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Digital Detox in the Classroom: Exploring Its Impact on Student Engagement and Communication in ESL Settings in a Military University in Vietnam

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***Abstract*—The increasing use of digital tools in English as a Second Language (ESL) education has transformed learning, yet excessive dependence may hinder language acquisition, spontaneous communication, and long-term retention. This study examines the impact of a structured digital detox on student engagement and linguistic performance in an ESL classroom at military university in Vietnam. Using an action research approach, 64 military ESL students participated in a 12-week intervention involving classroom observation, instructor interviews, focus groups, and pre-and post-intervention assessments. Results indicate that reducing digital reliance enhances focus, verbal fluency, and critical thinking. While students initially struggled, they showed improved confidence, participation, and retention of vocabulary and grammar. However, challenges such as adaptation difficulties and the need for supplementary learning support were noted. This study highlights the benefits of a balanced technology approach in ESL learning, particularly in military settings. It offers pedagogical recommendations for integrating structured digital detox strategies to optimize language acquisition. Findings contribute to broader discussions on digital dependency in education, emphasizing fostering interactive, technology-conscious learning environments.**

***Index Terms*—digital detox, ESL learning, language retention, military education, technology dependence**

I. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid integration of technology into education has reshaped how students learn, interact, and process information. Digital tools, from interactive learning apps to multimedia platforms, have undeniably enhanced access to resources, but their pervasive presence also raises concerns. In English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, where communication skills are paramount, excessive reliance on technology may inadvertently hinder natural language acquisition. While technology provides valuable support, offering translation tools, speech recognition, and instant access to information, it can also become a barrier to authentic language interaction. Many ESL learners depend heavily on digital aids, sometimes at the expense of developing independent speaking, listening, and critical thinking skills. This paradox prompts an essential question: What happens when technology use is deliberately minimized in ESL education?

Digital detox refers to the intentional reduction or temporary elimination of digital tools to promote deeper engagement in learning. In classroom settings, this strategy encourages students to shift away from passive consumption and instead engage in active participation, face-to-face communication, and cognitive processing without digital distractions. The potential benefits of digital detox for ESL learners are particularly noteworthy. Language acquisition thrives on immersion, interaction, and spontaneous verbal expression, elements that can be diminished when students rely on translation apps or prerecorded language exercises. Reducing technological crutches may foster more organic speaking, listening, and comprehension skills.

While extensive research has explored the role of technology in language learning, fewer studies have examined the consequences of reducing digital reliance in ESL education. Existing literature focuses on how technology enhances learning, often overlooking its potential drawbacks, particularly in contexts where face-to-face interaction and cognitive engagement are critical for language acquisition. Moreover, discussions on a digital detox in education are primarily centred on general student well-being, attention span, and productivity. Very little research has been dedicated to its

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impact on ESL learners, who require interactive, real-time linguistic engagement to develop fluency. This gap becomes even more significant in specialized learning environments, such as military training institutions, where technology is restricted to enhance discipline, focus, and collaboration.

In military academic settings, where smartphones and digital devices are often limited or prohibited, students experience an enforced form of digital detox. This unique environment offers an opportunity to examine the effects of technology reduction on ESL learning without external variables interfering. Military trainees must develop rapid decision-making, precise verbal communication, and teamwork under high-pressure conditions, skills that align closely with language acquisition principles. The absence of constant digital access forces learners to engage in direct communication, rely on memory recall, and enhance verbal problem-solving skills, all of which contribute to more muscular linguistic development.

This study, titled "*Digital detox in the classroom: Exploring the impact of limiting technology use on English learning outcomes for students in a military university*" investigates the implications of reducing digital reliance on student engagement, linguistic performance, and overall communication skills. Our research aims to: (1) evaluate how digital detox influences active participation in ESL classrooms; (2) assess the impact of reduced technology on language retention and verbal fluency and (3) explore alternative, non-digital teaching strategies that maintain engagement and comprehension.

This study seeks to redefine the conversation around technology in ESL military learning. Rather than treating digital tools as an absolute necessity or an outright distraction, our research aims to examine when and how technology should be integrated or intentionally minimized for optimal language acquisition. This study will analyze the impact of digital detox on ESL military engagement, communication, and fluency, providing educators with practical insights into balancing technology use with the need for active, immersive language learning experiences. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of digital dependency in ESL education, offering strategies that empower learners to develop linguistic competence beyond the constraints of digital assistance.

II. Literature Review

A. Digital Detox in the Context of Education

(a). Definition of Digital Detox

Digital detox in education is not merely about reducing technology use but is also a strategy to restore traditional learning skills and improve psychological, social, and academic factors by reducing the negative influence of technology in the classroom (Rosen et al., 2017). In the recent research, this concept will be explored to identify the impact of limiting technology use on ESL (English as a Second Language) learning outcomes, particularly focusing on how reducing technology use can improve language communication skills among ESL students.

