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ENGLISH AS A GLOBAL LANGUAGE: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract
English has become a central medium for global communication, especially in digitally connected environments where interaction occurs across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Recent studies highlight a shift from viewing English as a fixed system to understanding it as a flexible, experience-driven resource shaped by everyday use. However, limited attention has been given to how students themselves interpret and experience English in real digital contexts, particularly in relation to communication practices, identity, and confidence. This study aims to explore students' perceptions of English as a global language in the age of digital communication, focusing on how they use, understand, and value the language in their daily lives. The study employed a qualitative research design involving 27 students. Data were collected through open-ended surveys that captured students' experiences, attitudes, and reflections on using English in digital environments. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, allowing patterns and meanings to emerge from participants' responses through systematic coding and interpretation. The findings reveal that students perceive English as a practical and meaningful tool for communication and access to information, especially in online spaces. They tend to prioritize meaning over accuracy, using English in relaxed and informal ways while gradually developing flexibility and confidence through repeated exposure. At the same time, traces of formal learning remain, particularly in their concern for correctness. English also serves a personal function, enabling self-expression and fostering a sense of connection to a global community, although some students still experience anxiety and occasional misunderstandings. These findings suggest that English learning is increasingly shaped by digital interaction and personal experience. The study highlights the need for pedagogical approaches that balance accuracy with communicative flexibility, while also recognizing students' lived experiences and emotional engagement in using English.

Keywords: Digital communication, global English, students' perception

INTRODUCTION

English has evolved into a dominant medium of communication that connects people across nations, cultures, and technological spaces. In the current era, digital communication platforms such as social media, messaging applications, and virtual learning environments have intensified the presence of English in everyday interactions. Students engage with English not only through formal instruction but also through spontaneous and informal exchanges online. These interactions shape how they understand and value the language in real-life contexts. English is no longer viewed solely as an academic subject but as a living tool that facilitates participation in global conversations. This transformation influences how learners position themselves as users of English in both local and international settings. Exploring students' perceptions offers a deeper insight into how English operates within digitally mediated communication.

The importance of this topic emerges from the growing role of English in shaping students' academic, social, and professional experiences. Digital

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communication requires learners to use English in authentic and immediate ways, often without the structured support found in classrooms. This condition influences their confidence, identity, and willingness to communicate. Students are exposed to a wide range of language varieties, which may challenge traditional notions of correctness and fluency. Their perceptions determine how they respond to these variations and how they adapt their language use accordingly. Understanding these perspectives is essential for aligning teaching practices with students' actual experiences. It also highlights how language learning extends beyond institutional boundaries into everyday digital interactions.

Recent research has highlighted the dynamic role of English as a global language in the context of digital communication. Scholars have shown that learners increasingly perceive English as a practical resource for accessing information and engaging in global discourse (Sim & Ismail, 2023; Zeng & Yang, 2024). Other studies emphasize the role of social media in shaping learners' identities and attitudes toward English use (Alhadidi et al., 2025; Yunhua & Budiman, 2024). Research has also demonstrated that online communication environments provide authentic opportunities for language use, which can enhance engagement and confidence (Zhang et al., 2025). In addition, studies on global Englishes suggest that exposure to diverse linguistic forms influences how learners interpret language norms and ownership (Jane, 2021). These developments indicate a shift toward more flexible and context-driven understandings of English.

Despite these advancements, existing research tends to prioritize observable trends and general attitudes while offering limited insight into how students personally interpret their experiences with English in digital environments. Many studies categorize perceptions into broad themes without capturing the depth of students' reflections and meanings. There is also limited attention to how individual experiences, emotions, and interactions shape their understanding of English as a global language. As a result, current knowledge does not fully represent the lived realities of learners navigating digital communication spaces. This leaves important questions about how students construct meaning from their experiences and how these meanings influence their perceptions. A closer exploration of students' voices provides a richer and more detailed understanding of these processes.

