



Examining Alternatives to Conventional Classes for ESL/EFL Students

Andrew Szanajda¹, Yu-Jie Li²

¹Associate Professor, Applied English Department, Overseas Chinese University, Taichung, Taiwan, ROC

²National Changhua University of Education, Graduate Institute of Children's, English

***Corresponding Author:** Andrew Szanajda, Associate Professor, Applied English Department, Overseas Chinese University, Taichung, Taiwan, ROC

Abstract: This study evaluates student experiences with three alternative forms of English language learning. Firstly, exchanging in ad-hoc language exchanges involving individuals essentially swapping their respective expertise in different languages with each other in a context without an underlying cost element. Secondly, the use of mobile applications as part of the means through which a person could use a self-study tool. An underlying problem area in this approach is the potentially negative effects of gamification. Thirdly, using contemporary technological advances for increasingly efficient distance learning. Measuring the extent to which students could be satisfied with their learning experiences with each or any of these three alternative English education approaches was based on examining a hundred completed random online surveys. The results indicated notably high levels of satisfaction with experience in participating in ad-hoc language exchanges, in contrast to quite low levels of satisfaction with distance learning in general. Reaction emanating from using mobile apps mainly appear to have been ambivalent overall, which may indicate that these platforms will not compose a primary future language learning tool, as could have been hitherto envisaged.

1. INTRODUCTION

The common demand for English language instruction has outweighed the number and availability of trained ESL instructors or possessing the means to cover study costs for this purpose. Hence, alternative learning methods have been devised and utilized to this end. The recent and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic conditions has accelerated a shift from conventional physical in-classroom instruction toward new context forms for ESL functions (Tahir et al., 2021). This unexpectedly rapid switch to distance learning has been the subject of pertinent discussion in the academic literature, and this present study partly aims to contribute to those contents, with a view toward evaluating the effectiveness of alternative forms of language study. An underlying matter of consideration is elucidating how there are other forms of education that have emerged (Aldossari & Altalhab, 2022) alongside using new forms of technology for practical purposes. Among these is the development of mobile applications, or apps, designed to simplify the process of English language learning while concurrently reducing the amount of perceived drudgery associated with that process (Deris & Shukor, 2019). Although these apps have been hailed as constituting the future of language learning, there are those who have expressed reservations regarding the process of gamification as well (Halak et al., 2019), which ought to be considered in the interest of attempting to establish an indefinite degree of objectivity. In addition, the use of ad-hoc language exchanges has increasing considerably in recent years (Sevy-Biloon & Chroman, 2019). The continued advance of technology with respect to smart phones and internet applications has been a major driver of this process, and there are also additional alternative options (Ali & Ghazali, 2016). This new English language learning landscape leaves the way open for what the best direction applying future resources could be. What should ESL experts consider in terms of taking further action?

This study evaluates the usefulness and overall efficacy of various non-standard forms of English language learning, in terms of what alternative ESL study forms could lead to producing effective results, with a specific focus on the use of mobile applications, ad-hoc language exchanges, and

distance learning. While studying the direct results in terms of achievement is outside the scope of this study, reporting satisfaction with these different forms of English language learning will be evaluated before future sources of evidence could yet corroborate these claims. The distribution of an online survey and the consequent results of this questionnaire were examined on the Likert scale to evaluate the levels of learner satisfaction among the sampled respondents.

A literature review elucidates three major types of alternative English learning contexts. First, the efficacy of learning English through mobile apps is considered in light of the existing literature. This is followed by a discussion of some of the negative issues relating to gamification that have been noted by previous researchers in this field. The effects of learning English through ad-hoc language exchanges are evaluated thereafter, along with discussing how distance learning can benefit or hinder a learner's efforts to improve their English abilities.

