



EXPLORING STUDENTS' MOTIVATION IN LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH DIGITAL-BASED INSTRUCTION IN INDONESIAN EFL SCHOOL CONTEXTS

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Abstract

Students' motivation remains a central issue in English as a foreign language learning because it influences their willingness to participate, persist, communicate, and develop autonomous learning habits. In many classroom contexts, students still perceive English as difficult, distant from daily communication, and strongly associated with examination pressure. Digital-based instruction offers opportunities to increase motivation by providing multimodal input, interactive tasks, immediate feedback, flexible access, and more authentic exposure to English. However, the motivational role of digital instruction depends on how students experience the learning process, not merely on the presence of technology. This study aims to explore students' motivation in learning English through digital-based instruction in Indonesian EFL school contexts. A qualitative case study design was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, students' reflective journals, and learning document analysis. The participants consisted of 36 junior secondary students and two English teachers. The data were analyzed thematically. The findings revealed four major themes: digital-based instruction increased situational interest, supported learner autonomy, strengthened confidence through feedback and peer interaction,

and created motivational tensions related to distraction, access, fatigue, and English anxiety. The study concludes that digital-based instruction can enhance students' motivation when digital tools are pedagogically structured, emotionally supportive, interactive, and aligned with students' language needs. Technology should therefore be treated as a motivational mediator rather than as an automatic solution for English learning.

Keywords: *digital instruction; English learning; motivation; qualitative study; EFL students*

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A. Introduction

Motivation is one of the most important factors in English learning because it influences students' attention, persistence, participation, confidence, and willingness to use the target language, especially where exposure outside the classroom is limited. Students may know English matters for their future but not experience it as meaningful or enjoyable, so many participate only to complete assignments or pass examinations.

In Indonesian school contexts, students encounter English through lessons, courses, social media, games, music, films, and mobile apps, so English learning is no longer limited to textbooks. However, informal digital exposure does not automatically build sustained motivation; students may enjoy digital English content yet still feel anxious or unmotivated in formal classrooms.

Digital-based instruction integrates digital tools, platforms, multimedia, online tasks, learning management systems, interactive quizzes, and mobile activities to support learning objectives. In English learning it can provide richer input, varied practice, immediate feedback, and authentic contexts, while supporting autonomy by letting students access, repeat, and review materials beyond class time.

Its motivational potential relates to self-determination theory, which holds that motivation strengthens when learning supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Students may be more motivated when they have control over activities, feel capable of improving, and experience supportive interaction with teachers and peers, which digital instruction can support through choice, feedback, and interactive communities.

Second language motivation theory connects motivation to identity, future self, emotion, and social context. Ushioda (2011) argues motivation should be understood in relation to learners' self and identity, and Boo, Dornyei, and Ryan (2015) show L2 motivation research has grown into a dynamic field considering psychology, context, and method. In digital environments, motivation may be shaped by how students imagine themselves as English users and how digital platforms connect to daily life.

Prior studies show technology supports language learning in various ways: mobile-assisted learning expands opportunities beyond class (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008; Stockwell, 2010); digital gameplay can increase willingness to communicate (Reinders & Wattana, 2014); informal digital learning of English relates to proficiency, affective variables, and willingness to communicate (Lee & Dressman, 2018; Lee & Drajati, 2019); and technology reviews suggest digital tools help learning when paired with appropriate pedagogy (Golonka, Bowles, Frank, Richardson, & Freynik, 2014; Hwang & Fu, 2019; Sung, Chang, & Yang, 2015).

Nevertheless, digital instruction does not automatically increase motivation; it can also create distraction, cognitive overload, superficial engagement, unequal access, and digital fatigue. Some students enjoy digital activities without connecting them to learning goals, while others feel anxious when speaking, recording, or submitting work online—so students' motivation needs to be examined from their own perspectives.

Most studies on digital learning and motivation rely on quantitative surveys or experiments, which may not fully explain how students interpret digital instruction or what tensions they

experience. A qualitative approach is needed to capture students' voices and contextual meanings. This study therefore explores students' motivation in learning English through digital-based instruction in Indonesian EFL contexts, asking: (1) how do students experience digital-based instruction; (2) what motivational factors emerge; and (3) what challenges affect their motivation?

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative case study design, chosen to explore students' motivation from their lived experiences and reflective responses within a bounded context: digital-based English instruction in two junior secondary classes.

The study was conducted in a junior secondary school where teachers had integrated digital tools—presentation slides, learning videos, vocabulary quizzes, audio models, online worksheets, discussion boards, and mobile assignments—connected to objectives such as vocabulary practice, reading, speaking, listening, and writing.

