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The Role of Digital Technology in Supporting English Language Learners: Balancing Engagement and Access in Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This study examines how digital technology mediates English language learners' (ELLs') engagement and learning experiences in secondary classrooms. Drawing on interviews and focus group discussions with three ELLs, the analysis identifies key ways in which students use digital tools for research, language support, and independent learning. The findings indicate that smartphones, online dictionaries, and translation applications function as important language and learning mediators, enabling learners to clarify unfamiliar terms, access background knowledge, and participate more confidently in academic tasks. At the same time, students express a preference for a balanced approach to technology integration, combining digital supports with traditional instructional practices. In the context of increasing restrictions on personal mobile devices in schools, the findings raise concerns about how such policies may disproportionately limit ELLs' access to essential language support resources. The study therefore highlights the need for more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to technology policy and pedagogy that recognize the role of personal digital tools in supporting ELLs' engagement and academic participation.

Keywords: English language learners, digital technology integration, classroom engagement, secondary education, language support tools

1. Introduction

1.1 Framing the Challenge

The use of digital technology in educational settings has grown dramatically over the past two decades, reshaping both teaching practices and student learning experiences. For English language learners (ELLs), digital tools offer unique opportunities to engage with classroom content by providing access to language support and promoting independent learning (Alsuhayl et al., 2025). These students often face additional challenges as they navigate both linguistic and academic hurdles in content-rich classrooms. Consequently, understanding how technology influences their learning experiences is critical for informing effective teaching practices in today's increasingly digital and diverse classrooms.

As classrooms around the world become more linguistically diverse, research suggests that digital technology can play a significant role in supporting ELLs' academic achievement. It provides these students with real-time translation services, interactive language-learning platforms, and multimedia resources that reinforce language acquisition (Liu, 2024; Zhang, 2024). Technology also offers students control over their learning pace, enabling them to review materials repeatedly and access resources outside of traditional class hours (US Department of Education, 2017). Additionally, for English language learners who may experience exclusion or anxiety related to language proficiency, thoughtfully designed digital tools (e.g., chatbots, online discussion platforms, and multimodal supports) can reduce speaking anxiety and increase psychological safety, confidence, and engagement, thereby helping learners access course content and participate with peers more effectively (Du & Daniel, 2024).

However, technology also brings challenges. Some studies indicate that ELLs find digital tools both beneficial and potentially overwhelming if not integrated carefully into the learning process (Sung et al., 2016). Schools are increasingly moving toward policies that restrict cell phone use in classrooms, which could disproportionately affect ELLs who rely on mobile devices for translation, quick research, and communication (Nami, 2020). Without access to these tools, ELLs may lose a primary means of navigating linguistic barriers in real-time (Kim et al., 2025). Thus, this study aims to investigate the impact of digital technology on the engagement and learning experiences of ELLs in secondary classrooms, focusing on both the advantages and drawbacks to provide insights into inclusive technology policies.

1.2 Exploring the Importance of the Problem

The rapid evolution of digital technology in education necessitates ongoing research, particularly regarding its impact on English language learners (ELLs). While existing studies have highlighted the potential benefits of technology for supporting ELLs, inconsistencies in results indicate a need for further investigation. Understanding how these tools are utilized and perceived by ELLs can extend the theoretical framework surrounding digital education and address gaps in the literature.

Moreover, as classrooms become more diverse, the social implications of digital technology use for ELLs warrants attention. Addressing these concerns is crucial not only for academic

achievement but also for fostering inclusive learning environments. Given the increasing prevalence of restrictive technology policies, such as cell phone bans, it is essential to explore how these policies may hinder ELLs' access to vital resources for language acquisition and engagement.

This research aims to resolve these issues by examining ELLs' experiences with digital technology in secondary classrooms. By investigating the advantages and drawbacks of technology use, this study seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how to effectively support ELLs in their educational journeys.

1.3 Background Literature

Research into the role of digital technology in classrooms has highlighted both its potential benefits and limitations for English language learners (ELLs). Digital tools, such as Google Translate, online dictionaries, and educational apps, are commonly used by ELLs to aid comprehension of unfamiliar words and phrases (Prince, 2017). These resources create a bridge between students' native languages and the academic English needed for classroom success. For example, technology allows ELLs to work autonomously, helping them to self-regulate their learning without direct teacher intervention, which can foster greater independence (Junaštíková, 2024). Additionally, ELL students benefit from tools that facilitate feedback and revision more frequently than traditional classroom settings permit (Li & Liu, 2018).

