

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the study, explaining its research background, research problem, research question, research purposes, research significance, theoretical framework, research contributions, and previous studies. Each subsection was explained in a separate section to detail this study. This study focuses on self-initiated learning by learners who learn English through a Personal Learning Network (PLN), understanding how learners use PLN to support informal self-initiated learning goals.

1.1. Research Background

A Personal Learning Network (PLN) is a system of digital connections between people and resources that an individual constructs for professional learning, using social technologies (Trust, 2012). It is not just a digital platform that supports media and technology. It is also a means of fostering good relationships with the people around us and facilitating lifelong learning. This goal is to create a meaningful learning network among learners. This condition has become a unique phenomenon that can also inspire other learners to learn English anytime, from anywhere. Drawing on the concept of PLN, Warlick (2009) claims that every learner has a personal learning network. This core idea highlights how language learners can develop their language skills in informal educational settings.

Despite extensive studies on PLN, little is known about how informal learners use PLN to support self-initiated learning. They use PLN to develop English language skills and foster continuous learning. For them, PLN has different meanings because they have different goals when building one. This idea aligns with Dulay and Burt's (1973) view that language ability develops through authentic language experiences, with results following a natural sequence from simple to complex forms. PLN not only allows learners to connect with others but also facilitates self-initiated learning. When someone joins a learning network, the potential for learning growth is limitless.

However, this issue arises in the context of school failure. It is not entirely due to unstable economic factors. Beyond structural factors such as financial constraints, early school leavers are closely associated with learners' emotional and motivational conditions, which play a crucial role in determining whether learning continues outside formal schooling. This may be due to several factors, such as a lack of learning motivation and a social environment (Saputra et al., 2022), laziness, an uncomfortable environment, children from broken homes (Nugroho, 2021), economic factors (Susanti & Hidayat, 2021), and early marriage (UNICEF Indonesia, 2022). Even so, every learner certainly has desires and abilities buried within that may not yet be visible and need further exploration. It is not necessarily that the person is lazy; it could be that their learning methods are wrong or their environment does not support them.

In Indonesia today, as Kemendikbudristek (2023) noted, the early school-leaving rate is increasing. Many learners choose to work rather than continue their education. Despite this, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics (BPS) in 2024, 61.47% of secondary school learners, or about 38%, do not continue their education. On the other hand, early school leavers also occur among learners in both developing and developed countries, including those across Europe, the Americas, and the United Kingdom. It happens among college learners and teenagers.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the early school leaver rate for adolescents aged 16-24 years was approximately 5.3% in 2023. The contributing factors include poverty (Rumberger, 2011), emotional and mental health issues (Kearney, 2008), low motivation (Finn, 1989), gender and ethnic disparities (OECD, 2023), and family responsibilities (UNESCO, 2022). Meanwhile, in Bandung, according to research by Salsabila et al. (2024), the primary reason for early school leavers is economic factors.

Moreover, if economic factors are the most significant cause, they do not hinder the great. Through informal education, language learners can develop their language skills. They have their own ways of creating a learning atmosphere that suits their style. Effective engagement in learning begins with a positive affective

state, a supportive environment, and consistent study habits. When educators overlook the importance of learners' emotions, they fail to recognize their significant influence on learners (Yang, 2016). Therefore, mood, including emotions, is a core element that underpins learner engagement in learning. Gholami & Salahshour (2025) found that English-language learners who use digital media can reduce anxiety and enhance their learning mood.

On the other hand, the accessibility of digital media enables learners to take greater control over their learning processes, thereby fostering self-initiated learning practices supported by PLN. In informal learning contexts, emotional engagement is often mediated through learning tools and environments, particularly digital media that allow learners to choose content aligned with their interests and moods. Today, technological breakthroughs, especially in generative Artificial Intelligence, ChatGPT, and gamification, are revolutionizing English learning, making it more accessible, affordable, and adaptable to every learner's needs (Godwin-Jones, 2022; Liu et al., 2024a; Lai & Sundqvist, 2025).

