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Research Paper

A Model of Informal Digital Learning of English, Ideal L2 Self, Foreign Language Enjoyment, and Student Engagement in an EFL Context

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Abstract

Despite the growing importance of digital learning environments and motivational factors in language acquisition, there is a paucity of research

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exploring how these elements interact to influence student engagement, particularly in the context of Iranian EFL learners. Addressing this gap, the aim of this study was to examine the relationship between informal digital learning of English (IDLE), ideal L2 self, foreign language enjoyment (FLE), and student engagement among EFL learners using a structural model. The researchers conducted a mediation analysis to investigate whether FLE would mediate the effects of IDLE and ideal L2 self on student engagement. Data was collected from 378 Iranian EFL learners who completed four questionnaires related to the variables of interest. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to test the hypothesized relationships. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the fitness of the questionnaires and the structural model. Results indicated that ideal L2 self and FLE had a direct impact on student engagement, whereas IDLE influenced student engagement indirectly through FLE as a mediator. The findings suggest important implications for theory and practice, highlighting the significance of fostering a positive ideal L2 self and leveraging informal digital learning environments to enhance student engagement in EFL contexts.

***Keywords**: Informal digital learning of English, Ideal L2 self, Foreign language enjoyment, Student engagement, EFL*

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1. Introduction

Student engagement is crucial for academic success, especially in EFL contexts, encompassing learners' cognition, emotion, behavior, and agency (Eccles, 2016; Reeve, 2012). It is influenced by internal and

external factors, which is particularly relevant for EFL learners facing complex dynamics (Guilloteaux, 2016). Research shows a clear link between engagement and learners' active learning, maintenance, and determination (Dao & Sato, 2021; Hiver et al., 2021; Wind, 2021). Engagement is also associated with emotions, motivation, and learning approaches (Mercer, 2019; Noels et al., 2020; OgaBaldwin & Nakata, 2017). Positive psychology (PP) has shifted focus to positive affective characteristics in EFL students, such as engagement, motivation, ideal L2 self, and foreign language enjoyment (FLE) (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017; Li, 2021; Wang et al., 2021; Zhang & Zhang, 2020). This approach enhances social connections, resilience, and mitigates negative emotions (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; MacIntyre et al., 2016). SLA researchers have integrated these affective assets into L2 learning, improving social connections and resilience while mitigating negative emotions (Seligman, 2018).

Inspired by positive psychology (PP), researchers have explored Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE), which involves the pleasure experienced in the L2 learning context (Lee, 2020). High levels of FLE are linked to better goal-setting, problem-solving, information processing, and self-regulation, contributing to greater L2 proficiency and learning outcomes (Botes et al., 2020; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). FLE can originate from internal sources like students' achievements and external sources such as teachers' instructional practices and the social

climate in the learning environment (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017). Despite extensive research, further investigation is needed on FLE's impact on EFL student engagement and its predictive power relative to other learner-related factors (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Dewaele & Li, 2021; Feng & Hong, 2022).

The ideal L2 self, reflecting learners' aspirations for future L2 proficiency, is a key factor in enhancing L2 learning motivation (Dörnyei, 2009; Magid & Chan, 2012; Yousefifard & Fathi, 2021). Al-Hoorie's (2018) meta-analysis highlights its stronger role compared to other components of the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS). Additionally, the global prevalence of English has created opportunities for informal digital learning (IDLE), characterized by self-directed learning using digital devices and resources (Lee, 2019). IDLE, which allows for informal independent learning through digital devices, has gained attention and interest among EFL learners (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Liu et al., 2024; Soyoof et al., 2021; Sundqvist, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021). This extramural digital learning has been shown to significantly impact L2 learning (Lai et al., 2015).

While prior research has investigated the individual relationships between ideal L2 self, IDLE, and learner-related factors such as enjoyment and engagement (Lee & Dressman, 2017; Lee & Lee, 2020), there remains a significant gap in understanding the complex interplay of these factors and their relative contributions to student engagement. Specifically, the extent to which the ideal L2 self

and IDLE directly predict student engagement, as well as the potential mediating role of FLE in these relationships, is not yet clear. Most studies have focused on the isolated effects of these variables, without considering their potential interaction within a comprehensive model. Additionally, there is a notable gap in the literature concerning the investigation of these relationships within EFL contexts, where exposure to English is limited. This gap is particularly evident in contexts such as Iran, where English is primarily learned as a foreign language. In such settings, learners may have different motivations, learning opportunities, and cultural backgrounds, which could influence the relationships between ideal L2 self, IDLE, FLE, and engagement.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to examine the direct and indirect relationships among IDLE, ideal L2 self, FLE, and student engagement specifically within a sample of Iranian EFL learners. We hypothesize that FLE serves as a mediator between ideal L2 self and IDLE, and student engagement. By employing structural equation modeling (SEM), we will test this mediation model, examining both direct and indirect effects. This approach will allow us to assess the relative importance of each factor in predicting student engagement and to determine whether FLE plays a crucial role in mediating the influence of ideal L2 self and IDLE on engagement.

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Positive psychology (PP) serves as the foundational framework for this study, providing insight into the dynamics of IDLE, ideal L2 self, FLE, and student engagement. PP, introduced by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), emphasizes positive emotions, strengths, and virtues that enable individuals to thrive. Unlike traditional psychology, which focuses on pathology and deficits, PP aims to understand what makes life worth living and how to cultivate well-being, resilience, and optimal functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Lopez & Snyder, 2003).

In second language acquisition (SLA), PP has gained traction as researchers explore how positive emotional and psychological constructs influence language learning (Derakhshan & Fathi, 2024; Fathi et al., 2024; MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 2016; Pawlak et al., 2024). Key figures like Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), Dörnyei and Ryan (2015), and Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) emphasize incorporating positive affective variables such as enjoyment, motivation, and the ideal L2 self into SLA research and practice. Seligman's (2011) PERMA model—Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment—provides a framework for understanding how learners can flourish in language learning contexts. Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of "flow," a state of deep

immersion and optimal experience, underscores the potential for heightened engagement and enjoyment in language learning activities.