Despite these benefits, technology can also introduce new challenges. Sung et al., 2016 noted that while digital tools can engage students, they can also overwhelm learners, especially ELLs who balance both linguistic and academic demands. ELLs acknowledge the utility of digital resources for learning but report that social media notifications and messaging apps distract them from their work (Pérez-Juárez, 2023). Furthermore, technology policies such as mobile phone bans could inadvertently hinder ELLs who depend on these devices for real-time translation, language support, and access to online resources, potentially exacerbating learning disparities (Panagiotidis et al., 2023).

Research on technology use in education has often focused on general student populations, leaving gaps in our understanding of ELLs' unique needs. Many studies explore technology's role in enhancing student engagement and achievement, yet tend to overlook the specific challenges ELLs face, such as limited vocabulary, linguistic anxiety, and difficulty accessing academic language (Chun et al., 2016). Additionally, while technology can improve ELLs' language acquisition, the literature lacks a thorough investigation into how these tools influence day-to-day classroom experiences, such as managing distractions, selecting appropriate tools, and adapting to restrictions like cell phone bans (Nami, 2020; Sun & Yang, 2015).

Further complicating this landscape is the intersection between school policies and technology access. Research suggests that policies aimed at minimizing distractions may disproportionately impact ELLs, who rely more heavily on mobile devices for translation, research, and other language support services (Panagiotidis et al., 2023). Moreover, much of the literature examines the use of technology from teachers' or administrators' perspectives, rather than ELLs' experiences directly, which leaves out the nuanced ways in which ELLs

navigate these tools in their academic routines (Grgurović et al., 2013). This research gap calls for a focus on how ELLs perceive and utilize digital tools under restrictive technology policies, especially as these devices play a pivotal role in bridging language barriers.

Finally, while some studies report short-term gains for ELLs using digital tools, such as improved comprehension of specific lessons (Sun & Yang, 2015), few address the long-term impacts on language development, vocabulary acquisition, or academic fluency. This research seeks to fill these gaps by investigating ELLs' perspectives on digital technology use in secondary classrooms. By focusing on the day-to-day experiences and examining the broader implications of policies like cell phone bans, this study aims to inform more inclusive teaching practices and policies that support ELLs in overcoming the unique challenges they face in digital learning environments.

1.4 Qualitative Framing

This study aims to investigate the impact of digital technology on the engagement and learning experiences of English language learners (ELLs) in secondary classrooms. The central research question explored is: *How does digital technology impact ELLs' engagement in classroom learning and activities?*

This study is guided by the expectation that digital technology may support ELLs' active participation in classroom learning and activities, inciting their engagement. This question is derived from existing literature that highlights the potential benefits of technology use among ELLs.

The research design is qualitative in nature, involving interviews guided by a preliminary survey completed by participants. This approach focuses on gathering in-depth insights into ELLs' experiences with digital tools in their educational environments.

By prioritizing the exploration of this primary research question, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how technology facilitates engagement among ELLs, while also considering the contextual factors that influence their learning experiences.

This qualitative framework enables the development of rich, nuanced data that can illuminate the ways in which digital technology supports ELLs' active participation in classroom activities. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the development of more inclusive teaching practices and technology policies that address the unique needs of ELLs, enhancing their academic success and overall learning experiences in increasingly digital classrooms.

1.5 Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that positions digital technology as a mediating tool within English language learners' (ELLs') engagement with academic content, language, and classroom participation. Drawing on sociocultural theories of learning, research on technology-enhanced language learning, and scholarship on learner autonomy and engagement, the framework conceptualizes technology not as a neutral or inherently beneficial input, but as a resource whose educational value emerges through learners' purposes, classroom practices, and institutional conditions.

At the centre of the framework is the relationship between technology use and learner engagement. Engagement is understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioural participation, cognitive investment, and affective involvement in learning activities. For ELLs, engagement is inseparable from language access: learners cannot fully participate, think deeply, or feel confident in classroom tasks if linguistic barriers prevent them from understanding instructions, content, or peer interactions. Digital tools such as translation apps, online dictionaries, multimedia resources, and search engines therefore function as language mediators, enabling learners to bridge gaps between their existing linguistic repertoires and the academic English required in mainstream classrooms.

