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UNPACKING SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN SELF-PACED EXTENSION LEARNING: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EFL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES

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Abstract: Self-Paced Extension Learning (SPEL) is increasingly adopted in secondary EFL classrooms to personalize instruction and foster learner autonomy. However, prior research has largely emphasized learning outcomes, offering limited insight into the self-regulatory and affective-cognitive processes shaping learner engagement. This study addresses this gap by exploring learners' experiences within SPEL through the lens of Pintrich's self-regulated learning (SRL) framework. Specifically, the study is guided by two research questions: (1) How does SPEL influence learners' affective-cognitive engagement and SRL processes? and (2) How do individual differences and contextual factors mediate learner success and struggle in SPEL? Using a phenomenological-narrative qualitative design, data were collected from 36 lower-secondary EFL students through interviews, focus groups, reflection journals, and LMS artifacts. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis with a hybrid approach—deductive coding based on Pintrich's SRL phases and inductive coding for emergent themes. Findings indicate that SPEL activates all SRL phases, but engagement varies significantly. Learners who set feedback-driven goals, managed pacing, and adapted strategies demonstrated higher motivation and agency, whereas others experienced anxiety, cognitive overload, and task avoidance. Digital literacy and instructional support emerged as key mediating factors. These findings contribute to a process-oriented. understanding of SPEL and highlight the need for structured scaffolding to ensure equitable learner engagement.
Keywords: *self-paced extension learning; self-regulated learning; EFL learners; affective-cognitive engagement; digital literacy; instructional scaffolding*.

INTRODUCTION

The achievement of EFL classrooms in secondary schools is most frequently measured by learners' progress toward individually designed language goals, and this process depends on learners' ability to regulate their learning and apply effective self-control strategies. Recent work in the field emphasizes that self-regulated learning (SRL) processes, adaptive pacing, and diagnostic pathways are central to supporting second language development in technology-mediated settings (Revishvili & Tsereteli, 2024; Kong et al., 2024). In contemporary educational discourse, there is a growing recognition that learners are not passive recipients of knowledge but active agents who construct meaning through strategic engagement and continuous self-monitoring. In particular, self-paced extension activities that are aligned with learners' proficiency can provide purposeful practice opportunities within the Zone of Proximal Development, facilitating improvements in vocabulary, grammatical retention, and communicative fluency in secondary EFL contexts (Khan et al., 2023; Luo & Wang, 2023; Wang, 2023; Yabukoshi & Mizumoto, 2024).

Conversely, designs that do not account for learners' self-regulatory capacities can lead to cognitive overload, insufficient access to corrective feedback, and pacing demands that exceed adolescents' executive-functional capabilities, producing frustration and disengagement. This challenge becomes even more pronounced in digitally mediated environments, where learners must independently navigate content, manage time, and interpret

feedback without continuous teacher guidance (Fauziah & Diana, 2023; Habók et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023; Shurovi et al., 2024; Yabukoshi & Mizumoto, 2024). Contemporary evidence highlights the importance of adaptive SPEL models that scaffold self-monitoring and provide timely feedback to learners in secondary EFL contexts (Khan et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2024)

Self-Paced Extension Learning (SPEL) is an instructional approach in which learners regulate the order, pace, and additional learning activities beyond core curriculum content, guided by diagnostic pathways (Khan et al., 2023; Wang, 2023; Xia et al., 2023; Yabukoshi & Mizumoto, 2024). Compared to traditional asynchronous learning, SPEL integrates adaptive learning routes allowing learners to select content aligned with their strengths and weaknesses (Khan et al., 2023; Wang, 2023; Xia et al., 2023). This adaptability not only supports differentiated instruction but also enables learners to experience a sense of ownership over their learning trajectories. Its implementation in secondary schools requires adequate digital infrastructure, teacher preparedness, and structured scaffolding. Teachers must develop technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) to curate digital resources, interpret learning analytics, and facilitate interaction (Khan et al., 2023; Shurovi et al., 2024). When supported effectively, SPEL enhances learner autonomy, motivation, and ownership of learning, while technology-mediated feedback serves as a bridge between confusion and proficiency (Khan et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2024; Yabukoshi & Mizumoto, 2024).

SPEL also plays a significant role in supporting personalized learning pathways, intrinsic motivation through autonomy and competence, and long-term language development (Khan et al., 2023;Wang, 2023; Xia et al., 2023). However, despite its increasing adoption, research findings remain inconclusive regarding how self-paced modalities influence learners' affective and cognitive experiences in secondary education (Habók et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023; Wang, 2023). Most existing studies focus on learning outcomes such as achievement scores or completion rates, providing limited insight into the self-regulatory processes that mediate these outcomes (Kundu & Bej, 2024). This limitation suggests that current understandings of SPEL are still partial, as they overlook the internal processes that shape learners' engagement and persistence. This indicates a need for a more process-oriented understanding of SPEL in EFL contexts (Kundu & Bej, 2024).

