

THE DIGITAL DILEMMA: OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS FOR ELT STUDENTS IN THE EVOLVING CLASSROOM

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Abstract: This study explores the opportunities and threats of digital tools in English Language Teaching (ELT) from the perspective of university students. Using a mixed-method approach that combined qualitative interviews and quantitative questionnaires, the research identifies both the benefits and challenges of digital learning environments. Findings reveal that approximately 80% of respondents perceived digital tools as beneficial for improving accessibility and motivation, while nearly 60% reported distractions and technical issues as key obstacles. Theoretically, the study draws on constructivist learning theory, which posits that technology supports learner autonomy when accompanied by meaningful interaction. The results highlight the dual nature of digital learning—its ability to enhance engagement while simultaneously creating new barriers to effective communication and focus. This study contributes to the growing discourse on digital pedagogy by offering contextual insights into ELT students' experiences, providing practical implications for educators and policymakers seeking to optimize digital learning environments in higher education.

Keywords: English language teaching, digital learning, opportunities and threats, university students

INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly evolving landscape of education, the integration of technology has redefined the way we approach English Language

Teaching (ELT) (Hafifah, 2019; Wagiati et al., 2024). The traditional classroom model, once dominated by face-to-face instruction and printed textbooks, is increasingly being

supplemented in some cases, replaced by digital tools and platforms. This shift brings both opportunities and challenges for ELT students, who must adapt to new learning environments that often transcend the physical classroom (Samari & Atashak, 2011). As digital technologies like online courses, mobile applications, and multimedia resources continue to proliferate, the question arises: How do these innovations affect students' learning and outcomes in English?

The rise of digital learning environments presents numerous opportunities. It opens the door to greater accessibility, personalized learning, and collaborative engagement among students across geographic boundaries (Maghfiroh et al., 2023). With a single click, students can access a wealth of resources, engage in interactive lessons, and

receive immediate feedback. However, this digital transformation is not without its challenges. While technology promises efficiency and flexibility, it also introduces potential distractions, issues of unequal access to resources, and the risk of depersonalizing the learning experience.

Several studies have highlighted the positive impact of digital tools on ELT, particularly in enhancing student engagement and promoting autonomous learning (Samsudin et al., 2023); (Chueh & Kao, 2024); (Kencana, 2017). Digital platforms, such as language learning apps and online discussion forums, have been shown to improve learners' motivation and facilitate more diverse communication methods. At the same time, research has pointed to the limitations of technology in language

acquisition, including concerns over its ability to replicate the social and interactive aspects of in-person language learning (Gillett-Swan, 2017; Kimberley et al., 2021). These studies underline a critical element of the digital dilemma: the balance between technology's benefits and its potential drawbacks in real-world ELT contexts.

Despite the promising benefits, many ELT students face significant challenges in adapting to this digital transformation. Limited access to reliable internet, a lack of digital literacy, and the overwhelming nature of technology can hinder students' ability to fully leverage digital tools for language learning (Menggo & Darong, 2022). Moreover, the shift towards online and hybrid classrooms has raised concerns about the diminished quality of teacher-student

interactions, as digital platforms often reduce the face-to-face communication that fosters deeper linguistic and cultural understanding (Nguyen, 2015; Woo & Choi, 2021). These issues highlight the pressing need to investigate the lived experiences of ELT students within the evolving digital classroom.

The urgency of this research lies in its ability to address these gaps in understanding. While a growing body of literature explores the integration of digital tools in language education, few studies focus specifically on how students in ELT programs perceive and navigate these innovations. In particular, the intersection of opportunities and threats in digital ELT for students remains underexplored, especially given the unique challenge they face across diverse educational contexts. This

research aims to fill this gap by providing a qualitative, in-depth analysis of the opportunities and threats encountered by ELT students in the digital age.

Previous research has primarily focused on technological integration from the perspective of instructors (Hafifah, 2019), or on broad patterns of digital literacy in education (Dhilon & Murray, 2021; Suharini et al., 2024). However, the specific impacts of digital technologies on ELT students' learning experiences have not been sufficiently explored. This study seeks to add a novel perspective by focusing on the perceptions of ELT students themselves, shedding light on the opportunities they identify, the barriers they face, and how these factors influence their language learning journeys. By exploring these dimensions, the study aims to

contribute new insights into the ongoing debate surrounding the future of ELT in a digitally driven world.