As learners gain greater autonomy through these digital environments, it is important to distinguish between self-initiated learning and self-directed learning. Self-initiated learning refers to learners starting learning on their own because they are interested or motivated, without waiting for instructions (Boyer et al., 2014; Morris, 2019). In contrast, self-directed learning involves a broader process in which learners plan, manage, and evaluate their own learning, including setting goals and choosing appropriate learning strategies (Knowles, 1975; Garrison, 1997).

Digital platforms now offer a more authentic and engaging English-learning experience. Interactive applications allow learners to practice English directly, share interests, and participate in discussions, tailoring learning to individual needs while providing space to interact with people around the world on topics of interest. Within this dynamic landscape, many language learners are turning to informal digital methods to improve their English skills. In this phenomenon, learners actively explore various online resources, such as podcasts, YouTube, and language

exchanges, at their own pace and according to their personal interests (Rezai & Goodarzi, 2025).

Even so, formal education is often viewed as the most common pathway to English learning. As a result, learners who early school-leaving are often perceived to have limited opportunities to improve their English. Yet some English club members have shown that learning can continue well beyond the classroom. By continuing to learn independently outside the formal education system, they have developed strong speaking, writing, and reading abilities. Along the way, they have learned by interacting with fellow club members, engaging with digital content and social media, and communicating with native speakers online. By engaging with diverse people and online learning resources, they develop a personal learning network that supports their learning. Their experiences remind us that formal education is not the only place where language learning can take place.

The most significant recent developments in this direction have been those of the correlation between self-initiated learning through PLN and informal learners because this research not only fills a gap in the literature, which still rarely discusses informal learners, but also provides a broader perspective on how language learning can take place independently and informally in the digital era. Notably, discussions comparing responses from randomly selected learners in formal education settings with those of independent learners revealed a shared perception. School-based learning is often viewed as limited in scope, whereas independent exploration is perceived as having unlimited potential to acquire knowledge. Commenting on this issue, Cengiz Yurdakul (2017) argues that self-initiated learning is conceptualized as a form of lifelong learning, reflected in continuous learning and intrinsically motivated learning activities.

A substantial body of literature has been published in some journals about PLN. Early research in Indonesia indicates positive outcomes from PLN. Personal learning is valuable because it identifies digital literacy practices that support various professional practices, thereby enhancing learning in digital technology (Tour, 2016). Surveys such as those conducted by Arzu Ekoç (2020) have shown that blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media are suitable virtual platforms

for personal learning. Similarly, Davis (2013) found that PLN benefits learners and educators who use social media to build them.

It is believed that PLN is primarily grounded in empirical studies investigating how 20th-century information and communication technologies enable learners to create PLN that change how they interact online and help them become independent in both formal and informal learning contexts (Teresa & Jeffrey, 2011). Factors found to be influencing PLN have been explored in several studies, as noted by Arsarkij & Laohajarsang (2021) in their research, that teaching and learning using PLN on social networking tools with gamification play an important role in the maintenance of learning mood, and it has proven to have a high standard evaluation level.

This research notably fills a gap in current literature. Although extensive research has been conducted on PLN, no study has examined how informal learners independently learn English. On the other hand, most studies still focus on teachers' proficiency and on actively engaging learners, while informal learners have been understudied, and PLN is positioned as a supplementary learning resource rather than the primary source of learning. Theoretically, no study explicitly examines English learning among informal learners who learn independently through their PLN, including the benefits they derive from this approach. Studies on informal learners in Indonesia have primarily focused on social factors, economics, academic anxiety, motivation, and feelings of failure, but have not examined how these relate to learners' interest in and mood for learning, which are linked to improving English language skills.

This inquiry highlights that every learner follows a unique learning trajectory shaped by their interests and goals. This feature explores how learning changes amid global trends and rapid technological advances, and how PLN supports self-initiated learning. This study contributes to the exploration of PLN by examining learning experiences and how four informal learners learn English beyond formal educational contexts, and offers a perspective on “informal learners,” a group that has rarely been investigated in the Indonesian context.

1.2. Research Problems

Increasing access to digital technology opens new opportunities for English-language learners to rely less on formal education. Learners can now build a Personal Learning Network (PLN) to study independently across various digital platforms, including learning apps, social media, interest-based content, and online communities. In this way, learners consciously build a personal learning network that suits their conditions and needs.