The methods used by this study to obtain encompass both a discussion of the decisions made in crafting questions relating to demographics, as well as those relating to the categories of English learner experience considered in this study. Describing the results of the study involves presenting the overall average scores given for each item, as well as any notable differences among the demographic categories. The mean score is provided in addition to the standard deviation – these data points along with the Cronbach Alpha results contribute to elucidating contextual information, which are to be addressed in the conclusion, along with how these findings contribute to the existing corpus of data in the academic literature.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several possible alternatives to conventional ESL instruction under the direction of a paid instructor in a physical classroom with several students. There are three particularly major alternative options that have acquired significant interest in recent years, including during worldwide pandemic conditions. Envisage how one or more of these may become the default option for ESL instruction in the foreseeable future remains feasible. The three approaches under consideration here are the use of mobile applications, more commonly known as apps, for language education, the use of ad hoc language exchanges that do not involve making tuition payments, and online instruction on any of different platforms with a live instructor in real time. This section will begin with an examination of recent available academic literature sources. The focus in each of these sub-sections will be on the extent to which each of these three options can be considered reasonably efficacious relative to conventional in person English instruction in a physical rather than a virtual classroom.

2.1. The Efficacy of Learning English Using Mobile Apps

Mobile apps have been shown to be quite effective in many aspects of language acquisition (Ebadi & Bashiri, 2018). They provide an especially effective means to drill vocabulary as a fundamental building block toward acquiring increasing degrees of fluency proficiency, and this is a key element of the overall process of learning English in particular (Fu et al., 2021), much as with any other foreign language as a starting point before having sufficient fluency proficiency to construct and communicate in complete sentences. Given that the English language draws from so many other languages for its vocabulary, there are very few overriding rules that apply to the meanings of words (Nguyen, 2022). Systemic knowledge of Latin roots helps to some extent, but the process of learning English vocabulary is nevertheless inevitably a long and tiresome one (Deris & Shukor, 2019).

Mobile apps demonstrate their quality in this respect (Ghobadi & Taki, 2018) through a gamification process to make what would otherwise be a tiresome undertaking into something that a learner would enjoy doing, and thereby greatly reducing the prolonged struggle and tedium of vocabulary acquisition (Ali & Ghazali, 2016). Language teachers have been aware of this matter since the shift away from writing-based drills in the 1960s (Nami, 2020). However, class time has always been a very limited resource (Wang, 2020). These mobile apps allow for students to use their leisure time to increase their English proficiency in ways that these students would be otherwise unlikely to do, including while having to manage time constraints (Ebadi&Bashiri, 2018). A teacher might assign homework to their students that would involve going over flashcards for limited periods of time every day, but only a very unrealistic one would expect that more than a few students would complete this

assignment (Deris&Shukor, 2019). However, it has been shown that the same exact content can be packaged and presented in such a manner by these mobile apps that students will gladly participate in this type of personal computer game type of activity (Wang, 2020).

2.2. The Negative Effects of Gamification

There remain a considerable number of concerns related to the idea of gamification. One of the most relevant of these is also perhaps the most prosaic – gamification is highly costly (Herzig et al., 2015). They require amassing a considerable number of resources – whether those are measured in terms of teacher time and effort, or in terms of actual capital expended – to create a gamified lesson, compared to a more traditional one (Halak et al., 2019). Developing animations, coding software, and otherwise creating the attractive aspects of any digital game all require both effort and expertise. The specific skills required often outstrip those of any given educator or programmer as well. They can entail sufficient amounts of knowledge in the fields of psychology and sociology to anticipate the likely response to a given aspect of a gamified lesson in a large potential cohort of app users, as well as an understanding of the limited aims of a gamified educational app, in comparison to compared to a traditional game (Almeida et al, 2023) with physical dimensions, such as with a board and game pieces. This requirement has the effect of pushing gamification out of the reach of most content creators and leaving it to the more established players in the mobile app industry (Surendeleq et al., 2014) who possess material and financial resources. Nevertheless, this may actually be regarded as an overall positive development in view of the significant unintended negative consequences of gamification, (Xiao, 2022).