The primary objective of this research is to gain a deeper understanding of the digital challenges and opportunities that ELT students encounter, as well as how they adapt to and engage with digital technologies in their learning processes. Through qualitative analysis, this study aims to capture the nuances of student experiences, offering theoretical and practical insights for educators, policymakers, and future research in digital ELT.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design; it is used mixed methods to explore the opportunities and threats faced by university ELT students in the context of digital English Language Teaching

(ELT) (Cresswell, 2012). The purpose of this research is to gain in-depth insights into students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges related to the use of digital technologies in language learning.

The research design for this study is a descriptive qualitative design. Descriptive research aims to present a clear and accurate picture of ELT students' current experiences with digital tools. Exploratory research is used to identify the various opportunities and threats these students encounter in the evolving digital classroom. Data from the semi-structured interviews and questionnaire were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach.

The participants of this study were university ELT students enrolled in the English Language Teaching program at a university in Indonesia.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who had substantial experience with digital learning tools, especially those involved in online or hybrid English language courses. A total of 10 university students (10 male and 10 female) were selected. These students were between 18 and 22 years old, and their English proficiency ranged from beginner to advanced. The purpose of selecting participants from diverse proficiency levels was to capture a variety of perspectives on the use of digital tools in language learning.

The students were selected based on the following criteria: (1) enrolled in an ELT university program and (2) actively engaged with digital learning tools (e.g., online learning platforms, mobile apps, multimedia resources), and (3) willingness to participate in

interviews and complete the questionnaire.

Data were collected using a combination of semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. Each method was designed to gather different types of data, providing a comprehensive view of the participants' experiences with digital ELT.

1. Semi-Structured Interviews: Each participant was interviewed individually to explore their personal experiences with digital learning tools. The semi-structured interview format allowed for flexibility in questioning, enabling the researcher to explore topics in more depth as they arose during the conversation. The interview questions focused on the following themes:

- a. Perceived opportunities of digital tools for language learning.
- b. Challenges and threats encountered when using digital tools.
- c. Emotional responses to digital learning (e.g., frustration, motivation).
- d. Suggestions for improving digital learning environments

Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes each and were conducted in English to match the students' proficiency levels. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and detailed field notes were taken to supplement the recordings.

2. Questionnaire: A structured questionnaire was distributed to the participants to collect quantitative data on their

experiences and perceptions of digital learning tools. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions and Likert scale items designed to measure students' attitudes towards digital ELT, their perceived benefits and drawbacks, and their emotional responses. The main areas of focus in the questionnaire were:

- a. Opportunities in Digital ELT: Questions about how digital tools enhance learning, engagement, and language skills (e.g., "I find digital tools helpful for improving my English vocabulary").
- b. Threats in Digital ELT: Questions about challenges such as technical issues, distractions, and lack of engagement (e.g., "I get

distracted easily when using digital learning tools").

- c. Emotional Impact: Questions measuring students' emotional responses to digital learning experiences (e.g., "I feel motivated to learn English using digital tools").

The questionnaire was distributed online via Google Forms, available in both English and Indonesian, and participants had one week to complete it. The responses were then analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine patterns and trends across the participants' responses.

Data from the semi-structured interviews and questionnaire were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach.

1. Qualitative Analysis: The transcriptions of the semi-

structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis involves identifying and interpreting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. The steps for thematic analysis included:

- a. Familiarization with the data: Reading through the transcripts to understand the overall content.
- b. Coding: Identifying key phrases or segments of text related to the research questions and assigning labels (codes) to them.
- c. Theme Development: Grouping the codes into broader themes, such as “opportunities,” “challenges,” and “emotional responses,” that captured the core experiences of the participants.

d. Reviewing and Refining Themes: Ensuring that the identified themes were accurate representations of the data.

2. Quantitative Analysis: The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, focusing on frequency distributions and means for Likert scale items. The results provided a quantitative overview of students' perceptions of digital ELT, highlighting areas of agreement and disagreement among participants. This data was then compared with the qualitative themes to triangulate the findings and provide a more robust interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study, which were

obtained through a combination of semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The results are analyzed based on the themes identified during the data analysis, with a particular focus on the opportunities and threats encountered by university ELT students in the context of digital English Language Teaching (ELT). Both qualitative and quantitative data are integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences and perceptions.

