

# Online Informal Learning of English Activities to Improve Students' English Communication Skills

Zahrotul Lutfiana<sup>1</sup>, Diah Kristina<sup>2</sup>, Sumardi<sup>3</sup>

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## Abstract

This study aims to learn about students' experiences developing their speaking skills using Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) activities. The researcher gathered data for this narrative study by interviewing and observing three English education students at a State University in Central Java. The data were then evaluated qualitatively. The results indicated that students learned several aspects of speaking and communicating in English using Youtube video content, including pronunciation, intonation, and expressiveness. Additionally, the students used a variety of social media and chat platforms to engage with their international peers in English. Additionally, students favoured this informal learning mechanism because they recognized the efficacy of these online everyday learning activities in pleasantly achieving meaningful learning goals. Additionally, OILE activities aided students' speaking performance during informal learning activities.

## Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman mahasiswa jurusan pendidikan bahasa Inggris dalam meningkatkan keterampilan berbicara mereka melalui kegiatan pembelajaran informal bahasa Inggris secara online. Dalam studi naratif ini, peneliti mengumpulkan data dengan mewawancarai tiga mahasiswa jurusan pendidikan bahasa Inggris di salah satu Universitas Negeri di Jawa Tengah dan mengamati dokumen digital mereka. Kemudian, data dianalisis secara kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa memperoleh pengetahuan tentang aspek berbicara dan berkomunikasi dalam bahasa Inggris seperti pengucapan, intonasi dan ekspresi melalui konten video Youtube. Para mahasiswa juga menggunakan berbagai jenis media sosial, dan platform percakapan untuk berlatih berkomunikasi dalam bahasa Inggris dengan teman asing mereka. Para mahasiswa juga menyukai mekanisme pembelajaran informal ini karena mereka menemukan efektivitas dari kegiatan pembelajaran informal secara online ini untuk mencapai hasil belajar yang signifikan dengan cara yang menyenangkan. Selanjutnya, kegiatan – kegiatan pembelajaran informal bahasa Inggris secara online ini juga berkontribusi terhadap performa berbicara bahasa Inggris siswa pada kegiatan – kegiatan pembelajaran formal di kelas.

<sup>1</sup> Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia  
Email: [ninaviana@student.uns.ac.id](mailto:ninaviana@student.uns.ac.id)

<sup>2</sup> Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia  
Email: [diahkristina@staff.uns.ac.id](mailto:diahkristina@staff.uns.ac.id)

<sup>3</sup> Universitas Sebelas Maret, Surakarta, Indonesia  
Email: [sumardi74@staff.uns.ac.id](mailto:sumardi74@staff.uns.ac.id)

## INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, people have experienced an exponential accretion in utilising mobile devices, particularly smartphones, for functional but academic, informational, social, and entertainment aims (Godwin-Jones, 2017). Millennials also use mobile devices and the internet to learn English because they can find partners to practice communication directly. Further, English is often established as the language of the digital environment, and still, its online use in many contexts remains underexplored (Jurkovič, 2019; Jarvis, 2014; Lai, Hu & Liu, 2017; Sockett, 2014). Indeed, English became a foreign language in non-English speaking countries. But now, it is widely used in the daily activities of many online users. Thereby, it can be assumed that online activities significantly impact people's communicative competence in English (Jurkovič, 2019).

Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) involves various language practices involving non-specialist English language EFL students on the Internet (Tofoli & Sockett, 2015). OILE is a self-learning activity for second language development carried out by someone outside of the classroom with the help of computer media or digital devices to overcome the limitations of classroom learning (Lee & Dressman, 2018). The growth of digital technology and the ability of millennials to use technology allow them to learn English without restrictions. Millennial students can find lots of informal learning English resources by a sophisticated cellphone, personal computer (PC), and an internet connection which are mostly free to be downloaded via applications or opened directly through credible websites. Hence, it is known that the efficiency and broadness of technology in supporting informal online learners provide enormous benefits for learners (Sockett, 2014). The OILE study explores to identify language development utilizing online activities such as social networking, streaming or downloading television series or films, e-mail, blogging, chatting, conversations via VOIP (voice over Internet protocol), participating in online forums, listening to music on demand and browsing the web in English (Tofoli & Sockett, 2015).

