

Preferred Learning Media and Learning Strategies of High-Achieving English Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the learning media preferences and cognitive learning strategies used by high-achieving English learners in informal English learning outside the classroom. Employing a qualitative case study design, the study involved three participants from the English Education Study Program, batch 2022, at Universitas Tanjungpura, selected through purposive sampling based on a grade point average of at least 3.70, a TOEFL score of at least 520, and verified English-related achievements. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation, then analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings reveal three themes. First, participants preferred video-, audio-, and text-based media, with video being the most dominant due to its multimodal nature. Second, participants applied four cognitive strategies, namely inferencing, translation, resourcing, and note-taking, flexibly based on content difficulty and individual habits. Third, learning media and cognitive strategies were interconnected, with media providing language input and strategies enabling meaningful processing of that input. These findings suggest that informal English learning among high-achieving learners is an active, self-directed, and cognitively engaged process that also contributes to their academic development.

Keywords: *cognitive learning strategies; high-achieving learners; independent english learning; learning media.*

INTRODUCTION

The field of English language learning has been broadened by technological developments, with videos, podcasts, social media, and online reading materials now accessible anytime and anywhere. Integrating technology into English learning improves learning effectiveness (Amir & Rustam, 2025), supports vocabulary development and comprehension through authentic digital exposure (Hameed, 2025), and positions social media as both a communication and knowledge source for students (Salih & Elsaid, 2018). Students who engage in technology-based English learning outside the classroom tend to show better language performance (G. L. Liu & Hossain, 2026), particularly through Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE), which is associated with better standardized test results (G. L. Liu et al., 2025).

This study draws on two theoretical frameworks. Learning media are conceptualized using the six categories proposed by Smaldino et al. (2019): text, audio, visual, video, manipulative (objects), and people, providing a basis for analyzing learners' media preferences. Learning strategies are examined through cognitive learning strategies as defined by O'Malley and Chamot (as cited in Talok et al., 2023), referring to strategies learners use directly to process and understand language information. This study focuses on five strategies—note-taking, summarizing, resourcing, inferencing, and translation—identified as the most consistently used among EFL learners (Zakiah, 2019; Naufal et al., 2025; Awinindia, 2023). As Griffiths (2020) notes, learners' cognitive preferences shape both their media choices and strategy use, indicating that the two elements are interrelated.

Examining high-achieving learners offers insight into successful independent learning practices, since GPA is a widely used indicator of academic success in higher education (Han & Keefe, 2020). High-achieving students tend to use more varied strategies, set clearer learning goals, and engage in deeper self-reflection than their peers (Liu et al., 2023). In English learning specifically, higher TOEFL scores are linked to stronger academic performance (Pranita, 2023), and stronger self-regulation supports more active strategy selection and progress monitoring (Mallipa & Murianty, 2022), making high-achieving learners a particularly informative group for this study.

Previous studies have examined out-of-class English learning, technology use, and learning strategies, but largely as separate elements. Oraby and Alaraj (2024) found out-of-class learning contributes to proficiency without linking media to strategy use; Hameed (2025) examined technology's impact on EFL learning without exploring how learners applied strategies during media use; and Kheder (2025) investigated strategy frequency without connecting it to specific media or individual experiences. These studies focus on general trends rather than on individual, especially high-achieving, learners' experiences.

This gap indicates a need for research linking learning media preferences and cognitive strategy use in informal English learning among high-achieving learners. This qualitative case study therefore examined English Education students, batch 2022, at Universitas Tanjungpura, aiming to explore (1) how high-achieving learners use learning media in independent English learning, and (2) how they apply cognitive strategies while using these media, offering insights for students and educators in the digital age.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design. According to Creswell (2016), qualitative research aims to explore a problem and develop deep understanding based on participants' perspectives. A case study design was chosen because the research focuses on a bounded system—the 2022-batch students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Tanjungpura who qualify as high-achieving English learners—and because, as Yin (2018) notes, this design relies on multiple data sources when boundaries between phenomenon and context are unclear.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Miles et al., 2014) based on active enrollment in batch 2022, a GPA of at least 3.70, a TOEFL score of at least 520, a minimum grade of A in at least three core English skills courses, and verified English-related achievements. From an initial pool of 90 students, three participants (coded M1, F1, and M2) were selected after a multi-stage screening process, as summarized in Table 1. M1 had a GPA of 3.90 and a TOEFL score of 558; F1 had a GPA of 3.78 and a TOEFL score of 590; and M2 had a GPA of 3.81 and a TOEFL score of 570. All achieved excellent grades in core English skills courses and were actively involved in English-related academic activities.