SPEL improves learning efficiency, conceptual understanding, and learner autonomy (Herold & Seufert, 2025). Studies show that flexible pacing and adaptive learning systems allow learners to revisit challenging material and progress through familiar content more quickly, resulting in improved retention and engagement (Khan et al., 2023; Luo & Wang, 2023; Wang, 2023). Recent developments further emphasize the effectiveness of adaptive self-paced systems in enhancing domain generalization and learning transfer (Zhu et al., 2024), with evidence also underscoring the need for data-informed design to support learner trajectories in EFL contexts (Habók et al., 2024; Tatnall, 2023; Yabukoshi & Mizumoto, 2024). These findings suggest that SPEL has strong potential to support learning trajectories in EFL contexts (Luo & Wang, 2023; Wang, 2023; Yabukoshi & Mizumoto,2024).

However, this positive portrayal is not consistent across all studies, as some findings indicate that autonomy gains depend on learners' prior self-regulatory capacity and instructional support (Hsu & Liu, 2023). In contexts with limited guidance, flexibility may reduce persistence and encourage superficial task completion. This suggests that SPEL does not inherently enhance autonomy but operates under specific conditions.

However, most of these studies remain outcome-oriented, focusing on measurable performance indicators rather than explaining how learners regulate their learning processes within SPEL environments. While improvements in scores and completion rates are well documented, the underlying mechanisms that lead to these outcomes are not sufficiently examined (Habók et al., 2024; Wang, 2023). As a result, there is a risk of oversimplifying learning as merely a product rather than a complex, dynamic process involving cognitive, metacognitive, and emotional dimensions. There is still limited understanding of how SPEL shapes learners' engagement and self-regulatory processes beyond measurable outcomes (Wang, 2023; Yabukoshi & Mizumoto, 2024).

Self-regulated learning (SRL) is widely acknowledged as a key determinant of effective learning, especially in digital and self-paced contexts. In second language acquisition, SRL processes enable learners to plan linguistic goals, apply cognitive, metacognitive strategies, and evaluate performance for future improvement

(Wang, 2023; Xia et al., 2023).

Recent studies highlight that digital learning environments can enhance SRL when supported by feedback, learning analytics, and scaffolding (Ng et al., 2024; Tatnall, 2023). Moreover, SRL in online and blended learning is increasingly influenced by learners' ability to manage cognitive load, maintain motivation, and adapt strategies in real time (Luo & Wang, 2023; Ng et al., 2024; Yabukoshi & Mizumoto, 2024). These findings indicate that SRL is a situational and evolving process shaped by interactions between learners and their environments. However, many studies treat SRL as a predictive variable rather than examining how it is enacted dynamically during learning (Tatnall, 2023). The dynamic interaction between SRL phases and SPEL environments remains insufficiently explored, particularly in secondary EFL contexts (Khan et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2024; Wang, 2023; Xia et al., 2023).

Individual differences such as digital literacy, prior language exposure, and perceived instructional support have been identified as critical factors influencing learner engagement in SPEL environments (Fauziah & Diana, 2023; Ng et al., 2024; Shurovi et al., 2024; Yabukoshi & Mizumoto, 2024). Learners with higher digital literacy are better able to navigate platforms, interpret feedback, and regulate their learning, while those with limited digital skills often experience cognitive overload and disengagement (Fauziah & Diana, 2023; Khan et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2024; Shurovi et al., 2024; Feng & Liu, 2024).

Recent studies emphasize that digital competence and environmental support significantly mediate learners' ability to benefit from self-paced systems, especially in blended and online learning contexts (Tatnall, 2023). Additionally, research highlights that teacher scaffolding and peer interaction play essential roles in supporting learners who struggle with self-regulation (Kundu & Bej, 2024; Ng et al., 2024). This suggests that learning success in SPEL environments cannot be attributed solely to individual ability but must be understood as the result of complex interactions between personal, technological and pedagogical factors. The interaction between individual differences and self-paced learning demands in shaping learner success and failure remains underexplored (Ng et al., 2024; Tatnall, 2023).

Although SPEL has been increasingly implemented in secondary EFL contexts, there are limited studies that systematically examine how self-regulated learning processes, individual differences, and contextual factors interact to shape learner engagement (Kundu & Bej, 2024; Tatnall, 2023). More specifically, limited study has traced SRL phases longitudinally across forethought, performance, and reflection within SPEL among lower-secondary EFL learners. In addition, individual differences are mostly examined through quantitative correlations, limiting understanding of learners' real-time experiences and strategy use, which cannot be captured through outcome-based approaches. This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological design to address this gap by capturing these processes and interactions.