Digital detox, in educational settings, refers to the intentional reduction or temporary removal of technology used to improve focus, psychological well-being, and interpersonal communication skills. In military education, this concept extends beyond mere restriction, it is a pedagogical approach designed to cultivate discipline, cognitive engagement, and real-time communication skills, all essential in academic and operational contexts. The potential benefits of digital detox in military ESL education are not just promising, but also inspiring, offering a pathway to improved learning outcomes and enhanced communication skills.

Existing research suggests that excessive reliance on digital tools can diminish attention spans and reduce the depth of learning experiences (Twenge, 2017). While technology provides valuable resources for ESL students, particularly interactive language exercises and instant translation, an over-dependence on digital aids may weaken language retention and speaking fluency (Piller, 2024). In response to these challenges, military academies worldwide have explored structured digital detox strategies to balance leveraging technology for education and fostering traditional learning competencies (Dahlstrom et al., 2012).

(b). Key Factors Shaping the Success of Digital Detox in ESL Classrooms

1. Teaching Methods

(1). Designing Low-Tech Learning Strategies

How lessons are structured significantly affects how well students adjust to a learning environment with limited technology use. Instructors who find alternative ways to engage students can maintain learning momentum without relying on digital devices. Some practical approaches include:

- Interactive Language Games: Instead of using apps, teachers can introduce verbal challenges, role-playing, and storytelling exercises. These activities make language practice fun and engaging, keeping students focused without the need for screens (Gee, 2003).

- Group Discussions and Debates: Encouraging students to express their ideas, respond to opposing viewpoints, and defend their arguments fosters critical thinking and fluency. Engaging in face-to-face exchanges builds stronger communication skills than relying on digital feedback (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

- Practical Task-Based Learning: Assignments that require writing field reports, conducting interviews, or explaining concepts to peers make learning purpose-driven and applicable to real-life situations. This is especially relevant for military ESL learners, who must use English in command structures, briefings, and operational planning.

(2). The Role of Educators in Supporting Digital Detox

For digital detox to be effective, instructors must lead the transition, making students comfortable with low-tech learning methods. Some key responsibilities include:

- Framing digital detox as an opportunity, not a restriction – Students should understand that reducing screen time improves focus, enhances memory retention, and strengthens real-world communication (Wilmer et al., 2017).
- Using military-specific training exercises – Simulated mission debriefs, tactical response exercises and chain-of-command communication drills give learners hands-on experience using English without relying on digital tools.

2. Student Characteristics and Learning Environment

Every student approaches learning differently, meaning not all learners adjust to digital detox simultaneously. Several factors determine how well students transition to a low-tech ESL environment:

- Age and Learning Habits – Younger students tend to be more flexible with learning styles, whereas older learners may take longer to adjust if they are accustomed to digital learning. However, structured learning environments in military settings often make digital detox easier to implement, as cadets are already trained to follow discipline-based methods (Vygotsky, 1978).
- Language Proficiency – Beginners might find it challenging to practice without translation apps, while more advanced learners can focus on improving fluency and spontaneity through direct conversation.
- Learning Support Needs – Some students benefit from assistive technology, making digital detox more challenging. Teachers should provide alternative learning tools—such as peer support groups, note-sharing, or hands-on vocabulary exercises to ensure all students remain engaged.
- Understanding how the classroom environment can affect digital detox success is crucial for educators. By being aware of this, they can proactively create learning spaces that minimize digital distractions and maximize student engagement (Turkle, 2016).
- Class Size Matters – Smaller groups allow more interaction, making it easier for teachers to keep students engaged through direct conversation. In larger classrooms, structured activities such as roundtable discussions, peer-led presentations, and interactive group work help maintain active participation without digital distractions.
- Traditional vs. Virtual Learning – In-person classrooms offer more opportunities for spontaneous interaction, making it easier to minimize technology use. In contrast, online courses require a different approach, as completely removing digital tools is impractical.

3. Encouraging Active Participation Without Digital Tools

(1). How Students Stay Engaged in a Low-Tech Learning Space

When students shift their focus away from screens, they naturally become more involved in direct communication and problem-solving activities. Some practical ways to maintain engagement include:

Encouraging peer discussions, allowing students to exchange perspectives and refine their speaking skills through genuine interactions.

- Introducing real-world problem-solving scenarios so learners apply their English skills meaningfully rather than passively absorbing information.
- Focusing on military-specific communication drills, helping cadets develop quick response strategies for operational tasks (Turkle, 2016).

(2). How Digital Detox Boosts Motivation

Reducing screen dependence can increase motivation by fostering self-reliance and confidence in language use. Zimmerman (2008) found that students less reliant on technology became more proactive in their learning, seeking solutions rather than expecting automated answers. In military ESL settings, cadets trained in low-tech environments build more decisive decision-making and communication skills, preparing them for high-pressure command situations.