Meanwhile, speaking is one of the four English skills that allow us to communicate effectively. According to Brown (2000), speaking is an interactive process of generating meaning that implicates producing, receiving, and digesting information. However, in the context of speaking English, a problem occurs when most young students from non-English speaking countries struggle to speak fluently and confidently in English. Based on the writer's learning experience, learning English in formal schools does not focus on speaking skills but vocabulary mastery and tenses. Instead of actively learning to communicate in English, students are used to learning English passively in the classroom. Students are good in scores, but communicating in English is still low. Suharyanto (2018) highlighted the problem of students getting many vocabularies but less practising in the classroom. It reported that students get many new vocabularies every time they learn English in school. However, they only get a few opportunities to communicate in English. Therefore, it concludes that the passive classroom learning system is one factor in students' unwillingness to communicate in English. Furthermore, the cases of students' lack of confidence and English speaking fluency are the primary factors that cause students' anxiety when speaking English. That problem also initiates them to remain silent (Oda, 2015). For those reasons, this current study presents insight into how to break shortcomings in improving English communication skills since students need to find a way to enhance their learning motivation.

Several researchers have previously discovered the effectiveness of informal online activities in improving English language skills. Tofoli & Sockett (2015) used a qualitative method to investigate teachers' views on the impact of OILE activities on students informal learning activities. The results show that students are not bothered by fast speaking speed. Students can use authentic expressions with the correct pronunciation. Students are better at English usage, and students generally have better accent and become more fluent. Also, interviewees mentioned that OILE had increased students' curiosity in English. The motivation of students to learn English is driven by

their willingness to understand English more deeply. Through watching TV series/movies to understand the social culture and pronunciation of English in the United States, the United Kingdom and the countries that use English as a communication language. Similarly, Song & Bonk (2016) investigated the motivational factors of autonomous informal learning in online learning resources. The results show that the main factors for independent informal learning through network resources are freedom and choice, control and interest and participation. Furthermore, Trinder (2017) investigated how useful technologies can help Austrian university students improve their various language skills. The results show that students are more willing to use movies or television shows to improve their English skills. They like to get excited about pronouncing English words, accents, social culture, idioms, styles, and everyday English from native speakers. Furthermore, Klimova (2020) reveals how older people can benefit from using mobile applications to learn foreign languages. The results show that students of English as a foreign language have improved their cognitive abilities, positive psychological effects, reduction of anxiety, a gain of self-confidence, development of new social relationships and feeling of self-realization by using English learning mobile application. In addition, Lamb & Arisandy (2020) found that using English online impacts the motivation to learn English inside and outside the classroom.

In the present study, the researcher examines the experiences of three English education students. They are Rose, Daisy, and Lily (Pseudonym). They were students at a university in Central Java, Indonesia. The researcher explored how online Informal Learning of English Activities has a significant role in improving and accelerating their motivation and English performance (Creswell & Poth, 2016). So that, these activities affected formal learning outcomes. The researcher focuses explicitly on the factors that motivate students to engage in Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) activities and the contribution of Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) activities to students' performance informal learning activities.

## **METHODS**

The purpose of this study was to conduct a narrative investigation. The researcher obtained narrative data from students' experiences of English online informal learning in the context of a university in Surakarta. The narrative inquiry technique appeared to be the most appropriate for this research. It emphasized human experience and recorded through accounts of individual life experiences, which was in line with the aim of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Two undergraduate students from a university in Surakarta, Central Java, Indonesia, served as informants for this study. The researcher found three competent informants for data validity in the triangulation resource data in this study. They were Rose and Lily (Pseudonym). They were voluntarily willing to participate in this study. They were females and roughly 20 years old. Their roles were to give information about the essential data. Rose was considered an international speech participant, and Lily was considered to have had achievements in English debate at the international level. Besides that, they were English users on social media, and they had the experience of improving their English skills through social media activities. Therefore, the researcher was drawn to investigate how informal online learning of English contributed to their attempts to enhance and accelerate their motivations and English performance.