Unfortunately, research on independent English language learning is still dominated by studies involving active learners or teacher proficiency. Knowledge about how informal learners carry out, initiate, and sustain self-initiated learning through PLN remains very limited. Therefore, this thesis not only examines learning activities but also explores how they build learning networks, the reasons for their choice of learning resources, and their views on the role of PLN in helping them continue learning outside formal education.

Furthermore, this study addresses the following research problems: first, to what extent can a PLN help language learners independently build a learning network and interact through various digital platforms; second, what reasons do learners have for learning based on their goals and motivation. Moreover, the last one, self-initiated learning through PLN, has an impact on language development, such as skills, knowledge, and attitudes, because English language learning is carried out naturally.

1.3. Research Questions

This research was conducted to address the issue of self-initiated learning through Personal Learning Network (PLN) in English language learning among learners, exploring how language learners develop their English skills beyond formal education. Therefore, this study formulates three interrelated research questions in the context of PLN as learning networks. The three research questions are presented as follows:

1. How do learners utilize their Personal Learning Network (PLN) to support informal self-initiated learning through interactions and connections facilitated within the network?
2. How do learners describe the role of their Personal Learning Network (PLN) in shaping their motivation for self-initiated English learning?
3. What benefits do learners perceive from learning English through their Personal Learning Network (PLN) in terms of their skills, knowledge, and attitudes?

The first to third research questions are answered qualitatively through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis with four learners. In an investigation of PLN, Warlick (2009) noted that learning through PLN expands access to previously unavailable knowledge, and technological advancements increasingly facilitate the control and capture of information. In his book, Warlick (2009) argues that PLN involves significant responsibility because our PLN is also part of others' networks. Then, Jongsermtrakoon and Songkla (2020) noted that PLN is a network of individuals shaped by what, how, where, and whom they want to learn.

The PLN concept encompasses lifelong learning, which involves pursuing knowledge through active social processes. Learners' PLNs strengthen and grow into sustainable learning networks. Technology has enabled PLNs to empower learners to capture more of the knowledge generated (Warlick, 2009, p. 13). The freedom in their learning system reflects what they learn. The learners create their learning programs and mobilize support networks from organizations and people who assist them (Mintzberg, 1989). Today, learners use a variety of tools for learning. Oblinger (2004) advocates using tools preferred by today's learners.

1.4. Purposes Of The Study

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate self-initiated learning through a Personal Learning Network (PLN) conducted by informal learners in the process of learning English. Specifically, this research aims to:

1. To explore how learners utilize their Personal Learning Network (PLN) to support their informal self-initiated English learning through interactions and connections within the network.
2. To examine how learners perceive the role of their Personal Learning Network (PLN) in shaping their motivation for self-initiated English learning.
3. To investigate the perceived benefits of using a Personal Learning Network (PLN) for self-initiated English learning in terms of learners' language skills, knowledge, and learning attitudes.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to generate empirically grounded, contextually relevant recommendations for informal digital learning that support self-initiated learning through a PLN accessible anywhere, anytime.

1.5. Significance of The Study

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of Personal Learning Networks (PLN) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning by extending its application to informal learning contexts. It brings together PLN theory (Warlick, 2009) and the concept of self-initiated learning (Tough, 1971) to provide a theoretical perspective on how learners can take greater control of their English learning beyond formal education. This study also broadens the theoretical discussion of PLN by considering the role of personal connections, digital resources, and learning environments in supporting independent English learning.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings of this study have the potential to contribute to educational development, particularly by fostering enthusiasm for learning. For learners, it aims to build the personal learning network they dream of, emphasizing enjoyable, self-initiated learning tailored to their preferences and delivered in a comfortable environment. It also provides new motivation and inspiration for those who do not pursue formal education, enabling them to continually hone their English skills through social media, podcasts, videos, short-form videos, films, gamification, and other platforms.