B. Rationale for Digital Detox in Military ESL Education

(a). Improving Focus and Cognitive Engagement

Studies indicate that reducing digital distractions improves concentration and deeper cognitive processing, particularly in structured environments where students must retain complex information (Ophir et al., 2009; Ward et al., 2017). The potential of a digital detox to enhance focus and cognitive engagement is inspiring, offering a new perspective on learning in military ESL education.

(b). Enhancing Face-to-Face Communication in ESL Learning

One of the primary challenges in ESL education is the over-reliance on digital translation tools, which can inhibit the development of natural speaking and listening skills (Stockwell, 2013). Research in military and discipline-based education shows that reducing digital dependence fosters active verbal engagement, a crucial factor in second language acquisition (Thapa, 2024). Traditional teaching methods emphasizing direct instructor-student interaction and peer discussion have enhanced language fluency and comprehension (Ellis, 2008).

(c). Strengthening Retention and Language Proficiency

Research has consistently demonstrated that long-term memory retention is more muscular when learners actively engage with material rather than passively consuming it through digital interfaces (Mayer, 2003). Salmerón et al. (2023) found that students who participated in low-tech or tech-free learning environments outperformed their peers in comprehension-based assessments. This is particularly relevant in military academies, where structured learning environments emphasize memorization, discipline, and applied knowledge, all benefit from a controlled digital detox.

C. Implementing Digital Detox Strategies in Military ESL Classrooms

(a). Structured Approaches to Digital Detox

For instance, a complete ban on electronic devices, controlled use of technology, dedicated 'no-tech' learning periods, and selective technology use for language learning are four primary models commonly used in military academies worldwide.

1. Complete Ban on Electronic Devices

Some academies enforce a strict no-device policy, removing all digital distractions to cultivate deep focus and interpersonal communication skills. While this approach is effective in enhancing classroom engagement and minimizing distractions, research suggests that it must be complemented by interactive learning strategies to prevent disengagement (Junco & Cotten, 2012).

2. Controlled Use of Technology

Instead of a complete ban, some institutions regulate when and how digital tools are used, allowing selected educational platforms while restricting non-academic technology use. This approach aligns with studies on blended learning, which indicate that controlled technology use leads to higher engagement compared to unrestricted digital access (Means et al., 2013).

3. Dedicated "No-Tech" Learning Periods

Some military academies allocate specific time blocks without digital devices, focusing entirely on verbal exercises, debates, and interpersonal communication tasks. Research on linguistic immersion strategies suggests that structured periods of device-free learning accelerate fluency and conversational confidence (Ortega, 2014).

4. Selective Technology Use for Language Learning

Another approach is intentionally using technology for targeted language-learning applications (e.g., pronunciation tools or interactive simulations) while restricting passive engagement, such as video consumption. This method has been shown to maximize the benefits of technology without fostering dependence (Qiao & Zhao, 2023).

D. Key Insights From Previous Research

A growing body of research highlights the potential advantages of reducing technology use in ESL classrooms, a practice commonly referred to as “digital detox”. This approach has been shown to improve communication skills, student focus, and engagement levels. However, these findings mainly apply to traditional educational settings, leaving a significant gap in understanding how digital detox functions in structured and high-discipline environments like military academies.

- Strengthening real-world communication: Cutting back on digital reliance encourages more frequent and meaningful verbal interactions, helping students develop stronger listening, speaking, and comprehension skills through direct engagement (Rosen et al., 2017).
- Enhancing focus and reducing stress: Research suggests that limiting classroom technology improves concentration by removing distractions and lowering anxiety linked to digital overload (Rosen et al., 2017).
- The value of traditional teaching approaches: Instructional strategies such as peer discussions, hands-on problem-solving, and collaborative learning have proven to be highly effective in language acquisition, even without technological support.
- Difficulties in reducing technology use: While digital detox offers clear benefits, removing technology entirely is not always feasible, especially in online ESL programs, where digital tools are integral to lesson delivery, tracking progress, and assessments.
- Encouraging deeper engagement: When screens are removed from the equation, students engage more actively in class discussions and group work, leading to greater language retention and practical communication skills (Turkle, 2016).

- Developing key cognitive and social skills: Beyond language learning, reducing technology use fosters better critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication, which is essential in high-discipline settings such as military training programs.

E. Research Gaps

Despite growing interest in digital detox strategies, little research focuses specifically on ESL learners. Most existing studies examine technology reduction in general academic environments without assessing its effects on second-language acquisition in "structured or immersive learning settings", where students are fully engaged in the learning process.

- Limited ESL-Specific findings: Digital detox has been studied in various educational fields, yet few empirical studies have examined its direct impact on ESL learners, particularly those in structured programs that demand intensive language use.
- Absence of research in military and specialized ESL Programs: Military academies and structured ESL programs present unique linguistic and disciplinary challenges. However, there is little research on how digital detox affects students in these environments.