Another issue that has begun to come to light in recent years with respect to gamification is its negative effects on motivation (Almeida et al, 2023). This may seem somewhat paradoxical – given that the boost to motivation is a large part of the selling points of gamification in the first place. However, some emerging research indicates that the longer-term effect of usage of these gamified apps by English language learners may indicate an initial increase in motivation, followed by a steep decline (Xiao, 2022). Similar effects were found from in-classroom gamification attempts, such as the practice of the granting of special badges to learners. However, there may be a more considerable underlying problem than simple app design in this case (Toda et al., 2018). It appears that this is simply yet another case of external rewards having the effect of ultimately sapping away a learner’s internal motivation (Xiao, 2022). At some point, the external reward either loses its lustre or is taken away, and whatever temporary motivation that it might have granted will dissipate along with it (Almeida et al, 2023).

2.3. The Efficacy of Learning English Using Ad-hoc Language Exchanges

Learning English through the medium of ad hoc language exchanges – typically termed as language exchange programs in the literature, which technological advancements have since made it possible to be managed online – presents a variety of potential useful benefits for a majority of prospective English language learners. Perhaps the primary and most important of these benefits is the fact that participation in these exchanges is typically available at no monetary cost to the cooperating students who will not face the pressure of exchanging money, and instead using a barter arrangement by offering their own time to teach different native languages that they already know. This allows any nearly language learner – regardless of their socioeconomic status – the opportunity to benefit from these exchanges. Even refugees who would often not have access to a mobile phone without internet access or financial resources are enabled to participate in in-person versions of such learning activities.

Another benefit of these language exchanges is that they offer the opportunity to engage in conversation that closely approximates the sort found in a fully natural context. There are certainly drawbacks associated with the fact that the language exchanges feature random speakers of the language, rather than trained language instructors, but the authenticity of these cooperative agreements is undeniable. This allows for the beginnings of immersion in the target language, which is otherwise extremely difficult to achieve for most language learners. These informal cooperative arrangements offer what could compose to be more favourable than genuine immersion, as they provide a sense of safety to the language learner. Even a slight misunderstanding of language in real life everyday situations can often cause problems, in contrast to the context of a language exchange that reduce or eliminate these possibilities.

While these benefits can be feasible based on the evidence in the available literature, this does not necessarily mean that these exchanges are truly more effective approaches than some of the other options that are available to a contemporary English language learner. Several studies will be examined here to provide an overview appraisal. The first of these discusses a study conducted in Ecuador, in which seventeen students were involved in a video chat-based program of a language exchange with students from the United States (Sevy-Biloon & Chroman, 2019). After only five weeks, these students demonstrated significant proficiency in terms of their overall English fluency, which has likewise been confirmed by the results in other studies (Wang et al., 2016). In addition, these benefits were also correlated with a shift to a more intrinsic type of motivational process. This underlying element will likely serve these students well in the future, given that intrinsic motivation is a major underlying predictor of language learning success (Ali & Ghazali, 2016).

Potential drawbacks relating to the non-professional nature of language exchange participants were found to be quite extensive. The sixty-four participants had all enrolled in a social media-based language exchange program, and while their self-reports indicated a relatively high level of satisfaction with their overall experience, an underlying element was their interlocutors were found to only rarely address, much less correct, issues relating to grammar or pronunciation errors (Acar & Kobayashi, 2011). This study emphasized the importance of the interaction across cultures, which was supported in many other studies. For example, a study of the free4talk platform indicated similar results with respect to fluency improvement, as well as cultural competency (Gelen & Tozluoglu, 2021). However, this study indicated that the intrinsic desire to learn English had increased as a result of using it. There were also meagre results in terms of providing evidence that participants in the free4talk program actually improved in their language abilities in any truly measurable degree (Gelen & Tozluoglu, 2021). Hence, the recurring problems relating to the lack of professional oversight and planning were found to be extant (Sevy-Biloon & Chroman, 2019).

