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Undergraduate Dissertation

Revisiting the Good Language Learner in the Digital Age: Teaching Strategies to Foster Modern Learner Characteristics

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores what it means to be a good language learner in the digital age, revisiting Joan Rubin's (1975) foundational work. Rubin's seven traits of successful learners laid the groundwork for subsequent research into strategy instruction and learner autonomy. Nevertheless, with the increasing influence of digital tools and informal learning environments, the profile of the good language learner has evolved significantly.

Adopting a qualitative lens, this dissertation investigates the traits that define successful English learners today. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with advanced English learners and analysed employing ATLAS.ti software. The results, informed by previous academic research, reveal six core characteristics in common: flexibility and adaptability, autonomy and self-regulation, engagement in informal digital environments, digital competence, intrinsic motivation, and willingness to communicate in authentic contexts.

These findings suggest that successful language learners are not only strategic, self-directed, and emotionally engaged, but also digitally competent. In response, the dissertation proposes pedagogical practices grounded in the CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach) framework, tailored for B1-level students. The teaching practices highlight explicit strategy instruction, practical application alongside curricular content, and opportunities for reflection and expansion. Special attention is given to digital and autonomous learning, encouraging all students – regardless of their proficiency – to take ownership of their learning process.

Finally, this study addresses the gap in the existing literature by offering an updated definition of what it means to be a good language learner in today's digital age.

Keywords: good language learner, digital age, strategy instruction, autonomous learning, digital competence, informal learning environment

RESUMEN

Este trabajo explora qué significa ser un buen aprendiz de lenguas en la era digital, retomando el trabajo fundacional de Joan Rubin (1975). Los siete rasgos de Rubin que caracterizan a los alumnos de éxito sentaron las bases para la investigación posterior sobre la enseñanza de estrategias y la autonomía del alumno. Sin embargo, con la creciente

influencia de las herramientas digitales y los entornos de aprendizaje informales, el perfil del buen aprendiz de lenguas ha evolucionado considerablemente.

Adoptando una perspectiva cualitativa, este trabajo investiga los rasgos que definen a los estudiantes de inglés de éxito en la actualidad. Se realizaron diez entrevistas semiestructuras a estudiantes con nivel avanzado del inglés y se analizaron con el programa ATLAS.ti. Los resultados, basados en investigaciones académicas previas, revelan seis principales características comunes: flexibilidad y adaptabilidad, autonomía y autorregulación, participación en entornos digitales informales, competencia digital, motivación intrínseca, y disposición para comunicarse en contextos auténticos.

Estos hallazgos sugieren que los buenos aprendices de lenguas no solo son estratégicos, autónomos, y emocionalmente comprometidos, sino también digitalmente competentes. Como consecuencia, este trabajo propone prácticas pedagógicas basadas en el modelo CALLA (Enfoque Cognitivo-Académico para el Aprendizaje de Lenguas), adaptadas a estudiantes de nivel B1. Las prácticas destacan la instrucción explícita de estrategias, su aplicación práctica junto al contenido curricular y oportunidades para la reflexión y la transferencia. Se otorga especial importancia al aprendizaje digital y autónomo, fomentado que todos los estudiantes – independientemente de su nivel – asuman el control de su propio proceso de aprendizaje.

Finalmente, este trabajo responde a una laguna en la literatura existente al ofrecer una definición actualizada de lo que significa ser un buen aprendiz de lengas en la era digital.

Palabras clave: buen aprendiz de lenguas, era digital, enseñanza de estrategias, aprendizaje autónomo, competencia digital, entorno de aprendizaje informal.

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1. Introduction

The acquisition of a second language is shaped not only by the curriculum and teaching methods employed but also, fundamentally, by the learners' own behaviours and strategies. Although individual differences (IDs) have a crucial impact on how learners engage with the language process (Dörnyei, 2009) and are considered reliable predictors of language learning success (Pawlak, 2012), these variables alone do not fully explain why some learners thrive while others struggle under similar circumstances. As Rubin (1975) observed, many students manage to succeed in language learning despite limitations. This observation led Rubin to suggest that successful learners adopt specific strategies that allow them to take charge of their learning and progress independently. Motivated by this concern, she sought to isolate the behaviours and techniques that distinguished good language learners, to transfer this knowledge to less successful students. In doing so, Rubin outlined seven key characteristics that define the good language learner.

Although Rubin's model was based on observation rather than empirical data, it laid the groundwork for years of research into learner autonomy and strategy instruction (Griffiths, 2008a; Oxford & Lin, 2011; Kim & Bae, 2020). Nevertheless, in the current educational landscape – characterized by technology and access to digital resources – language learning increasingly occurs across formal and informal environments (Hafner et al., 2015; Carrao & Trinder, 2021), redefining what it means to be a good language learner in the digital age. This shift needs a renewed examination of the concept, recognizing the role of strategy instruction and emerging digital literacies as essential elements of language learning success.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the characteristics of the good language learner in the digital age. Thus, this study aims to update the description of the good language learner, originally coined by Rubin (1975), contemplating the considerable changes in the language learning process due to technological advancements and the emergence of informal, autonomous learning environments. Elaborating on his research, the final aim would be to propose learning and teaching practices that help learners develop these features.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Good Language Learner

Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975) were among the first to outline the behaviours that distinguish good language learners (GLLs), aiming to support less successful students through strategy instruction. According to their models, the GLL (a) is confident in making guesses, (b) do not let fear hinder their learning, (c) pays attention to form, (d) is motivated to communicate effectively, (e) engages in practice, (f) self-evaluates their own speech and that of others, and (g) pays attention to meaning (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975). Rubin's ideas were further expanded thoroughly in *Lessons from Good Language Learners* (Griffiths, 2008a), an edited volume celebrating the 30th anniversary of Rubin's publication. In this book, researchers analysed influential aspects for defining the GLL that Rubin identified as further research, such as the age (Griffiths, 2008b), the context (Cotterall, 2008), or the cultural differences (Finkbeiner, 2008). Although conclusions vary, all emphasise that a fixed set of characteristics cannot be established and that the spotlight should be on the uniqueness of each student.