This study investigates how FLE, as a manifestation of positive emotions, contributes to student engagement in EFL contexts. FLE includes the joy and satisfaction derived from learning a foreign language, enhancing learners' motivation, resilience, and willingness to communicate (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Botes et al., 2020). The ideal L2 self, another PP construct, represents learners' aspirational vision of their future selves as proficient language users, motivating them to invest effort and persist in their learning (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Chan, 2013). Moreover, IDLE aligns with PP principles by promoting autonomous, self-directed learning that enhances flow experiences and engagement (Lee, 2019). The digital environments and resources characterizing IDLE offer learners meaningful and enjoyable language engagement, supporting their positive emotional and psychological development (Chik, 2014; Godwin-Jones, 2022).

Grounding this study in PP highlights the interconnectedness of positive emotions, motivational constructs, and engagement in language learning. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of how IDLE, ideal L2 self, and FLE contribute to student engagement and offers practical insights for educators to foster positive learning environments and enhance learners' well-being and success in EFL contexts.

2.2 Student Engagement

Positive psychology (PP) highlights the shift from negative to positive emotions like enjoyment, motivation, passion, and engagement to help individuals thrive (Seligman, 2007; Wang et al., 2021). Drawing from positive experiences, individual characteristics, and contextual factors (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014), PP emphasizes engagement in EFL classes, which fosters academic vitality, investment, and achievement (Zhang, 2021). In L2 education, engaged learners are more motivated, dedicated, and confident (Guilloteaux, 2016; Zhang, 2021), leading to better outcomes and sustained progress (Christenson et al., 2012), as well as increased passion and enjoyment (Fredricks et al., 2004; Derakhshan et al., 2022). Conversely, non-engaged learners may experience anxiety and perform poorly (Kelly, 2008; Mantzios & Egan, 2019). The success of L2 learning is thus linked to learners' engagement (Wang & Pomerantz, 2009).

Engagement is a multifaceted concept encompassing behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and agentic dimensions (Reeve, 2013). Behavioral engagement involves participation in learning activities, cognitive engagement refers to mental energy and strategy use, emotional engagement pertains to affective responses, and agentic engagement reflects the ability to influence learning quality (Reeve, 2013). These dimensions can be influenced by tasks, competencies, culture, demographics, personal traits, and instructional factors (Guilloteaux, 2016).

Although research on student engagement is extensive (Bond, 2020; Christenson et al., 2012), few studies have examined how learner-related variables predict engagement (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Dincer, 2019; Guo, 2021; Mercer, 2020). For example, Mohammad Hosseini et al. (2022) found that classroom social climate and FLE significantly predicted engagement among intermediate EFL learners. Similarly, Luan (2020) discovered that social support's association with online learning engagement was fully mediated by behavioral engagement among 615 Chinese university students. Additionally, Derakhshan et al. (2022) found that classroom social climate positively predicted EFL student engagement, while boredom negatively impacted it, and growth mindset indirectly influenced engagement through boredom.

In summary, while the existing literature underscores the importance of student engagement in fostering successful L2 learning outcomes, significant gaps remain in understanding the interplay between various learner-related variables. The current research aims to address these gaps by examining the predictive roles of the ideal L2 self and IDLE on engagement, with FLE as a potential mediator.

2.3 Informal digital learning of English

Proficiency in a foreign language is no longer confined to formal classes where teachers impart knowledge (Dehler & Welsh, 2014). Modern language learning extends beyond the classroom through technology-mediated devices, social media, and real-world products (Atmojo, 2021; Darwis et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025). The Internet

offers ample opportunities for learners to communicate in their target language using tools like chats, posts, and other forms of online communication (Kern, 2014). Due to its status as an international language and the language of media, English is widely used online (Chen et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2022). Consequently, EFL learners engage in informal learning activities such as listening to music, watching movies, chatting on social media, and playing games to acquire English proficiency (Brevik, 2019). This type of learning does not require specific books or formal instruction (Atmojo, 2021). The widespread use of digital apps and social media has increased interest among EFL learners in mastering English through extramural and online settings, leading to the development of informal digital learning of English (IDLE) (Lee, 2017, 2020).

Modern language learners increasingly engage in language learning beyond the classroom (LBC) in both online and offline settings, known as Extramural English, or strictly online, known as IDLE (Peng et al., 2022; Reinders et al., 2022). Opportunities for informal language learning in digitalized environments are expanding, drawing more EFL learners to IDLE (Peng et al., 2021; Sockett, 2013, 2014; Soyoof et al., 2021). Benson (2011) proposed four dimensions for L2 learning beyond the classroom: formality, location, locus of control, and pedagogy. Formality refers to whether learning is certified or informal; location pertains to where learning occurs (in-class, out-of-class, extracurricular, or extramural); pedagogy highlights the mode of learning (instructed, self-instructed, or

naturalistic); and locus of control focuses on whether learning is self-directed or other-directed. EFL learners may choose informal learning (formality), utilize digital resources (location), pursue autonomous learning (locus of control), and acquire language without formal instruction (pedagogy). IDLE activities are categorized into receptive and productive activities (Lai et al., 2015; Lee, 2022; Sockett, 2014). Receptive activities involve comprehending English digital content, like watching YouTube clips and reading social media captions, while productive activities involve creating English content, such as writing comments or engaging in conversations.

IDLE offers numerous psychological benefits to EFL learners, including increased autonomy, flow, a sense of community of practice, FLE, reduced affective filter, and improved grit (Chik, 2011, 2014; Lee, 2022). By allowing students to choose their own content, materials, and activities, IDLE promotes independence. Additionally, students can immerse themselves in learning by watching movies, dramas, and communicating with others in a friendly online atmosphere through gaming and chatting, leading to a flow state and lower affective filter (Kiaer et al., 2021; Li & Dewaele, 2021; Li & Wei, 2022). Recent literature has linked IDLE with FLE (Dressman & Sadler, 2020; Lee, 2022; Soyoof et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021), and studies have shown that IDLE can predict willingness to communicate (WTC) (e.g., Lee & Dressman, 2017). Furthermore, Lee et al. (2021) found that FLE and anxiety can mediate the relationship between IDLE and WTC. Although the prediction of FLE from IDLE has been

partially explored, the contribution of IDLE to EFL student engagement remains an area for further investigation.