Opportunities in Digital ELT

The interviews revealed several significant opportunities that digital tools provide for ELT students. Participants reported that digital platforms enhance learning by providing interactive, engaging content. Key benefits highlighted by the students include:

1. **Enhanced Accessibility to Learning Resources:** Many participants emphasized that digital tools provide access to a variety of learning materials, such as online dictionaries, grammar guides, podcasts, and videos, which were not available in traditional classrooms. One participant noted, "I can learn anywhere and anytime. There are so many apps and websites where I can practice my English, even outside of class hours."
2. **Personalized Learning Experience:** Several students found that digital tools, such as language learning apps (e.g., Duolingo, Quizlet), allow them to work at their own pace, providing a more tailored learning experience. One student shared, "With apps, I

can study according to my own schedule and focus on areas where I need more practice."

3. **Increased Motivation and Engagement:** The integration of multimedia and gamified learning features was often mentioned as a motivational factor. Many students expressed that digital tools make learning more enjoyable and engaging. As one participant stated, "The interactive quizzes and games make me look forward to studying. It's much more fun than just reading from a textbook."

Quantitative Findings

The questionnaire results confirmed the qualitative findings. Many students agreed with the statement "Digital tools help me

improve my English skills," with 85% indicating agreement (4) or strong agreement (5). Additionally, 75% of participants reported that digital tools increased their motivation to learn, suggesting that these tools are perceived as valuable assets in the learning process.

Threats in Digital ELT

Qualitative Findings

While digital tools offer many advantages, the interviews also uncovered several threats or challenges associated with their use in ELT. These challenges include:

1. **Technical Issues and Accessibility Problems:** A significant number of students reported difficulties with slow internet connections, device malfunctions, and problems accessing online learning platforms. One participant

shared, "Sometimes the internet is too slow, and I can't attend the live sessions properly. It's frustrating."

2. Distractions and Lack of Focus:

Many students expressed that the digital environment can be distracting. Social media, notifications, and other apps often compete for their attention during online lessons. One student explained, "When I'm using my phone for learning, I always get notifications from other apps. It's hard to concentrate."

3. Isolation and Lack of

Interaction: Some participants noted that digital learning can feel isolating compared to face-to-face interaction. This lack of human connection in online learning was highlighted as a

threat to their motivation and emotional well-being. As one student stated, "I feel like I'm learning alone. There's no personal connection with the teacher or my classmates."

The quantitative data from the questionnaire mirrored these concerns. 65% of participants agreed that "Technical issues negatively affect my learning experience," and 70% of students reported that they find it difficult to stay focused during online lessons due to distractions. Additionally, 60% of participants reported feeling isolated during digital learning, supporting the qualitative finding of emotional disconnection.

Emotional Responses to Digital Learning

Qualitative Findings

Emotional responses were also a key aspect of the students'

experiences. The emotional impact of digital learning was mixed, with some students feeling motivated and empowered, while others experienced frustration and stress:

1. **Positive Emotional Impact:**

Many students reported feeling excited and motivated by digital tools. Interactive and gamified elements, as well as the convenience of accessing learning materials at any time, were highlighted as key factors contributing to positive emotions. "I feel motivated to study when I can use fun apps to practice English," said one participant.

2. **Negative Emotional Impact:** On

the other hand, some students expressed frustration, particularly when faced with technical difficulties or when

they felt that online lessons lacked personal connection. "I feel frustrated when I can't access the materials, and it's hard to understand without face-to-face interaction," one student commented.

Quantitative Findings

Quantitative data also shed light on emotional responses to digital learning. 55% of respondents reported feeling more motivated when using digital tools, while 50% reported feeling frustrated when encountering technical issues. 45% felt that they lacked personal connection in online learning, which contributed to negative emotional responses.

The results of this study underscore both the potential and limitations of digital English Language Teaching (ELT) from students' perspectives. These findings

align with previous studies emphasizing the transformative potential of technology in language education (Arif, 2019; Chueh & Kao, 2024).

Consistent with constructivist learning theory, students reported that digital tools foster self-directed learning and autonomy by enabling them to access materials independently and engage with interactive resources. Approximately 85% of participants agreed that digital tools improve their English skills, reflecting similar outcomes in prior studies that link digital engagement with increased motivation and confidence (Apriani et al., 2022; Samsudin et al., 2023).

However, the findings also reveal a persistent tension between technological affordances and cognitive focus. About 70% of

respondents acknowledged that distractions and multitasking hindered their concentration, echoing Laugu et al. (2024), who observed that online environments can reduce social presence and emotional engagement. These challenges reaffirm the notion that technology, while empowering, requires structured pedagogical design to mitigate its potential drawbacks.