Practically, this study provides guidance for informal learners to build and utilize a Personal Learning Network (PLN) based on their interests, needs, goals, and learning preferences. Learners can connect with English users, online communities, digital platforms, and various learning resources without relying entirely on teachers or formal education. Thus, PLN can help learners create a flexible, personalized learning environment and access English learning resources anytime, anywhere.

1.6. Conceptual Framework

The main theory used in this study is the Personal Learning Network (PLN) proposed by Warlick (2009). Warlick claims that "Information and communication technologies (ICT)... have freed content from the printed page... enabling us to reshape our information experiences to suit our learning needs" (Warlick, 2009, p. 12). Thus, PLN is a group of self-initiated learners with their own learning needs and goals who come together to share common interests or solve various problems in learning English.

Additionally, the researcher combined Dörnyei's (2005) motivation theory and Kirkpatrick's Four Levels English Learning Evaluation to test the validity of the research findings, ensuring that the results of the study did not depend solely on a single data type or theory. "By combining multiple observers, theories, methods, and empirical materials, researchers can hope to overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-method, single-observer, and single-theory studies." (Denzin, 1978, p. 14). This research employs descriptive qualitative analysis to examine the data, focusing on behavior and content.

The analyzed data also come from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Research that produces descriptive data in the form of words, utterances, or the behavior of an observed individual is a qualitative research procedure (Bogdan & Taylor, 1998). It illustrates, analyses, and explains the phenomenon underlying the data. Therefore, this research not only explores PLN among learners engaged in self-initiated learning through PLN but also examines in depth their motivation, experiences, challenges, and learning outcomes. The subject of this

study is four informal learners who study English through a Personal Learning Network. The theoretical approach used is based on David Warlick's theory.

According to Arsarkij & Laohajaratsang (2021), the four components of PLN are: (1) learning resources, which include information, people, and networks; (2) learning tools, which are the devices, applications, platforms, or networks; (3) learning content, which means any knowledge content, particular subject content, or any area of interest that learners learn, and (4) learning activities, defined as the activities or processes that learners perform to gain knowledge or to contribute knowledge. Thus, in this research, it is also essential to analyze learners' content, such as videos or written work.