2.4 Ideal L2 self

The study of L2 motivation was pioneered by Canadian psychologist Robert Gardner, who identified various dimensions and concepts associated with L2 motivation (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). His findings led to the dominance of integrative motivation, which is based on a socio-educational model and has been widely studied by scholars (Gardner, 1985, 2001, 2012). However, since the 1990s, integrativeness has faced skepticism and its significance has been challenged (Dörnyei, 2010). Integrative motivation may not be as relevant in EFL contexts, where English is not considered a second language, but rather a subject to be taught according to a predetermined curriculum, and where learners are not sufficiently exposed to English in their daily lives. Due to these limitations, Gardner's theory (1985) has been deemed unsuitable for educational and EFL settings (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). In response, the L2 motivational self-system theory was developed to address this gap. Dörnyei (2010) proposed the ideal L2 self, ought-to self, and L2 experience as dimensions of motivation that can accommodate diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. Numerous studies have investigated the ought-to L2 self and ideal L2 self in various settings over the past decades (Salimi & Rashidi, 2024; Taguchi et al., 2009). The ought-to L2 self is associated with external expectations and the must-be self,

while the ideal L2 self represents a desired future self-image and is viewed as a predominant element in exploring the motivation system (Kim & Kim, 2012) that can motivate learners to connect their current abilities with future goals (Dörnyei, 2010). In other words, the ideal L2 self is defined as the "L2-specific facet of one's ideal self" (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29) and a learner's envisioned future proficiency in the target language (Fathi & Hejazi, 2024; Magid & Chan, 2012; Zhang et al., 2022).

Zhang et al. (2022) investigated a model involving growth mindset, boredom, ideal L2 self, and WTC among 437 undergraduate students of English. The study found that the ideal L2 self and boredom positively influenced WTC directly, and WTC was indirectly affected by growth mindset. Recent research has focused on the relationship between the ideal L2 self and foreign FLE, as well as the impact of the ideal L2 self on L2 learning motivational intensity (Fathi et al., 2023b; Feng & Papi, 2020; Ryan, 2009; Ueki & Takeuchi, 2013; Yashima, 2009). Learners with a higher degree of ideal L2 self were observed to achieve better results in L2 learning (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013. Kong et al. (2018) also confirmed a positive correlation between the ideal L2 self and FLE among Korean EFL students. While previous studies have explored these motivational factors to some extent, it is important to understand how the EFL ideal L2 self can affect engagement (Csizer & Kormos, 2009; Dörnyei & Chan, 2013).

While previous studies have explored these motivational factors to some extent, it is important to understand how the EFL ideal L2 self can affect engagement (Csizer & Kormos, 2009; Dörnyei & Chan, 2013). Further research is needed to elucidate the mechanisms through which the ideal L2 self impacts various dimensions of student engagement, particularly in diverse educational contexts. This understanding could provide valuable insights into designing effective pedagogical strategies that foster strong motivational and engagement outcomes among EFL learners.

2.5 Foreign Language Enjoyment

Scholars have recognized the emotional and affective nature of L2 learning, identifying both positive and negative emotions as well as L2 learner constructs in this domain (MacIntyre et al., 2019; Plonsky et al., 2022; Soodmand Afshar et al., 2016). FLE, which draws on positive emotions and the broaden-and-build theory, posits that EFL learners can benefit from positive emotions as they "share the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources" (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 2020). Enjoyment and pleasure are crucial assets for future success (Fathi & Mohammaddokht, 2021; Fathi et al., 2023a). While pleasure encompasses the fulfillment of fundamental homeostatic needs, such as comfort, housing, and food, enjoyment goes beyond these fundamental needs and involves successfully

confronting challenges (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Pleasure refers to the satisfaction of basic homeostatic needs such as comfort, housing, and food. In contrast, enjoyment goes beyond these fundamental needs to achieve more outstanding outcomes by successfully overcoming challenges (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Hence, enjoyment is emphasized as "a positive state where challenges and skill are aligned well" (Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014, p. 242). The term FLE refers to achieving short- or long-term goals in a foreign language proficiency (Thohir, 2017). Measurement of FLE takes various forms. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) first introduced a questionnaire with 21 items, which later underwent validation and identified two sub-elements: private-FLE and social-FLE (Dewaele et al., 2018; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016). The three-dimensional FLE, consisting of FLE-private, FLE-teacher, and FLE-atmosphere, was corroborated by Li et al. (2018) and Dewaele and Li (2021). Recently, Botes et al. (2021) also proposed a nine-item FLE scale with three subscales: teacher appreciation, personal enjoyment, and social enjoyment - all of which highlight the significance of teacher support, personal enjoyment, and social interaction in achieving FLE.

The current literature suggests that FLE has significant effects on various aspects of L2 learning (Hwang et al., 2024). Specifically, FLE has been found to impact WTC (Khajavy et al., 2018), actual L2 performance (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018; Saito et al., 2018), and the ideal L2 self (Fathi & Mohammaddokht, 2021). Additionally, other learner-related variables, such as trait emotional intelligence (Li,

2020) and grit (Wei et al., 2019), have been found to influence FLE. FLE has also been shown to mediate the associations among different personal traits, such as between trait emotional intelligence and L2 learning achievement (Li, 2020), motivation and language proficiency (Zhang & Zhang, 2020), and IDLE and WTC (Lee, 2022). A related study found a correlation between FLE and engagement elements (Guo, 2021). To address gaps in the literature and build upon previous findings, this study aims to investigate the direct effects of IDLE, ideal L2 self, and FLE on student engagement. Specifically, this study will examine how FLE mediates the influence of IDLE and ideal L2 self on engagement through SEM.

2.6 The Present Model

As noted previously, engagement among EFL learners is dynamically influenced by emotional and environmental factors (Guilloteaux, 2016). Against this backdrop, this study explores the relationship between EFL student engagement and three specific variables: IDLE, ideal L2 self, and FLE. The hypotheses formulated in this study aim to shed light on the relative significance of each variable.

The first hypothesis posits that ideal L2 self directly predicts student engagement. As a desirable self-image, ideal L2 self motivates EFL learners to maintain their future L2 competencies (Kim & Kim, 2012), which in turn guides their actions towards achieving their goals purposefully. Consequently, when EFL learners set realistic goals, take calculated risks, plan, act persistently, reflect on their practices,

and enthusiastically change their attitudes (Dörnyei, 2009, 2010), they are likely to become more engaged and invested in their L2 learning. In addition, Dörnyei and Chan (2013) suggest that EFL learners can achieve better results by boosting their ideal L2 self. This involves setting an ideal self-image and engaging in meaningful actions to bolster motivation (Magid & Chan, 2012; Yousefifard & Fathi, 2021).

