

## EXPLORING ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING BEYOND THE CLASSROOM IN THE DIGITAL AGE: INSIGHTS FROM ENGLISH MAJORED STUDENTS AT A VIETNAMESE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

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**Abstract:** *With the rapid advancement of digital tools and platforms, the integration of digital technology into learning English outside the classroom has gained significant attention in recent educational research (Nguyen et al., 2024). This research explores how out-of-class activities in this digital age influence the English language learning of third-year students majoring in English language teaching at a Vietnamese public university in the North of Vietnam. The study involved 100 student participants who completed a questionnaire, with 10 of them taking part in individual interviews. The results indicate that engaging in different out-of-class language learning activities had positive effects on the participants' language skills to varying degrees. The research highlights the significance of incorporating out-of-class activities into the language learning journey to enhance overall proficiency.*

**Keywords:** *Out-of-class English language learning, digital technology, students*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In light of rapid advancements in digital tools and platforms, the integration of digital technology into the English learning process has garnered significant attention in recent educational research (Lee, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2024; Trinder, 2017). Studies have underscored the potential benefits of engaging in self-directed, technology-assisted learning outside traditional classroom settings. These benefits include accessing authentic learning resources, practicing language skills through social media and online platforms, and nurturing learner autonomy (Choi & Nunan, 2018; Lee, 2019; Wang & Chen, 2020).

Autonomous learning, facilitated by a variety of digital tools and resources, empowers students to assume greater control over their learning processes, leading to enhanced competencies and academic achievement (Nguyen et al., 2024; Tragant et al., 2021). Recent studies have highlighted the advantages of incorporating out-of-class activities into language learning programs. For instance, Lee (2019) demonstrated that participation in language clubs and cultural events significantly improves students'

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language proficiency and cultural competence. Similarly, Wang and Chen's research (2020) emphasized the positive impact of digital resources and online platforms on informal language learning outcomes, calling for further exploration of technology's role in language acquisition.

Benson (2011) defines out-of-class learning as any language learning activity occurring outside traditional classroom instruction, including self-study, interactions with native speakers, language exchange programs, and digital resource engagement. This approach allows individuals to tailor their learning experiences to their specific needs and interests (Reinders & Benson, 2017).

In this digital era, the availability of portable devices such as mobile phones (Nguyen et al., 2024) has significantly transformed out-of-class language learning, granting learners unprecedented access to digital resources. Trinder (2017) highlighted the transformative impact of technology, enabling learners to engage with language anytime and anywhere for both learning and practical use. This is because many learners have easy access to technology and frequently utilize it for out-of-class language learning purposes (Wang & Chen, 2020). Consequently, many employ language learning apps and participate in virtual language exchange communities to create additional opportunities to enhance their communication abilities and proficiency (Brown, 2017; Reinders & Benson, 2017; Tragant et al., 2021).

Several studies have explored the frequency of out-of-class learning practices, including the prevalence of online activities such as using social media platforms like YouTube (Wang & Chen, 2020) and using authentic materials such as websites, movies, and radio broadcasts to practice English (Brown, 2017; Trinders, 2017). This points to the significance of understanding how language learners make use of their affordances and exercise their agency to create language learning opportunities (Choi & Nunan, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2024).

Research consistently demonstrates that learners perceive the effectiveness of various out-of-class activities in enhancing their English language learning. For example, Trinder (2017) highlighted how technology supports vocabulary learning and listening practice. Lee (2019) emphasized the effectiveness of online language exchange platforms in improving speaking proficiency and intercultural communication skills. In the same vein, Wang and Chen (2020) conducted a qualitative study with 20 EFL university students in China, revealing that students frequently used YouTube to watch English videos in their leisure time to enhance their English productive skills and communication abilities. Additionally, Nguyen et al. (2024) explored the experiences of Vietnamese students, highlighting a variety of online activities and their perceived benefits on the four

language skills. These studies underscored the crucial role of authentic language use in real-world contexts, such as watching authentic media and engaging in social media interactions for developing learners' communication skills.