This study aims to fill these gaps by providing a detailed analysis of digital detox in ESL education, particularly emphasising military training and highly structured learning programs. The findings of this study could potentially revolutionize ESL education, offering a new perspective on non-digital ESL learning and helping educators develop effective, technology-free teaching methods.

- Providing new perspectives on Non-Digital ESL learning: By evaluating how limiting technology affects language acquisition and communication skills, this study offers practical insights for students in regimented programs where real-world interaction is crucial.
- Helping educators develop low-tech strategies: The findings will support ESL instructors in designing effective, technology-free teaching methods, ensuring that students remain engaged while building essential language skills without digital reliance.

By investigating how digital detox impacts ESL learners in structured learning environments, this study contributes significantly to the ongoing debate on how to balance technology use with immersive, real-world language instruction. The findings of this study will provide valuable insights and perspectives, enriching the discourse on ESL education and technology use.

III. Methodology

A. Research Design

This study employs an action research approach to investigate how digital detox influences student engagement and communication in military ESL classrooms. While pre- and post-intervention tests were not conducted, the study relies on qualitative and observational tools such as instructor interviews, classroom observation, and student surveys to assess changes over time. Action research was chosen for its flexibility in exploring real-time adaptation and feedback in structured learning environments.

Rather than dividing students into separate experimental and control groups, this study tracks a single cohort over multiple weeks, documenting their experiences as they transition into a digital detox learning environment. The iterative nature of action research enables the researcher to assess short-term and long-term changes in students' engagement, focus, and academic performance.

B. Participants and Context

The study occurs in a distinctive setting: a military medical university, where students adhere to strict schedules and have limited access to personal technology. The participants are first-year and second-year ESL medical students enrolled in English courses.

Our study will closely follow a single cohort ($n \approx 64$) over several weeks to evaluate their adaptation to a classroom environment with reduced technology use, a topic of increasing importance in ESL education.

C. Phases of the Study

The study follows the action research cycle (Plan → Act → Observe → Reflect) across 12 weeks, divided into three phases:

(a). Phase 1: Initial observation (Weeks 1-4) to evaluate establishing a baseline understanding of student engagement, participation, and learning behaviors in a technology-free environment.

- *Classroom observations:* Teachers pay close attention to how students stay focused, interact with peers, and participate in lessons. They use a structured checklist to document engagement levels.
- *Instructor interviews:* Educators reflect on their experiences teaching without technology, discussing initial challenges, student motivation, and adjustments they have made to their teaching approach.
- *Student group discussions:* Students share their thoughts on learning in a technology-free classroom, discussing the benefits and the difficulties they have encountered while adapting.

- *Student survey (Week 4):* A short questionnaire helps assess students' ability to concentrate, confidence in speaking, and motivation to engage in class without digital devices.

(b). Phase 2: Instructional Adjustments (Weeks 5-8) to implement and refine non-digital teaching strategies based on Phase 1 findings.

- *Modification of teaching approaches:* Instructors adjust classroom techniques, incorporating discussion-based learning to enhance engagement, paper-based resources instead of digital materials and collaborative group activities to maintain interactivity.
- *Classroom observations (Continued):* to assess the impact of instructional adjustments on student participation.
- *Student focus group (Week 8):* to collect feedback on teaching modifications, identify effective strategies, and identify remaining challenges.

(c). Phase 3: Reflection and evaluation *(Weeks 9-12)* to assess the long-term impact of a technology-free classroom and finalize best practices.

- *Classroom observations (Final Round*) to evaluate sustained changes in student engagement and participation.
- *Instructor interviews (Week 4 & 12)* to gather final insights on successful instructional methods and overall classroom adaptation.
- *Student group discussion (Week 4, 8 &12):* Students reflect on their learning experience, engagement, and personal growth in a non-digital setting.
- *Student survey (Week 12)* measures students' final perceptions of focus, participation, and motivation, compared with Week 4 survey data.

D. Data Collection Methods

A multi-method approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of how students and instructors adapt to a technology-free classroom. This includes observations, interviews, focus groups, and surveys, ensuring data triangulation for validity and reliability.

(a). Classroom Observations (Weekly, Weeks 1-12) to track student engagement, focus, and participation throughout the study used a structured rubric to measure:

- Engagement levels (low, moderate, high).
- Participation frequency (active, passive, non-participatory).
- Indicators of focus (eye contact, body language, distractions).

(b). Instructor Interviews (Week 4 and Week 12) to understand how instructors adapt their teaching strategies in a technology-free setting.

- Week 4: Initial reflections on student behavior and teaching modifications.
- Week 12: Final reflections on what worked best and what needs further adjustment.

(c). Student Group Discussions (Week 4, Week 8 and Week 12) to gather qualitative insights into student adaptation, engagement, and challenges.

- Week 4: Initial experiences and concerns.
- Week 8: Feedback on instructional adjustments.
- Week 12: Final reflections on overall learning experiences.

