The self-positioning of students as either language learners or language users is a central theme in Critical Applied Linguistics, which critiques dominant ideologies such as native-speakerism and deficit-based models of language learning. Scholars in this field advocate for recognizing language learners as legitimate users of English in global contexts (e.g., Pennycook, 2001; Darvin & Norton, 2015). The

present study adds to this conversation by showing how such identity positioning may shape engagement in informal, digital language learning. This topic will be explored in greater depth in a separate paper.

At the programmatic level, more liberal and inclusive approaches to English language education should be considered—approaches that position EL students as legitimate language users rather than perpetual learners plagued by linguistic insecurity, as reported by most of the participants. Within this paradigm, English is framed not merely as a subject to be mastered, but as a medium for engaging with global issues and participating in international discourse. To this end, concepts such as global citizenship and internationalization could be explicitly embedded within the EL curriculum. This would allow students to develop not only disciplinary knowledge in linguistics and literature but also a broader sense of global cultural capital, enabling them to feel intellectually and socially at home across diverse contexts.

More concretely, Vietnamese EL students could be encouraged to participate in globally oriented, English-mediated activities both on and off campus, online and offline, such as book clubs, panel discussions, student-led newsletters, and talk shows. These platforms offer authentic contexts for language use, reinforcing students' identities as communicators and contributors (rather than mere learners). Indeed, the aspiration to become 'global citizens' was explicitly expressed by at least two students participating in this study—T and M. In alignment with this shift, and given the fact that many EL students are highly focused on assessment and their academic standing—as shared by N and, at a lesser extent, by several others, assessment practices should move away from traditional, accuracy-focused models toward alternative forms of evaluation—such as portfolios, project-based work, professional engagement, and peer/group assessments. These assessment strategies prioritize meaning-making and communicative competence, reducing the emphasis on linguistic precision and lowering anxiety related to correctness. When instructors adopt a more supportive and less judgmental stance on language accuracy, students are more likely to feel empowered and motivated to engage in IDLE and other informal learning opportunities.

5 Conclusion

Based on in-depth interviews with seven Vietnamese EL students from two EMI universities in Vietnam, this case study to some extent confirms earlier findings that Vietnamese EL students tend to favor receptive over productive forms of IDLE. More importantly, the study identifies the academic environment and student motivation as two possible overarching factors contributing to students' limited engagement with IDLE, despite the availability of international faculty and students on campus and the prevalence of digital technologies. These findings may highlight the importance of considering both institutional and interpersonal dynamics when promoting IDLE in EMI contexts.

The primary contributions of this study likely lie in its exploration of a relatively underexamined issue: the reasons behind students' reluctance to engage in IDLE. The study may also present several novel findings—for instance, that even EL students with advanced proficiency levels experience persistent language anxiety, along with heightened sensitivity to external judgment and self-criticism.

Most notably, the study highlights that interpersonal dynamics, particularly those involving peers and teachers, may play a more significant role in shaping IDLE engagement than previously reported in the literature. While the presence of international faculty and students and modern infrastructure remain important, they are probably insufficient on their own; EL students are more likely to engage in IDLE when they experience supportive and meaningful interactions within their immediate social environment.

Another key potential contribution of this study is its identification of a critical distinction between two learner identities: the language learner and the language user. Although this distinction has been implicitly referred to in the field of Critical Applied Linguistics, this study seems to be among the first to contextualize and articulate it explicitly within the Vietnamese EMI higher education setting. This insight

possibly opens promising avenues for future research on ideology, identity, and agency in language teaching and learning in Vietnam.

This case study, however, has limited generalizability due to its small sample size and the participants' relatively advanced levels of English proficiency. Additionally, with six of the seven participants being female and all participating on a voluntary basis, the findings may be subject to gender bias and volunteer bias. To address these limitations, future research could involve a more diverse and representative sample, including EL students with lower proficiency levels and those from non-EMI universities.

Further studies could also explore how to more effectively leverage the presence of international faculty and students on campus to support informal learning. Moreover, future research might examine the self-positioning of EL students as either language learners or language users, and investigate how this identity construction influences their engagement in IDLE. Such inquiries hold important implications for curriculum design, pedagogy, and assessment practices within Vietnamese EL programs.

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Cuong Huy Nguyen is an Assistant Professor in language education at Ho Chi Minh City Open University, Vietnam. With an MA in TESOL (Canberra University) and a PhD in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education (Michigan State University), he is interested in the intersection between curriculum theory, mindfulness, and language education.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1660-850X