Studies also emphasize the importance of understanding students' out-of-class language activities and how these activities contribute to the language learning process (Reinders & Benson, 2017; Lee, 2019; Tragant et al., 2021). Understanding out-of-class learning factors that contribute to English language development among university students is crucial for informing effective language education practices (Nguyen et al., 2024). This is especially important given the notable focus on enhancing English education in the Vietnamese higher education sector in response to globalization and internationalization (Nguyen et al., 2022). As such, this study aims to investigate how English language learning outside the classroom influences the students' English language abilities by examining their practices and attitudes towards out-of-class activities. Specifically, taking the English majored students at a Vietnamese university as the participants, this study aims to answer two research questions:

1. What out-of-class activities do the students engage in to improve their English language skills?
2. What are the students' attitudes towards the impacts of these out-of-class activities on their English language abilities?

## **2. RESEARCH CONTENT**

### ***2.1. Research Methodology***

The current study adopted qualitative and quantitative methods using a questionnaire and interviews to collect data to answer the research questions. This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena, allowing for data triangulation and enhancing validity and reliability to best understand the students' practices and attitudes towards out-of-class language learning activities.

#### ***2.1.1. Participants***

For participant selection, 100 third-year students enrolled in the English language teaching program at a public university in northern Vietnam were targeted (see Table 1). These students, aged 20 to 23, were chosen from different classes to ensure a diverse range of perspectives and experiences. The majority of the participants were female, reflecting the teacher education program's demographics, but efforts were made to include male participants to ensure gender diversity. A smaller group of participants, consisting of 02 males and 08 females, was selected randomly for interviews to allow for an in-depth

exploration of their experiences and perceptions. This approach aims to capture nuanced insights that may not be revealed through questionnaires alone.

**Table 1.** Participant's Demographic Information

| Demographic Information | Options | Number (N=100) | Percentage |
|-------------------------|---------|----------------|------------|
| Age                     | 20      | 10             | 10%        |
|                         | 21      | 85             | 85%        |
|                         | 22      | 4              | 4%         |
|                         | 23      | 1              | 1%         |
| Gender                  | Male    | 9              | 9%         |
|                         | Female  | 81             | 81%        |

### 2.1.2. Data Collection Instruments

In this study, a questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data on the students' out-of-class activities. A questionnaire is a structured tool for collecting data through predetermined questions (Dörnyei, 2007) and is particularly useful for gathering data from a large number of participants quickly (Mertens, 2010). Additionally, the structured format ensures consistency, making data analysis and interpretation straightforward (Dörnyei, 2007). Online platforms like Google Forms enhance this process by facilitating easy distribution and data management.

In this current study, the Google Form link was distributed to 100 participants via their emails. The questionnaire consists of two sections: Section A collected demographic information, including age and gender, providing a profile of participants. Section B focuses on the participants' engagement in out-of-class activities aimed at enhancing their English language abilities, asking them to select the activities they are involved in and identify the skills they improve through these activities. The questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale from "Never" to "Very Frequently" providing quantitative data on the popularity and frequency of these activities. Section C focused on participants' perceived improvements in their English language skills, asking them to select the skills they believe they have enhanced the most and the least among Listening, Reading, Speaking, Writing, Vocabulary, and Grammar. These insights will guide recommendations for tailored skill development strategies. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives on informal language learning. The interviews explored the participants' experiences in more depth, capturing nuances that structured formats might miss (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Before the

interviews, participants were informed about the study's purpose and procedures. The interview sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

#### *2.1.3. Data Collection Procedure*

The data collection procedure in this study followed three steps. Step 1 involved distributing a questionnaire via a Google Form to 100 students. Following this, Step 2 entailed selecting 10 representative students from the questionnaire respondents for interviews to gain deeper insights into their out-of-class language learning experiences. The interview participants were selected randomly and included both male and female students. In Step 3, individual interviews were scheduled with the selected participants, ensuring their readiness and obtaining consent to record the interviews.