(d). Student Surveys (Week 12) to measure perceived concentration, participation, and motivation at key phases of the study.

- Week 12: Final reflections.
- Likert-scale items (1-5) measuring focus and concentration, confidence in communication, overall satisfaction with learning in a technology-free classroom.

E. Data Analysis

A mixed-methods approach is used, integrating quantitative and qualitative analysis for a comprehensive understanding of learning in a non-digital classroom.

(a). Quantitative Data Analysis

1. Survey Data

- Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) analyze student-reported engagement.
- T-tests identify significant changes.

2. Observation Data: Engagement and participation ratings will be quantified and analyzed using trend analysis to track progress over time.

(b). Qualitative Data Analysis

- Instructor interviews and group discussions: Thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in student adaptation, teaching challenges and effective instructional techniques.

IV. Results and Discussion

A. Class Observation

(a). Changes in Student Engagement Over Time

Throughout the 12-week study, classroom observations indicated a gradual shift in student engagement as they adjusted to a technology-free ESL learning environment. While some students initially found it challenging, engagement levels rose consistently as they became more accustomed to interactive learning without digital tools as in the following graph:

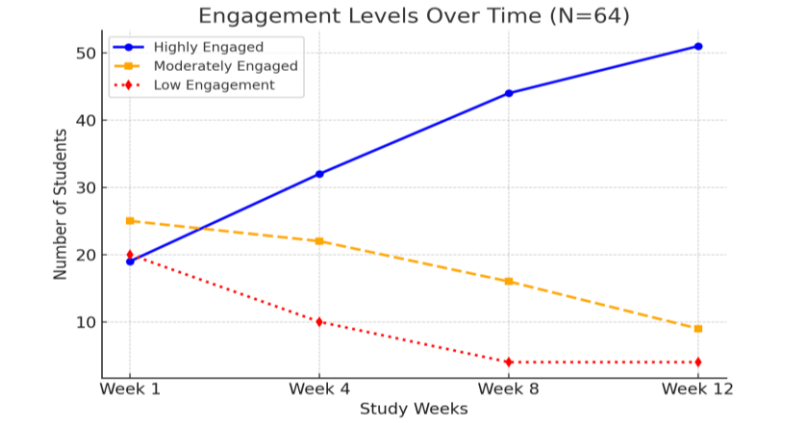

Figure 1. Changes in Student Engagement

One of the most prominent findings from this study is the increased student engagement in verbal communication over the 12 weeks. As students adapted to a technology-free classroom, their reliance on face-to-face discussions, debates, and collaborative tasks became more evident. This observation is consistent with Garg et al. (2024), who argue that limiting technology fosters more assertive listening, speaking, and comprehension skills by compelling students to engage directly with their peers and instructors. The gradual reduction in distractions observed in Weeks 5-12 suggests that students actively participated in discussions rather than passively consuming information from digital devices. The increase in focus and participation mirrors Turkle's (2016) assertion that students become more invested in real-time discussions when technology is removed.

However, this study adds a new perspective by demonstrating that military ESL learners may require a longer adaptation period due to their initial reliance on structured digital learning aids. While engagement levels ultimately increased, some students required additional instructional support in Weeks 1-4 to adjust to the lack of digital learning tools.

(b). Improvement in Focus and Attention

Maintaining focus improved as students moved away from multitasking with digital devices and adapted to a more structured, discussion-driven learning approach.

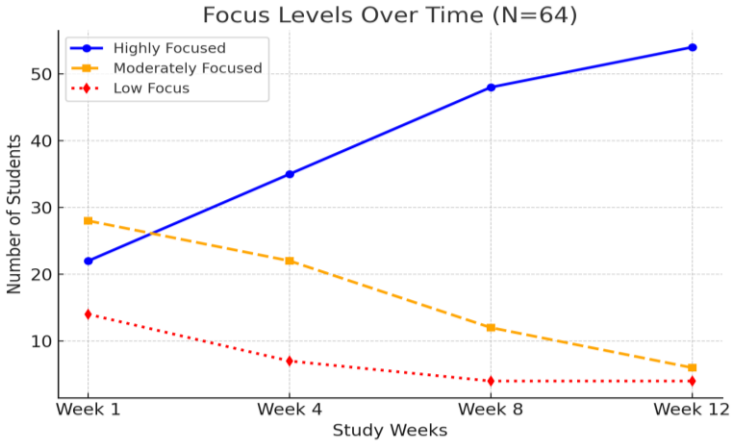

Figure 2. Improvement in Focus and Attention

Findings also support the argument that a technology-free environment promotes better focus and reduces cognitive overload, as outlined in Garg et al. (2024). Over the 12 weeks, students demonstrated progressive improvements in sustained attention, as seen in the steady increase of students exhibiting high levels of concentration (from 34.4% in week 1 to 84.4% in week 12). This aligns with prior research indicating that reducing screen exposure minimizes cognitive distractions, allowing students to engage in classroom activities without digital interruptions fully.