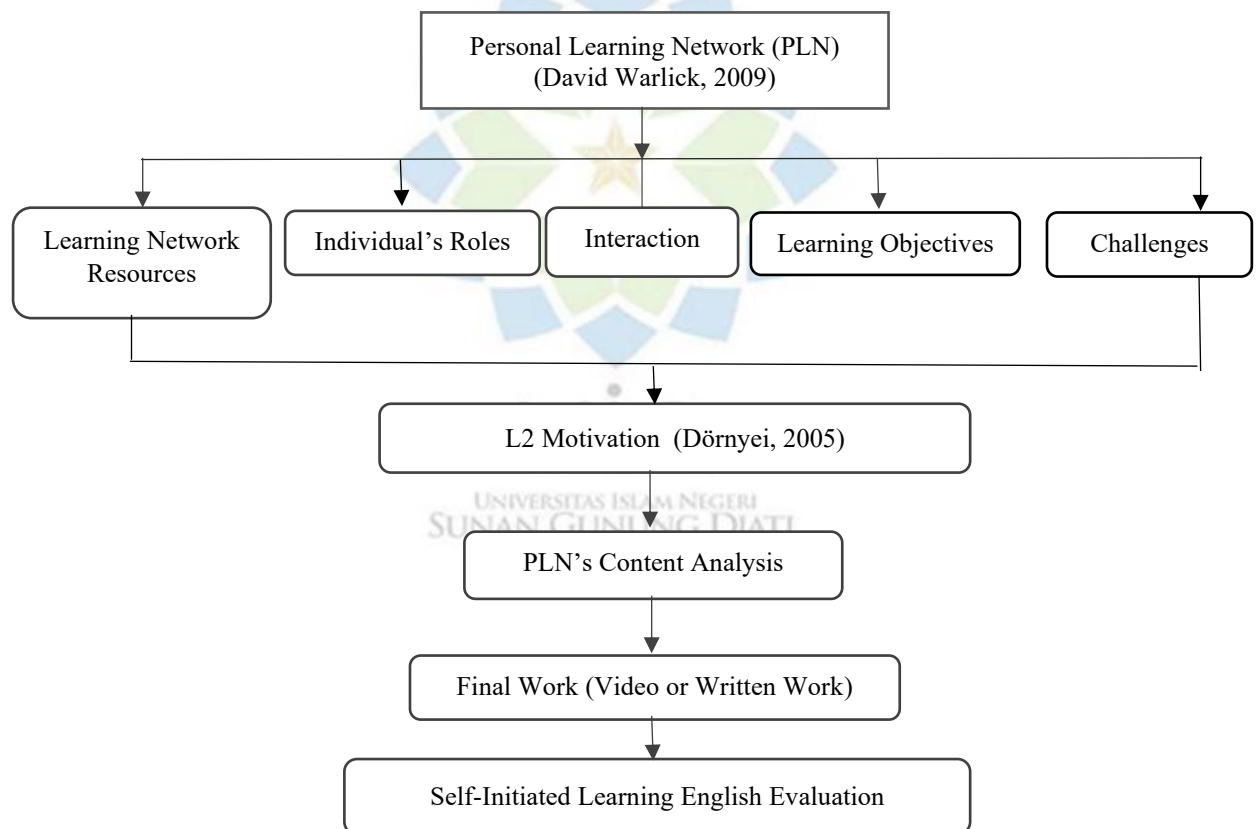


Figure 1. 1 Conceptual Framework of Personal Learning Network (PLN)

The framework in Figure 1.1 shows how the researcher analyzed PLN according to the components in Warlick's (2009) theory, which are: learning network resources; individual roles, such as which tools are used; interactions about

how individuals connect; learning objectives; and challenges in using PLN. Additionally, the researcher used Dörnyei's (2005) motivation theory to know each learner's motivation to learn English independently, using several indicators: Ideal-L2 Self, Ought-To L2 Self, and L2 Learning Experience. Furthermore, the learning process was evaluated using Kirkpatrick's (2005) theory, and the content produced by learners in the PLN, including videos and written work, was analyzed as learning outcomes using the rubric for oral proficiency (Brown, 2004, pp. 172-173) and writing proficiency scoring (IELTS, British Council, 2023).

In summary, learners who align with the needs of both formal and non-formal learning and are supported by communication and information technology are well connected. On the other hand, to achieve successful learning, they need to have good networking skills, which include content skills, to have good communication to convey ideas, thoughts, and opinions to the audience (Dillenbourg, 1999; Kintsch & Van Dijck, 1978), and (ii) the skill to develop, build, and maintain a Personal Learning Network (PLN). Learners who possess these skills will be able to form a more effective, meaningful, and valuable learning network to support their current and future learning needs (Rajagopal et al., 2012).

1.7. Contribution Of The Study

From a practical standpoint, this research provides several specific contributions to the field of English language learning and technology integration.

1.7.1. Empirical Contribution

This research makes an empirical contribution by examining how learners independently learn English through a Personal Learning Network (PLN) within a learning community, namely the Muthahhari English Club. To date, studies on self-initiated English learning have been conducted mostly in formal or institution-based educational contexts. In contrast, learning practices arising from learners' initiatives in community environments have been studied in depth relatively rarely.

Based on the concept of self-initiated learning, this study provides an empirical overview of how learners actively take on a role in their learning process, from setting learning goals and selecting resources and activities to evaluating their

English development. This study showed that learning English does not always depend on a formal curriculum but can develop meaningfully through social networks, communities, and daily interactions that learners build themselves.

1.7.2. Contextual Contribution

The contextual contribution of this research lies in the effort to understand the concept of self-initiated learning in the Indonesian social and cultural context, particularly through learning communities such as English Clubs. In the same vein, English language learning occurs not only individually but also through cooperation, social interaction, and a sense of togetherness among community members.

On the other hand, the Personal Learning Network (PLN) built by learners is not only a means of accessing learning resources but also a space for social interaction that supports learning. Through discussions, mutual support, and speaking practice, community members play an important role in helping and correcting one another as they develop their English language skills.