Within this framework, technology supports engagement through three interrelated mechanisms. First, it provides language mediation, allowing learners to translate, clarify, and decode unfamiliar vocabulary, idioms, and disciplinary terminology in real time. This supports comprehension and reduces the risk of learners disengaging due to confusion or linguistic overload. Second, it enables cognitive support and self-regulation, allowing students to independently access explanations, examples, and background knowledge when needed, at their own pace. This fosters learner autonomy and reduces dependence on the teacher for every moment of clarification. Third, technology contributes to affective and social support, reducing anxiety, increasing confidence, and enabling learners to participate more comfortably in classroom activities without fear of linguistic exposure or embarrassment. These mechanisms do not operate in isolation; they are activated, constrained, or amplified through learners' agentic choices and the pedagogical and policy contexts in which technology use occurs.

Importantly, the framework also recognizes that learners are not passive recipients of technology. ELLs actively make decisions about when, how, and why to use digital tools based on their perceived usefulness, task demands, personal preferences, and prior experiences. Technology use is thus conceptualized as a form of learner agency, reflecting students' strategic responses to linguistic, academic, and social demands within the classroom.

Taken together, this conceptual framework suggests that digital technology influences ELLs' engagement not directly, but through its role as a mediating resource that supports language access, autonomy, and emotional safety within specific pedagogical and policy environments. The framework informs the study's qualitative focus on learners' experiences and meanings, guiding attention toward how students describe using technology, how they interpret its value and limitations, and how contextual factors enable or constrain its effectiveness. Rather than evaluating technology as "effective" or "ineffective" in isolation, this study uses the framework to explore how technology becomes educationally meaningful through learners' lived experiences in classroom practice.

2. Method

2.1 Participant Characteristics

The purposive sample for this study consisted of three full time secondary students in a grade

11 English class (see Table 1). Despite being English learners, all participants were in a mainstream English class with their 25 peers being native-English speakers. As per ethical obligations, all participant information was anonymized and pseudonyms selected by the participants themselves were used throughout the study to ensure confidentiality.

2.2 Procedures

All 28 students in the grade 11 English class were invited to participate in a study examining the impact of digital technology on their learning and engagement. Each student received an information letter explaining the study's purpose. As the participants were minors, parental consent forms were also provided. Of the 28 students, 15 agreed to participate, and data was collected from all 15. Informed consent was obtained from both the students and their legal guardians.

Among the participants, three were English language learners and because the purpose of this study was to explore ELL experiences specifically, this report focuses on those three students." This report highlights the findings related to these students to explore how technology specifically influenced their learning experiences. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point prior to verifying their focus group transcripts, though none chose to do so. The study was approved by Nipissing University's Research Ethics Board (#101001) and the school board's Research Advisory Committee. It adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent revisions. Interviews were recorded using a portable digital device, with all data securely stored on a server protected by two-step authentication.

Table 1. Demographic information about the participants

Pseudonym As Chosen By the Participant	Gender	Age	First Language Spoken	Devices Used in the Classroom
Panda	Female	16	Mandarin	Smartphone, personally owned laptop computer
Nyan	Female	16	Korean	Smartphone, personally owned laptop computer
Irene	Female	16	Spanish	Smartphone, teacher-supplied Chromebook

2.3 Questionnaire and Interviews

Participants completed a 12-question survey designed to gather demographic information, assess their technology proficiency and access, and explore their preferences for using it. They were given three days to complete the survey to account for the fact that English was not their

first language, ensuring they had ample time to read, comprehend, and respond thoughtfully. This extended timeline supported participants by allowing them to process the questions at their own pace, leading to more accurate and reflective responses. The questionnaire is available upon request from the researcher.

After the surveys were returned, participants took part in one-on-one, semi-structured interviews during the second week of February, shortly after the English course began. The interviews were grounded in participants' questionnaire responses, allowing them to verify their answers and elaborate on their experiences. This process was especially beneficial for English language learners, giving them multiple opportunities to reflect on their thoughts.