Additionally, qualitative feedback from instructors suggested that students exhibited lower stress levels, particularly when engaging in group discussions rather than managing multiple digital inputs.

However, while focus levels improved overall, a small subset of students (6.3%) struggled with maintaining attention by week 12. This suggests that not all learners benefit equally from a digital detox, highlighting the need for individualized support strategies, particularly in military learning environments where structured training is essential.

(c). Reduction in Classroom Distractions

Observations also tracked behaviours linked to losing focus, such as looking away, fidgeting, and side conversations. A clear reduction in these behaviours was noted as students adjusted to the technology-free setting.

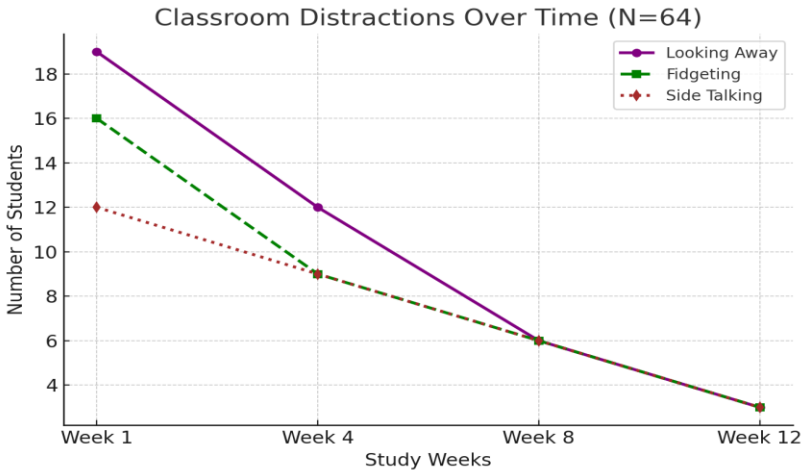

Figure 3. Reduction in Classroom Distractions

Throughout the 12-week study, noticeable improvements were observed in students' ability to maintain focus in a classroom without digital devices. In the beginning, nearly a third of the students frequently lost concentration, 29.7% were looking away, 25% fidgeted, and 18.8% engaged in side conversations. However, as weeks progressed, these behaviours declined significantly, with only a tiny fraction (4.7%) still showing signs of distraction by Week 12. This shift indicates that students gradually adapted to a more discussion-based, technology-free environment, reinforcing findings from Garg et al. (2024), which suggest that reducing screen exposure enhances attention and reduces cognitive overload. Turkle (2016) also emphasized that the absence of digital tools encourages more meaningful engagement in face-to-face discussions, a key component of ESL learning. Despite these positive trends, a few students struggled to maintain focus, possibly due to their prior reliance on digital resources for learning. This highlights the importance of employing varied instructional strategies to support students transitioning to a technology-free classroom while maximizing the benefits of direct interaction and deeper engagement.

B. Instructor Interviews

The semi-structured interviews with instructors at week 4 and week 12 provided valuable insights into how teachers adapted to a technology-free ESL classroom and how student engagement, participation, and communication skills evolved over time. The responses highlight initial challenges in student adaptation, modifications to teaching strategies, and long-term benefits observed throughout the 12-week digital detox period.

(a). Initial Reflections

By the fourth week, instructors observed a mixed but positive shift in student behaviour. Initially, many students felt uneasy without access to digital tools, mainly regarding notetaking and information recall. *"Some of them kept reaching for their phones instinctively, only to realize they were not allowed,"* one instructor noted. However, after a few weeks, students began to find alternative ways to engage, relying more on peer discussions and in-class materials.

One of the most significant adjustments for instructors was keeping students engaged without screens as a fallback. Previously, learners could quickly search for definitions, review grammar explanations, or check pronunciation apps. Without those tools, the responsibility shifted more toward active classroom participation. To adapt, instructors redesigned activities to be more interactive, incorporating role-playing, group challenges, and collaborative exercises. *"It forced them to rely on each other more, which improved teamwork,"* one instructor commented.

Another noticeable change was the way students interacted with their peers. Instead of retreating behind screens, they became more engaged in face-to-face discussions, which previous research highlighted as a benefit of digital detox in language learning (Rosen et al., 2017; Turkle, 2016). One instructor described the shift as follows: *"They were hesitant at first, but now they listen more attentively and respond more thoughtfully in discussions."*. However, not all students found the transition smooth. A handful struggled with independent learning, particularly those who relied heavily on

translation apps or digital notetaking. *"A few students mentioned that organizing their notes without a tablet was difficult. They felt like they were losing efficiency,"* another instructor reported. While some learners thrived in the structured, discussion-heavy format, others missed the convenience of digital tools, reinforcing prior research that suggests a complete removal of technology may not work for all learners (Wilmer et al., 2017).