#### *2.1.4. Data Analysis*

First, for the data collected from the questionnaire, the researcher undertook a quantitative analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the frequency and patterns of out-of-class activities in which the students engaged. The analysis primarily focused using descriptive statistics to provide an overview of the frequency of the activities reported by the participants and the specific language skills that participants believed these activities enhanced. Second, the analysis of the interview data involved several stages, starting with accurate transcription to maintain data integrity and subsequent readings of the transcribed interviews to familiarize with the content. The data was then coded thematically, which allowed for the identification of recurring themes and patterns within the interview data, offering a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Third, the quantitative results from the questionnaire analysis and the qualitative insights from the thematic analysis of the interviews were triangulated. The integration of both data sources enriched the research by offering both quantitative and qualitative perspectives on the impact of informal activities on the participants' language skills.

## **2.2. Results**

This section presents the findings from the study focused on the students' experiences and attitudes towards out-of-class learning activities.

#### *2.2.1. The Students' Out-of-Class English Learning Activities*

The frequency of the reported out-of-class language learning activities can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *The Frequency of the Students' Out-of-class Language Learning Activities*

| Activities                                                                              | M    | SD   |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|
| 1. Watching English-language movies or TV shows                                         | 2.61 | 1.67 |
| 2. Participating in English conversation clubs or language exchange programs            | 2.61 | 1.47 |
| 3. Reading books or novels in English                                                   | 3.26 | 1.25 |
| 4. Using English-language apps or websites                                              | 3.63 | 1.17 |
| 5. Engaging in informal conversations with native or fluent English speakers            | 3.07 | 1.35 |
| 6. Listening to English-language podcasts or radio programs                             | 2.99 | 1.29 |
| 7. Playing English-language video games                                                 | 3.08 | 1.24 |
| 8. Writing in English, such as maintaining a diary or blog                              | 2.65 | 1.23 |
| 9. Attending cultural events or activities related to English-speaking countries        | 2.64 | 1.29 |
| 10. Using social media platforms in English                                             | 3.30 | 1.31 |
| 11. Joining online groups to discuss English language materials and practice together   | 3.20 | 1.28 |
| 12. Taking online courses specifically designed for language improvement                | 3.31 | 1.26 |
| 13. Participating in English language competitions or events                            | 3.00 | 1.25 |
| 14. Engaging in debates or public speaking events in English                            | 3.02 | 1.21 |
| 15. Traveling to English-speaking countries                                             | 2.15 | 1.38 |
| 16. Listening to English music and paying attention to the lyrics for language exposure | 3.28 | 1.35 |
| 17. Reading English-language newspapers, magazines, or online articles                  | 3.13 | 1.37 |

*Notes: M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation*

The results reveal that the students frequently engaged in out-of-class activities with an overall mean score of 2.99, indicating regular participation in these activities. The

activity that students engage in the most is using English-language apps or websites ( $M = 3.63$ ;  $SD = 1.17$ ), indicating a moderately high level of participation among students. The result suggests that digital platforms played a significant role in their language learning. Following closely, the second most popular activity is taking online courses specifically designed for language improvement ( $M = 3.31$ ;  $SD = 1.26$ ). Although slightly lower than the top activity, it still demonstrates considerable engagement among students seeking structured online learning opportunities. The use of social media platforms in English came the third popular activity ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.28$ ), suggesting that while social media is utilized for language practice, its popularity is comparable to other online activities designed explicitly for learning purposes. In the interviews, the students explained that they “*frequently use smartphones and laptops with internet connection to use and practice English beyond the classrooms*” (S6) and “*online learning is very convenient because I can learn everywhere*” (S8). These findings highlight the significant role of digital resources in facilitating language acquisition as students leverage technology for self-directed learning and communication.

Listening to English music and paying attention to the lyrics ranks fourth ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.35$ ). This indicates a moderate level of engagement, highlighting the role of music as a supplementary tool for language exposure and comprehension. Reading books or novels in English occupies the fifth position, with a mean score of 3.26 and a standard deviation of 1.25. Despite being ranked fifth, the closeness in mean scores across activities suggests that reading remains a commonly practiced method for language skill enhancement among students.