In addition to expanding Rubin's work, scholars have also analysed it critically. In the research on the GLL and language learning strategies, two main approaches are found, namely, a cognitive psychology and a sociocultural standpoint. As for the former, Rubin (1981) and Parks and Raymon (2004) argue that language learners achieve success due to their knowledge and use of an extensive repertoire of language learning strategies, suggesting that strategy training is a solution for less successful learners. Nevertheless, some authors have argued that there is no correlation between the teaching of strategies and the enhancement of poor language learners (Porte, 1988; Vann and Abraham, 1990). For instance, Porte (1988) found that unsuccessful learners employed similar strategies to successful ones but misapplied them. The latter, advocated by Norton and Toohey (2001) and Ushioda (2008), is based on the relevance of the context of language learners. Consequently, strategy instruction should be adjusted to learners' personal histories and goals for studying the language (Wray & Hajar, 2015). This perception fits with what Rubin (2008) stated a few years later: effective learning does not depend on the use or lack of use of a strategy, but on the way this strategy is employed so as to achieve the learner's objective. Finally, although most researchers mentioned are aware that generalizations must be made carefully due to the wide range of differences among learners and their environments, the majority agree that the GLL is eclectic, and therefore,

flexible to adapt themselves to any situation by choosing the appropriate learning methods (Gordon, 2008; Oxford and Lee, 2008). This flexibility suggests that being a good language learner is not about the quantity, but the quality of the strategies and the ability to differentiate when, how, and why to use each one competently. In today's digital world, where learning can happen anywhere and anytime, this eclecticism increases in importance. The modern GLL cannot be defined by a rigid list of characteristics but by their adaptive mindset.

2.2. The Good Language Learner in the Digital Age

One major development in language learning in the 21st century that impacted Rubin's (1975) characterization of good language learners is the transformation of language learning environments: digital tools and online resources have reshaped how and where language learning occurs. By way of illustration, Hafner et al. (2015) explore how reading is no longer restricted to the interaction with printed texts through top-down and bottom-up strategies, but digital learners have to find, assess, and evaluate online texts, as well as negotiate meaning through multimodal cues such as images, layout, and hypertexts links. Similarly, writing skills training has also adapted to digital communities, and activities may involve writing blogs or Wikipedia entries, providing instances of authentic digital tasks (Hafner et al., 2015). This progress illustrates a fundamental shift in language learning environments, where learning in informal digital contexts is increasingly used to complement formal instruction. Hafner et al. (2015) argue that, in contrast to the teaching of standardized forms in formal environments, online, informal spaces present fluid language, combining different codes. In these informal and online contexts, learners are no longer passive students, but they take an active role in their language learning. This participation can take place in multiplayer games (Thorne, 2008), online fan communities (Lam, 2000), or discussion forums (Chik, 2014). For instance, Lam (2000) presents a case study of a learner who used English to engage on a Japanese pop fan site, finding that these interactions supported his language development by allowing him to connect and express himself meaningfully.

Successful participation in these online environments depends largely on the learner's digital competence. Digital competence, defined as the ability to use digital tools effectively for learning, goes beyond general tech skills and is closely linked to language fluency. It enables learners to search, evaluate, and share information, engage with multimedia, and communicate in digital environments (Cao et al., 2023; Niu et al., 2022).

Niu et al. (2022) state that the lack of proper digital competence might lead to disadvantages such as technostress – learners' ineptitude to adapt to digital tools – which may damage learners' outcomes. Consequently, these findings underline the need for students to become digitally competent in both formal and informal environments, but also for teachers, whose digital competence is crucial for the design of personalized and engaging digital experiences (Rahimi, 2024). The digital age has witnessed not only a change in educational tools but also a revision of the language learning process itself.

Several studies on language instruction in the digital age have explored whether the use of electronic devices in classrooms promotes learning or is a distracting element. Some researchers (Oxford & Lin, 2011; Maqbool et al., 2020; Hassan, 2022) highlight their distracting nature, since immediacy encourages multitasking and a fragmented attention span. Research by Hembrook and Gay (2003) and Barkhuus (2005) found that students often used laptops for unrelated tasks during lessons, while Mosquera et al. (2016) reported that half of the respondents felt disengaged due to digital device use. Moreover, students' attention may be affected by external factors such as poor Internet connection (Hassan, 2022), limited storage, application load, and battery failure (Zilka, 2021). In contrast, other researchers (Kim and Bae, 2020; Zheng et al., 2016; Zilka, 2021) argue that technology motivates students by enhancing their attitudes and boosting engagement. For instance, Zilka (2021) found that laptops improved learners' understanding of the academic material, becoming more motivated, and Hassan (2022) reported that over 44% of students became more engaged. This positive impact is largely attributed to technology's capacity to meet diverse learning needs and promote teacher-student interaction (Mosquera et al., 2016; Kim & Bae, 2020). Overall, these studies reflect that a key trait of the GLL is the ability to adapt to and effectively use technology to support their individual goals.