One possible method of addressing these issues is for the interactions to be somewhat more guided in their nature, as was demonstrated in a study involving the WeChat platform (Wang et al., 2016). While providing specific lesson plans to interlocutors would essentially defeat the purpose of a language exchange by turning the foreign language speakers into unpaid English teachers, guiding the conversation with general topics was found to have overall positive effects (Wang et al., 2016). Following these forms of guidance led to recording gains that demonstrated shifting beyond simple increases in fluency and motivation, which also included notable and measurable increases in vocabulary acquisition (Heinzmann et al., 2022).

One of the issues that makes the study of these ad hoc language exchanges difficult to manage is that they can be undertaken in a wide range of formats. They can be entirely synchronous, as is conducted in in-person language exchange models, or they can be only semi-synchronous, as in text message-based programs (Wang et al., 2016). In addition, the technology utilized can often be a confounding factor. For example, how can a program using video chat be directly compared with one that only relies on exchanging text messages? The underlying importance of being able to view or use body language must not be underestimated when directly facing another instructor/learner. The most egregious factor is there is significant opportunity for further studying of these programs, as the best uses of them remain undiscovered in the extant literature (Heinzmann et al., 2022).

2.4. The Efficacy of Learning English Using Paid and Planned Online Classes

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a great deal of data collected regarding the usefulness of distance learning in a variety of contexts, including English language learning (Tahir et al., 2021). Data is still being aggregated during this time, but several strengths and weaknesses of this approach relative to traditional classroom settings have been identified. One area that has become increasingly apparent in comparison with the early data is the importance of maintaining high levels of motivation in students that are learning in a remote context (Aldossari & Altalhab, 2022). While this has always been important for language learners – and indeed, for learners studying any subject – the key distinction between online courses that were seen as effective in terms of the results that they generated, and those that were seen as less effective appears to have led to this one specific motivation aspect (Yusof et al., 2021). In a traditional in-person classroom, even a less motivated student, or one who could be less confident in their English abilities, would be involved in many of the group activities (Gao, 2021). In fact, it is this participation itself that has been so strongly correlated with success in

language learning. When a student is within a group of other students, particularly ones they will see several times a week for the next several months in most cases, that student will be pressured socially to apply some effort into fulfilling classroom requirements (Yusof et al., 2021). In contrast, a student who is comfortably ensconced in their home watching or listening to Zoom video contents is by definition significantly less connected to their classmates in this type of virtual environment (Tahir et al., 2021). This effect is dramatically increased when the class is delivered in an asynchronous manner, on the strength of when the content is being accessed by each student at whatever time that is most convenient for them as individuals (Bailey et al., 2021). In such classes, each student begins to view themselves as an island. As a result, they do not feel any strong drive to do more than the minimum required to get through the class requirements, and this factor is then reflected in the quality of their work, as well as the overall English language growth that they experience (Aldossari & Altalhab, 2022). Regardless of technological advancements, the underlying energy of face to face collaboration between instructors and learners must not be underestimated, including for the purposes of receiving clarification during the course of instruction and immediate feedback during the inevitable occurrence of making errors during a learning process, or merely benefiting from receiving encouragement from a necessarily more objective viewpoint.

3. METHODS

The data collected for this study were obtained from conducting an online survey by applying the snowball sampling method. Questions on this survey could be grouped into two major categories – those relating to demographic information of the respondents, and those directly related to the topic at hand. The questions in each of these categories will be discussed with closer scrutiny.

With respect to demographic information, the first question related to gender. Options available for responses here were female, male, or identifying as other. In view of how the literature reveals at least some evidence that gender might play a role in how well students respond to different learning contexts, this was deemed to be relevant information. In addition, respondents were asked to identify an age range for themselves. While this survey specifically targeted university students, it is common for people in different age groups to be enrolled in university courses. Hence, this question asked which of the following group categories the respondent was in: 17 or younger, 18-20, 21-22, 23-29, or 30 and up. Very little research had been done on the effects of age with respect to different classroom experiences for English language learners, so it was highly uncertain at the time of writing whether relevant data would be revealed from this response. Another demographic related question asked respondents to identify themselves according to race or ethnicity. As before, data on this topic is meagre, and therefore the extent to which this might have proven substantive was not clear when the questions were being written.