This study addresses the following research questions: (1) How does SPEL affect learners' emotional and cognitive engagement experiences and their SRL processes? (2) How do individual differences moderate motivational and environmental factors influencing learner success and struggles?

This study contributes to the literature in several important ways. First, it adopts a process-based conceptualization of SPEL, moving beyond outcome-focused approaches to examine how learning unfolds over time. Second, it applies Pintrich's SRL framework to analyze learners' engagement across forethought, performance, reflection, and adaptation phases within a secondary EFL context. This study is one of the first qualitative, process-oriented accounts that operationalize Pintrich's SRL phases within SPEL in secondary EFL settings. Third, it identifies digital literacy as a gatekeeper skill, demonstrating its critical role in enabling or constraining learners' participation in self-paced environments. By including AI-enabled SRL (Chang et al., 2023; Wei, 2023), online collaborative learning, and digitally mediated feedback, the study integrates theoretical and practical perspectives to inform equitable SPEL design and implementation in diverse learner populations (Fauziah & Diana, 2023; Habók et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023;Luo & Wang, 2023; Ng et al., 2024; Wang, 2023; Xia et al., 2023; Yabukoshi & Mizumoto, 2024).

The findings have theoretical implications for SRL in technology-mediated language learning and practical implications for designing adaptive SPEL environments that scaffold regulation, feedback, and learner autonomy in secondary EFL classrooms (Habók et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2024; Wang, 2023; Yabukoshi &

Mizumoto, 2024). By employing a qualitative phenomenological-narrative design, the study captures learners' lived experiences, providing a deeper and more nuanced understanding of engagement patterns. In doing so, the study also bridges the gap between theoretical models of SRL and practical classroom implementation, offering insights that are both conceptually grounded and pedagogically relevant.

This study has theoretical, practical, and pedagogical significance. Theoretically, it extends SRL theory by situating it within SPEL contexts and demonstrating how regulatory processes operate in technology-mediated language learning. Practically, it provides insights for designing effective SPEL environments. The findings highlight the need for structured scaffolding, including clear task sequencing, timely and actionable feedback, and explicit guidance on strategy use emphasizing the importance of scaffolding, feedback, and adaptive support systems (Fauziah & Diana, 2023; Luo & Wang, 2023). Further, for low-digital-literacy learners, simplified interfaces, guided task pathways, and consistent feedback mechanisms are essential to prevent cognitive overload and disengagement. The study therefore suggests that hybrid approaches—combining self-paced learning with teacher mediation, peer collaboration, and structured checkpoints—may be more effective in under-resourced settings. Pedagogically, it informs secondary EFL teachers on how to implement equitable self-paced instruction that accommodates diverse learners, particularly those with varying levels of digital literacy and self-regulation. By highlighting the conditions that support or hinder learner engagement, the study contributes to the development of more inclusive and effective self-paced learning practices. Furthermore, the study provides a foundation for future research to explore intervention strategies that strengthen learners' SRL capacities within SPEL frameworks, thereby enhancing both short-term performance and long-term language development.

METHOD

This work employed a qualitative interpretive design of phenomenological–narrative inquiry to understand learners' lived experiences in SPEL environments. Phenomenological approach (e.g., exploration of motivation, cognitive load) and narrative inquiry (e.g., reconstructive analysis of SRL across Pintrich's (2000) four phases were used respectively (Kurt & Tomak, 2022). This approach integrated process-oriented and outcome-oriented research to fill the gap for insights beyond outcome-focused research (Du et al., 2025; Saks, 2025). The four-phase SRL model described by Pintrich (2000) has been repeatedly invoked to organize analysis around forethought (goal setting and planning) and preparation, monitoring, control, and reaction/self-reflection, with contemporary studies reinforcing how these phases operate within diverse learning environments (including SPEL) (Clayton Bernard & Kermarrec, 2022; Hung, L. T., & Tang, 2024; Sins et al., 2025; Yang et al., 2025; Zhou & Thompson, 2023).

Thematic analysis using an inductive-deductive hybrid approach Create codes that fell into either deductive or inductive, with the deductive being guided by Pintrich's SRL phases (forethought, performance, reflection, and adaptation phases) and the obviously emergent themes falling outside of any existing theory (Lindberg et al., 2024; Goyanes et al., 2024).