An area of particular importance to understanding the features of the GLL in the digital age is how the digital context encourages autonomous learning. There is a general agreement that technology enhances learning autonomy (Zheng et al., 2016; Kim & Bae, 2020; Pratiwi & Waluyo, 2023). Studies show that digital tools improve self-directed learning (Lai & Gu, 2011) and adapt to individual needs (Kim & Bae, 2020; Kul, 2023), allowing learners to choose when, where, and how they study (Wiwin et al., 2021). In addition, the vast range of online materials facilitates autonomous learning (Kul, 2023; Pratiwi and Waluyo, 2023). Nevertheless, technology also poses challenges. Lai (2019)

found that some learners abandoned the digital resources due to anxiety, insecurity, and embarrassment. This dual nature of technology – as both a facilitator and an obstacle – has been thoroughly examined by Oxford and Lin (2011), who argue that success in digital autonomy is not innate but must be developed through strategy instruction. They present a series of challenges that learners might face, including misleading advertising; difficulty navigating hypertexts; a poor design leading to "extraneous cognitive load" (Oxford & Lin, 2011, p. 160), i.e., confusion felt by students followed by dispersed attention; excessive of complex information causing "intrinsic cognitive load" (Oxford & Lin, 2011, p. 161); multitasking distractions; lack of authentic interaction; and, in distance education, the absence of a learning community, weak teacher-student connection, and generalized instruction, all of them leading to demotivation and a sense of isolation.

Nevertheless, most of the authors mentioned propose different strategies for effective digital language learning. Oxford and Lin (2011) propose diverse strategies such as metacognitive strategies – planning, monitoring, and evaluating – to foster "executive control" (Oxford & Lin, 2011, pp. 162, 167), which prevent learners from multitasking and develop self-discipline and autonomy; linking strategies so as to assimilate information; affective strategies such as self-reflection and relaxation to provide motivation and compensate the absence of a strong teacher-learner connection; and social strategies to give a sense of community. While many of these strategies have long been part of language learning theory, Oxford and Lin (2011), along with Karsenti et al. (2020), consider the importance of further competencies specific to the current digital landscape. One of the most relevant is information competence, which is the ability to "find, select, evaluate, secure, present, and share information in a foreign language" (Karsenti et al., 2020, p. 84), as well as to assure the authenticity and reliability of online sources. They also emphasize the need for flexibility since learners must adapt to the distinct features of digital environments, such as self-correcting tools, mobile communication formats, and intercultural interactions. Finally, to avoid misinformation and overload, learners must clearly establish their learning goals and concentrate on extracting meaningful content. These findings collectively suggest that the characteristics of the GLL have developed alongside the changing landscape of language instruction. In this context, the GLL is not merely a user of different strategies but an eclectic, digitally competent individual in a variety of formal and informal learning spaces.

3. Methodology

In order to identify the features of the GLL in the digital age, I conducted interviews with several successful English learners, focusing on their language learning experiences, personal strategies, and the use of technology for learning or personal purposes. The participants were 10 successful English learners, 40% of whom were male and 60% female, all aged between 20 and 24 years old. All participants were native Spanish speakers, born and educated in Spain. The criteria for selecting participants and assessing their success in English learning were based on either official English language certification – ranging from B2 to C1, with only one participant holding B2 – or on having demonstrated the ability to communicate effectively in real-life English-speaking environment.

With the purpose of exploring the research question in depth, I adopted a qualitative approach, as I aimed to understand not just the participants' behaviours, but also their attitudes, experiences, and decision-making processes. Rather than gathering quantitative data, I focused on narrative responses, and for that purpose, I conducted semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a flexible conversation. In addition to a set of core open-ended questions, the use of probes and follow-up questions in semi-structured interviews enables a deeper exploration of the participants' answers. This approach was selected for its ability to balance structured topics with flexibility. It allowed interviewees to share their experiences freely while giving the researcher opportunities to probe deeper, resulting in more nuanced understandings of successful language learners in the digital age (Rabionet, 2011; Scanlan, 2020).

The interview consisted of 14 questions (see *Appendix I*), grouped into five thematic blocks. To begin with, the interviews started with some opening questions to explore the respondents' personal journey in language learning. The remaining questions focused on the four core features that, based on the research discussed in the literature review, characterize the GLL in the digital age. These are: (a) flexibility and adaptability, (b) autonomy and self-regulation, (c) engagement in informal digital environments, and (d) digital competence.

The interviews were conducted entirely in English. Four were carried out via video calls, and six were conducted face to face. The average interview duration was 23.7 minutes. All interviews were recorded using the Voice Recorder app on the mobile phone.