Sample interview prompts included: “You identified yourself as an expert in technology use. Can you elaborate on that?”; “In response to question 10, you mentioned using technology sometimes for assignments. How do you decide when to use or not use technology?”; and “You disagreed with the statement that technology makes you more interested in what is being taught. Can you explain that further?”

Each interview lasted approximately 35 minutes and was recorded to ensure accuracy. Participants received their interview transcripts within seven days, with the opportunity to review, amend, or clarify their responses. All transcripts were verified within two weeks, and no changes were requested.

2.4 Focus Group Interviews

A second round of interviews was conducted in a focus group format at the end of the semester in April. Prior to the focus group conversation, participants were given a copy of the three guiding questions. This was done to support participants whose first language is not English, allowing them time to decode the meaning of the questions and begin considering their responses. During this 65-minute session, participants engaged in a semi-structured discussion with the researcher. The conversation began with three guiding questions: “The teacher integrated technology into lessons throughout the semester. What aspects did you like or dislike?”; “You used technology to create media during the semester. What did you enjoy or not enjoy about that?”; and “How did you feel about using technology for your assignments? What worked well or didn’t work for you?” These questions prompted participants to share their thoughts, build upon one another’s responses, and provide specific examples.

The focus group format also allowed participants to share their voices and perspectives, hear others’ thoughts, and feel heard. This collaborative environment enabled them to build on one another’s responses, fostering deeper reflections and insights. Like the earlier interviews, participants were provided with a transcript for review within a week, and they were reminded of the process for withdrawal. Once the transcripts were verified, no further withdrawal was permitted. All participants confirmed their transcripts within two weeks without making changes.

2.5 Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis approach was employed to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke,

2013). This method was chosen for its flexibility, allowing the researcher to uncover complex and nuanced patterns within the data. By focusing on themes that emerged directly from the participants' responses, the analysis aimed to capture key insights that were closely aligned with the research question. This approach not only facilitated the identification of significant themes but also provided a deeper understanding of how digital technology impacts learning and student engagement, particularly for English language learners.

3. Results and Discussion

The analysis identified three key themes. The first, "Technology as a learning tool," with sub-themes "Research assistance" and "Language assistance," emphasizes student agency by showing how technology helps English language learners overcome challenges. The second theme, "Technology preferences," centers on how students use technology. The final theme, "The teacher's role in technology integration," discusses how teachers can effectively integrate technology to support English language learners and areas where its use may be less effective.

3.1 Theme 1: Technology as a Learning Tool

For many students, especially English language learners, technology is more than just a supplementary tool; it is integral to their educational success. As Panda notes, "it is a better way of learning. Through technology. Because the access to technology makes our learning easier." This sentiment reflects the broad value students place on technology as an enabler of learning, giving them the resources and tools to navigate complex academic content with greater ease.

However, beyond this general advantage, technology plays a specific role in helping students overcome language barriers and gaps in understanding. Irene, for instance, explains, "I feel like there are some words that I do have struggle with and I feel having technology is the best way for me to catch up and communicate with everyone else." This highlights how technology fosters independence, enabling students to address unfamiliar terms without disrupting the flow of the classroom or relying on others.

Similarly, Nyan reflects on the immediate support technology provides, particularly in language comprehension: "It helps me with some of the terms that are really important." For students like Nyan, having access to digital tools can be the difference between understanding key concepts and falling behind, illustrating the critical role that technology plays in enhancing both language and content learning.

3.1.2. Subtheme A: Research Assistance

For English language learners (ELLs), technology plays a critical role in facilitating research, allowing students to independently seek out information that enhances their understanding of classroom content. Panda highlights this advantage, noting, "Sometimes like it is easier to have technology to do research and it just makes things easier. Having access to the Internet to connect with the knowledge." This instant access to vast digital resources allows students to supplement the information provided by their teachers, ensuring that they can quickly address

gaps in their knowledge. As Pourhossein Gilakjani (2017) points out, technology enables learners to adjust their own learning processes, granting access to a wealth of information that teachers may not always be able to provide directly.

In addition to accessing factual information, technology also connects students to classroom resources that reinforce their learning. Panda further explains, "Because we always tend to use technology to do research and to take photos of like the board or for example access to Google Classroom. It connects the teacher and the student together." This connection helps students maintain a continuous learning process by providing them with access to instructional materials, assignments, and teacher feedback even outside of class hours.