Furthermore, it is plausible that IDLE has a direct impact on student engagement, as supported by other studies (Peng et al., 2021; Sockett, 2013, 2014; Soyoof et al., 2021). Engagement, which refers to the level of participation and contribution by EFL learners in class, is crucial for achieving better outcomes and creating a vibrant learning environment. IDLE offers a diverse array of tools and environments that cater to the interests of foreign language learners. It develops in a digitalized environment through informal learning with receptive and productive language practices (Lee, 2020). Therefore, EFL learners can engage in activities such as playing games, watching TV or chatting on social media (Lee, 2019) to positively impact their L2 learning (Lai et al., 2015). When EFL students engage in "self-directed, informal English learning using a range of different digital devices (smartphones, desktop computers) and resources (web apps, social media) independent of formal contexts" (Lee, 2019, p. 2), they tend to become more attracted to informal online learning and display increased engagement (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Soyoof et al., 2021; Sundqvist, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021).

Additionally, FLE is hypothesized to have a direct influence on student engagement. FLE refers to the pleasure derived from achieving an objective in L2 learning (Lee, 2020). Hence, EFL students who experience adequate FLE set higher L2 learning goals, generate creative responses, contribute more frequently, regulate their L2 learning (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014), and achieve greater L2 proficiency, ultimately leading to their increased engagement (Botes et al., 2020; Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012). To add more, FLE has been shown to increase engagement by promoting investigation and creativity (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Zhang & Zhang, 2020), while also providing motivation during the learning process (Dincer et al., 2019; Guo, 2021; Kissau, 2006; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Reeve, 2012; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). It is also reasonable to speculate that FLE mediates the relationship between the ideal L2 self and student engagement. The ideal L2 self is one of the internal factors that contribute to FLE (Papi et al., 2019), and by clarifying their ideal L2 self, learners can strengthen their motivation and further enhance FLE, leading to more enthusiastic involvement during the learning process (Lee, 2020). This relationship has been confirmed by Kong et al. (2018), who found that the ideal L2 self and FLE are associated, which may result in increased engagement.

The literature suggests that FLE may mediate the relationship between IDLE and student engagement. IDLE has been found to provide EFL learners with various benefits, such as autonomy, flow, a community

of practice, FLE, affective filter reduction, and grit (Chik, 2011, 2014; Lee, 2022). EFL students can enhance their autonomy by selecting their own content, resources, and tasks; achieve a state of flow by immersing themselves in movies and dramas; connect with others through online groups; and reduce emotional barriers by establishing rapport (Kiaer et al., 2021; Li & Dewaele, 2021; Li & Wei, 2022). Previous studies have linked IDLE with FLE (Dressman & Sadler, 2020; Lee, 2022; Soyoof et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021), suggesting that FLE intensifies the interaction between IDLE and student engagement. Therefore, this study aims to confirm or refute previous findings and contribute new insights to the literature by exploring the following hypotheses:

1. Ideal L2 self predicts student engagement directly.

2. IDLE influences student engagement directly.

3. FLE influences student engagement directly.

4. FLE mediates the relationship between IDLE and student engagement.

5. FLE mediates the relationship between the ideal L2 self and student engagement.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

This study involved 378 undergraduate Iranian EFL learners, consisting of 237 females (62.7%) and 141 males (37.3%). Participants were selected using convenience sampling based on their willingness and accessibility. All participants were English major students from three public universities in Iran, enrolled in either the English Literature or Translation Studies programs. The participants' ages ranged from 20 to 27 years, with a mean age of 21.35 (SD = 2.18). Their English language learning experience averaged 6.5 years, with a range from 3 to 10 years.

To provide a more comprehensive demographic profile, participants included students at various stages of their undergraduate BA program: 28% were freshmen, 24% were sophomores, 26% were juniors, and 22% were seniors. Additionally, 45% of participants reported engaging in extracurricular English language activities, such as attending language institutes, participating in online English forums, or engaging in self-directed learning through digital platforms. Participants were selected using convenience sampling due to the accessibility of students within the selected universities and their willingness to participate. This method was chosen to ensure a sufficient sample size and feasibility within the study's time frame and resources. Although convenience sampling may introduce some bias, the diverse demographic characteristics of the participants help to

mitigate this limitation and provide a broad perspective on the research questions.

Prior to the study, participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, ensuring their understanding of the study's purpose, procedures, and the confidentiality of their responses. No incentives were offered for participation; students participated willingly, motivated by their interest in contributing to the research.

3.2 Instruments

3.2.1 Foreign Language Enjoyment Scale

The study employed the Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) Scale, comprising 10 items adapted from Jiang and Dewaele's (2019) work, which captures both social and private aspects of FLE as described by Dewaele and MacIntyre (2016). Respondents rated each item on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "not at all" to "very much so."

3.2.2 Ideal L2 Self Scale

The Ideal L2 Self Scale, adapted from Papi and Abdollahzadeh (2012), consisted of eight items used to evaluate the participants' perception of their ideal selves concerning English usage. The Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 6 (Strongly Agree) was used to measure each item.

3.2.3 IDLE Scale

To measure IDLE, the researchers used the IDLE Scale developed by Lee and Drajati (2019). The IDLE Scale is comprised of 13 items grouped into four subscales, including form-focused activities (three items), game-based activities (two items), receptive IDLE activities (four items), and productive activities (four items). Participants rated their engagement in IDLE activities on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often – many times per day), by responding to the question 'How often do you engage in the following IDLE activities?'

3.2.4 Student Engagement Scale

In this study, the level of student engagement was measured using the Student Engagement Scale, which was validated by Reeve (2013). This scale is composed of 17 items and has been specifically developed for university students. The scale measures four different components of engagement, namely Agentic Engagement (AE, 5 items), Behavioral Engagement (BE, 4 items), Cognitive Engagement (CE, 4 items), and Emotional Engagement (EE, 4 items). Participants rated their responses on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The reliability indices of all four dimensions of the scale were reported to be good by Reeve (2013).