This narrative study used semi-structured interviews to discover how students' motivation improved since the Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) engagement and to what extent Online Informal Learning of English (OILE) activities contributed to students' performance in classroom activities. The stories from participants were research data that will answer the research questions of this study (Barkhuizen et al., 2013; Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2016). The study was carried out for about seven months, from January to July 2021. Due to social distancing, the researcher and participants agreed to conduct the E-interview (Bampton and Cowton, 2002). Meanwhile, the interview ran for 1 to 2 hours and ended after the researcher confirmed the interview with the participants. The researcher also used digital materials and recorded

individuals' life experiences, which connected students' activities as supporting data. Furthermore, the data was analyzed qualitatively based on the analysis technique proposed by Creswell and Poth (2016).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### ***The Stories***

In this section, the researcher retold the stories shared by Rose and Lily about their experiences in improving English speaking through online informal learning activities. They were the informants of this study. Their story was presented separately, covering their online everyday English learning activities and speaking English performance after improving their speaking skills.

#### *Rose's Stories: She's been in love with English for a long time*

The first time Rose became interested in English was when she was in the second grade of junior high school. It started when she listened to a radio broadcast where the radio announcer spoke a mixed language between Indonesian and English, which attracted my attention to follow the radio program. She listened and paid attention to every word the announcer had to say. She thought it would be really nice if she could speak English from that moment. Although she had studied English formally since she was in elementary school, that moment was the first time she became interested in learning English.

#### *Rose Needed a Suitable Learning System*

Finding a learning system that matched Rose's learning style was one of the aspects that she used in this informal online activity to improve her English abilities. She believed that relying entirely on learning resources for formal education was insufficient. As part of her learning resources, she used films, internet videos, and social media. She enjoyed watching videos of native English speakers since it helped her learn more about pronunciation, expressions, intonation, and expanding her vocabulary.

The researcher was curious about what films Rose watched. Then Rose said that she watched a lot of English films. She said during the interview that she had just finished the Lupine series. She enthusiastically told the story of the series. She went on to tell the researcher that the first English language film he watched was a Harry Potter film. She liked the film because the pronunciation used in the dialogue was easy for her to understand. She was also fascinated by the British accent, which she found easy to imitate in the Harry Potter movies.

*"I find it easier to imitate the pronunciation, intonation, and expressions of the characters or speakers in the film or video content."*

Rose went on to say that she uses social media to practice speaking and to communicate in English. She could practice directly with native English speakers or English users to improve her English skills. When the researcher asked why she thought such a learning method would suit her learning style, Rose responded that she wanted to enhance her speaking and communication skills in an enjoyable way without noticing she was learning.

*"I want to learn English without feeling pressured, yet the outcomes are significant."*

Based on Rose's experience, she was able to find a fun learning strategy for learning English using Youtube and movies as a reference. This was attempted to gather information from English speakers to improve her vocabulary, speech, and expressions in English. It was understandable since people were familiar with those media sources. It was simple to use and provided a wide range of content. Therefore, people could select inspiring content based on their preferences (Song & Bonk, 2016). It was also said by Trinder (2017) that movies could help students enhance their English abilities because they felt enthused about learning how to pronounce English words,

accents, social culture, idioms, styles, and daily English conversations from native speakers. Rose found the learning resources she needed to achieve her learning objectives by linking with the current study. As a result, she understood English better, specifically how to communicate in English as effectively as possible. It was also stated by Toffoli & Sockett (2015) that students easily learned speaking aspects by watching English speaker content since the students enjoyed the activities.