Active participation in online activities such as engaging in debates or public speaking events, joining study groups for language practice, and taking online courses specifically designed for language improvement also garnered notable mean scores above 3. These activities emphasize the importance of active engagement and collaboration in language learning, providing students with opportunities to practice and refine their speaking and critical thinking skills.

Conversely, activities such as traveling to English-speaking countries for educational purposes or language immersion were less frequently participated in ( $M = 2.15$ ;  $SD = 1.38$ ). This lower engagement is likely due to “financial constraints or limited opportunities for international travel” as stated by S5 in the interview. Interviews with participants clarified their motivations for participating in out-of-class activities, underscoring the importance of English proficiency for employment opportunities and the global economy. This motivates students to engage in various activities to enhance their language skills.

### 2.2.2. The Impacts of Out-of-Class Activities on English Language Learning

The data from the questionnaire show students' perceived relationship between the out-of-class language learning activities and the development of six essential language skills—speaking, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Students' attitudes towards the impacts of out-of-class activities to their English abilities

| Activities                                                                          | Perceived impacts (%) |      |      |      |      |      |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                                                                                     | L                     | S    | R    | W    | V    | G    |
| 1. Watching English-language movies or TV shows                                     | 29,4                  | 12,7 | 10,5 | 3,8  | 21,6 | 22,2 |
| 2. Participating in English conversation clubs or language exchange programs        | 18,1                  | 32,2 | 9,4  | 5,3  | 15,4 | 19,4 |
| 3. Reading English books or novels                                                  | 2,8                   | 6,4  | 33,5 | 12,1 | 20,7 | 24,3 |
| 4. Using English-language apps or websites for learning                             | 22,6                  | 12,6 | 13,7 | 8,4  | 21   | 25,5 |
| 5. Engaging in informal conversations with native or fluent English speakers        | 27,4                  | 31   | 11,3 | 7,7  | 10,6 | 12   |
| 6. Listening to English-language podcasts or radio programs                         | 36,4                  | 20,4 | 14,4 | 5,3  | 13,6 | 9,8  |
| 7. Playing English-language video games                                             | 21                    | 15,1 | 25,6 | 10,5 | 18,4 | 9,2  |
| 8. Writing in English, such as maintaining a diary or blog                          | 8,3                   | 6,8  | 18,8 | 36,1 | 11,3 | 18,8 |
| 9. Attending cultural events or activities related to English-speaking countries    | 25,2                  | 28,5 | 11,9 | 7,3  | 13,2 | 13,9 |
| 10. Using social media platforms in English                                         | 17,3                  | 13,6 | 19,7 | 12,9 | 24,7 | 11,7 |
| 11. Joining study groups to discuss English language material and practice together | 22,3                  | 20,7 | 21,2 | 11,2 | 11,7 | 12,8 |
| 12. Taking online courses specifically designed for language improvement            | 19,7                  | 19,3 | 15,7 | 17   | 14   | 14,2 |



| Activities                                                                                 | Perceived impacts (%) |      |      |      |      |      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                                                                                            | L                     | S    | R    | W    | V    | G    |
| 13. Participating in or attending English language competitions or events                  | 21,8                  | 27   | 11,2 | 12,3 | 17   | 10,6 |
| 14. Engaging in debates or public speaking events in English                               | 24,7                  | 31,5 | 10,5 | 9,2  | 13,6 | 10,5 |
| 15. Traveling to English-speaking countries for educational purposes or language immersion | 20,2                  | 19,2 | 17,4 | 14,1 | 15   | 14,1 |
| 16. Listening to English music and paying attention to the lyrics for language exposure    | 32,4                  | 15,5 | 12,7 | 11,3 | 14,8 | 13,4 |
| 17. Reading English-language newspapers, magazines, or online articles                     | 12,2                  | 7,2  | 33,2 | 10,8 | 15,1 | 20,9 |

Notes: *L* = Listening, *S* = Speaking, *R* = Reading, *W* = Writing, *V* = Vocabulary, *G* = Grammar

The results demonstrate the effectiveness of various activities that students find helpful for improving their English listening skills. Listening to English-language podcasts or radio programs is considered the most beneficial, with 36.4% of students noting significant improvement. Traveling to English-speaking countries follows closely at 32.4%, offering immersive and practical language practice. Watching English-language movies or TV shows is also highly effective, with 29.4% of students reporting improvement. Engaging in informal conversations with native or fluent English speakers ranks next at 27.4%, providing real-time interaction and exposure to natural language use. Listening to English music, while beneficial, is considered less effective compared to more interactive methods, with a notable percentage of 32.4%.