Furthermore, emotional responses among students-ranging from motivation to frustration-reflect the dual impact of digital learning. This echoes findings by Susanty & Syahid (2021), who noted that emotional well-being is a critical yet often overlooked component of online education. Thus, the integration of digital tools in ELT should not only emphasize accessibility and engagement but also address affective

and psychological dimensions of learning.

The results of this study also highlight a complex picture of digital ELT experiences among university students. On the one hand, digital tools provide valuable opportunities for personalized, flexible, and engaging learning experiences. These tools can enhance students' motivation, increase access to resources, and offer a more interactive learning environment. However, challenges such as technical difficulties, distractions, and feelings of isolation should not be overlooked. It also provides important insights into the experiences of university ELT students in the context of digital English Language Teaching (ELT). The data gathered through interviews and questionnaires reveal both the opportunities and threats posed by digital tools, and the emotional impact

these tools have on students. In this section, we delve deeper into these findings, linking them to existing literature and discussing the broader implications for ELT practice in the digital age.

Opportunities of Digital ELT

The study highlights several key opportunities that digital tools provide for ELT students. These include enhanced accessibility to learning materials, personalized learning experiences, and increased engagement and motivation. These findings are consistent with prior studies on the integration of technology in education, which emphasize the transformative potential of digital tools in enhancing learning outcomes.

1. **Enhanced Accessibility and Flexibility:** One of the most frequently cited benefits of

digital tools is the increased accessibility to learning materials. This finding aligns with previous research digital tools students to access a wider range of resources beyond traditional textbooks, such as online language databases, interactive grammar exercises, and authentic language materials (Arif, 2019). The ability to learn anytime and anywhere is particularly important for students who face time constraints or limited access to traditional learning environments. As one participant noted, "I can study whenever I want, even if I'm not in class." This flexibility helps foster a student-centered learning environment, where students can

take greater control over their learning.

2. Personalized Learning Experience: The ability to learn at one's own pace and receive tailored feedback is another significant opportunity afforded by digital tools. Many of the students in this study highlighted the benefits of language-learning apps that offer personalized practice, particularly for vocabulary acquisition and grammar. Previous studies have also shown that adaptive learning technologies enable students to focus on areas where they need improvement, thereby leading to more efficient learning (Chandra et al., 2024). This personalized approach not only increases student engagement but also helps

students feel more confident and in control of their learning progress.

3. **Increased Motivation and Engagement:** The gamification and interactivity features of digital tools were identified as powerful motivators for learning. The incorporation of game-like elements, such as points, rewards, and levels, was particularly appealing to students, making the learning process more enjoyable and engaging. Research by Apriani et al. (2022) emphasizes that gamification can enhance student motivation, increase their involvement in learning tasks, and improve learning outcomes. By making learning enjoyable and interactive, digital tools can help students stay

motivated, especially in online learning environments.

Threats in Digital ELT

While digital tools offer numerous advantages, the study also highlights several threats or challenges that ELT students face in the digital classroom.

These threats primarily revolve around technical difficulties, distractions, and a sense of isolation, all of which are consistent with challenges identified in previous research.

1. **Technical Issues and Limited Accessibility:** A major concern raised by participants was the technical problems they encountered when using digital tools, including slow internet connections, device malfunctions, and platform access issues. This finding

echoes the research of (Stanca & Cristina, 2014) and (Toleuzhan et al., 2023), who argue that the digital divide-the gap in access to technology-remains a significant barrier to effective learning in many contexts. For students who lack reliable internet access or appropriate devices, digital tools may not only be ineffective but may also exacerbate existing inequalities. One student commented, "The internet is too slow, so I miss parts of the lesson." Such technical barriers create frustration and disrupt the learning experience, undermining the potential benefits of digital learning.

2. Distractions and Lack of Focus: Another significant challenge identified in this study is the distraction posed by digital tools,

particularly social media notifications, and other non-educational apps. This issue is particularly relevant in the context of self-directed online learning, where students may struggle to maintain focus without direct supervision. The literature has long highlighted the impact of digital distractions on students' attention and concentration, with studies showing that students often multitask during digital learning activities, which negatively affects their learning outcomes (Samsudin et al., 2023). Several students in this study expressed similar concerns, saying that they found it difficult to stay focused on their language lessons due to constant interruptions from social media

and messaging apps. As one participant put it, "I always get distracted by notifications when I am studying on my phone."