The Coding Process were as follow: (1) Transcription and familiarization, (2) Line-by-line coding inductively, (3) Deductive categorization using SRL stages (4) Development and refinement of themes. Ensuring intercoder reliability, a second researcher independently coded 20% of the data with 95% agreement following reconciliation. Trustworthiness Following the Mirhosseini & Pearson (2025): (1) Member Checking and prolonged engagement for achieving credibility; (2) Audit trail for methodological decisions that enhance dependability; (3) Reflexive journaling and independent coding (confirmability); (4) Transferability via rich contextual descriptions (Hu & Zhang, 2025; Hung, L. T., & Tang, 2024; Kaplan et al., 2025; Enworo, 2023; Ahmed, 2024). Member checking was conducted with 8 participants, who were invited to review summarized interpretations of their interview responses and confirm the accuracy and clarity of the researchers' interpretations. Minor clarifications were incorporated based on their feedback (Kaplan et al., 2025; Mejeh et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2024; Villagrán et al.,2024).

Prolonged engagement was maintained over the 12-week data collection period, during which researchers interacted with participants across multiple phases (orientation, ongoing SPEL engagement, midpoint interviews, and final FGDs), allowing deeper contextual understanding and more reliable interpretation of learner

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experiences (Hung, L. T., & Tang, 2024; Kaplan et al., 2025; Villagrán et al., 2024).

An audit trail was systematically maintained to document key analytical and methodological decisions, including the development of initial coding categories (based on SRL phases), revisions of codes during inductive analysis, merging or splitting of themes (e.g., separating affective trajectories from strategy adaptation), and decisions related to data inclusion or reduction (Hung, L. T., & Tang, 2024; Mejeh et al., 2024; Villagrán et al., 2024).

Reflexive journaling was conducted throughout the study to record researcher assumptions, emerging interpretations, and potential biases during coding and theme development (Hung, L. T., & Tang, 2024; Kaplan et al., 2025). Independent coding by a second researcher on 20% of the dataset further enhanced confirmability by ensuring consistency of coding decisions (Mejeh et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2024). Transferability was supported through rich contextual descriptions of participants, setting, and the SPEL implementation (Mejeh et al.,2024; Sharma et al.,2024; Villagrán et al.,2024).

In this context, the research was situated in a blended EFL program at one public secondary school; SPEL acted as a supplement to classroom instruction. Apart from providing modular tasks, the LMS also provided automated feedback and generated analytics in real time. SPEL was accessed outside class hours by students indicating fund of knowledge proficiencies and digital literacy (Hung, L. T., & Tang, 2024; Sins et al., 2025; Villagrán et al., 2024) Steering maximum variation purposive sampling was conducted to attain varied experiences of 36 students (Grades 8–9; ages 13–15). This included being participating in SPEL at any point, completing the task and agreeing to participate in data collection (Mejeh et al., 2024; Villagrán et al., 2024). It enabled complexity and guarantee findings represented systems instead of particular characteristics (Villagrán et al., 2024).

Table 1. *Participant profile*

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Female	19	52.8
	Male	17	47.2
Grade Level	Grade 8	18	50.0
	Grade 9	18	50.0
EFL Proficiency (placement)	Low	12	33.3
	Medium	14	38.9
	High	10	27.8
Digital Literacy (self-reported)	Basic	11	30.6
	Intermediate	15	41.7
	Advanced	10	27.8
Prior English Exposure (outside)	Limited	14	38.9
	Moderate	13	36.1
	Extensive	9	25.0
Perceived Classroom Support	Low	10	27.8
	Moderate	16	44.4
	High	10	27.8

The sample consisted of 19 female and 17 male students, equally across grades. Individual differences among the participants included EFL proficiency, digital literacy and classroom support; these variables helped consider how they interact with self-paced learning (Sharma et al., 2024; Villagrán et al., 2024).

The research employed multiple data sources to ensure triangulation and depth of analysis. Data were collected through four primary instruments: (1) semi-structured interviews, (2) focus group discussions (FGDs), (3) learner reflection journals, and (4) SPEL learning artifacts (e.g., LMS logs, completed tasks). Semi-structured interviews explored SRL phases, affective experiences, and contextual influences, guided by phenomenological principles (Kleimola et al., 2025). FGDs examined social dimensions such as peer support and collaborative (Sharma et al., 2024). Reflection journals captured ongoing learner experiences, while LMS artifacts provided behavioral evidence of engagement and strategy use (Santos & Henriques, 2024; Palalas & Wark, 2020). Data collection was conducted longitudinally over 12 weeks in four phases: orientation, SPEL engagement, midpoint interviews, and final interviews/FGDs. All sessions were recorded and transcribed to ensure analytic rigor.