The remaining questions of this survey asked respondents about their experiences in various forms of ESL instruction. These forms included the use of apps designed to facilitate such learning, participation in distance learning classes of various types, and their personal involvement, or their lack thereof, in ad-hoc language exchanges. Unfortunately, a certain degree of overlap in these categories will be unavoidable, since a given language learner may have been using an app while enrolled in a distance learning course. However, the stated goal is to uncover which of these general categories will produce the highest levels of self-reported satisfaction on the part of the learner. A Likert scale was used to make an estimable measurement of their satisfaction level. A score of 1 indicated the lowest level of satisfaction with that learning experience, while a score of 5 indicated the highest degree of satisfaction with it. These scores were then collated and compared, taking the demographic information provided into account in the process. To ensure that answers given represented the true feelings of the respondents, rather than a random click, several questions were included that were essentially reworkings of the same idea. A given respondent's answers on those questions were subjected to the Cronbach Alpha test in order to ensure similarity between them, and thus reinforcing the reliability of the instrument.

Distribution of this survey was done through the process of first posting it online. Once it was coded and available as a link that could then be distributed, the next step was to make the target population – university level English language learners – aware of its existence so that they could become participants in the study. The link was distributed through several online forums including Facebook,

Discord, and Reddit, among others. The goal was to obtain a total response volume of 100. If responses were received in excess of that number, 100 would be randomly selected from them to be included in this study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data that is particularly notable will be highlighted, and is discussed to determine its ultimate implications on the basis of conclusions to be drawn following the data presentation.

4.1. Demographics

Of the 100 respondents whose responses were randomly included in this study, 64 of them were female, 31 were male, and 3 identified themselves as other. In view of this result, the “other” category was too small to meaningfully contribute to the results of this study. All gender breakdowns will therefore be subject to the common gender binary for the purpose of simplicity and avoiding over-generalizing from a very slight sample.

With respect to the age categories demographic question, 7 were 17 or younger; 57 were 18-20, 23 were between the ages of 21 and 22, 10 were between 23 and 29, and 3 were 30 or older. This breakdown was roughly what was expected to be evaluated for the purpose of this study. The standard ages are still by far the most common, regardless of the common ages among contemporary university students.

In terms of race or ethnicity, 74 participants were Asian, 12 black, 5 white, 4 mixed heritage, 4 Latino/a, and 1 aboriginal. This breakdown also followed the study expectations. Nevertheless, this will be revisited in the conclusion, as it is possible that the specific areas of the internet where this survey was promoted may have led to a demographic bias in this respect.

4.2. Content Items

The remaining survey items were all answered on a Likert scale, with a score of 5 indicating the highest level of agreement, a score of 3 indicating no strong feelings or neutrality, and a score of 1 indicating the strongest level of disagreement with the statement that the item poses. Putting this data in numeric form allows it to be analyzed in several ways. The mean score for each item as well as the standard deviation was provided, along with any interesting or significant demographic tendencies associated with it. Given that several of the items were intentionally crafted to be nearly identical in terms of their content, in order for the Cronbach Alpha test to be applied, these will be discussed by category rather than on an individual basis below.

The first category of content items was related to the use of ad-hoc language exchanges. This category had a few set-up questions that preceded it. The first of these was: “Have you participated in an unpaid language exchange program?” Respondents that answered in the affirmative were then asked if this program was online or in-person in terms of its overall design. The overwhelming majority of those that answered in the affirmative to the first question – 30 of the 33 – chose the online answer, making in-person ad-hoc language exchanges outside the scope of relevance for this study. Of those who indicated that they had participated in an ad-hoc language exchange, 70% were female. There was not any other egregious demographic data element in this category. The results of the remaining questions in this category are reproduced below. The Cronbach Alpha result for these items was 0.77, which is considered to be quite acceptable. This indicates that responses here were taken seriously overall, and that respondents did not lose their attention while answering these items.