#### *Rose's Speaking Performance After Joining OILE Activities*

Rose's informal learning activities, which she did while having fun, assisted her in strengthening her English-speaking skills. She was formerly unskilled in English. She can now communicate fluently in English and even compete in an English speech competition. Since she noticed that her academic successes in speaking class were improving, she said that the OILE activities contributed to her formal learning achievements. She could also deliver outstanding presentations, ensuring that the audience grasped the message and content of the information she delivered. Even though she still made mistakes once in a while, it was understandable. Her improvement was evidenced by academic achievement scores and excellent feedback from the lecturer when she gave a presentation.

*"My ability to communicate, as well as my ability to pronounce words, is improving."*

She further said,

*"When I was in the first to third semester, my speaking scores were no higher than 90. But, my scores rocketed when I was in the fourth and fifth semesters."*

Rose was ecstatic with her outstanding performance on the speaking subject. She made a substantial numerical achievement, which increased her GPA's value. However, as she had previously mentioned, this informal learning activities engagement was not entirely boosting her English-speaking skills. The lecturer who guided her and the informal learning courses were also beneficial to her development. She actively used informal online activities to put what she had studied informal learning into practice.

Rose went on to say, and she used to be very nervous when she was asked to deliver a presentation. But ever since she was involved in communicating with foreigners, she had become more confident.

*"But... what's more important is that I'm comfortable giving presentations in front of my students."*

She added,

*"Even though I still feel nervous, it is not as stressful as it once was."*

Rose's informal online activities include watching YouTube videos and movies and practising with her foreign friends. It was no surprise if she had been trained psychologically and mentally to speak English. Therefore, she can effectively manage her nervousness when giving presentations and speaking English in front of others. As Klimova (2017) stated, it was accurate that online informal English learning through mobile applications was beneficial. Using an English learning mobile application improved students' cognitive ability and had good psychological impacts, such as reduced anxiety and increased self-confidence.

#### *Lily's Stories: she knew English, but she could not speak it*

Lily has loved English since she was in elementary school. That was ever since she listened to a song by a popular teenage singer. It was the first English song she had heard. However, she had no idea what the song was about. She simply remembered memorizing the song and liking it because it was popular at that time. It was also new English knowledge for her in informal English learning.

Among the most interesting parts of Lily's experience was that her English scores in high school were consistently high. However, there were times when she doubted her own ability to communicate in English. There was a moment she had the opportunity to speak English with an English-native speaker. At that point, she was eager to communicate with the foreigner. However, due to her inadequate grasp of English, she could not effectively communicate. She had no idea what the foreigner was talking about. That was the reason she was unable to communicate effectively with the foreigner.

### ***Finding Partner Practice***

Lily's experience of being incompetent at speaking English inspired her to practice it more frequently. However, because she lived in a non-English speaking environment, she had difficulty making practice friends. Fortunately, social media had begun to gain popularity at the time. As a result, she considered using social media to find a practice partner. Indeed, Lily's primary motivation for participating in this informal online learning activity was to make foreign friends with whom she could practise interacting in English. Besides, it was for keeping up with the latest news about her favourite K-pop idol.

*“At that time, I thought if I could make many foreign friends, I would have more opportunities to practice English. In that way, my English skills would improve.”*

Until now, Lily had a large number of foreign friends. She was a student who got along well with international students. She mentioned that she made friends from the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Canada. They communicated intensively three times a week, either by text or phone calls.

Since she was a member of a K-pop group fan community, Lily met her foreign friends. No wonder if the majority of their conversations were around their idols. They interacted with each other using a range of devices. Sometimes it was through social media, and other times through private messaging applications. It seemed good that Lily and her foreign friends interacted on social media by commenting on each other's posts. They occasionally expressed their opinions on different topics.