To analyze the data, thematic analysis involved both deductive and inductive coding (Naeem et al., 2023). The deductive coding was operationalized using predefined categories derived from Pintrich's SRL framework, specifically: (1) forethought (goal setting and planning), (2) performance control (strategy use and monitoring), and (3) self-reflection (evaluation and attribution) (Bernard & Kermarrec, 2022; Hung, L. T., & Tang, 2024). In addition, three SPEL-related dimensions (strategies, perceived social support, and exercise enjoyment) and two affective constructs (motivation and anxiety) were used as initial coding categories to align analysis with the research focus (Mejeh et al., 2024). Inductive

coding was then applied to identify emerging themes beyond the predefined framework (Villagrán et al., 2024). Coding followed a systematic process consisting of segmentation into meaning units, initial coding, category assignment, and iterative refinement across cases. Cross-case comparison was conducted to identify patterns and variations, leading to the generation of transferable themes. The coding procedure using NVivo were conducted (Mejeh et al., 2024; Sharma et al., 2024).

Intercoder reliability was established by having a second researcher independently code 20% of the dataset (approximately 200 coding units). Agreement was calculated using percentage agreement (number of agreements divided by total coding decisions × 100), resulting in 95% agreement after reconciliation discussions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section delineates the results obtained from a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, learner reflection journals, and SPEL learning artifacts. The analysis produced six principal themes, each encompassing several subthemes that elucidate the manner in which secondary EFL learners navigate success and failure within Self-Paced Extension Learning (SPEL) contexts.

Table 2. *Overview of themes, subthemes, and data sources*

Theme	Subthemes	Primary Data Sources
T1. Goal Setting and Forethought Regulation	Adaptive goal alignment; Vague or externally driven goals	Interviews, Journals
T2. Pacing Control and Cognitive Load	Strategic pacing; Overwhelm and time distortion	Journals, LMS logs
T3. Affective Trajectories in SPEL	Motivation growth; Anxiety and frustration cycles	Interviews, FGDs
T4. Feedback as a Regulatory Catalyst	Feedback clarity; Feedback absence or delay	Artifacts, Interviews
T5. Strategy Adaptation and Persistence	Strategic refinement; Task avoidance	Journals, Interviews
T6. Individual Differences and Contextual Mediation	Digital literacy; Classroom support	FGDs, Interviews

Theme 1: Goal setting and forethought regulation in SPEL

The effectiveness of the learners in the sphere of SPEL was largely determined by the quality of goal formulation that occurred in the forethought stage. Two opposite trends emerged.

Subtheme 1.1: Adaptive goal alignment with diagnostic feedback

People who expressed clear and immediate goals often of a formative assessment demonstrated high degrees of both engagement and persistence.

Table 3. *Frequency indicator*

Goal Orientation	Learners (n=36)
Clear, adaptive goals	21
Vague or externally imposed goals	15

Representative excerpts (n = 5)

> "I did not do grammar practice after I viewed my quiz result. I did not spend time on vocabulary since I was already aware of It". (P08, Grade 9)

> "I was not going to do more than two tasks, but I wanted to get stuck into them, not to press the keys until it was over". (P21, Journal)

> "The system assisted me in making choices on what to study. It felt like a map." (P03, Interview)

> "I had little targets; 15 minutes at a time so I would not feel exhausted". (P14, Journal)

> "I knew the reason I was performing the task and thus I did not avoid It. (P27, Interview)

Subtheme 1.2: Vague goals and compliance-oriented engagement

Weak SRL learners complained about vague goals which are usually motivated by task accomplishment and not learning.

Representative excerpts (n = 5)

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> "I simply opened the task because it existed. I was not much aware of what it was about". (P11, Interview)
>
> "I would sometimes just want to get over with it". (P06, Journal)
>
> "I did not go through my errors since the next task had already appeared". (P18, Interview)
>
> "I did not listen to the feedback; I followed my friend". (P32, FGD)
>
> "I believed that everything was just the same, and I did not make a good selection". (P04, Interview)

Theme 2: Pacing control and cognitive load management

There were severe differences in the way learners handled time, pacing, and mental effort.

Subtheme 2.1: Strategic pacing and load regulation

High- and mid-proficiency learners frequently demonstrated intentional pacing control, reducing overload.

Table 4. *LMS log pattern*

Pacing Strategy	Learners
Distributed Sessions	19
Massed sessions	17

Representative excerpts (n = 5)

> "When I was getting lost, I would stop and resume the following day." (P09, Journal)
>
> "Slowly doing it taught me the grammar better". (P16, Interview)
>
> "The video had to be replayed more than once, which is why my brain was not full". (P02, Interview)
>
> "I was not in a hurry because I was not pushed by anyone". (P29, Journal)
>
> "Breaking tasks helped me to be focused". (P20, Interview)

Subtheme 2.2: Overwhelm, time distortion, and cognitive fatigue

Less digitally literate learners reported losing track of time, as cognitive overload accumulated and resulted in mental exhaustion during extended task engagement.