3.3 Procedure

To collect data for the study, an online survey was created using Google Docs, a reliable survey platform. The link to the survey was

shared with the participants via email and social media platforms. Data collection took place in May 2022 over a period of approximately three weeks.

Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the ethical committees of the universities to ensure adherence to ethical principles. Participants were informed about the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and the confidential nature of their responses. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before they proceeded to complete the four questionnaires. The order of the questionnaires was randomized to avoid order effects, and participants were given clear instructions on how to complete the questionnaires.

To ensure accessibility, the survey was designed to be user-friendly, with clear instructions and a straightforward layout, allowing participants to complete the questionnaires at their convenience. Participants were informed that it would take approximately 20-30 minutes to complete all four questionnaires. Regular reminders were sent via email and social media to encourage timely completion of the survey. These reminders were spaced out over the three-week data collection period to maintain engagement and prompt participants who had not yet completed the survey.

To maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, several measures were implemented. The survey did not collect any personally identifiable information. Responses were anonymized, and each participant was assigned a unique code for data analysis purposes. All data were stored securely on a password-protected

computer, accessible only to the research team. The participants were assured that their responses would be used solely for research purposes and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with the AMOS 24 software. To verify the fitness of the used questionnaires and the structural model, the researchers conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Then, the hypothesized model was tested using SEM, and a mediation analysis was conducted to examine the mediating role of FLE in the relationship between IDLE and student engagement, as well as between ideal L2 self and student engagement. As for the model evaluation, we used several fit indices including the χ^2-goodness of fit to the degree of freedom (df) ratio, the Goodness of Fit Index (GFI), the Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Root-Mean-Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and the Standardized Root-Mean-Square Residual (SRMR). The $\chi^2/df < 3$ was considered good. (Chau, 1997). Additionally, GFI and CFI values of 0.90 or higher RMSEA < 0.08, and SRMR < 0.10 indicate good fit (Kline, 2016).

4. Results

Before conducting SEM, several preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure the robustness of the results. Firstly, missing data were handled using a full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) approach, which is considered to be the most effective method for

addressing missing data in SEM (Byrne, 2013). The FIML method estimates the model parameters based on all available data, including cases with missing data, thereby reducing the potential bias and increasing the statistical power of the analysis (Kline, 2016). Secondly, the normality of the data was assessed using the skewness and kurtosis values, as well as the histograms and normal probability plots. The results indicated that the data were approximately normally distributed, with skewness and kurtosis values within the acceptable range of -2 to +2, indicating that parametric tests were appropriate for the analysis. Thirdly, univariate and multivariate outliers were identified using the Mahalanobis distance, and their influence on the model was assessed using leverage values and standardized residuals (Kline, 2016). Based on these assessments, no significant outliers were identified in the dataset that could have influenced the results of the analysis.

Taken together, the preliminary analyses indicated that the data were suitable for SEM analysis using AMOS, and no significant issues were identified that could have compromised the validity of the results.

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among the variables in the study, including foreign language enjoyment (FLE), ideal L2 self, informal digital learning of English (IDLE), and student engagement (SE). The results show that FLE had a positive and significant correlation with ideal L2 self ($r = .47$, $p < .001$), IDLE ($r = .36$, $p < .001$), and SE ($r = .54$, $p < .001$). Ideal L2

self had a significant correlation with IDLE ($r = .53$, $p < .001$) and SE ($r = .49$, $p < .001$). IDLE also had a positive and significant correlation with SE ($r = .37$, $p < .001$). All correlations were significant at the 0.001 level. These findings suggest that FLE, ideal L2 self, and IDLE may be important factors in promoting student engagement in informal digital English learning.

Table 1

Means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables

Construct	M	SD	1	2	3	4
FLE	4.32	0.85	-			
Ideal L2 Self	3.91	0.68	0.47***	-		
IDLE	3.56	0.81	0.36***	0.53***	-	
SE	4.17	0.73	0.54***	0.49***	0.37***	-

Note: FLE = foreign language enjoyment; IDLE = informal digital learning of English; SE = student engagement; *** significant at the 0.001 significance level

Then, CFA was run in order to confirm the construct validity of all the scales. The results indicated that the four-factor model provided a good fit to the data ($\chi2(71) = 168.25$, $p < 0.001$; CFI = 0.95; TLI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.07; SRMR = 0.05). According to commonly accepted criteria, a CFI and TLI greater than 0.90 indicate an acceptable fit, while RMSEA values less than 0.08 and SRMR values less than 0.08 suggest a reasonable error of approximation (Hu & Bentler, 1999; Kline, 2016). Table 2 presents the factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), maximum shared variance (MSV), average shared variance (ASV), and Cronbach's α/CR for all constructs. The results of Table 2 show that all factor loadings of the items in the constructs were above the acceptable threshold of 0.50, indicating that the items had significant and strong relationships with their respective constructs. The AVE values for FLE, Ideal L2 Self, and IDLE were 0.75, 0.77, and 0.73, respectively, indicating that each construct explained more than 50% of the variance in the items measuring it. The AVE for SE was 0.84, which suggests that the items measuring this construct were highly related and shared a considerable amount of common variance (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). The MSV values were lower than the AVE values for all constructs, indicating that each construct shared more variance with its own items than with other constructs. The ASV values were also lower than the AVE values, indicating that the constructs had more unique variance than shared variance with other constructs (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Finally, the Cronbach's α/CR values for FLE, Ideal L2 Self, IDLE, and SE were

above the acceptable threshold of 0.70, indicating that the constructs had high internal consistency reliability. Overall, the results of Table 2 indicate that the constructs had good convergent and discriminant validity and were reliable measures of their respective constructs.