Students feel that participating in English conversation clubs or language exchange programs (32.2%), engaging in public speaking events (31.5%), engaging in informal conversations with native speakers (31%), attending cultural events (28.5%), and participating in language competitions (27%) significantly improve their speaking skills. These activities provide structured opportunities for regular practice and exposure to natural language use, helping students “gain confidence” (Student 2), “understand idiomatic expressions” (Student 1), and “enhance practical language use” (Student 10).

When it comes to reading skills, students believe that reading English books or novels is the most beneficial activity (33.5%). This practice allows for deep language immersion, vocabulary enhancement, and “*understanding of complex sentence structures*” (Student 4). In terms of writing skills, students feel that writing in English, particularly through maintaining a diary or blog, is the most effective activity (36.1%). This practice enables students to “*regularly express their thoughts*” (Student 6) to “*refine their writing style and develop fluency*” (Student 5).

The students expressed a preference for out-of-class activities because these activities offer opportunities to apply language skills in real-life contexts, making learning more dynamic and interactive as Student 9 said: “*They are more practical, motivating, and enhance interaction for learners, helping them discover personal talents.*” (Student 8). Out-of-class activities also foster personal growth, offering autonomy and self-directed learning opportunities. Students appreciated the chance to develop essential skills like time management, communication, and critical thinking because: “*It increases students' interest in learning due to its diversity.*” (Student 2). However, challenges such as time management, vocabulary acquisition, cultural barriers, and confidence issues persist. Student 7 said that: “*When participating in informal conversations with native speakers, I feel less confident and sometimes I don't always have the opportunity to speak with them.*”

In summary, the data indicate that the reported out-of-class activities enhance English language learning by offering practical, engaging, and diverse experiences that promote both linguistic proficiency and personal development. These activities provide valuable opportunities for students to apply and advance their language skills in real-world contexts.

### **2.3. Discussion**

Upon examining the data, it becomes evident that a blend of traditional and contemporary practices characterizes the language learning journey of third-year English-major students outside the classrooms. The utilization of language-learning applications and online platforms has gained considerable traction, reflecting the pervasive influence of technology on language-learning practices (Nguyen et al., 2024). Furthermore, the proliferation of English-language media and cultural events has emerged as a prominent feature of out-of-class language learning experiences. Students actively seek out opportunities to immerse themselves in English-language media, ranging from films and television shows to podcasts and online forums, capitalizing on the rich linguistic input and cultural insights afforded by these mediums.

Traditional methods, such as reading English literature, persist as a cornerstone of language learning activities, with students gravitating towards this activity for its dual benefits of linguistic enrichment and cultural immersion (Jones, 2017). In addition, activities rooted in real-world interaction remain paramount in the language learning repertoire of English language teaching students. Participation in language exchange programs, for instance, continues to serve as a vital conduit for honing speaking proficiency and fostering cross-cultural understanding (Reinders & Benson, 2017). This underscores the enduring appeal of authentic language exposure and communicative engagement in the language learning process.

The analysis of the survey data unveils the students' perceived enhancements across language domains, shedding light on the potential of specific activities to improve the students' language proficiency. The findings showed the significant role of English-language media in strengthening listening comprehension, enriching vocabulary, and refining grammatical acumen among English language teaching students (Nguyen et al., 2024). This underscores the potency of authentic language exposure in engendering linguistic competence, with students reaping substantial benefits from their engagement with diverse media sources.