Representative excerpts (n = 5)

> "I did not know that I had spent nearly two hours". (P07, Journal)
>
> "There were too many options that made my head feel weary". (P01, Interview)
>
> "The reason is that I was stressed when I did not know when to stop". (P23, FGD)
>
> "I continued to click but I did not recall anything". (P10, Interview)
>
> "Freedom seemed to be a pressure at times". (P31, Journal)

Theme 3: Affective trajectories in SPEL

Students experienced shifting emotional states that disrupted stable and sustained motivation.

Subtheme 3.1: Motivation growth through autonomy and mastery

Representative excerpts (n = 5)

> "I was proud when I made the appropriate level." (P15, Interview)
>
> "The reason I wanted to continue was that I saw improvement." (P19, Journal)
>
> "The experience was more of learning on my part rather than the teacher." (P33, FGD)
>
> "Feedback made me confident." (P05, Interview)
>
> "I said that I was in control of my learning." (P26, Journal)

Subtheme 3.2: Anxiety and Frustration Cycles

Representative Excerpts (n = 5)

> "I was too afraid to do the wrong task". (P12, Interview)
>
> "When I tried twice and failed, I did not want to do it anymore". (P17, Journal)
>
> "The fact that there was no deadline made me more anxious". (P24, Interview)
>
> "When I was lost, I felt alone". (P30, FGD)
>
> "I was too free to know what to do". (P22, Journal)

Theme 4: Feedback as a regulatory catalyst

Feedback determined whether learners could sustain or fail in SRL processes.

Table 5. *Perception data*

Feedback Perception	Learners
Clear & actionable	20
Ambiguous/minimal	16

Representative excerpts (n = 5)

> “It received feedback which informed me what to correct”. (P18, Interview)

> “I re-strategized on the basis of feedback”. (P07, Journal)

> “I did not know whether I was right or not without feedback”. (P11, Interview)

> “The responses assisted me in strategizing the next activity”. (P03, Interview)

> “Late feedback connected me to forget about the error”. (P28, FGD)

Theme 5: Strategy adaptation versus task avoidance
Subtheme 5.1: Strategic refinement and persistence
Representative excerpts (n = 5)

> “I changed to videos as reading was difficult”. (P25, Journal)

> “Due to failure in two attempts, I asked my friend”. (P34, Interview)

> “I used notes to make less mistakes”. (P13, Interview)

> “I had attempted another level of task”. (P09, Journal)

> "I learned how to learn better." (P21, Interview)

Subtheme 5.2: Task avoidance and silent disengagement
Representative excerpts (n = 5)

> "I skipped the hard tasks." (P04, Journal)

> "I pretended to finish." (P10, Interview)

> “I waited until I was reminded by the teacher. (P27, FGD)

> "I stopped opening the LMS." (P06, Interview)

> “I was ashamed to request assistance.” (P32, Journal)

Theme 6: Individual differences and contextual mediation
Subtheme 6.1: Digital literacy as a gatekeeper skill
Representative excerpts (n = 5)

> "I knew how to navigate easily." (P35, Interview)

> "I got lost in the menu." (P01, Journal)

> “Use of the platform was more difficult than English.” (P12, Interview)

> “I learned faster because I was familiar with technology.” (P16, Interview)

> "I needed help just to start." (P07, Journal)

Subtheme 6.2: Classroom and peer support as regulatory scaffolds
Representative excerpts (n = 5)

> “Explanations by the teacher brought SPEL into focus.” (P29, Interview)

> “I was assisted in selecting tasks by friends.” (P14, FGD)

> “Without guidance, I felt lost.” (P23, Interview)

> “Peer support helped me to feel less stressed.” (P31, Journal)

> “Learning was made human by teacher feedback.” (P08, Interview)

This paper examined the role of Self-Paced Extension Learning (SPEL) in forming affective and cognitive experiences of EFL learners in secondary schools and how variations between individuals intermingle with self-paced requirements to generate contrasting learning paths. The findings will bridge the outcome-focused validation of previous studies on SPEL with a process-focused explanation by foregrounding the lived experiences of learners (Camilleri et al., 2024).

The findings are interpreted here through the lens of Pintrich’s SRL framework to explain why similar SPEL conditions produced divergent learner outcomes. The results suggest that the effectiveness of SPEL is not inherent to its flexible design, but contingent upon learners’

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ability to activate and sustain self-regulatory processes across forethought, performance, and self-reflection phases. This shifts the interpretation of SPEL from a neutral instructional model to a conditional learning environment that amplifies existing differences in SRL capacity.

The thematic analysis identified six interrelated dimensions that influenced the experiences of learners, which included goal setting, pacing control, affective trajectories, feedback use, strategy adaption, and individual/contextual mediation.