Table 2

Factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), maximum shared variance (MSV), and average shared variance (ASV) for all constructs

Construct	Factor Loadings	AVE	MSV	ASV	Cronbach's α/CR
FLE	FLE1 0.87, FLE2 0.85, FLE3 0.68, FLE4 0.73, FLE5 0.80, FLE6 0.88, FLE7 0.89, FLE8 0.76, FLE9 0.81, FLE10 0.78	0.75	0.47	0.28	0.93/0.94
Ideal L2 Self	Ideal1 0.93, Ideal2 0.86, Ideal3 0.74, Ideal4 0.79, Ideal5 0.84, Ideal6 0.81, Ideal7 0.76, Ideal8 0.68	0.77	0.40	0.22	0.89/0.91
IDLE	IDLE1 0.85, IDLE2 0.68, IDLE3 0.78, IDLE4 0.74, IDLE5 0.87, IDLE6 0.91, IDLE7 0.81, IDLE8 0.83, IDLE9 0.86, IDLE10 0.83, IDLE11 0.69, IDLE12 0.71, IDLE13 0.79	0.73	0.43	0.23	0.91/0.93
Student Engagement	SE1 0.78, SE2 0.73, SE3 0.82, SE4 0.78, SE5 0.76, SE6 0.92, SE7 0.75, SE8 0.83, SE9 0.88, SE10 0.71, SE11 0.77, SE12 0.90, SE13 0.79, SE14 0.69, SE15 0.89, SE16 0.86, SE17 0.79	0.84	0.05	0.37	0.96/0.96

Next, SEM was employed to test the hypotheses. The results of the direct effects, full mediation, and partial mediation models were compared. Table 3 presents the results of the fit indices for the three models tested: the Direct Effects Model, the Full Mediation Model, and the Partial Mediation Model. In the Direct Effects Model, all variables are directly connected to student engagement without any

mediation. The model shows an acceptable fit with a $\chi 2/df = 2.03$, GFI = 0.84, CFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.07, TLI = 0.89, and SRMR = 0.19.

In the Full Mediation Model, FLE mediates the relationship between IDLE and student engagement, while Ideal L2 Self is not included in the model. The model indicates a better fit: $\chi 2/df = 1.94$, GFI = 0.88, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.04, TLI = 0.94, and SRMR = 0.08. However, the model's chi-square difference ($\Delta\chi 2$) of 352.16 compared to the Direct Effects Model indicates that this model does not fit the data significantly better than the previous model.

In the Partial Mediation Model, both FLE and Ideal L2 Self mediate the relationship between IDLE and student engagement. The model shows the best fit among the three models with $\chi 2/df = 1.76$, GFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.03, TLI = 0.97, and SRMR = 0.06. The model's $\Delta\chi 2 = 63.28$ compared to the Full Mediation Model shows that adding Ideal L2 Self as a mediator provides a significant improvement in the model fit. The values of path estimates are also depicted in Figure 1. Overall, the Partial Mediation Model provides the best fit to the data, indicating that both FLE and Ideal L2 Self mediate the relationship between IDLE and student engagement in the EFL context.

Table 3

Results of fit indices of structural models

	$\chi 2/df$	$\Delta\chi 2$	GFI	CFI	RMSEA	TLI	SRMR

Direct Effects Model	2.03		0.84	0.90	0.07	0.89	0.19
Full Mediation Model	1.94	352.16	0.88	0.96	0.04	0.94	0.08
Partial Mediation Model	1.76	63.28	0.91	0.97	0.03	0.97	0.06

$\Delta\chi 2$ shows differences between model and the following model

In the following step of the data analysis, Baron and Kenny's (1986) method was employed to examine the mediation role of FLE. The requirements of their method were met by the hypothesized model in this study (as seen in Table 4). The direct effects model shows that Ideal L2 Self is positively and significantly related to student engagement ($\beta = 0.38$, $t = 5.68$, $p < 0.001$), and to foreign language enjoyment ($\beta = 0.42$, $t = 5.66$, $p < 0.001$). Additionally, IDLE is positively and significantly related to foreign language enjoyment ($\beta = 0.40$, $t = 6.01$, $p < 0.001$), but not to student engagement ($\beta = 0.12$, $t = 2.59$, $p < 0.05$).

The full mediation model shows that the relationships between Ideal L2 Self and student engagement, and between IDLE and student

engagement are fully mediated by foreign language enjoyment. The partial mediation model shows that FLE partially mediates the relationship between Ideal L2 Self and student engagement ($\beta = 0.36$, $t = 5.08$, $p < 0.001$), and between IDLE and student engagement ($\beta = 0.06$, $t = 0.74$, $p > 0.05$). The findings suggest that FLE plays a significant mediating role in the relationships between Ideal L2 Self and student engagement, and between IDLE and student engagement.

Table 4

Path estimates of structural model

	Standardized path coefficients (t-value)		
	Direct effects model	Full mediation model	Partial mediation model
Ideal L2 self → SE	0.38 (5.68***)		0.36 (5.08***)
IDLE → SE	0.12 (2.59*)		0.06 (0.74)
Ideal L2 self → FLE		0.42 (5.66***)	0.41 (5.89***)
IDLE → FLE		0.40 (6.01***)	0.38 (5.29***)
FLE → SE		0.59(8.55***)	0.52 (7.88***)

Note. SE = student engagement, IDLE = informal digital learning of English, FLE = foreign language enjoyment. *p-Value <0.05, **p-Value <0.01, ***p-Value <0.001

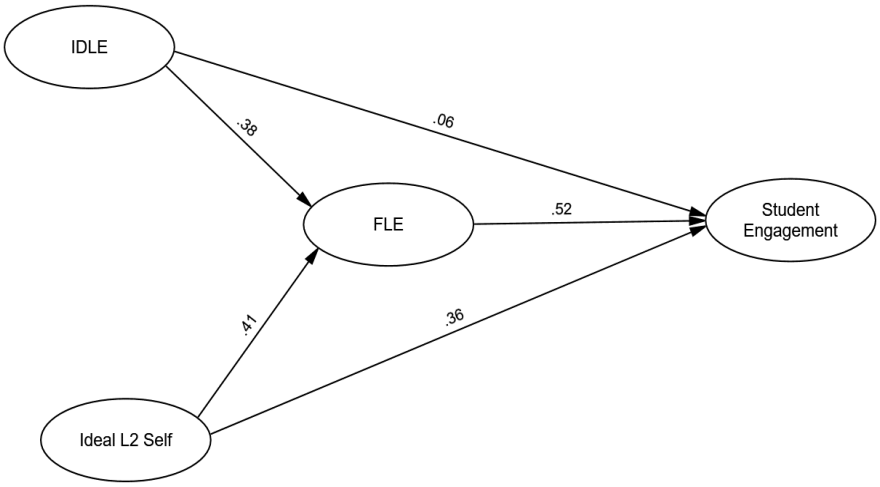

Figure 1

The Final Model

5. Discussion

This study utilized SEM to investigate the relationships among the ideal L2 self, IDLE, FLE, and student engagement among Iranian EFL students. The findings revealed a direct positive effect of the ideal L2 self on student engagement. This may be attributed to the motivational power of the ideal image that EFL learners hold regarding their future performance, which drives them to strive for their desired self (Magid & Chan, 2012; Yousefifard & Fathi, 2021). The ideal L2 self acts as a self-guide that energizes and directs learners' behaviors towards language learning goals, aligning their current efforts with future aspirations (Dörnyei, 2009). This alignment can foster a sense of

purpose and determination, enhancing engagement in learning activities (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013).