This study presents a fresh perspective by focusing on students' interpretations and reflections on their engagement with English in digital communication contexts. It highlights how learners describe their experiences, negotiate meaning, and construct their understanding of English in real-life situations. The novelty lies in connecting global language theory with personal narratives that reveal how English is perceived and experienced in practice. Rather than examining language use in isolation, the study emphasizes the relationship between digital interaction and perception formation. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how English functions in students' daily lives. It also uncovers diverse viewpoints that may not be visible through surface-level analysis. The objective of this study is to explore students' perceptions of English as a global language and to examine how digital communication experiences shape these perceptions.

The insights generated from this study reflect how learners interpret English within the realities of digital communication. They provide a clearer understanding of how students position themselves as language users in global contexts. This

perspective supports the development of teaching practices that resonate with students' actual experiences. It also encourages the integration of authentic communication activities into classroom settings. In addition, the findings offer guidance for creating learning environments that reflect the diversity of language use in digital spaces. The study highlights the importance of considering students' voices in shaping educational approaches. It aligns language learning with the ways English is used in contemporary communication.

This study contributes to the field of English language education by offering an in-depth exploration of students' perceptions grounded in their digital experiences. It contributes by revealing how learners interpret English as a global language beyond general attitudes and surface-level observations. The study also contributes by connecting individual experiences with broader discussions of global English and digital communication. Furthermore, it contributes to existing literature by emphasizing the importance of learners' voices in understanding language use. The findings contribute to expanding theoretical perspectives by incorporating real-life experiences into discussions of English as a global language. In addition, they contribute to pedagogical considerations by informing more context-relevant teaching practices. This contribution strengthens the understanding of English in digitally mediated learning environments.

Research Questions:

1. How do students perceive English as a global language in the context of digital communication?
2. How do students interpret their experiences of using English across different digital platforms?
3. What factors shape students' perceptions of English as a global language in digitally mediated environments?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reimagining English as a Global Language in the Flow of Digital Communication

English has gradually transformed into a shared medium that allows people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to communicate with relative ease. Its spread has been closely tied to globalization, where mobility, technology, and intercultural contact reshape how language is used. What makes the current situation distinct is the strong presence of digital communication, which brings English into everyday interaction in immediate and informal ways. Learners no longer encounter English only in textbooks but also in conversations, comments, and online exchanges that feel real and spontaneous (Atmojo, 2022; Duraipandi & Murugan, 2024). This constant exposure subtly changes how English is understood—not as something distant, but as something lived. The language becomes part of daily routines rather than a subject to be mastered. This shift invites a different way of thinking about English, one that sees it as fluid and shaped by use. It suggests that meaning emerges from interaction rather than strict adherence to rules.

The global presence of English also influences how learners interpret its role in their lives. Many students associate English with access to wider opportunities, whether in education, careers, or social networks. These perceptions are not formed

in isolation but develop through repeated exposure to both structured learning and informal engagement (Al-Roomy, 2023; Çolak, 2025; Tartory, 2020). Digital spaces, in particular, introduce learners to multiple voices and styles of English that do not always align with classroom expectations (Zumrudiana & Alejandro, 2025; Lai & Wang, 2024; Lee, 2020). This creates a space where learners begin to question fixed ideas about correctness. Instead of simply following models, they start to negotiate meaning based on context. Their understanding of English becomes more flexible and personal. In this sense, English shifts from being a target to being a tool shaped by experience. Such a transformation reflects how learners actively make sense of the language in their own way.

Digital communication has opened new pathways for learners to engage with English beyond formal boundaries. Social media, online forums, and messaging platforms provide spaces where language is used naturally and without delay. These environments encourage experimentation and reduce the fear of making mistakes (Alisoy & Sadiqzade, 2024; Khattak & Binu, 2024; Zainuddin, & Babić, 2025). Students often participate in conversations that are brief, dynamic, and multimodal, combining text, images, and emojis. This kind of interaction feels closer to real communication than traditional exercises. As a result, learners begin to see English as something functional and adaptable (Alhamam, 2025; Binu, 2022; Horn, 2024). Their confidence may grow as they realize they can communicate successfully even without perfect accuracy. These experiences gradually reshape how they evaluate their own abilities. English becomes less about perfection and more about connection.