For transcription, I used the built-in transcription function in Microsoft Word. However, I carefully revised each transcription by listening to the recordings while reading, correcting any errors generated by the automatic transcription tool. After completing the transcription process, a qualitative analysis of the data was conducted using ATLAS.ti, a specialized software designed for qualitative research. The use of this tool enabled the systematic coding of participants' responses and the identification of recurrent patterns and themes related to the features of successful language learners in the digital age. The coding framework was developed inductively, without pre-defined categories. The framework was informed by the literature review, but the codes emerged through engagement with the data. Responses were coded according to the following thematic categories and sub-categories (see *Table 1*)

Table 1 - Thematic categories and sub-categories of the good language learner in the digital age

Thematic categories	**Sub-categories**
Flexibility and adaptability	Environment change
	Switching learning tools
Autonomy and self-regulation	Goal setting
	Self-monitoring and regulation
	Distraction management
Engagement in informal digital environments	Use of English media
	Participation in online communities
Digital competence	Information Literacy
	Tool Selection
	Digital content creation
	Problem-solving with technology
	Safe and critical use
Intrinsic motivation and enjoyment	Enjoyment of the process

	Personal connection to content
	Sense of progress
Willingness to communicate in authentic contexts	Speaking in real context
	Interaction online

4. Results and Discussion

This section presents the major findings of the interviews conducted with ten good English language learners in the digital age. The main purpose of the interviews was to identify consistent behaviours, strategies, and features that reflect what defines the GLL in the digital age, thereby addressing the first research question. The analytical framework, informed by the literature review and developed through inductive coding with ATLAS.ti, focuses on four main categories: (1) Flexibility and Adaptability, (2) Autonomy and Self-regulation, (3) Engagement in Informal Digital Environments, and (4) Digital Competence. Moreover, emerging strongly from the data analysis, (5) Intrinsic Motivation, and (6) Willingness to Communicate in Authentic Contexts are discussed as complementary traits contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the GLL. To support the thematic analysis, *Table 2* presents the frequency with which each sub-category was mentioned by participants, highlighting patterns and areas of emphasis.

This section combines descriptive and interpretative analysis, linking the participants' voices to broader theoretical frameworks, including recent studies on language learners in the digital age and their strategies (Carraro & Trinder, 2021; Turula, 2016; Kim & Bae, 2020). Particular emphasis is placed on Rubin's (1975) seminal work on GLLs, which serves as a foundational reference for both this dissertation and the wider literature on the topic.

Table 2 - Frequency of mentions for sub-categories across all participants

Category and Sub-category	**Sub-category**	**Mentions**
	Use of English media	33

Engagement in informal digital environments	Participation in online communities	6
Digital competence	Safe and critical use	23
	Problem-solving with technology	22
	Tool selection	16
	Information literacy	10
	Digital content creation	9
Autonomy and self-regulation	Self-monitoring and reflection	18
	Goal setting	14
	Distraction management	9
Intrinsic motivation and enjoyment	Personal connection to content	16
	Enjoyment of the process	13
	Sense of progress	9
Willingness to communicate in authentic contexts	Speaking in real contexts	15
	Online interaction	14
Flexibility and adaptability	Environment change	13
	Switching learning tools	8

4.1. Flexibility and Adaptability

Flexibility and adaptability refer to learners' capacity to modify their strategies and tools due to contextual or personal changes. All interview participants demonstrated a high degree of adaptability caused by external forces such as the COVID-19 pandemic, moving abroad, schedule shifts, or preparation for official language exams. Several interviewees described changing their routines due to a lack of formal instruction – either during the lockdown or summer breaks – which led them to adopt a more independent approach. In such cases, many relied on passive input through the media, such as watching English

series or YouTube videos, emphasizing a shift towards self-directed learning. Others, facing exam preparation or changes in their schedules, become more intentional and intensive in their strategies. For instance, Interviewee 7 remarked, “the thing I would usually do in a month, I was doing it in a week”, reflecting an increased focus driven by specific goals and deadlines.

As a consequence of these changing circumstances, six participants admitted switching tools to adapt to each situation, such as turning to online dictionaries or self-correction platforms after acquiring a personal laptop, shifting to exam-focused learning strategies, or moving from platforms like YouTube to newer ones, such as TikTok, as technology advanced. These findings echo Turula’s (2016) observations, where learners demonstrated similar adaptability in adjusting to changing tech-mediated environments. Similarly, Kim and Bae (2020) noted that advanced learners strategically switched digital tools on shifting goals or contexts, reinforcing this study’s findings that participants adapt their methods and technologies to meet evolving needs.

4.2. Autonomy and Self-Regulation

Autonomy involves learners taking responsibility for their learning by making decisions about goals, methods, and self-monitoring, including the freedom to decide what, how, and where to learn (Cotterall, 2008). In this study, seven of the ten participants reported setting learning goals, most commonly to pass official language exams or improve particular language skills. The remaining three demonstrated a different orientation towards goal-setting: one preferred to lean naturally, expressing difficulty in identifying when a learning goal had been achieved, while the other two adopted a more organic form of autonomy, utilizing all available resources to achieve overall improvement.

Self-monitoring emerged as one of the most frequently mentioned strategies. Eight participants acknowledged actively identifying their weaknesses and taking measures to address them. A commonly reported method was recording and listening to their own speech. While most found this practice helpful for identifying patterns of error, one interviewee expressed discomfort, noting a disconnect with how they sounded. Another key strategy was learning from feedback received through practice exams. For example, Interviewee 9 explained, "After taking [practice exams], checking the corrections and seeing the mistakes helped me understand English on a deeper level."