Although the impact of the ideal L2 self on student engagement has been understudied, it is reasonable to infer its significance based on related research. As previously noted, motivation is a crucial component of engagement (Svalberg, 2009), and the ideal L2 self is a type of motivation. Understanding how EFL learners' ideal L2 selves influence their engagement is essential for designing effective language learning interventions (Csizer & Kormos, 2009). The motivational power of the ideal L2 self can lead to increased engagement in language learning activities, including attending classes, participating in and initiating discussions, and practicing outside of class (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). This aligns with the self-discrepancy theory, which posits that reducing the gap between one's current self and ideal self can lead to increased motivation and effort (Higgins, 1987).

Additionally, previous studies have shown that the ideal L2 self and FLE are significantly correlated and both affect student engagement (Feng & Papi, 2020; Ryan, 2009; Ueki & Takeuchi, 2013; Yashima, 2009). For example, Yashima (2009) found that learners with a strong ideal L2 self were more likely to engage in communicative activities, which in turn enhanced their language proficiency. Guo (2021) found a significant and positive correlation between FLE and engagement, indicating a reciprocal causal

relationship. This suggests that learners who enjoy their language learning experiences are more likely to invest time and effort into their studies, further reinforcing their ideal L2 self. Furthermore, the study confirmed that FLE can directly influence student engagement. This finding is consistent with prior research highlighting the relationship between FLE and student engagement (Derakhshan et al., 2022; Dewaele & Li, 2021; Feng & Hong, 2022). FLE is associated with the pleasure derived from achieving a goal or aim (Lee, 2020), and enjoyment and pleasure are crucial factors to consider in language learning (Fathi & Mohammaddokht, 2021). High levels of FLE can foster a positive emotional climate in the classroom, which in turn can enhance students' willingness to participate and engage in learning activities (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

EFL learners exhibiting a noticeable degree of FLE try hard to pursue specified goals, creatively solve problems, actively and purposefully participate in activities, and regulate their learning (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). This indirect enhancement of engagement occurs as learners engage in planning their learning, problem-solving, active participation, and self-management. The positive relationship between FLE and student engagement can be accounted for by the fact that enjoyment is a key source of intrinsic motivation (Abuhamdeh et al., 2015), which has been found to be a strong predictor of student engagement in various educational contexts (Reeve, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Intrinsic motivation, driven by enjoyment and interest in the task itself, leads to higher levels of

engagement and persistence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As such, students who enjoy learning the language are more likely to engage in various learning activities, invest more time and effort in their learning, and persist despite challenges and setbacks. This enjoyment can be fostered through positive interactions with peers and teachers, engaging and meaningful tasks, and a supportive learning environment (Fredricks et al., 2004). Additionally, teachers' supportive behaviors and instructional styles that promote autonomy and competence can enhance FLE and, consequently, student engagement (Reeve, 2012).

Furthermore, FLE can lead to significant improvements in L2 proficiency and outcomes (Botes et al., 2020; Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014), which can further enhance student engagement. Research has demonstrated that students with higher levels of FLE tend to perform better in language proficiency tests and other academic assessments (Botes et al., 2020). This improvement in proficiency can create a positive feedback loop, where enhanced skills increase learners' enjoyment and confidence, further boosting their engagement (Dewaele & Macintyre, 2014). Moreover, FLE has been associated with various components of engagement, such as behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement (Guo, 2021). Mohammad Hosseini et al. (2022) suggest that a positive classroom social climate significantly contributes to learners' FLE, which in turn enhances their engagement. This indicates that creating a supportive and enjoyable learning environment is crucial for fostering student engagement.

FLE promotes engagement by fostering inquiry and imagination (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016; Zhang & Zhang, 2020). Students who enjoy their language learning experience are more likely to be curious and explore new ways of using the language, leading to deeper cognitive engagement (Mahmoodzadeh & Khajavy, 2019). This curiosity-driven learning can result in more innovative and effective language use, further enhancing engagement and proficiency. Additionally, FLE indirectly enhances engagement-related traits such as willingness to communicate (WTC) (Khajavy et al., 2018), actual L2 performance (Dewaele & Alfawzan, 2018), and the ideal L2 self (Fathi & Mohammaddokht, 2021). For instance, students with higher FLE are more likely to seek opportunities to practice their language skills, which can improve their WTC and overall performance. This demonstrates the multifaceted role of FLE in promoting various aspects of student engagement. Finally, motivation, which includes the ideal L2 self, is a key factor in promoting greater engagement (Dincer et al., 2019; Guo, 2021; Kissau, 2006; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Reeve, 2012; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). The ideal L2 self serves as a powerful motivator, driving students to engage more deeply with their language learning tasks. Understanding the interplay between motivation and FLE can provide valuable insights into how to enhance student engagement in language learning contexts.

The findings also indicated that IDLE indirectly affected student engagement through its impact on FLE. FLE can be influenced by various factors, including instructional, social,

environmental, and personal features (Dewaele & Dewaele, 2017; Li, 2020). As IDLE is informally taught, practiced in a digitalized setting, and performed autonomously (Lai et al., 2015; Lee, 2022; Sockett, 2014), it can affect FLE and subsequently impact student engagement. This aligns with the concept that engagement encompasses EFL learners' participation, vigor, investment, and fulfillment. EFL learners who engage in IDLE can play games, watch TV shows or movies, listen to music or podcasts, and chat on social media platforms (Brevik, 2019; Lee, 2019). This allows them to engage beyond the traditional classroom setting. Consequently, students become more independent in task selection, more interested in their practices, and experience a flow state when using online platforms that create a welcoming milieu with lower emotional barriers (Kiaer et al., 2021; Li & Dewaele, 2021; Li & Wei, 2022). This aspect of IDLE promotes a sense of autonomy and self-directed learning, which are critical for sustained engagement.