Table 1. Participant Selection Process

Selection Stage	N
Total students in batch 2022	90
Students with GPA $\geq$ 3.70	24
Students who completed screening questionnaire	23
Students who met all selection criteria	6
Final Participants	3

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation. Yin (2018) notes that interviews help explain how and why events occur. Each participant was interviewed individually for 15–25 minutes on April 16 and 18, 2026, with sessions audio-recorded with consent. Interviews explored preferred learning media, the application of five cognitive strategies, and participants’ reflections on how these contributed to academic achievement, guided by 15 open-ended questions developed from Smaldino et al. (2019), Ikhsanudin and Purwoko (2022), Mulyani (2020), Talok et al. (2023), Şendurur et al. (2020), and Griffiths (2020). Documents, including academic transcripts, TOEFL certificates, and records of achievement, verified eligibility and corroborated interview data, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument (Creswell, 2016).

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) through six phases, resulting in 56 initial codes, 13 initial themes, and three final themes: Preferred Learning Media, Learning Strategies in Independent Learning, and Cognitive Involvement in Learning Media and Learning Strategies. Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, as cited in Ahmed, 2024; Banda et al., 2026), via data triangulation, detailed contextual description, systematic documentation, and grounding interpretations in participant data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are organized into three themes derived from the thematic analysis of interview data conducted with three high-achieving English learners: (1) Preferred Learning Media, (2) Learning Strategies in Independent Learning, and (3) Cognitive Involvement in Learning Media and Learning Strategies. Each theme represents recurring patterns that emerged from participants' accounts of their informal English learning practices outside the classroom.

Theme 1: Preferred Learning Media

Participants combined video, audio, and text-based media based on personal preference, accessibility, and learning needs. Video, mainly via TikTok and YouTube, was most preferred for combining audio, visual, and textual input. M1 favored TikTok's curated content and used it to observe and correct native-speaker pronunciation; F1 valued video's visual support and said repeated exposure improved her familiarity with native speech patterns and listening ability. Audio media, chiefly Spotify music, was M2's main daily input: beyond passive listening, he actively looked up lyrics and vocabulary, drawn to their poetic qualities, which also sharpened his sense of English sounds and rhythm. Text-based media—subtitles, captions, comments, and lyrics—supported all participants: M1 read TikTok captions and comments critically, F1 relied on YouTube subtitles for comprehension and vocabulary, and M2 used Spotify's lyrics to connect sound and meaning.

Theme 2: Learning Strategies in Independent Learning

Participants applied translation, inferencing, resourcing, and note-taking flexibly depending on content difficulty and individual habits. Translation was used by all three despite their high proficiency, though applied differently: M1 used TikTok's built-in translator for short captions but ChatGPT for longer, complex texts; F1 preferred DeepL for its accuracy; and M2 translated single words rather than full sentences to preserve context for memorization—suggesting translation served as a strategic comprehension tool rather than a sign of limited proficiency. Inferencing was applied first, before translation: M1 guessed meaning from video context and repeated listening, F1 relied on visual and situational cues, and M2 inferred meaning from song-lyric context and cross-checked translation results against it, indicating active monitoring of comprehension. Resourcing extended beyond dictionaries to AI tools: M1 used ChatGPT to simplify TikTok comments, F1 used DeepSeek and requested further simplification when needed, and M2 consulted others' interpretations before turning to ChatGPT or Gemini. Note-taking was practiced by F1 and M2 to retain vocabulary—F1 by writing down translated words and M2 by noting new lyrics—while M1 skipped this strategy, treating his learning as casual rather than goal-directed.