The value of technology for research becomes especially clear when students encounter unfamiliar terms or concepts. Irene, for example, explains, "I will go on Google and like I just checked the term. I will look at the first thing that comes up and I feel that it's the best way for me to learn." This quote illustrates how technology empowers students to take immediate action to clarify unfamiliar information. Rather than relying solely on the teacher, students can independently search for definitions or explanations, which enhances their autonomy as learners.

Similarly, Nyan describes how technology assists her in understanding complex subjects: "For example biology class science is really hard to understand so when the teacher says something I will go online and Google something." This ability to quickly research challenging topics allows ELLs to keep up with the class and fill in knowledge gaps as they arise, supporting their overall academic performance.

Together, these perspectives illustrate how technology not only facilitates research but also enhances communication, supports independent learning, and connects students with essential resources. For ELLs, technology is more than a convenience; it is a vital tool for navigating both academic content and language challenges.

3.1.3. Subtheme B: Language Assistance

For English language learners (ELLs), technology is an indispensable tool for overcoming language barriers in the classroom. It provides immediate access to translation tools, dictionaries, and other language resources that help students comprehend academic content. As Nyan explains, "As a second language learner, it is really important for me to use a dictionary on my phone and research some of the words and slangs that are used in English class." The ability to quickly access these tools allows students like Nyan to navigate unfamiliar language in real-time, ensuring that they can keep up with their classmates and fully engage with lesson materials. Technology can thus support the development of biliteracy and bilingualism, as learners utilize digital resources to bridge the gap between their native language and academic English (Bangou et al, 2025). Personal mobile digital devices, in particular, can help solve the problem of language difficulties or vocabulary limitations (Elaish et al., 2017). The use of handheld mobile devices to assist or enhance language learning is termed Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) (Chinnery, 2006).

In addition to dictionaries, students frequently turn to technology for specific translation tools and apps that help them decode terms or phrases they don't fully understand. Nyan further illustrates this by sharing, "I use Urban Dictionary. Or I will translate to English-Korean to help me understand." This access to bilingual resources is critical in helping ELLs process both formal and informal language, including slang or subject-specific vocabulary that may not always be covered by traditional classroom instruction. The flexibility and speed of these tools allow students to independently navigate challenging language without interrupting the flow of the lesson.

Irene also emphasizes the importance of technology for language support, particularly when dealing with subject-specific terminology: "A lot of times you can see that we use Kahoot or she says terms... Sometimes we may do glossary work and I may not know what the words mean. Instead of keeping it that way I like to go through my phone." By using their phones to look up definitions on the spot, students like Irene can instantly clarify unfamiliar terms, preventing potential confusion from accumulating throughout a lesson. This aligns with research that suggests technology can support the development of all language skills, from reading and writing to speaking and listening (Ghanizadeh et al., 2017).

In addition to addressing immediate language challenges, the participants' words reveal that mobile devices also play a key role in building learners' autonomy and confidence. As students rely on technology to solve their language difficulties, they gradually become more independent in managing their learning. Mobile devices encourage ELLs to take ownership of their language acquisition process, helping them to feel more confident in navigating academic content on their own (Kacetl & Klímová, 2019).

In conclusion, technology offers crucial language assistance for ELLs by providing instant access to translation, dictionary, and glossary tools that help them understand new and complex vocabulary. These tools not only facilitate immediate comprehension but also support the long-term development of bilingualism and all facets of language acquisition, making technology an essential component of language learning in the classroom.

3.2 Theme 2: Technology Preferences

Smartphones and digital tools have a significant positive impact on English language learning, providing students with quick access to a variety of apps that facilitate language acquisition. As Klímová (2018) notes, smartphones and their apps generate positive effects in English learning, helping learners to access information and practice their language skills. Additionally, having access to their smartphones can reduce anxiety among English language learners (ELLs), allowing them to feel more secure and confident in managing classroom tasks (Huang & Li, 2024; Luo et al., 2015). However, while technology provides valuable resources, ELLs demonstrate selective preferences for how and when they use it in their learning process.