IDLE has been linked to FLE in several further studies. Specifically, Dressman and Sadler (2020), Lee (2022), Soyoof et al. (2021), and Zhang et al. (2021) have explored the relationship between IDLE and FLE, finding that informal digital learning environments can significantly enhance learners' enjoyment and engagement in language learning. The finding that IDLE indirectly affected student engagement through the mediation of FLE is also consistent with previous studies on the relationship between IDLE and language learning outcomes (Lee, 2019, 2022; Soyoof et al., 2021).

These studies have demonstrated that IDLE can positively influence language learning outcomes by providing learners with access to authentic language input and increasing their motivation to learn through various digital platforms (Lee & Dressman, 2017). The authentic, real-world use of language in digital contexts helps learners see the practical value of their language skills, thereby enhancing their motivation and engagement. Additionally, the finding that FLE mediated the relationship between IDLE and student engagement aligns with literature on the role of affective factors in language learning (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 2016). This literature highlights the crucial role that learners' emotions and attitudes, specifically FLE, play in determining their motivation and engagement to learn a second language. For instance, Mohammad Hosseini et al. (2022) found that FLE is positively associated with increased engagement in L2 learning, underscoring the importance of fostering positive emotional experiences in language education.

This study makes several unique contributions to the literature on EFL student engagement. Firstly, it demonstrates that the ideal L2 self has a direct and substantial effect on student engagement, an area that has been underexplored in previous research. Secondly, the study highlights the mediating role of FLE in the relationship between IDLE and student engagement, providing a nuanced understanding of how digital learning environments can enhance language learning engagement through affective pathways. These findings suggest that fostering a positive ideal L2 self and promoting enjoyable learning

experiences can significantly enhance student engagement in EFL contexts. This research fills a gap by exploring these dynamics specifically within the Iranian EFL context, offering insights that can inform educators and policymakers in similar educational settings.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined learner-related variables and their impact on student engagement in EFL learning. Specifically, it aimed to predict student engagement based on learner-related variables such as the ideal L2 self, IDLE, and FLE. By administering validated questionnaires to Iranian EFL learners and analyzing the data using SEM, the study revealed direct and indirect interrelations among these variables. Specifically, the results indicated that both the ideal L2 self and FLE directly predicted student engagement. The ideal L2 self and FLE, which encompass motivation, pleasure, and passion in foreign language learning, proved to have a significant impact on EFL student engagement. However, it should be noted that IDLE only indirectly predicted student engagement through FLE.

The findings of this study have several theoretical and pedagogical implications that extend beyond generic and cliché observations. First, the study underscores the nuanced interplay of affective and motivational factors in EFL learning, emphasizing the unique role of FLE as a mediator between ideal L2 self, IDLE, and student engagement. This highlights the need for a more holistic approach to language education that integrates not only cognitive but

also affective and motivational components. Second, the study provides empirical evidence for the importance of considering learners' ideal L2 selves in EFL contexts. By fostering learners' aspirations and envisioning their future L2 selves, educators can tap into a powerful source of motivation and engagement. This suggests that language teaching should not only focus on linguistic development but also on cultivating learners' self-beliefs and sense of agency in their language learning journey.

Third, the findings highlight the potential of IDLE in promoting student engagement in EFL contexts. However, the indirect relationship between IDLE and engagement suggests that simply providing access to digital resources is not sufficient. Instead, educators need to strategically design and implement IDLE activities that foster FLE, as this positive emotional experience appears to be a crucial mechanism through which IDLE influences engagement. This necessitates a more nuanced understanding of how different types of IDLE activities can be leveraged to enhance learners' enjoyment and, consequently, their engagement. Finally, the specific focus on Iranian EFL learners provides valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities in this context. The findings suggest that cultural and contextual factors may play a role in shaping the relationships between ideal L2 self, IDLE, FLE, and engagement. This underscores the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in EFL contexts, where educators need to adapt instructional practices to align with learners' cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values.

From a practical standpoint, the findings of this study offer several recommendations for EFL educators and stakeholders. First, it is essential to create a supportive and positive learning environment that fosters learners' FLE. This can be achieved through incorporating enjoyable and meaningful tasks, providing positive feedback, and promoting a sense of community and belonging in the classroom. Second, educators should explicitly integrate IDLE into their instructional practices. This involves not only providing access to digital resources but also guiding learners on how to use them effectively for language learning purposes. Additionally, educators should encourage learners to explore various IDLE activities that align with their interests and learning styles, thereby enhancing their enjoyment and engagement.

Third, given the mediating role of FLE, educators should prioritize the design and implementation of IDLE activities that are inherently enjoyable and engaging. This may involve incorporating game-based elements, social interaction features, and opportunities for self-expression and creativity. Finally, future research should explore the long-term effects of ideal L2 self, IDLE, and FLE on student engagement and other relevant outcomes, such as language proficiency, motivation, and self-efficacy. Additionally, it would be valuable to investigate the moderating role of individual differences, such as learner characteristics and cultural background, in these relationships.

This study has several limitations, including a small sample size and a limited participant location confined to Iran. Future studies should aim to recruit larger and more diverse samples from various contexts to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study's reliance on quantitative methods may lack the depth of understanding that qualitative approaches can provide, particularly in capturing the subjective experiences and perceptions of EFL learners. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study, which restricts our ability to capture the dynamism and temporal changes in the studied variables. Constructs such as IDLE, FLE, and ideal L2 self are inherently dynamic and influenced by various contextual factors over time. Consequently, the assertions made in this study should be interpreted with caution. It is more appropriate to suggest that these variables might influence EFL student engagement, reflecting the potential variability and reducing the level of certainty associated with these relationships. Furthermore, while the SEM used in this study provides valuable insights into the relationships among the variables, it does not establish causality. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how these relationships evolve over time and to better understand the causal pathways involved. Future research should also qualitatively examine each variable to offer more practical suggestions, indicate students' perceptions, and narrate students' practical experiences. Qualitative studies could provide richer data and deeper insights into how IDLE, FLE, and ideal L2 self influence EFL student engagement.

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