The idea of Global Englishes has further expanded the understanding of how English operates worldwide. This perspective recognizes that English exists in many forms, influenced by local cultures and contexts (Boonsuk et al., 2021; Budiman & Liu, 2025; Sanczyk, 2023). For learners, this can be both liberating and confusing at the same time. On one hand, it validates different ways of speaking and reduces pressure to imitate native norms. On the other hand, it raises questions about which forms are appropriate in different situations. Digital communication intensifies this experience by exposing learners to a wide range of variations in real time. They are constantly adjusting their understanding as they encounter new expressions and styles. This ongoing adjustment reflects a learning process that is deeply connected to context. It shows that language perception is shaped by continuous interaction rather than fixed instruction.

Students' sense of identity also plays a meaningful role in how they relate to English. Language is not only a tool for communication but also a way of expressing who they are. Digital platforms create spaces where learners can explore different versions of themselves through language (Byfield et al., 2015; Little & Wahaibi, 2017; Mekheimer, 2025; Puspitasari et al., 2024). Some students feel more confident when communicating online because the environment feels less intimidating. Others may hesitate, unsure of how they are perceived by others. These emotional responses influence how they view English as part of their identity. Over time, repeated interactions shape their sense of belonging in global communication spaces. This process highlights the personal side of language learning. It reveals that perception is closely tied to experience and self-expression.

Technology has become an inseparable part of how English is encountered and practiced today. Digital tools offer access to authentic materials and real

communication opportunities that were once difficult to obtain (Najib & Trudeau 2025; Sim & Ismail, 2023; Yutdhana & Kohler, 2023). Students can watch videos, join discussions, and interact with people from different backgrounds with ease. These experiences create a learning environment that feels immediate and relevant. However, not all learners engage with technology in the same way. Their attitudes toward these tools influence how they use them and what they gain from them. Some see technology as empowering, while others may feel overwhelmed. This variation shows that perception plays a key role in shaping engagement. It reminds us that tools alone do not determine learning outcomes.

Even with extensive discussions on global English and digital communication, there is still limited attention to how learners themselves interpret these experiences. Many studies focus on patterns and trends but do not fully capture personal reflections (Humphreys, 2023; Nugroho & Triana, 2021; Wu, 2020). This leaves an incomplete understanding of how English is experienced in everyday life. Students' voices offer insights that cannot be reduced to categories or numbers. Their stories reveal how meaning is constructed through interaction and reflection. Listening to these perspectives allows for a deeper understanding of language use. It brings attention to aspects that are often overlooked. It also highlights the importance of seeing learners as active participants in shaping their own perceptions.

Looking at these discussions, English as a global language appears deeply intertwined with digital communication and personal experience. Learners do not simply receive the language; they interpret, adapt, and reshape it through their interactions (Gruber et al., 2023; Humphreys, 2023; Yunhua & Budiman, 2024). Their perceptions reflect both global influences and individual realities. These perspectives offer valuable insight into how English is used in meaningful ways. They also show how learners navigate the complexities of communication in digital spaces. Understanding this process helps bring theory closer to lived experience. It opens space for more grounded and realistic approaches to language learning. It also reminds us that language is always evolving through the people who use it.

Understanding Students' Voices: Perceiving English in Digitally Connected Worlds

Students' perceptions of English shape how they approach learning, communication, and participation in global spaces. These perceptions influence not only motivation but also how comfortable they feel using the language. English is often seen as more than just a school subject, especially in contexts where it is widely used online (Al-Roomy, 2023; Haukås et al., 2021; Tartory, 2020). Digital communication introduces learners to real-life situations where English becomes necessary and meaningful. This exposure changes how they relate to the language on a personal level. Instead of focusing only on accuracy, they begin to value communication itself. Their understanding of English becomes more experience-based. This shift highlights the importance of perception in shaping language learning.