Participants were 36 Grade VIII students and two English teachers who had used digital instruction for one semester. Of the students, 18 were purposively selected for interviews, representing different achievement levels, participation, and digital learning experience.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations (six lessons), students' reflective journals, and document analysis (lesson plans, materials, quiz results, worksheets, and teacher feedback) to understand students' motivation and how instruction was structured.

Data were analyzed thematically through familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, review, definition, and interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017), triangulating interviews, observations, journals, and documents.

Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking with participants, and peer debriefing with another

researcher. Ethical considerations included school permission, explaining the research purpose, anonymizing identities, and ensuring participation did not affect grades.

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

The thematic analysis produced four major themes: situational interest and enjoyment, autonomy and learning control, confidence through feedback and interaction, and motivational tensions. These show that motivation emerged from the interaction between digital tools, teacher facilitation, peer support, task design, and students' emotional responses.

Digital-Based Instruction Increased Situational Interest and Enjoyment

The first theme indicates digital instruction increased situational interest: students found lessons more attractive with videos, images, audio, and interactive quizzes, describing digital-based instruction as more alive and interesting compared to textbook-dominated lessons.

Observations supported this: during digital vocabulary quizzes students showed higher attention and faster responses than during conventional exercises, and were more willing to predict meanings and connect content to their own experience when shown short videos.

Reflective journals showed enjoyment was tied to comprehension, not mere entertainment—audio models helped pronunciation and images helped memory, indicating enjoyment was connected to perceived learning usefulness.

However, interest depended on task design: students stayed engaged when activities required thinking, answering, speaking, or collaborating, but became passive when digital media were used only for watching long videos.

Table 1. Theme 1: Situational Interest in Digital-Based English Instruction

Subtheme	Evidence from Data	Motivational Meaning
Visual attraction	Students responded positively to images, videos, and interactive slides	Digital input increased attention
Enjoyable learning atmosphere	Students described lessons as more interesting and less monotonous	Enjoyment reduced learning boredom
Easier comprehension	Students used visuals and audio to understand vocabulary and pronunciation	Comprehension supported motivation
Active task participation	Students were more engaged in quizzes, prediction tasks, and interactive exercises	Interaction sustained interest

Source: Synthesized from interviews, observations, and reflective journals.

Digital Instruction Supported Autonomy and Learning Control

The second theme shows digital instruction supported autonomy: students could review vocabulary, replay videos, check pronunciation, and access materials outside class at their own pace, making them feel more responsible for learning.

This was visible in mobile-based assignments, where students reviewed vocabulary via flashcards and audio and practiced more frequently without waiting for the next class—extending learning beyond classroom time.

Autonomy also involved choice: students could select topics, images, or formats, which made them feel more involved in decisions about their own learning, supporting motivation through a sense of control.

However, autonomy was not equal for all students; those less used to independent digital learning, especially with weaker proficiency, needed more guidance, showing that autonomy should be scaffolded with clear instructions, models, and feedback.

Feedback and Peer Interaction Strengthened Confidence

The third theme concerns confidence: students felt more motivated when digital tools gave immediate feedback, since interactive quizzes let them recognize mistakes quickly and want to try again.

Digital instruction also supported peer interaction: collaborative online tasks reduced fear of mistakes since students could discuss answers with friends first, making learning feel less intimidating.

Speaking tasks became more manageable when students could record and repeat responses before submitting, reducing anxiety, though some remained uncomfortable hearing their own pronunciation—showing speaking tasks must be introduced gradually.

Teacher feedback remained essential: digital platforms made comments and scores more efficient, but students still needed personal encouragement from teachers, showing technology cannot replace relational aspects of motivation.

Table 2. Theme 2 and Theme 3: Autonomy, Feedback, and Confidence

Motivational Factor	Digital Instructional Form	Student Experience
Autonomy	Replayable videos, digital notes, mobile vocabulary review	Students could study independently and repeat difficult materials
Choice	Topic selection, digital product options, flexible task formats	Students felt more involved in learning decisions
Competence	Immediate quiz feedback, pronunciation audio, guided practice	Students recognized progress and corrected mistakes
Relatedness	Group tasks, online discussion, peer support	Students felt less afraid and more connected
Confidence	Voice recording, teacher comments, repeated practice	Students became more willing to use English

Source: Synthesized from student interviews and classroom observations.

Motivational Tensions in Digital-Based English Learning

The fourth theme indicates digital instruction also created motivational tensions: distraction, unequal access, digital fatigue, and English anxiety, despite generally positive responses.

Distraction was the most common challenge—mobile phones that helped learning could also lead to games and unrelated content, indicating a need for classroom rules and self-regulation strategies.