Managing distractions was also identified as a sub-category of autonomous learning. Six participants described employing specific techniques to maintain focus while studying in digital environments. These included activating “Do Not Disturb” mode (4 participants), removing phones from their learning space (4 participants), limiting browser tabs to only the necessary ones (3 participants), and setting realistic goals through structured timetables (2 participants).

This high level of self-awareness and strategic learning closely aligns with Rubin's (1975) sixth characteristic of good language learners: the ability to monitor one’s own output and learn from one’s mistakes. Similarly, the findings resonate with O’Malley and Chamot’s (1990) and Kim and Bae's (2020) observations that more proficient learners tend to use metacognitive strategies more frequently, including planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning. Unlike Turula’s (2016) study, where such strategies were lacking, learners in the present study demonstrated advanced self-regulation, supporting Carraro and Trinder’s (2021) emphasis on its role in consistent digital strategy use.

4.3. Engagement in Informal Digital Learning Environments

Engagement in informal digital learning environment refers to learners’ involvement in digital activities that occur outside formal educational contexts and are not initially undertaken with a learning purpose in mind. As the most reported strategy, all ten participants engaged with English through various forms of digital media, notably via TV series (10), following social media (9), listening to music (5), podcasts (3), and playing video games (3). One learner noted, “I don’t even realize whether it’s English”, emphasizing the seamless integration of the English language into their everyday routines.

While all participants consumed content in English, active participation in online communities was less common. Only four learners mentioned being part of such communities, and only two engaged actively. This mirrors Turula’s (2016) critique that digital learners often prefer input over interactive output. Carraro and Trinder (2021) further observed that learners favour easily accessible, passive content over active engagement embedded within academic contexts. Nevertheless, informal exposure remains highly significant, as it supports Rubin’s (1975) fifth feature, i.e., good learners create and exploit practice opportunities. Even without frequent interaction, regular exposure contributes significantly to fluency development.

4.4. Digital Competence

Digital competence, in this context, involves not only the ability to operate digital tools but also the capacity to use them meaningfully for language learning (Cao et al., 2023; Niu et al., 2022). Overall, participants displayed varying degrees of digital competence, with strong performance in some sub-categories and gaps in others.

Information literacy was present in all participants by using academic platforms (e.g., Google Scholar, Scribbr, ResearchGate) and applying reading strategies like skimming, scanning, and summarizing. However, some limitations were noted. Interviewee 6 highlighted the challenge of accessing specific types of content, particularly colloquial expressions and information from academic texts. The former was described as difficult due to outdated or incomplete entries in online dictionaries, while the latter, although more accessible, was seen as time-consuming or obstructed by restricted access to full texts. These insights reflect both awareness and constraints within learners' digital literacy, echoing Turula's (2016) findings regarding learners' difficulties navigating the diversity and trustworthiness of online content.

Tool selection emerged as a deliberate and strategic behaviour. Participants adapt the use of digital tools according to their proficiency level and specific learning goals. For instance, many categorized Duolingo as suitable for beginners, while more advanced resources include newspaper apps or podcasts. Learners often associated particular tools with distinct skills – podcasts for listening, Grammarly for writing, and newspaper apps for reading. This approach supports Kim and Bae's (2020) findings that effective learners adopt tools to meet individual needs and reflects Turula's (2016) notion that good digital language learners skilfully manage and navigate the wide array of available digital tools.

Problem-solving with technology was another prominent strength. Nine participants reported resolving technical or learning issues by turning to YouTube tutorials or AI tools. As interviewee 8 explained, "I think you can get it faster than if you try to do it on your own". Conversely, two participants admitted to ignoring the problems, relying on contextual guessing to comprehend the meaning. This behaviour aligns with Rubin's (1975) first characteristic of the GLL: being comfortable with uncertainty and willing to make guesses.

Digital content creation was also reported, with eight participants having experience producing materials such as video presentations (3) or designing visual

content (5). While some expressed discomfort with this process, others viewed it as a valuable opportunity for reflection and progress. This reinforces Carraro and Trinder's (2021) assertion that digital content creation fosters deeper learning by encouraging learners to engage actively with the language.

Finally, all participants demonstrated a critical stance toward unreliable sources. When asked about a video called "Perfect English in 7 Days", scepticism was unanimous. Strategies for evaluating source credibility included checking authorship, publication dates, and user reviews – evidence of mature digital literacy. This reflects a strategic response to Challenge 1 in Oxford and Lin's (2011) framework: resolving confusion about which digital language learning programs to use. At the same time, four participants expressed distrust towards popular tools such as Wikipedia, Google Translate, Grammarly, or Duolingo. As Interviewee 8 stated, "I feel that [Duolingo] wants to offer a really fast improvement, and I don't feel that it can be real". This judgment illustrates their developing skills to navigate the digital learning landscape critically and effectively.

4.5. Emergent Trait: Intrinsic Motivation

Although not initially framed as a core category, intrinsic motivation emerged as a pivotal characteristic. Eight participants described enjoying the process of learning English. Motivational triggers ranged from personal interest and curiosity to the pleasure of using English in hobbies or personal relationships.

Seven learners emphasized a personal connection to content, such as reading novels or watching videos that matched their interests. As Interviewee 2 stated, "I think the best way to learn a language is to find motivation, and through that motivation, work to improve the language you want to learn". This idea is also demonstrated in Kim and Bae's (2020) study, since they proved that interest-based digital content promotes engagement and motivation.