The rise of digital communication has significantly altered how students experience English. Online platforms allow them to interact with people from different parts of the world instantly (Abrudan, 2025; Mahmud et al., 2023; Yaccob et al., 2023). These interactions are often informal and unpredictable, requiring

learners to adapt quickly (Fahmadi et al., 2025). Through this process, they gain exposure to diverse ways of using English. This can broaden their understanding but also challenge their expectations. Learners may begin to question what counts as "correct" English. These moments of uncertainty can lead to deeper reflection. They also show how perception evolves through experience.

Many students see English as a gateway to broader opportunities in education and communication. This belief often motivates them to engage more actively with the language (Al-Roomy, 2023; Hikmah & Daniel 2025; Soeung, 2020). Digital platforms reinforce this perception by offering immediate access to information and interaction. Students use English to explore content, connect with others, and express their ideas. These experiences make the language feel relevant and necessary. At the same time, expectations associated with English proficiency can create pressure. Learners may feel the need to perform in certain ways. This tension reflects the complexity of their perceptions.

Identity becomes an important factor as students navigate their use of English in digital environments. Language allows them to express themselves and connect with others in meaningful ways (Awadelkarim, 2021; Becker, 2023; Uysal, 2022). Digital spaces offer opportunities to experiment with identity in ways that may not be possible offline. Some learners feel more confident expressing themselves online. Others may feel hesitant or unsure. These experiences influence how they see themselves as English users. Over time, these perceptions become part of their identity. This process shows that language learning is deeply personal.

Exposure to different varieties of English also shapes how students think about the language. Digital communication introduces them to accents, expressions, and styles from around the world (Boonsuk & Fang, 2020; Lee, 2020; Uysal, 2022). This diversity can make English feel more inclusive and accessible. At the same time, it may create confusion about standards. Learners must decide which forms to adopt in different contexts. This requires flexibility and awareness. Their perceptions shift as they navigate these choices. It reflects a move away from rigid norms toward adaptable communication.

Technology plays a central role in enabling these experiences. Digital tools provide access to authentic communication that goes beyond classroom practice (Dewi & Slamet, 2025; Humphreys, 2022; Polishchuk et al., 2026). Students can interact, explore, and learn in ways that feel immediate and engaging. However, their engagement depends on how they perceive these tools. Some learners embrace technology as a helpful resource. Others may feel disconnected or overwhelmed. These differences highlight the role of perception in shaping behavior. It shows that learning is influenced by both access and attitude.

Although many studies explore students' perceptions, there is still limited attention to how these perceptions develop through lived experience. Much of the existing research focuses on general patterns rather than individual voices (Camilleri & Camilleri, 2020; Christidou et al., 2021). This leaves important dimensions of understanding unexplored. Personal reflections provide deeper insight into how learners make sense of their experiences. They reveal how meaning is constructed over time. Exploring these perspectives adds richness to the discussion. It also brings attention to the human side of language learning.

In this context, students' perceptions of English in digital communication reflect a blend of experience, identity, and interaction. These perceptions are shaped

by both opportunities and challenges encountered online (Uysal, 2022; Wang et al., 2022; Ying et al., 2023). Understanding these perspectives offers valuable insight into how English is used in real life. It also highlights the importance of aligning teaching with learners' experiences. Exploring students' voices helps create a more grounded understanding of language learning. It connects theory with practice in meaningful ways. It also reminds us that language is shaped by those who use it.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed an interpretive design aimed at exploring how students construct meaning from their experiences of using English in digitally mediated environments. The design was selected to capture participants' perspectives in a natural and context-sensitive manner, allowing their voices to emerge authentically. Rather than emphasizing numerical measurement, the study focused on in-depth understanding of perceptions, interpretations, and influencing factors. This approach enabled a closer examination of how English as a global language is experienced in everyday digital interactions. The design also allowed flexibility in capturing diverse viewpoints shaped by different digital practices. By prioritizing participants' narratives, the study provided a detailed portrayal of how English is understood beyond formal instructional settings. This orientation aligns with the intention to uncover how meaning is formed through lived experiences.