*“I'm also usually interested in joining to discuss specific topics or threads if I consider I'm capable of engaging in such discussions.”*

Even though not all of Lily's social media friends were foreigners, she frequently posted and commented on her friends' postings in English rather than Indonesian. The reason seemed to be that she could express herself more effectively in English. While that appeared to be a clever strategy when interacting with other social media users, Lily used English as her primary language. Since she was comfortable and willing to try to communicate in that language, she was able to use it effectively.

Since social media was so popular, the researcher assumed that millennials use it routinely nowadays. However, she was curious about the obstacles Lily had communicating in English with her foreign friends.

*“The difficulty comes only when I come across slang words that I am unfamiliar with.”*

She further said,

*“But it doesn't matter. I usually take a second to connect the term to the conversation's context.”*

Lily said that her motivation for engaging in online informal learning activities was to find friends to practise her English communication skills. Even though her foreign friends were not English native speakers, she had a partner to communicate within English. It was by the findings of Klimova (2020) that using an English learning mobile application could develop new social bonds

and feelings of self-realization. Lily regularly communicated with their foreign friends in English through various online devices in this kind of activity. She even admitted that she was close to her foreign friends. Their closeness was indicative of how they communicate, which was intense and allowed them to discuss personal matters. She trained herself to have daily conversations. As time went by, it allowed her to communicate naturally and understand how to socialize across countries.

### ***Lily's Speaking Performance After Joining OILE Activities***

Lily's purpose for participating in this informal online learning activity was to improve her English-speaking skills. So that the researcher wanted to know how much of an impact she had. As Lily said, the motivating factor for her to be involved in this OILE activity was to get a lot of foreign friends so that she had a partner to speak English. In this way, her English communication skills would improve. This automatically also affects her academic score, especially in speaking courses.

*"As far as I remember, my speaking score was B+ at the beginning of the first semester. Maybe one of them was because I was more and more involved in OILE activities, so it increased to A- and then increased to A."*

The researcher asked about vocabulary since it was one of the most significant aspects of speaking. Lily also mentioned that her vocabulary had improved. Besides being active on social media, she was like other teenagers who enjoyed watching movies and listening to music. She improved her vocabulary, phrases, pronunciation, and more due to these efforts. She came up with several words or phrases that were regularly utilized in daily communication. It was different when she wasn't actively participating in informal online learning activities. At that time, she exclusively used school textbooks that she had learned to enhance her vocabulary.

*"I also improve my English skills by watching YouTube videos and movies, and I get a lot of references on how to communicate from these activities."*

Overall, Lily's communication skills improved well. It also affected her performance in formal classroom activities. She gained confidence in speaking English and giving presentations in front of her classmates. She was also able to communicate properly enough for her classmates to understand what she said. Remembering she felt quite inferior and was nervous of speaking English when she was a new university student. Therefore, she might notice a considerable impact of these OILE activities, particularly on her SNS interactions with foreign friends.

*"The OILE activities helped me become more confident. I also find it easy to participate in almost every class activity."*

She added,

*"It is clear that OILE activities have had a significant impact on my English-speaking skills improvement."*

Lily said that she enjoyed the learning process without feeling burdened. She had only been involved in OILE activities such as daily activities. However, her English-speaking skills increased rapidly without her realizing it. She was excited because online informal English learning helped her English better. Therefore, she was interested in these activities (Song & Bonk, 2016).

## **CONCLUSION**

Learning has become more self-directed and informal as a result of evolving technologies. Students use Youtube and social media to improve their English communication skills. Students valued the informal learning system because they could learn while engaging in activities they enjoyed. They enjoyed studying English by watching videos on YouTube and practising communication skills through social media as well as other communication tools. This study also showed OILE activities contributed to student performance by making it easier for them to participate in classroom activities and increasing their confidence. Therefore, it indicated that

OILE activities provided benefits and positively impacted English communication skills. In addition, this study limited two informants and used qualitative analysis. The data in this study were also interview data and a collection of related documents. Crucial future research could be carried out using different methods and contexts to explore the benefits of OILE activities for students improving English language skills.

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