1.7.3. Practical Contribution

In practice, this research contributes to educational institutions and educators recognizing the potential of PLN as a complement and an alternative to English language learning. Then, it provides an overview of how English learning can be developed through simple yet meaningful activities, such as using digital media, small-group speaking practice, and informal discussions familiar to learners' lives. In addition, this research can inform formal educational institutions to support network- and community-based learning as part of a broader English learning ecosystem, where learning grounded in social relationships and learner initiatives can become a realistic and sustainable solution.

1.8. Review of Previous Studies

A growing body of published work provides evidence that networked learners encourage informal learning through connections with people across hemispheres and with technology-enabled learning resources. Thus, a person who learns online

and through connections has access to unlimited knowledge, and the learning process occurs naturally through technology. In a study investigating “Playing With Knives: The Socialization of Self-Initiated Learners”, Lancy (2021) confirms that there is an approach based on the belief that direct experience is an effective way to learn, including the approach that mistakes are part of the learning process. Furthermore, the natural learning process occurs not only through individual exploration but also through observation of the surrounding environment, including social interactions and peers.

Several lines of evidence indicate that self-initiated learning through personal learning networks supports lifelong learning without age limits. Morrison and McCutcheon (2019) confirm that older adults use the internet and social media to support their informal, self-directed learning. This study found that PLN use can increase older adults' motivation to learn, although its effects still warrant further research. In the context of digital and social learning, a sense of belonging through learning communities can enhance the learning experience and outcomes for digital learners (Thomas & Herbert, 2014). On the other hand, Camiel et al. (2014) claim that learners appreciated Twitter as a tool for facilitating the development of a PLN. This view is also supported by Wiske (2011), who found that interaction and relationships among individuals are key to success in informal learning.

In one of the earliest studies in this field, Rajagopal et al. (2012) found that self-initiated learning through PLN is often unconscious but can become more effective when accompanied by reflection. Their findings indicate that each social networking platform plays a distinct role in supporting learning, with Twitter emerging as the most extensive platform for various aspects of learning. As argued by Hase & Kenyon (2013, p. 112), the pedagogical approach aligned with the use of social media is heutagogy, the study of self-determined learning, which places the learner as responsible for their learning path and allows them to be the main controller of their own learning. Surveys such as those conducted by Arzu Ekoç (2020) have shown that blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media are suitable virtual platforms for personal learning. Similarly, Davis (2013) found that PLN benefit learners and educators who use social media to build them.

A broadly similar point has also recently been made by Arsarkij et al. (2021), who write, "A Design of a personal learning network on social networking tools with gamification for professional experience." In his study, he found that learning using PLN on social networking platforms with gamification support achieved a high level of assessment across innovation, evaluation standards, learning procedures, design processes, and learning activities. One qualitative case study by Oddone (2023) examined the trend in PLN. In his research, he reported that lecturers' use of PLN has a complex and profound impact on their professionalism, particularly in digital pedagogy and flexible and continuous learning, as it allows them to learn anytime, anywhere, from anyone (the global network), without limitations.

On the other hand, Dutta et al. (2024) found that learners underscore the potential of learner-driven personalized learning environments, such as PLE&N, to strengthen learners' self-directed and lifelong learning attributes. Insights from this research might encourage further innovative approaches to designing learner-driven, personalized learning environments to strengthen learners' self-directed and lifelong learning attributes. However, there is scope for further improvement in the PLE&N design and learning practices to further enhance learner involvement and learning outcomes. Nonetheless, the positive outcomes observed in this study highlight the potential of PLE&N to shift the learning paradigm from a traditional teacher-centric approach to a learner-centric, peer-based one.

The studies presented thus far provide evidence that self-initiated learning through PLN makes the learning process more flexible, natural, and unlimited. Learners can learn through peers, experience, social interaction, and various digital media, all at any time, anywhere, and with anyone. Each network created by an individual comprises both physical and virtual resources. When learning occurs naturally, knowledge spreads unlimited, and experience is the best teacher. However, these studies indicate the need for further research. Therefore, this study explores how these issues interact, particularly in English-language learning undertaken by informal learners through their PLN.