Although not as frequently mentioned as other sub-categories, a sense of progress was also motivational. Half of the participants said noticing improvement prompted continued engagement. These findings support Dörnyei's (2005) assertion that motivation is the cause of long-term learning since learners start setting goals, use effective strategies, and are less likely to abandon their language learning process.

4.6. Emergent Trait: Willingness to Communicate in Authentic Contexts

Another unplanned but powerful category was the willingness to engage in meaningful and authentic interaction. Seven participants highlighted how speaking in real-world contexts had enhanced their confidence and practical fluency. By way of illustration, Interviewee 10 contrasts role-play exercises in English class with living in the UK: “It's not like in class where you pretend to order a coffee. Living here, I actually do it.”

Nine participants reported online interactions, such as gaming chats or social media exchanges, contrasting with Turula’s (2016) findings, where digital communication was not considered relevant by her participants. Most of the study respondents described these interactions as useful; as Interviewee 6 pointed out, “It has helped me because I learned expressions I wouldn't have learned otherwise”. This perceived usefulness indicates an emerging symbolic competence, namely, the ability to navigate and perform across digital and cultural contexts (Turula, 2016).

Rubin (1975) and Turula (2016) emphasized a strong drive to communicate as central to effective language learning. The learners in this study echoed that drive, not only by initiating interaction but by persevering through discomfort, adapting to digital communication norms, and experimenting with their language use.

The findings of this study support and extend existing literature on good language learners, particularly Rubin’s (1975) framework. Participants demonstrated characteristics such as flexibility, self-directed learning, adaptability, and a strong desire to communicate – translated into digital behaviours like strategic tool use, critical digital literacy, informal media engagement, and autonomous learning.

Similar to Kim and Bae (2020) and Rubin (2008), this study found that successful language learners do not merely use strategies; they apply them critically and contextually. Echoing Rubin (2008), what distinguishes high performers is not just strategy quantity, but its relevance and quality. While the findings largely parallel those of Turula (2016), especially in the emphasis on learners’ preference for digital passive input, this study adds nuance by highlighting digital content creation and motivation. These learners are not mere passive recipients of the language, they are modifying and personalizing it.

These findings naturally lead to the next question: How can educators nurture these traits to promote successful English learning in the digital age?

5. Pedagogical Implications and Teaching Ideas

In light of the features identified through both literature and quantitative research, the second research question arises: How can teachers foster these traits to promote successful English learning? This section aims to translate theory into practice through strategy instruction. Within the field of Language Learning Strategy Instruction (LLSI), scholars such as Chamot (2005) and Psaltou-Joycey (2019) highlight the complexity of conducting it, noting that it depends on numerous factors, such as learners' age, task type, or personal learning preferences. Moreover, much of the research in this field remains largely descriptive, due to the difficulty in controlling all relevant variables in a real classroom. Nonetheless, studies demonstrate the effectiveness of strategy instruction as it enhances language performance, learners' motivation, metacognitive awareness, and learner autonomy (Chamot, 2005; Kinoshita, 2003).

Given the digital nature of today's learning environment, the teaching ideas presented in this section to help students become better language learners emphasise the importance of digital learning practices. While digital instruction offers promising opportunities for language exposure and strategy development, Robbins (2019) emphasizes that technology alone is not enough; without explicit strategy instruction, learners may struggle to use these tools effectively. Thus, instructors play a crucial role in guiding learners toward effective, self-directed online learning through strategy-based instruction.

To this end, the following section proposes flexible, research-based strategies that encourage learners to develop each of the traits identified as essential to successful English learning in the digital age (see *Table 1*). In order to make more specific pedagogical suggestions, the proposed activities and strategies are specifically designed with B1-level English learners in mind, ensuring that they are in line with the linguistic and cognitive abilities typical of this proficiency level. The motivation behind connecting theory and practice emerges from Rubin's (1975) view: no course can teach everything a learner needs; rather, teachers must equip students with strategies to continue learning independently beyond formal instruction.

The instructional framework used here is Chamot's (2005) Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA), a six-phase model for integrating language learning strategy instruction into classroom practice. The first two phases, preparation by

identifying the learner's existing strategies and presentation of the new strategies explicitly, will be consistently applied as the starting point across all the teaching ideas discussed, as well as the final phase, assessment. The focus of the discussion is on the three remaining phases: practice, self-evaluation, and expansion, which guide learners in applying, reflecting on, and adapting strategies across contexts (Chamot, 2008).

5.1. Flexibility and Adaptability

As highlighted in the interviews, learners frequently adapted their learning strategies due to context changes. Flexibility and adaptability can be developed to mirror this adaptive behaviour by placing students in structured, unfamiliar classroom scenarios – such as a "Challenge Day" – that require them to adapt, employing limited resources and making strategic decisions. Some challenges could be completing a task with only one computer, having no internet access, or relying solely on popular culture instead of formal instruction. These scenarios encourage learners to adapt their learning processes creatively, perhaps by visiting the library, collaborating with other groups, or extracting language patterns from informal media content. The significance of such activities lies in their practicality and their long-term educational impact. As Porter et al. (2022) explain, engaging with challenges through problem-solving is critical for developing learner autonomy and metacognitive awareness, but above all, resilience and flexibility.