Participants

The participants consisted of 27 undergraduate students from one of the private universities in Central Java, Indonesia. They were selected through purposive sampling to ensure that all participants had prior experience using English in digital communication contexts such as social media, online discussions, and messaging platforms. The participants were in their second and third years of study, indicating that they had already developed a foundational level of English proficiency. Their engagement with both academic and informal digital communication made them relevant sources of insight for this study. The group represented a range of confidence levels, frequency of English use, and digital engagement patterns. This diversity allowed the study to capture varied perspectives and experiences. All participants voluntarily agreed to participate and were informed about the purpose of the study. Ethical considerations were maintained by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process.

Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore students' perceptions, experiences, and influencing factors related to English use in digital communication. The interview questions were carefully developed based on the research questions and supported by existing literature on global English and digital interaction. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to elaborate on their thoughts and provide rich descriptions of their experiences. In addition, reflective written prompts were utilized to allow participants to express their perspectives in a more personal and

considered manner. These reflections complemented the interview data and provided deeper insight into individual experiences. The combination of interviews and written reflections strengthened the credibility of the findings. All instruments were reviewed and refined to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study's focus.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted over a period of four weeks to allow sufficient time for in-depth engagement with all 27 participants. Semi-structured interviews were carried out individually through online video conferencing platforms, enabling participants to share their experiences in a comfortable setting. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes, providing ample time for detailed responses. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in capturing their perspectives. Following the interviews, participants were asked to submit reflective written responses describing their experiences using English across different digital platforms. These reflections served as supplementary data to enrich the overall dataset. The use of both oral and written data provided a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Throughout the process, participants were encouraged to respond freely and honestly, fostering authentic and meaningful data.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Figure 1) conducted manually to ensure close engagement with the dataset. The process began with transcribing all interview recordings verbatim and compiling the written reflections into a single corpus. The data were read repeatedly to build familiarity and to identify initial impressions. This stage allowed meaningful patterns to emerge organically from participants' responses. The next step involved open coding, where significant statements and phrases were highlighted and labeled based on their relevance to the research questions. These codes were written systematically and continuously refined through comparison across the dataset. Similar codes were then grouped into broader categories, which gradually developed into themes representing shared meanings. Ongoing reflection was applied throughout the process to ensure that interpretations remained grounded in the data. The themes were reviewed, reorganized, and clearly defined to maintain coherence and depth. The final stage involved linking the themes to the research questions to produce a structured and meaningful representation of students' perceptions and experiences.