Access was another challenge: unstable internet, limited data, or shared devices affected students' ability to complete assignments on time, creating pressure for students with limited access.

Digital fatigue also appeared: students enjoyed digital media but tired when too many tasks required screen time, suggesting instruction needs balance rather than being fully digitalized.

English anxiety remained a challenge, as tasks requiring speaking, writing, or visible submissions created pressure, especially around low scores or pronunciation, indicating instruction should keep a safe atmosphere where mistakes are part of learning.

Table 3. Motivational Benefits and Challenges of Digital-Based English Instruction

Aspect	Benefits	Challenges
Attention	Videos, images, and quizzes attracted students' interest	Students could be distracted by non-learning applications
Autonomy	Materials could be accessed and repeated independently	Some students lacked self-regulation
Confidence	Feedback and repeated practice supported competence	Public scores and recordings could increase anxiety
Interaction	Digital collaboration encouraged peer support	Unequal participation occurred in some groups
Access	Mobile learning extended practice beyond class	Internet, device, and data limitations affected participation

Source: Synthesized from qualitative data.

2. Discussion

The findings show motivation was shaped by the interaction of interest, autonomy, competence, relatedness, and contextual challenges—digital tools motivated students not because they were modern, but because they created clearer, more interactive, flexible learning connected to students' digital practices.

The first finding—increased situational interest—aligns with studies on multimodal input and interaction (Golonka et al., 2014; Hwang & Fu, 2019); students engaged more when digital materials aided comprehension, suggesting motivation is closely tied to perceived comprehensibility.

However, situational interest is not deep motivation; long-term motivation requires meaningful engagement, feedback, and perceived progress, so videos and quizzes must be pedagogically connected to language objectives rather than used to merely decorate lessons.

The second finding—supported autonomy—aligns with self-determination theory's emphasis on autonomy as central to motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020), especially important in EFL contexts where classroom time is limited and digital tools can extend exposure.

This also supports research on self-regulated language learning: Lai and Gu (2011) found students use technology outside class to regulate learning, and Stockwell (2010) showed mobile platforms support vocabulary learning, though autonomy still required teacher scaffolding and structured tasks.

The third finding—confidence and relatedness—supports self-determination theory's competence and relatedness needs: immediate feedback helped students recognize progress while peer interaction reduced fear and increased participation.

This is consistent with digital game-based and online communication research: Reinders and Wattana (2014) found gameplay supports willingness to communicate, and Lee and Drajiati (2019) emphasized affective variables in informal digital learning—here, confidence grew when tasks allowed preparation, repetition, and collaboration.

The fourth finding—motivational tensions—shows distraction, access inequality, fatigue, and anxiety limited technology's benefits, cautioning against an overly optimistic view: technology can motivate but also create new barriers to attention, access, and emotional wellbeing.

Distraction points to a need for digital self-regulation and classroom routines; access inequality calls for inclusive planning that doesn't assume equal devices or internet; fatigue suggests blended over fully digital instruction; and anxiety means digital tasks must be emotionally safe.

Overall, digital-based instruction functions as a motivational mediator: it mediates interest, autonomy, competence, and interaction, but its effect depends on pedagogical design and classroom context. The teacher remains central in selecting tools, structuring tasks, giving feedback, and supporting students emotionally—without which digital tools may become entertainment or distraction rather than meaningful, motivating learning.

Pedagogical implications: digital materials should clarify meaning rather than decorate lessons; tasks should require active participation; students should receive controlled autonomy with guidance; digital feedback should pair with teacher encouragement; online and offline activities should be balanced to prevent fatigue; and access limitations should shape task design.

D. Conclusion

This qualitative case study explored students' motivation in learning English through digital-based instruction in Indonesian EFL contexts. Findings show digital instruction increased situational interest, supported autonomy, strengthened confidence through feedback and peer interaction, and created tensions related to distraction, unequal access, fatigue, and anxiety. Motivation grew not merely from using digital tools but from clearer understanding, flexible practice, peer interaction, feedback, and a sense of progress—though benefits depended on teacher mediation, task design, emotional support, and access conditions. The study concludes that digital-based instruction can support motivation when structured,

interactive, inclusive, and pedagogically aligned with language objectives. Future studies may examine this across school levels, compare urban and rural contexts, and combine qualitative findings with longitudinal measurement.

Declaration of AI-Assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, the authors used AI-assisted tools only to improve English language quality, grammar, readability, sentence clarity, and academic expression. The AI tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce findings, or draw conclusions. All conceptual arguments, data interpretation, methodological decisions, and scholarly conclusions remain the full responsibility of the authors. The authors carefully reviewed, edited, and verified all AI-assisted outputs to ensure the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the final manuscript.

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