Moreover, active participation in language exchange initiatives emerges as essential in the language learning journey of third-year English language teaching students, facilitating a seamless transition from classroom learning to real-world communicative contexts. By interacting with native speakers and fellow language enthusiasts, students not only bolster their spoken proficiency but also cultivate intercultural competence and communicative confidence. Nevertheless, the students reported coping with persistent challenges such as time management, which emerges as a recurring concern with students navigating the demands of formal learning alongside their out-of-class activities. Additionally, vocabulary acquisition poses a formidable obstacle, particularly in specialized domains or during interactions with native speakers (Trinder, 2017).

In brief, the exploration of out-of-class activities among third-year English language teaching students illuminates a multifaceted landscape that combines traditional pedagogies with contemporary technological advancements. The examination of how these activities impact language learning abilities highlights the transformative potential of experiential learning in fostering both linguistic competence and cultural fluency among English language teaching students. By comprehending the interplay between these factors, educators can develop tailored interventions to enhance student engagement and facilitate comprehensive language development.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study aimed to investigate how third-year university students engaged in out-of-class language learning activities and their perceived impacts on their English learning. The research utilized a questionnaire administered to 100 English-major students and conducted semi-structured interviews with a subset of 10 participants. The goal was to gather insights into the variety of activities students engage in outside the classroom and to understand their perspectives on how these activities influence their English language development.

The data reveal diverse out-of-class activities, including reading English books, participating in language exchange programs, using language learning apps, and engaging with English-language media. Technology emerged as a crucial facilitator, providing access to authentic language input and interactive learning experiences. The findings showed that these activities positively impact language learning abilities, with language exchange programs enhancing speaking proficiency and English-language media improving listening, vocabulary, and grammar skills. However, challenges like time management and vocabulary acquisition were identified, indicating a need for targeted support. Addressing these challenges is crucial. Educators and policymakers should collaborate to implement support mechanisms, providing guidance, resources, and financial assistance to ensure equitable access to these enriching learning opportunities. Creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment that encourages active engagement with English beyond the classroom is vital.

The implications offer actionable insights for educators and policymakers. The diverse array of activities highlights the necessity for multifaceted approaches to language learning and teaching. Teachers can encourage students to engage in out-of-class learning experiences using digital technology and authentic language experiences, like cultural events and interactive language practice, to help develop language skills and practical language competencies essential for real-world communication.

Despite valuable insights, the study has limitations. It focused solely on third-year students, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The reliance on self-reported data may introduce biases, such as social desirability or recall bias. Additionally, the study did not explore the impact of demographic factors like gender, age, or proficiency level on engagement in out-of-class activities. Future research could address these limitations by employing more diverse samples and methodologies to provide a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing out-of-class language learning activities.

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### KHÁM PHÁ VIỆC HỌC TIẾNG ANH NGOÀI LỚP HỌC TRONG THỜI ĐẠI SỐ: GÓC NHÌN TỪ SINH VIÊN CHUYÊN NGÀNH TIẾNG ANH TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC CÔNG LẬP Ở VIỆT NAM

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**Tóm tắt:** Với sự tiến bộ nhanh chóng của công nghệ thông tin và nền tảng kỹ thuật số, việc tích hợp công nghệ số vào việc học tiếng Anh ngoài lớp học đã thu hút được sự chú ý đáng kể trong nghiên cứu giáo dục những năm gần đây (Nguyen et al. 2024). Nghiên cứu này khám phá cách các hoạt động tự học ngoài lớp học ảnh hưởng như thế nào đến việc học tiếng Anh của sinh viên năm thứ ba chuyên ngành giảng dạy tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học công lập ở Việt Nam. Trong nghiên cứu này, 100 sinh viên đã tham gia khảo sát trực tuyến và 10 sinh viên trong số đó đã tham gia phỏng vấn. Kết quả phân tích chỉ ra rằng việc tham gia vào các hoạt động học tập khác nhau ngoài lớp học có tác động tích cực đến kỹ năng tiếng Anh của người tham gia ở các mức độ khác nhau. Nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của việc kết hợp các hoạt động ngoài lớp học vào quá trình học ngôn ngữ để nâng cao trình độ tổng thể của người học.

**Từ khoá:** Học tiếng Anh bên ngoài lớp học, công nghệ số, sinh viên

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