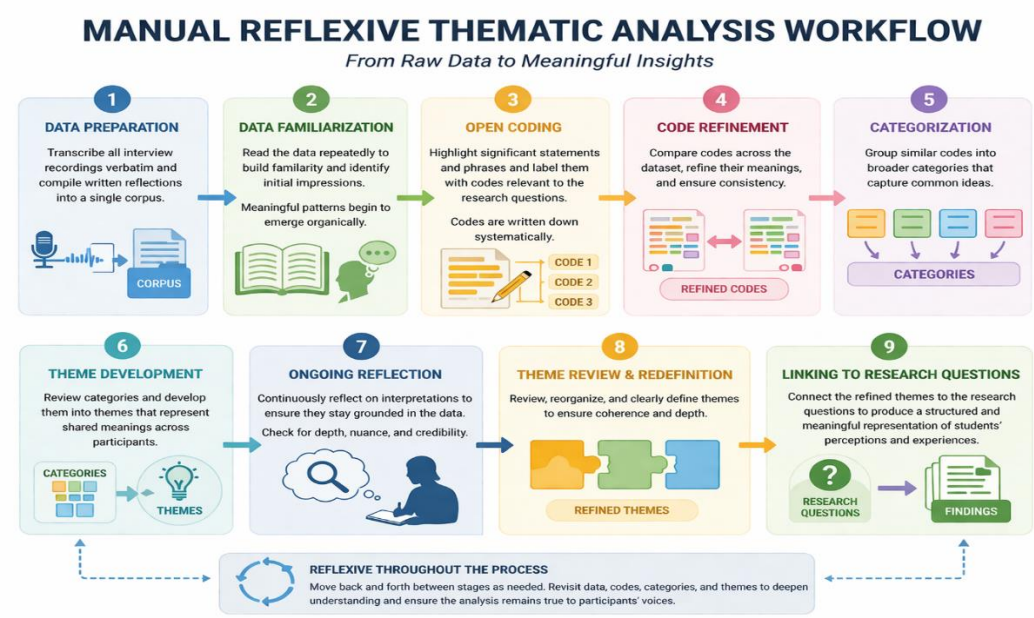


Figure 1. Manual reflexive thematic analysis workflow

FINDINGS

Students' perceptions of English as a global language in the context of digital communication are shaped by its role in enabling interaction and access to information. As presented in Table 1, most participants, 24 (88.9%), view English as a tool for global interaction, while 22 (81.5%) associate it with online use. English is also strongly linked to access, with 22 participants (81.5%) connecting it to digital content and 20 (74.1%) to academic sources. In addition, 18 participants (66.7%) accept variation in English, and 16 (59.3%) adjust their language based on context. A smaller group, 11 participants (40.7%), prefer accuracy. Personal aspects also appear, with 16 participants (59.3%) using English for self-expression and 14 (51.9%) linking it to global identity. These patterns show that English is understood in both practical and personal ways.

Table 1. Students' perceptions of English (n = 27)

Theme	Aspect	f	%
Communication	Global interaction	24	88.9
	Online use	22	81.5
Access	Digital content	22	81.5
	Academic sources	20	74.1
Flexibility	Variation acceptance	18	66.7
	Context adaptation	16	59.3
Standard orientation	Accuracy preference	11	40.7
Identity	Self-expression	16	59.3
	Global identity	14	51.9

The findings suggest that English is closely connected to daily communication rather than limited to classroom learning. Students use English to interact and participate in digital environments. The acceptance of variation reflects awareness that English exists in multiple forms. However, the preference for accuracy shows that earlier learning still influences perception. Students appear to

balance between formal rules and real use. Identity also plays a role, as English is used to express ideas and perspectives. This shows that the language is both functional and meaningful. Perception develops through experience and prior knowledge.

These patterns indicate that perception develops through continuous exposure to real communication. Frequent interaction strengthens practical understanding of English. At the same time, identity and flexibility continue to develop gradually. The reduced focus on correctness suggests a shift toward more flexible use. Students adjust their understanding based on context. Their perception changes over time. English becomes something they actively use and shape. This reflects its dynamic role in digital communication.

Students' interpretations of their experiences using English across digital platforms show patterns of informality and frequent use. As shown in Table 2, 25 participants (92.6%) describe their communication as casual, while 23 (85.2%) focus less on accuracy. Exposure to variation is also strong, with 23 participants (85.2%) encountering informal forms and 20 (74.1%) interacting with diverse users. Confidence develops through use, with 21 participants (77.8%) feeling more comfortable and 19 (70.4%) experiencing low pressure. At the same time, 13 participants (48.1%) report anxiety, and 12 (44.4%) experience misunderstanding. English is also used in real situations, with 20 participants (74.1%) applying it in communication. These experiences show both ease and difficulty.

Table 2. Digital communication experiences (n = 27)

Theme	Aspect	f	%
Informality	Casual use	25	92.6
	Less accuracy focus	23	85.2
Confidence	Repeated use	21	77.8
	Low pressure	19	70.4
Variation	Informal forms	23	85.2
	Multicultural use	20	74.1
Challenge	Anxiety	13	48.1
	Misunderstanding	12	44.4
Application	Real use	20	74.1
	Meaning focus	18	66.7

The findings indicate that English is used naturally in digital environments. Informal communication allows students to express themselves without focusing heavily on correctness. Exposure to different forms broadens their understanding of English. This contributes to increased confidence through repeated use. However, anxiety shows that challenges still exist. Students feel more confident in familiar situations but less certain in new ones. This creates a balance between comfort and hesitation. Learning occurs through interaction and adjustment.