Some learners prefer a combination of traditional methods, like handwriting, alongside technology. Panda, for example, explains her preference for handwriting during the early stages of writing: "Because for the rough copy I like to write things by hand because by hand I always have more ideas. I use technology when finishing the good copy because it looks way better."

Writing her initial thoughts by hand in her native language allows Panda to focus on generating ideas without the pressure of constructing sentences in English. Once she transitions to typing her final copy, she can use translation apps to refine her work and ensure that her English reflects her intended meaning. This approach highlights how students can use technology to enhance the quality of their writing after developing ideas by hand. This aligns with Lai and Zheng (2017) who found that even for the same task, English language learners choose different technological tools depending on the difficulty level, their familiarity with the task as well as their self-defined purpose of the task.

Similarly, Nyan expresses a preference for writing by hand during the planning stage of her work but uses technology to improve legibility and correctness. "I prefer to use paper but my handwriting is so bad that I can't even recognize my own words I wrote so I want to type after writing on the paper." For Nyan, technology becomes an essential tool in the final stages of her work, as it helps her overcome the challenges of illegible handwriting and offers digital tools for editing and refinement. The aid of multimedia tools allows her to feel more confident with her written work (Ajabshir, 2024).

In contrast, Irene describes her selective use of technology during classroom activities, favoring traditional methods such as handwriting when engaging with lesson content. "I like it when she is teaching a lesson and we do a fill-in-the-blank note because that is what my other teachers do. It's easy in a way but if we're doing something where I have to use technology and she uses technology I don't like that. I like doing more…like...she shows us and writes it down." Irene prefers when teachers write on the board rather than typing on the computer, feeling that traditional methods help her better engage with the material.

This preference for handwriting is further emphasized when Irene discusses classroom activities: "Like when she does that typing thing that's not really my type. I like when she writes it down with all the ideas we have." Irene finds it easier to follow along when teachers physically write on the board instead of projecting typed notes on the screen. Her selective use of technology reflects a broader preference for direct, hands-on learning experiences that she finds more engaging and effective.

Overall, while smartphones and technology provide valuable assistance for ELLs, learners like Panda, Nyan, and Irene demonstrate that technology is most effective when integrated thoughtfully into their learning routines. They choose when to use digital tools to enhance specific aspects of their learning, whether it be finalizing written work or addressing language barriers, while still valuing traditional methods like handwriting during the idea-generation or note-taking stages.

3.3 Theme 3: The Teacher's Role in Technology Integration

Teaching English language learners (ELLs) through the implementation of digital technology allows educators to provide learners with multimodal experiences that enrich their language acquisition (Rahmanu & Molnár, 2024). However, the success of technology in the classroom largely depends on how it is integrated by the teacher. All three participants in this study

expressed clear preferences regarding the way their teachers use technology, revealing the importance of thoughtful and balanced technology integration.

Both Panda and Nyan prefer when teachers use technology to clarify or enhance lessons through visual aids, such as slides or smart boards. These tools allow for clearer communication and a more engaging learning experience. Panda explains, "I like it when they use the smart board or PowerPoint…Because it is easier and clear to understand the overall idea because they are not writing by hand on the board." Nyan shares a similar perspective; "For me it's hard to understand something that a teacher says really quickly so I prefer to see the presentation but at the same time it's a little bit distracting...I think that maybe the teacher has to show something and let us write it and then explain it. That's better." These visual aids help students process information more effectively, reinforcing the benefits of using technology for multisensory learning experiences.

Despite their appreciation for technology, both Nyan and Irene highlight the need for balance. They caution against overloading lessons with technology, stressing the importance of leaving room for traditional methods and discussion. Nyan points out that while she benefits from visual aids, too much technology can be distracting. She explains, "For example if there are blanks I have to fill in on the paper that I should fill in, then I can't focus on what the teacher is saying. Like when I write something and then she explains something, it's a little bit hard to multi-task." This highlights her preference for teachers to give students time to process information before moving on to explanations, as an overload of technology can become overwhelming.

Irene echoes this sentiment, emphasizing her preference for a mix of traditional methods, such as writing on the board, alongside digital tools. She notes, "I like it when she is teaching a lesson and we do a fill-in-the-blank note because that is what my other teachers do. It's easy in a way but if we're doing something where I have to use technology and she uses technology I don't like that. I like doing more…like...she shows us and writes it down." Irene's preference for handwriting and board work reflects the need for a balanced approach, where technology enhances learning rather than detracting from it.