3. **Isolation and Lack of Social Interaction:** A third threat identified by the students was the sense of isolation that can occur in digital learning environments, where there is limited face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers. This finding is consistent with the research of (Laugu et al., 2024), who argue that online learning environments can lack the social presence that in traditional classrooms. Many students in this study reported feeling disconnected from their peers and instructors, which negatively impacted their emotional well-being and motivation to engage

with the content. One student remarked, "I miss the interaction with my classmates and teacher.

It feels like I am learning alone."

This sense of isolation can be particularly detrimental for students who rely on social interaction for emotional support and motivation in their learning journey.

Emotional Responses to Digital Learning

The emotional impact of digital learning was another significant finding in this study. Students' emotional responses to digital ELT were mixed, with some feeling motivated and excited, while others experienced frustration and stress. These emotions were strongly tied to the challenges they faced, particularly technical issues, distractions, and the lack of interaction.

1. **Positive Emotional Impact:** Many students reported feeling motivated, empowered, and engaged when using digital tools. The convenience of accessing learning materials at any time and the interactive nature of digital platforms were highlighted as factors that contributed to positive emotional responses. These findings are consistent with previous research that suggests digital learning can foster positive emotions, such as enjoyment and excitement, particularly when the tools are engaging and user-friendly (Samsudin et al., 2023) and (Maghfiroh et al., 2023). By providing a more flexible and interactive learning environment, digital tools help students feel more in control of their learning experience.
2. **Negative Emotional Impact:** On the other hand, some students expressed frustration, stress, and anxiety related to digital learning. These emotions were primarily attributed to technical difficulties, lack of interaction, and the distractions mentioned earlier. These negative emotional responses are consistent with findings from previous studies, which highlight the psychological strain that digital learning can impose on students, especially when they experience difficulties or feel disconnected (Susanty & Syahid, 2021). For example, students who struggled with unreliable internet or who felt isolated in the online environment often

reported feeling stressed or anxious about their learning progress.

Implications for ELT Practice

The findings of this study have important implications for English Language Teaching (ELT) in the digital age. While digital tools offer significant opportunities for enhancing language learning, the challenges highlighted in this study must be addressed to optimize the learning experience for students.

Improving technical infrastructure, managing distractions, fostering social interaction, and balancing emotional well-being are all essential components in creating an effective digital ELT environment. Educational institutions must invest in reliable technology, including high-speed internet, well-maintained learning management systems, and readily available technical support to ensure equal access for all

students. To address the issue of distractions, educators can implement strategies such as encouraging the use of distraction-free applications, guiding students in managing notifications, and incorporating short breaks or interactive tasks to maintain focus. Additionally, fostering social interaction is crucial to prevent feelings of isolation; this can be achieved through virtual study groups, synchronous discussions, and collaborative online activities. Finally, the emotional well-being of learners should remain a central concern, with teachers providing emotional support, promoting access to mental-health resources, and cultivating a positive, inclusive atmosphere that reduces stress and anxiety in digital learning settings.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the opportunities and threats faced by university English Language Teaching (ELT) students in digital learning

contexts. The findings show that digital tools provide substantial benefits, particularly in promoting personalized learning, flexibility, and motivation. For example, more than two-thirds of students indicated higher enthusiasm when using digital tools, while nearly half cited distractions as the main barrier. These data illustrate the paradoxical nature of digital ELT: it empowers students while simultaneously challenging their focus and emotional balance.

The results align with constructivist learning theory, which asserts that meaningful learning occurs when students actively construct knowledge through interaction and reflection. Digital tools can thus enhance learning when appropriately mediated by collaborative and communicative activities. However, without such

scaffolding, the technology risks fostering isolation and superficial engagement.

This study acknowledges several limitations. The research was conducted in a single institutional context, which may limit the generalizability of its findings. Moreover, the relatively small sample size suggests that future research could adopt a larger-scale or cross-cultural approach to validate these insights.

The novel contribution of this study lies in its balanced perspective on digital ELT-emphasizing both the cognitive and emotional dimensions of students' experiences, rather than focusing solely on technological effectiveness. By highlighting how opportunities and threats coexist in the digital learning environment, this research contributes to ongoing discussions on how to humanize

digital pedagogy and make it more responsive to learner needs.

In conclusion, the study advocates for strengthening institutional technological infrastructure to ensure equitable access, developing strategies to minimize digital distractions and sustain attention, integrating collaborative and affective components to enhance social presence, and recognizing the emotional well-being of students as a central element of digital education.

Through these recommendations, digital ELT can evolve toward a more holistic, engaging, and student-centered practice that not only leverages technological affordances but also supports the human aspects of learning.

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