These experiences show that English is part of everyday communication. Informality and variation shape how students use the language. Confidence develops gradually, while challenges remain present. Students adapt by observing and adjusting their language use. This reflects continuous learning through participation. English becomes something actively used rather than only studied. Its meaning develops through real interaction. This highlights the role of digital environments in shaping experience.

Students' perceptions of English in digital environments are shaped by several key factors. As indicated in Table 3, exposure plays a major role, with 25 participants (92.6%) engaging frequently and 23 (85.2%) encountering varied content. Interaction is also important, with 22 participants (81.5%) communicating socially and 18 (66.7%) influenced by feedback. Confidence appears at a moderate level, with 19 participants (70.4%), while 13 (48.1%) still experience anxiety. Learning background also contributes, with 17 participants (63.0%) influenced by formal learning. Platform use is relevant, with 21 participants (77.8%) identifying social media as influential. These factors work together in shaping perception.

Table 3. Influencing factors (n = 27)

Factor	Aspect	f	%
Exposure	Frequency	25	92.6
	Content variety	23	85.2
Interaction	Social use	22	81.5
	Feedback	18	66.7
Self	Confidence	19	70.4
	Anxiety	13	48.1
Learning	Formal learning	17	63.0
	Prior exposure	15	55.6
Platform	Social media	21	77.8
	Academic platforms	16	59.3

The findings suggest that frequent exposure to English strongly influences perception. Students encounter the language in real contexts, which shapes their understanding. Interaction with others strengthens this process. Confidence affects how students engage, while anxiety may limit participation. Formal learning still contributes but is less dominant than direct experience. This indicates that perception is shaped more by use than instruction. Students build understanding through interaction. Experience plays a central role.

These findings show that perception develops through continuous interaction between experience and personal response. Exposure and interaction provide the main context for language use. Confidence and prior knowledge shape how students interpret these experiences. The presence of both positive and negative factors shows that perception is not fixed. Students adjust their understanding based on context. Social media plays an important role in shaping use. Learning extends beyond formal settings. English develops through repeated experience.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that students primarily see English as a practical and meaningful tool for communication and access in digital spaces. This perception grows naturally as they encounter English in their daily online activities, where it becomes part of what they do rather than something they formally study (Atmojo, 2022; Duraipandi & Murugan, 2024). When students repeatedly use English to search for information, watch content, or interact with others, they begin to associate it with usefulness and relevance. Their reliance on English to access academic and non-academic resources strengthens this view even further (Al-Roomy, 2023; Çolak, 2025; Tartory, 2020). As a result, English feels less like a school subject and more like a helpful tool that supports their everyday needs.

The tendency to focus more on communication than accuracy reflects the realities of how students use English online. In fast-moving digital spaces, what matters most is being understood, so students naturally prioritize meaning over perfect grammar (Alisoy & Sadiqzade, 2024; Khattak & Binu, 2024; Zainuddin & Babić, 2025). This is why they feel comfortable using English in a relaxed and informal way. At the same time, some students still feel nervous or unsure, especially when they think about being judged or making mistakes. These feelings often come from their past experiences in formal learning environments, where correctness is emphasized. As a result, students find themselves balancing between wanting to communicate freely and wanting to be accurate.

Students become more flexible in using English because they are constantly exposed to different ways of speaking and writing online. They see English used in many forms, from formal academic texts to casual social media posts, which encourages them to adapt depending on the situation (Zumrudiana & Alejandro, 2025; Lai & Wang, 2024; Lee, 2020). Over time, they realize that communication can still be successful even if their English is not perfect. This realization helps build their confidence step by step. However, this variety can also be confusing, especially when students are unsure which forms are appropriate. This explains the growth of flexibility alongside occasional uncertainty.