Another important aspect of technology integration is the practice of posting materials in advance, which both Nyan and Irene find particularly helpful. Nyan explains, "I think posting the information before the day is really helpful because I always go on the Google Classroom and check to see what's next. If there is a video then I can watch it and turn on the subtitles or if there is any vocabulary that I don't know I can search it and be prepared so in the classroom I understand better." This approach allows ELLs to prepare for lessons in advance, reducing anxiety and enabling better comprehension during class. Irene adds, "Another thing is I wish all teachers who post the lesson ahead of time especially if it's something really big or something that I'm struggling with. I like to really see when I have to watch out for or to look at it again to figure out what I'm maybe missing rather than just posting in that night." This preference aligns with the flipped classroom model, in which students review content before class and use in-class time for active learning and discussion. Research indicates that flipped

classrooms benefit ELLs by providing them with more opportunities for language practice and comprehension (Turan & Akdag-Cimen, 2019; Lee & Wallace, 2018).

Ultimately, learning environments created by utilizing technology are found to be pleasant and supportive of language learning (Ghanizadeh et al., 2017). However, as highlighted by the participants, the key to success lies in how teachers balance technology use with traditional teaching methods, offering students both the resources and the time they need to fully engage with the material.

3.4 Limitations and Future Considerations

This study is limited by its small sample size of three ELL students in a single secondary classroom, which may not fully capture the diversity of ELL experiences or the varying ways technology is used in different educational settings. Additionally, as the study is purely qualitative in nature, it relies heavily on subjective, self-reported data, which introduces potential biases related to individual perceptions and memory. This methodological choice also limits the generalizability of the findings, as qualitative studies are inherently focused on depth rather than breadth.

Despite these limitations, the study offers valuable exploratory insights into the specific challenges ELLs face in technology-rich environments. Future research should build on these findings by examining larger, more diverse populations of ELLs across varied educational settings, including different grade levels, school environments, and regions. Comparative studies in classrooms with and without mobile device restrictions could provide further insight into how such policies affect ELLs' engagement, language development, and academic performance. Additionally, longitudinal research could explore the lasting effects of technology use on ELLs' language learning and academic achievement. Investigating the role of teacher training in effectively integrating technology for ELLs would also be critical, as teachers equipped with the right digital strategies may foster more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize the significant role that digital technology plays in shaping the engagement and learning experiences of English language learners (ELLs) in secondary classrooms. While technology facilitates research, language assistance, and independent learning, its effectiveness depends largely on how it is integrated by teachers. ELLs rely on digital tools such as smartphones, translation apps, and online dictionaries to navigate academic content, overcome language barriers, and engage more meaningfully with course material. These tools not only provide immediate access to language support but also foster student autonomy, allowing learners to take control of their educational journey.

However, in the current climate of restricting personal mobile technology, these benefits are at risk. As schools move toward banning smartphones and other personal devices in classrooms, ELLs may lose a crucial resource that supports their learning and helps them overcome

linguistic challenges. The restriction of mobile technology could disproportionately affect these students by limiting their access to language support tools that are integral to their success in mainstream classrooms. Without their personal devices, many ELLs may struggle to translate unfamiliar terms, conduct real-time research, or utilize bilingual apps, ultimately hindering their engagement and academic progress.

The findings of this study suggest that a blanket ban on mobile devices could disproportionately impact ELLs, limiting their access to essential language support tools like translation apps and online dictionaries. Policymakers and educators should consider revising such policies to allow for the thoughtful integration of personal technology in classrooms, particularly for students who rely on these tools for language support. Schools should aim for policies that promote equitable access to technology, ensuring that all learners, especially ELLs, can fully participate in classroom activities and engage with the content.

To support inclusion and ensure that ELLs continue to thrive in diverse learning environments, it is essential to revisit the notion of banning cell phones and personal technology in classrooms. Rather than imposing blanket restrictions, schools should explore balanced approaches that allow for the thoughtful integration of personal devices into the learning process. By recognizing the unique needs of ELLs and leveraging technology to support them, educators can create more equitable and supportive learning environments that empower all students to succeed.

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Notes

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No additional data are available.