Despite these challenges, most instructors agreed that a technology-free classroom promoted stronger engagement, better focus, and more meaningful communication. While some students required more time to adjust, the majority became more confident in speaking and participating over time. *"By the eighth week, even the quieter students were joining in conversations,"* one instructor noted.

In the long run, the experience highlighted both the advantages and limitations of digital detox. The lack of digital distractions enhanced real-time communication skills. However, some instructors suggested that a hybrid approach that allows limited technology for personal study while keeping classroom interactions screen-free might be a more sustainable model for future courses.

(b). Final Reflections

After three months of learning without technology, instructors noticed a gradual but meaningful shift in how students approached their studies. The transition was not immediate, some students hesitated at first, struggling to adjust to a classroom without quick access to digital resources. However, over time, their engagement levels changed, and so did their approach to communication. One instructor noted: *"At the start, students seemed sure how to keep up without their usual tech tools. However, by the end, they were actually talking more, listening more, and surprisingly, taking more risks in discussions."* This aligns with research suggesting that reducing digital dependency can foster more natural verbal communication (Rosen et al., 2017; Turkle, 2016).

By midway through the study, instructors observed that students participated more frequently, particularly in group discussions. Some key patterns emerged:

- More active engagement: Students relied more on speaking, debating, and asking clarifying questions to their peers and instructors without screens as a fallback.
- Better focus: Fewer distractions meant students were paying closer attention to explanations and peer responses.
- Improved eye contact and body language: Students seemed more present in conversations, mirroring key behaviours of effective communicators.

These findings are consistent with studies by Wilmer et al. (2017), which emphasize that face-to-face interaction enhances concentration and verbal fluency.

Despite these positive shifts, not all students found the transition easy. Some struggled with note-taking, particularly those used to digital dictionaries or online resources for quick word retrieval. One instructor admitted, *"I had to remind myself that some students were experiencing this learning for the first time. They needed extra guidance on how" to organize notes effectively."* Another added, *"A few students felt frustrated when they could not just Google something. However, eventually, they started asking their peers instead, which was great for engagement".*

This suggests that while digital detox can boost classroom communication, it may require extra scaffolding to help students develop new study habits. At the end of the 12 weeks, most instructors agreed that a technology-free classroom had real benefits but also noted the importance of balance.

C. Group Discussion

Student feedback over 12 weeks offered a layered view of how learners adjusted to a technology-free ESL classroom. While reactions varied, clear patterns emerged, revealing this learning shift's struggles and benefits. In the first few weeks, discussions reflected a mixed response. Some students found it refreshing to be without distractions, while others felt lost without quick access to digital dictionaries or online resources. One student admitted: *"I kept reaching for my phone out of habit. It initially felt strange, especially when I wanted to check a word or fact."* Another added, *"Taking notes by hand took more time than I was used to. I was not sure whether I was writing down the right things."* These early struggles align with Turkle (2016) and Garg et al. (2024), who found that reducing digital reliance initially causes discomfort but can lead to deeper engagement. Students accustomed to passive learning, where answers are readily available, had to relearn thinking critically and engaging actively.

By midway through the study, a shift became evident. Students participated more, asked more questions, and relied on peers for clarification instead of digital tools. Classroom discussions became more dynamic, with more back-and-forth dialogue rather than isolated, tech-dependent learning. One student shared: *"At first, I missed being able to Google things. However, now, I listen more carefully and ask my classmates when I do not understand something."* This reflects Wilmer et al. (2017), who argue that peer interaction in a non-digital setting strengthens real-world communication skills. When students no longer rely on digital tools for immediate answers, they engage in deeper discussions and retain information more effectively.

By the end of the study, most students reported feeling more confident speaking in class. Many noted that they had developed better concentration habits and no longer wanted to check their phones or rely on digital shortcuts. One student's final reflection: *"I never realized how much I depended on my phone before. Now, I feel more comfortable speaking up because I have gotten used to thinking through my responses instead of checking everything online."* These findings support Rosen et al. (2017), who argue that a technology-free environment fosters more profound learning and

self-reliance. They also suggest that digital detox does not just reduce distractions and actively helps students develop new language learning and communication strategies.

However, some students still struggled with information retrieval, particularly those used to digital search tools. Besides, a few learners felt note-taking was slower than typing on a laptop. Moreover, not all students adapted at the same pace, some required additional support in organizing study materials.

Despite initial frustration, most students found value in the experience by Week 12. The shift away from technology forced them to engage more, rely on their thinking, and actively contribute to discussions, all crucial skills for real-world communication. One student said, *"It was hard at first, but looking back, I would not change it. I feel like I learned more this way."* These insights reinforce previous research suggesting that while technology has its place in education, limiting its use can lead to stronger engagement, better communication, and more independent learning (Rosen et al., 2017; Turkle, 2016).