The environments based on SPEL activate self-regulated learning (SRL) processes of learners to a great extent, especially at the forethought and performance control stages of the Pintrich model (Zuo et al., 2024; Lai, 2024). Students who showed effective engagement defined proximal goals clearly, using formative feedback and diagnostic prompts to guide decisions and sustain controlled progression within the SPEL system (Martinez et al., 2023). This is strongly supported by the finding that 21 out of 36 learners demonstrated clear, adaptive goal alignment, often using feedback as a "map" to guide task selection and engagement. These learners exhibited intentional goal segmentation (e.g., short time-bound targets), which enhanced persistence and reduced fatigue. These students have chosen extension tasks strategically in accordance with perceived gaps of proficient and controlled pacing to handle the cognitive load (Camilleri et al., 2024). This trend proves earlier claims that self-paced modalities may contribute to effective planning and monitoring in cases when learners have adequate metacognitive awareness (ElSayad, 2024). Importantly, this finding extends Pintrich's model by demonstrating that SRL phases are not only cyclical but also fragile in self-paced digital contexts, where breakdowns in one phase (e.g., unclear goals) can disrupt subsequent regulation processes.

On the other hand, learners that reported vague or compliance-oriented goals portrayed fragmented engagement with surface task performance, minimal monitoring and decreased reflection. Instead of serving as an autonomous place, SPEL turned out to be a place of confusion and mental tension among these learners (Jung et al., 2022). Empirical evidence from the findings shows that 15 learners operated with vague or externally imposed goals, often engaging in task completion without understanding purpose, skipping feedback, or following peers blindly. This reflects a compliance-driven orientation rather than genuine self-regulation. This result narrows down previous assertions of learner autonomy in SPEL by showing how autonomy without premeditated scaffolding can worsen engagement, especially in the case of adolescents whose executive processes are still (J. Zhu et al., 2025; Jung et al., 2022). Therefore, the effectiveness of SPEL depends not only on pacing flexibility but also on the capacity of learners to operationalize SRL processes within the flexibility.

Across themes emerged that successful learners demonstrated alignment across SRL phases (clear goals, controlled pacing, adaptive strategies), whereas struggling learners showed fragmentation between phases (e.g., goal ambiguity leading to ineffective monitoring and eventual disengagement). This cross-theme integration highlights that it is not individual factors alone, but their coordination, that determines successful engagement in SPEL.

Affective experiences of learners during SPEL were both dynamic and non-linear, and swirled between motivation and anxiety as they were successful and failed to self-regulate (Han et al., 2024). Learners who felt that SPEL tasks were the most challenging reported that there were both motivation and self-efficacy surges and ownership of their learning. These affective changes were strongly connected to mastery experiences and explicit feedback, which is consistent with the self-determination theory that highlights autonomy and competence as the factors of maintaining engagement (Han et al., 2024; Luo & Wang, 2023).

The findings further showed that motivation growth was closely tied to mastery experiences and visible progress, with learners expressing pride, confidence, and a sense of control when feedback confirmed improvement. This suggests that affective experiences in SPEL are not merely outcomes but active regulators of engagement, reinforcing or disrupting SRL processes depending on feedback quality and task clarity.

Conversely, students with pacing difficulties often complained of increased anxiety, frustration, and cognitive exhaustion. This is reinforced by evidence that learners struggled with "time distortion," excessive task options, and inability to determine stopping points, often leading to mental fatigue and ineffective engagement (e.g., "I kept clicking but did not remember anything"). It is also important to note

that the lack of deadlines imposed by outside forces that is often proclaimed one of the major benefits of self-paced learning was felt by some as an extra burden instead of a relief. This observation questions the belief that temporal flexibility is equally beneficial to learners and emphasizes the affective expenses of uncontrolled pacing (Jung et al., 2022; Bergdahl & Bond, 2022).

In all instances, feedback turned out to be a determining factor between monitoring and adaptation stages of SRL (Mejeh et al., 2024). Quantitative perception data indicated that 20 learners experienced feedback as clear and actionable, while 16 perceived it as ambiguous or insufficient, demonstrating a critical divide in how feedback supports regulation. Students that got accurate, timely and practical feedback were better placed to adjust strategies, persevere through struggle and have a better choice of the next task. Effectually, feedback served as an external scaffold that overcame the self-monitoring that was still developing (Mejeh et al., 2024; Dignath et al., 2023). Learners explicitly described feedback as a regulatory catalyst rather than a passive evaluative tool.