The findings also connect closely with the idea that English exists in many forms around the world. When students are exposed to different accents, expressions, and styles, they begin to understand that there is no single "correct" way to use English (Boonsuk et al., 2021; Budiman & Liu, 2025; Sanczyk, 2023). This can feel freeing because it reduces the pressure to sound like a native speaker. At the same time, it can also create hesitation, especially when students are unsure which version to use in certain contexts. They learn to adjust their language depending on who they are communicating with. This ongoing adjustment shapes how they understand and use English.

Even though students become more flexible, their formal learning still influences how they think about English. Many of them have been taught to value accuracy, so this idea does not disappear easily (Lee, 2020; Lai & Wang, 2024; Zumrudiana & Alejandro, 2025). Instead, it stays with them and appears in certain situations, especially when they want to sound more formal or correct. Students often move between informal and formal ways of using English depending on the context. This shows that their understanding is not fixed but layered. It reflects both what they learned in class and what they experience outside of it.

English also becomes personal for students because it allows them to express themselves and connect with others. In digital spaces, they can share opinions, tell stories, and interact with people from different backgrounds (Byfield et al., 2015; Little & Wahaibi, 2017; Mekheimer, 2025; Puspitasari et al., 2024). These experiences make English feel more meaningful, as it becomes part of how they present themselves. Some students feel more confident online because the environment feels less intimidating. Others may still feel hesitant, especially when they are unsure about their abilities. These different experiences shape how comfortable they feel using English.

Students' understanding of English continues to grow through repeated exposure and interaction. The more they use the language, the more familiar it becomes, and the less intimidating it feels (Gruber et al., 2023; Yunhua & Budiman,

2024). Each interaction gives them a chance to practice, make mistakes, and improve. Over time, these small experiences build their confidence. However, not all students progress in the same way, as their engagement levels and experiences can differ. This explains differences in confidence and comfort among students.

Technology, especially social media, plays a major role in shaping these experiences. It gives students easy access to real communication and a wide range of content, making English feel relevant and present in their daily lives (Najib & Trudeau, 2025; Sim & Ismail, 2023; Yutdhana & Kohler, 2023). At the same time, these platforms can feel overwhelming for some students, especially when they compare themselves to others or feel pressure to respond quickly (Humphreys, 2022; Polishchuk et al., 2026). Some students see these spaces as opportunities to practice and grow, while others feel uncertain or anxious. These different reactions explain variations in how students engage with English.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that students tend to view English as a useful and meaningful language that helps them communicate and access information in digital spaces. They use it to interact with people from different backgrounds and to engage with both everyday and academic content. In their daily digital communication, English is often used in a relaxed and informal way, where conveying meaning becomes more important than following strict rules. Through frequent exposure to different forms of English, students become more flexible and gradually more confident, although some still experience anxiety and occasional misunderstandings, especially in new situations. At the same time, their previous learning still shapes their thinking, as some continue to value accuracy while adjusting to more natural forms of communication. English also plays a personal role, allowing them to express themselves and feel part of a wider global community. These perceptions are shaped by a mix of factors, including how often they are exposed to English, how they interact with others, the feedback they receive, their level of confidence, their learning background, and the strong influence of digital platforms such as social media. These insights suggest that teaching practices should give more space to real communication, encourage flexibility, and support students in building confidence while also helping them manage feelings of anxiety.

This study has several limitations that should be considered. The number of participants was relatively small and limited to one university, which means the findings may not fully represent students in other contexts. Since the data were based on interviews and written reflections, the results rely heavily on what students reported, which may not always reflect how they actually use English in real situations. The study also focused on a short period of time, so it may not capture how students' perceptions change over the long term. Future studies could involve more participants from different backgrounds, explore changes over time, and include other types of data such as actual digital interactions to provide a richer and more complete picture of how English is experienced in digital communication.

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