D. Student Survey

This study illuminates how limiting technology use in ESL classrooms affects learning, especially in a military setting. The findings reveal benefits and challenges, offering a fresh perspective on how reducing digital distractions influences students' concentration, communication skills, and ability to learn independently.

(a). Improving Focus and Critical Thinking

More than 60% of students reported that they found it easier to stay focused during lessons without digital devices. This supports earlier research suggesting that reducing screen time can enhance attention span and improve cognitive processing. A tech-free classroom may reinforce these qualities in a military environment, where discipline and mental resilience are key to helping students retain information more effectively.

(b). Boosting Real-World Communication

Around 65% of participants stated that digital detox encouraged them to engage more in class discussions and improved their spoken English. Studies suggest that relying too much on translation apps and other digital aids can slow natural language development. Without these tools, students must find ways to express themselves independently, strengthening fluency. This shift is particularly valuable in a military context where clear and confident communication is essential.

(c). The Role of Teaching Strategies

How well students adapt to digital detox depends largely on teaching methods. When instructors replace tech-based activities with interactive learning, such as role-playing, debates, and problem-solving exercises, students tend to stay engaged. In this study, learners who participated in these methods reported greater confidence in speaking English. This suggests that, with the right approach, removing technology does not have to hinder language learning; it can enhance learning outcomes.

(d). Challenges and Adaptation

Despite its advantages, transitioning away from technology was not easy for everyone. Some students struggled initially, especially those used to digital note-taking and online research. However, over time, many adjusted by switching to handwritten notes and engaging more in peer discussions. These findings indicate that a gradual approach to digital detox, rather than an abrupt ban, may be the best way to help students adapt smoothly.

(e). Implementing Digital Detox in Military ESL Training

Military ESL classrooms present a unique learning environment where structured routines and discipline play a significant role. A well-planned digital detox strategy can encourage students to develop stronger problem-solving skills, focus better, and engage more actively in discussions. Research suggests that designated "no-tech" periods, rather than complete bans, may strike the right balance by allowing students to refine essential language skills while benefiting from occasional digital support.

The results, thus, suggest that reducing technology use can help students concentrate better, improve their communication skills, and become more self-reliant learners. However, since some struggled with the transition, future implementations should take a step-by-step approach rather than imposing an immediate ban. By incorporating structured, low-tech teaching strategies, military ESL programs can maximize the benefits of digital detox while ensuring students develop the language skills needed for real-world situations.

V. CONCLUSION

This study explores how limiting digital tools in ESL classrooms, particularly in military education, affects student learning. Although the transition was initially challenging, students gradually became more engaged, improved their communication skills, and demonstrated better focus over 12 weeks.

One notable change was the increase in verbal participation. Without relying on digital devices, students were encouraged to engage in discussions and collaborate with peers, reinforcing findings from previous studies (Rosen et al.,

2017). However, military ESL learners took longer to adjust, which suggests that reducing technology use should be done gradually rather than all at once.

Another key observation was the improvement in concentration. At the start of the study, only 34.4% of students maintained strong focus, but by the twelfth week, this number had risen to 84.4%. Distractions like fidgeting and side conversations became less frequent, supporting earlier research that links lower screen exposure to better attention (Turkle, 2016; Rosen et al., 2017). However, a small group (6.3%) still struggled to focus, indicating that some students may need additional support.

Feedback from instructors and students supported these findings. More than 60% of students reported feeling more focused in class, while 65% noticed improved spoken English due to less reliance on translation apps. That being said, some students found note-taking more difficult without digital tools, highlighting the need for a step-by-step approach to reducing technology use rather than an abrupt ban.

Thus, when applied thoughtfully, limiting technology in military ESL classrooms can improve student engagement and learning outcomes. Future strategies should balance minimal but purposeful technology use with interactive, structured teaching methods. While digital tools still have value, restricting them in the classroom can help students develop stronger focus, better communication skills, and greater independence in their learning. However, reducing reliance on digital devices in ESL classrooms can be both a challenge and an opportunity in a military setting, where discipline and structure shape the learning environment. Instead of removing technology all at once, a step-by-step approach works better. For example, instructors can limit screen use during discussions and writing exercises before transitioning to an entirely low-tech classroom.

Without digital tools, interactive learning methods become even more important. Military students are already trained to work in teams, so incorporating group discussions, role-playing, and tactical problem-solving exercises can make lessons more engaging. These methods also prepare them for real-life scenarios where immediate digital assistance is unavailable.

Another key adjustment is helping students improve their note-taking skills. Many rely on digital notes, so introducing structured techniques like the Cornell Method or handwritten summaries can make the transition smoother. Encouraging students to support one another through peer mentoring ensures that no one falls behind during the shift away from digital aids. By combining gradual changes, practical exercises, and collaborative learning, military ESL students can improve their focus, communication, and adaptability, skills that are just as critical in the classroom as they are in the field.

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