On the contrary, a feedback lag or incomprehensible feedback derailed the regulation cycle of learners causing them to become uncertain, commit further errors and ultimately become disengaged. This result supported the need to design SPEL with high levels of feedback and extended the existing literature by showing that feedback has an active effect on regulatory decision-making, rather than just the results of learners (Mejeh et al., 2024; Dignath et al., 2023).

We found that individual differences had a great role in mediating the experiences of learners in SPEL. Digital literacy was a gatekeeping factor. Technologically more fluent learners entered the pathways of SPEL with higher efficiency and invested the cognitive resources in language processing, and less digitally skilled learners spent much energy on navigation in the platform, and thus increased cognitive load (Hernandez Cardenas et al., 2022).

The perceived classroom and peer support also contributed to the buffering role. Students with peer mentoring or teacher support could overcome initial failures and change their approaches with time; their counterparts did not receive help and resorted to avoidance of tasks, and silent withdrawal (Yan et al., 2021).

The most evident difference between the successful and struggling learners occurred in the process of adaptation of SRL. Effective learners were strategically flexible, i.e., they switched modalities, varied task difficulty and sought help, in situations where first strategies failed. The findings illustrate this through concrete behaviors such as changing learning modalities (e.g., switching from reading to videos), retrying tasks at different levels, and using notes or peer support to improve performance. Weak learners, in their turn, tended to revert to avoidance means, including avoiding work or delaying the work altogether. Evidence shows patterns of task skipping, pretending completion, delaying engagement, and complete withdrawal from the LMS, often linked to feelings of shame or lack of confidence. This opposition explains why SPEL can increase both success and failure: the same autonomy can be beneficial in the adaptive regulation process, but it can also lead to disengagement when it is not supported (Fromm & Ifenthaler, 2024).

This study contributes to the literature by offering a process-oriented explanation of learner variability. The findings explained not only whether SPEL works, but for whom and under what conditions it facilitates or constrains engagement.

Together, these results build upon Pintrich's SRL model by demonstrating the way in which the model phases are implemented or broken by self-paced digital settings at the secondary level (Heikkinen et al., 2023).The main contribution of the study is that it provides the reasons as to why SPEL is more helpful to certain learners and discriminatory against others. Pedagogically, according to our findings, an effective SPEL design should consider explicit SRL scaffolds or structure goal-setting support, pacing guidance, sustained teacher and peer scaffolding and effective feedback to provide equal learning opportunities to all EFL learners in the secondary school environment (R. Chen et al., 2025; Zhang & Liu, 2025). The empirical evidence underscores that without these supports, SPEL disproportionately benefits learners who already possess strong SRL skills, while marginalizing those still developing them.

CONCLUSION

This study has evaluated the role of Self-Paced Extension Learning (SPEL) in shaping the affective-cognitive engagement of secondary EFL learners and expounded the self-regulatory

mechanisms that either led to success or disengagement. The results showed that SPEL environments activated all phases of self-regulated learning (SRL), particularly at the forethought, performance, and self-reflection stages of Pintrich's model. Students who created feedback-based goals, controlled their pacing to manage cognitive load, and strategically adapted their learning approaches across SRL phases experienced SPEL as empowering and motivating (Khan et al., 2023; Ng et al., 2024). In contrast, learners with vague goals and limited guidance found the autonomy overwhelming, leading to anxiety, cognitive overload, and surface-level engagement (Habók et al., 2024; Shurovi et al., 2024).

The findings further highlight that individual differences—particularly digital literacy, prior language exposure, and perceived instructional support—played a critical mediating role in shaping engagement trajectories. Digital literacy functioned as a resource-management skill that determined whether learners could focus on language processing rather than platform navigation (Fauziah & Diana, 2023; Khan et al., 2023).Teacher presence and peer support acted as regulatory scaffolds that reduced affective barriers and enabled strategic adaptation, whereas their absence often resulted in disengagement and avoidance behaviors (Kundu & Bej, 2024; Ng et al., 2024).

The contribution of this study lies in offering a process-based, learner-centered account of success and failure in SPEL. By mapping learner experiences onto SRL phases, it demonstrates that SPEL is a regulatory ecosystem that amplifies differences in learners' self-regulatory capacity. Pedagogically, effective SPEL implementation requires structured scaffolding, including guided goal setting, pacing support, and timely feedback, to ensure equitable engagement among diverse learners.

This study has several limitations. First, it was conducted in a single school context, which may limit generalizability. Second, the findings rely on self-reported data, which may be subject to bias. Third, the relatively short duration of 12 weeks may not capture long-term SRL development. Finally, the study did not include quantitative measures of learning outcomes, limiting the ability to link processes with measurable performance.

Future research should examine SPEL across multiple school contexts, integrate mixed-method designs to connect SRL processes with learning outcomes, and explore longitudinal effects on sustained language development and self-regulation capacity.

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