Students may also complete a "Tool Timeline Challenge", representing key moments in their English learning journey, such as preparing for an exam, travelling abroad, or using English online, among others. For each stage, they identify the tools they used and explain why they adopted or switched tools at that time. Thereafter, learners are introduced to new and hypothetical situations like preparing for an official exam, learning colloquial expressions, or understanding different accents. In groups, they have to decide which tools they would use for each scenario and argue their choices. Involving students in the process of adapting materials will promote their improvement in assessing the relevance and interest of their learning (Clarke, 1989).

5.2- Autonomy and Self-Regulation

The findings indicated that GLLs often monitored their progress, set goals, and actively managed distractions. To reflect this, students can be encouraged to use a personal diary. In these journals, students write brief reflections after each lesson, starting by summarizing what they have done during class. To guide reflection, a simple color-coded

system can be employed: green for success, yellow for revision, and red for areas that need improvement. In addition to daily entries, the journal can also serve as a goal-setting tool. For example, every Monday, learners set two small personal learning goals. On Fridays, they revisit those goals and describe how they feel about their overall learning process. According to Porto (2007), diaries help students reflect on classroom experiences and their reactions, sharpening their sense of personal control. This reflection encourages students to take responsibility for their learning, promoting self-awareness as language learners and users (Porto, 2007). Moreover, distraction management – a challenge for almost half of the interview respondents – can be addressed by testing weekly focus strategies, such as the Pomodoro Technique, followed by class discussions to reflect on their effectiveness. Due to the highly individual nature of attention strategies, experimenting allows learners to discover what suits them best.

As a next step, students can be asked to design a personalized study plan as part of the expansion phase. This plan should include their weekly learning goals, regular reflections on their progress, notes on anything they find particularly interesting or motivating, and their preferred focus techniques. Then, students can share their plans with peers for feedback and, most importantly, are encouraged to revise them whenever a strategy no longer works or a better one is discovered. In this way, learners become more aware of what strategies help them succeed, where they need improvement, and how to make changes to support their growth, mirroring the autonomous behaviour demonstrated in the interviews.

5.3. Engagement in Informal Digital Environments

Remarkably, all ten interviewees engaged with English in informal digital contexts. To build on this habit, students can be introduced to a "Rate and Recommend" activity. Students are invited to explore any type of informal digital English media – videos, video games, social media, series, or even Wattpad stories. Then, they complete a short log including what they chose, why they selected it, what they learned from it, and whether they would recommend it to a peer. Once a month, students present their favourite selections in small groups.

Given that online interaction was less common among participants, it can be simulated safely and, in a classroom-based environment, through a "Classroom Forum" using platforms such as Padlet. With anonymous usernames and interest-based categories,

students write short posts and rely on each other's common language using informal English. This type of interaction helps them develop authentic digital communication skills while encouraging the use of less formal language.

Students can reflect on their media engagement in their diaries by answering prompts about language use and skill improvement, and extend their learning by spending 20 minutes daily with digital English content, linking informal experiences to formal tasks.

5.4. Digital Competence

As displayed in the previous section, participants demonstrated varying strengths in digital skills. Developing digital competence involves addressing sub-skills such as information literacy, safe and critical digital use, tool selection, digital content creation, and problem-solving skills with technology.

To enhance information literacy, activities may include researching culturally relevant topics from multiple online sources to practice searching techniques, evaluating credibility, and organizing findings to later share their knowledge. For safe and critical use of these sources, a game called "Fact or Fake?" can further train students to assess English-learning websites using checklists with criteria like author credibility, user reviews, date of publication, and engagement tactics.

Then, to foster strategic tool selection, students can engage in a task called "App Match". In this task, learners get familiar with different learning apps such as Duolingo, Quizlet, BBC Learning English, and LingQ. Afterwards, they are presented with various contexts, learning goals, and proficiency levels. Their challenge is to select the most appropriate app for each scenario and justify their choices using a rubric covering ease of use, user engagement, skill targeted, level of focus required, and accessibility.

Finally, students can develop their skills in digital content creation – commonly overlooked in the interviews. This can be effectively combined with problem-solving ability by having students create short video tutorials that teach their peers how to use a language-learning tool, using tools like Canva or iMovie. In doing so, students strengthen their critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills while learning to evaluate information, integrate ideas, and effectively convey messages to an audience (Mohlaroy, 2024). Moreover, uploading the videos to a shared platform creates a valuable class resource accessible anytime students need help with a learning app.

Notably, this approach is supported by Rahimi (2024), who found that ICT-related training significantly predicted students' digital content creation and information literacy – two areas directly addressed in these tasks. Moreover, Rahimi (2024) emphasizes that such training enhances peer problem-solving and collaboration, both within and beyond the classroom, goals that these activities aim to realize.

To transfer these digital skills beyond the classroom, students can be assigned a long-term "Digital Strategy Guide" project. They select different tools, platforms, and strategies, explain their strengths and limitations, and provide real-life examples of how and when to use them. This guide, in the form of a website, blog, or infographic, becomes a personal resource that supports continued learning in the digital age, reflecting the strategic awareness and digital adaptability shown by advanced learners in the interviews.

5.5. Intrinsic motivation

As one of the emergent traits identified in the interview data, intrinsic motivation gains prominence as a powerful reason for autonomous learning and long-term success. Research by Jin and Zhang (2021) confirms that enjoyment in language has a direct positive effect on their performance. Building on this, one classroom strategy to promote enjoyment is the introduction of "Fun Friday" sessions, where students explore playful resources such as online word games, karaoke, or virtual escape rooms. These activities foster engaging learning, strengthening students' positive associations with English; however, increasing enjoyment should be a consistent element in every class, not just occasionally.