Theme 3: Cognitive Involvement in Learning Media and Learning Strategies

Four patterns of cognitive involvement emerged. First, participants prioritized meaning over memorization: M1 contrasted this with school learning's focus on memorizing, while M2 and F1 noted that features like subtitles and AI lyric explanations helped them grasp vocabulary within broader context. Second, strategy adjustment to media varied: M1 used video for casual learning and books for academic depth, F1 found audio alone more cognitively demanding than video, while M2 applied the same strategies across all media. Third, learning felt naturally integrated into daily routines rather than formal study—F1 described it as pressure-free, M2 noted Spotify's low access effort, and M1 saw social media as constant real-life exposure. Finally, participants linked this informal learning to academic gains: M1 tied his social media use to improved

academic writing and noted that media supplied material while strategies helped him process it; F1 attributed her improved listening to consistent video use, which also aided competition preparation; and M2 reported that Spotify and Netflix expanded his vocabulary and improved his pronunciation..

Discussion

The findings show high-achieving English learners actively combine digital media and cognitive strategies in informal learning, reflecting multimodal learning: participants integrated video, audio, and text in complementary ways, consistent with Firmansyah (2021), who explains that multimodal learning combines visual, audio, and textual elements to aid contextual comprehension, and supporting Costa et al. (2025) and Claudio et al. (2026), who show that diverse digital media improve vocabulary mastery, comprehension, motivation, and engagement.

Video's dominance corroborates Yuyun and Simamora (2021), who argue it provides authentic input for realistic contexts; participants also used it to observe native pronunciation, suggesting video functions as an authentic language model. Digital platforms' flexibility in matching content to interests further supports learner autonomy, consistent with Daeli and Santosa (2025).

Cognitive strategy use reflects active processing rather than passive consumption, supporting Kaur (2023). Inferencing preceding translation aligns with Alahmadi et al. (2018), who found it enables meaning construction from context, aiding comprehension and incidental vocabulary gains. Participants also re-evaluated translation results against context rather than accepting them uncritically, suggesting active comprehension monitoring.

Participants' use of AI tools—ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Gemini—for resourcing extends the traditional notion beyond dictionaries, aligning with Putrawan (2019), Maudy et al. (2024), and Son et al. (2025), who highlight digital resources' role in achieving accurate comprehension, suggesting high-achievers actively adapt resources to evolving needs.

Continued translation use despite advanced proficiency challenges common assumptions: rather than indicating limited competence, it functioned as a strategic tool for verifying meaning, aligning with Arfianti and Widiati (2020), who frame translation as meaning-centered problem-solving rather than mechanical transfer.

The media-strategy relationship supports Kasap et al. (2018), who note that input effectiveness depends on active processing, not just availability, and aligns with Chen (2024) and Lestari and Sianipar (2024): video prompted inferencing, audio encouraged vocabulary exploration and note-taking, and text supported translation and critical reading.

Learning as a low-pressure, integrated process supports Ardasheva et al. (2017), who argue that successful independent learning depends on self-regulation and varied strategy use, not just exposure, sustaining intrinsic motivation even without formal instruction.

Together, these findings show media and strategies are mutually reinforcing: media provide contextualized input, while strategies enable meaningful processing, positioning high-achieving informal learners as active, strategic agents rather than passive recipients. Practically, this suggests effective independent learning may involve intentionally combining diverse media with flexible, context-sensitive strategies—insight relevant to learners and educators alike.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that high-achieving English learners at Universitas Tanjungpura actively managed their informal English learning through preferred digital media and cognitive learning strategies. Participants combined video-, audio-, and text-based media according to personal preference, accessibility, and learning needs; video was most preferred as it simultaneously provides audio, visual, and textual input while exposing learners to authentic pronunciation and speech patterns, while audio and text-based media supported vocabulary development, listening exposure, and deeper comprehension.

In terms of strategies, participants applied inferencing, translation, resourcing, and note-taking flexibly according to content difficulty and individual habits—inferencing as an initial comprehension strategy, translation to verify meaning regardless of proficiency, and resourcing extending to AI-assisted tools such as ChatGPT and DeepSeek—working in tandem with the media used rather than in isolation.

Overall, learning media and cognitive strategies are interconnected components of informal English learning: media provided contextualized input, while strategies enabled meaningful processing of that input, supporting a meaning-focused, low-pressure, and cognitively active learning process that also contributed to participants' academic development.

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