Another way to deepen intrinsic motivation is through a personal connection to the content. Activities such as "My English World", where students bring something personal and English-related (e.g., songs, books, or films), and share what it means to them and why they chose it. As observed by McLoughlin and Mynard (2015), constant motivation is often supported by interest and emotional engagement, especially when students select resources, they find enjoyable. This activity echoes with observations from the interviews, where several participants described connecting English learning to personal interests.

A sense of progress is equally vital for maintaining motivation. When students can see tangible growth, they feel more confident and invested in their learning. For instance, teachers can establish a "Before and After Wall" to make learners reflect on their progress.

Every two months, students revisit early work such as written paragraphs, audio recordings, or video presentations, and reflect on how their skills have improved. This activity not only encourages self-awareness but also helps students identify areas that may need further improvement.

For self-evaluation, students can use their language journals to document moments of success and emotional responses to activities. They might have to answer prompts such as “What made me feel proud this week?” or “What did I enjoy the most?” to guide their reflection, helping students become more aware of their evolving relationship with the language. As for expansion, students are encouraged to pursue passion projects, like blogs, podcasts, or themed social media accounts, connected with their personal interests, fostering deeper engagement and autonomous learning.

5.6. Willingness to Communicate in Authentic Contexts

Interview participants described growing confidence through real-life speaking experiences and digital exchanges. One meaningful way to foster the development of this skill is through a “Pen Pal Project”. After establishing a collaboration with another institution abroad, students can be paired with virtual partners to exchange messages or recordings on everyday topics or personal interests. In line with the findings of Yamada and Moeller (2001), this type of project motivates students to apply language strategies, use new expressions, and convey thoughts more effectively. The sense of having a real audience pushes learners to write and speak more purposefully and thoughtfully.

While this project fosters online interaction, communicative competence can also be promoted within the classroom itself, without requiring existing partners. Teachers can organize role-play activities based on common digital scenarios, such as writing a product review on Amazon that students have just bought, leaving polite complaints on TripAdvisor about restaurants or hostels they have visited, or simulating a Zoom job interview.

The self-evaluation of this category can be conducted through reflection on recordings of conversations or role-plays using peer and self-assessment rubrics. These rubrics may include criteria such as grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. One meaningful way to reinforce both real-speaking and online interaction is by having students create and manage a classroom “Questions and Answers Channel” in English, employing platforms such as Google Classroom or a private YouTube channel.

Each week, a small group of students takes on the role of "hosts" and responds through videos, voice recordings, or written replies to questions submitted by their classmates. Topics might include personal interests, school experiences, or language learning tips. This ongoing project enables learners to practice spontaneous speaking and engage in authentic digital communication. As in the pen pal exchanges, the knowledge that their messages will be received by real people promotes a sense of responsibility and purpose – qualities noted as key stimuli in Yamada and Moeller's (2001) study.

In response to the second research question, this section has illustrated how the traits identified in good language learners in the digital age may be fostered through strategy instruction. Inspired by the CALLA framework and influenced by today's digital resources, the proposals drawn aim not only to enhance language proficiency but also to empower learners to become autonomous learners. As the interview data and supporting literature have shown, supplying learners with these tools is essential for long-term success in a technology-rich world.

6. Conclusions

This dissertation has sought to examine what it means to be a good language learner in today's digital age and how teachers can nurture those qualities in their classrooms. Influenced by Rubin's (1975) pioneering work, this study aimed to revisit and expand the definition of successful language learning, with an awareness of how significantly the learning landscape has evolved. With digital tools transforming both formal education and informal engagement with English, learning no longer ends at the classroom door. Instead, learners access diverse resources anytime, anywhere, fostering autonomous learning on their own terms.

Through a qualitative methodology based on semi-structured interviews with ten successful English learners, six key traits were identified: flexibility and adaptability, autonomy and self-regulation, engagement in informal digital environments, digital competence, intrinsic motivation, and willingness to communicate in authentic contexts. These features convey a model of learners who are not passive recipients of knowledge but active agents – resourceful, strategic, self-directed, and reflective. They take ownership of their development, shaping their learning paths by benefiting from both formal and informal spaces. Compared to Rubin's (1975) original model, this updated profile of the good language learner incorporates contextual adaptability, digital literacies,

and informal engagement as indispensable components of success. The modern good language learner not only implements strategies but also engages with digital tools, collaborates online, and makes autonomous choices across diverse environments, displaying the escalating role of learner agency in the digital era. The findings were further translated into pedagogical proposals grounded in Chamot's (2005) CALLA framework, offering ways to foster these qualities in B1-level students.

However, these findings must be considered in light of several limitations. The small and relatively uniform sample restricts the generalizability of the results, leaving factors such as gender, socioeconomic background, and multilingualism unexplored. Furthermore, while the teaching ideas are theoretically grounded, they assume consistent technological access and time availability – conditions not guaranteed in all classrooms. The strategies, as yet untested, require empirical validation.

Future research would benefit from larger, more diverse samples, and classroom implementations. In this regard, helping students become successful language learners means not only teaching the language itself, but also the strategies to learn it independently. In a rapidly evolving digital world, equipping learners with the tools to manage their own learning is not a complement to language instruction; it is the core of it.

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