Table1. *Ad-hoc Language Exchanges*

Survey Question	Overall Mean	Overall Standard Deviation
I found my participation in the unpaid language exchange program to have been helpful in terms of my English language ability.	3.14	1.12
I would recommend participation in an unpaid language exchange program to my friends and acquaintances.	3.82	1.33
I have become a more proficient speaker of English due to my participation in an unpaid language exchange program.	3.81	1.73
My fluency in English has improved due to my participation in an unpaid language exchange program.	3.74	1.40

The second category of content items related to the use of mobile applications for English language learning. This category had just a single preceding set up question: “Have you participated in using mobile applications for English language learning?” Respondents who answered in the affirmative were then directed to answer the questions from this category. Of those who indicated that they had used mobile apps in their English language studies, 60% were male, indicating there was only a slight preference in this respect. There was no other egregious demographic data element in this category. The results of the remaining questions in this category are reproduced below. The Cronbach Alpha result for these items was 0.87, which is considered to be excellent overall. This indicates that responses here were taken quite seriously, and that respondents remained fully engaged with the task while answering these items.

Table2. Mobile Apps

Survey Question	Overall Mean	Overall Standard Deviation
I found my use of mobile apps to have been helpful in terms of my English language ability.	3.01	1.40
I would recommend the use of mobile apps to my friends and acquaintances.	3.09	1.29
I have become a more proficient speaker of English due to my use of mobile apps.	3.15	1.45
My fluency in English has improved due to my use of mobile apps.	3.20	1.67

The third content of content items considered the effects of distance learning. This category had just a single preceding set up question: “Have you participated in a distance learning program for the purposes of learning English?” Respondents that answered in the affirmative were then directed to answer the questions from this category. Of those who indicated that they had participated in a distance learning program as part of their English studies, the gender split was nearly even. As with the other categories, there was no other egregious demographic data element. The results of the remaining questions in this category are reproduced below. The Cronbach Alpha result for these items was 0.82, which is considered to be quite robust. As before, this indicates that responses here were taken seriously, and that respondents remained fully engaged with the task while answering these items.

Table3. Distance Learning

Survey Question	Overall Mean	Overall Standard Deviation
I found my participation in distance learning programs to have been helpful in terms of my English language ability.	2.56	1.39
I would recommend participation in a distance learning program to my friends and acquaintances.	2.71	1.94
I have become a more proficient speaker of English due to my participation in a distance learning program.	2.91	2.23
My fluency in English has improved due to my participation in a distance learning program.	2.70	1.80

5. CONCLUSIONS

The results of this study indicate that the surveyed respondents found the ad-hoc language exchanges to be the most useful of the three alternative learning options under examination. Not only were scores higher in this category, but the standard deviations were lower as well. Opinions on mobile apps were lower overall, indicating a more indifferent attitude to their effectiveness. The results in the final category relating to the students’ experience with distance learning were the ones who stood out the most, relative to the other two categories. Respondents had very strongly negative overall impressions of the usefulness of this mode of language education. However, it is worth noting that the standard deviations in this category were much wider than in the others. This indicates that while some found distance learning to be quite helpful, a wider proportion found it to be very much the opposite.

Perhaps the most important limitation of this study was the difficulty in obtaining a truly random sample. One way that this could be duly addressed in the future would be for a study to be focused on a particular student body. This would make the results more focused, and thus more applicable to the general population, and also likely allow for a larger initial sample amount. Gamification has also at least tentatively been linked to lower content knowledge (Toda et al., 2018). Interestingly, this was not accompanied by a corresponding decrease in the students' perceived learning achievement, i.e. meaning that these students were not aware of how little they had ultimately learned (Kwon & Özpolat, 2021). One possible explanation for this development could be that the users of gamified apps, as well as those involved in gamified classroom activities, to an extent, might be spending notable amounts of time interacting with the game functions while being off task with respect to the actual learning aspect of it (Andrade et al., 2016). This type of classroom activity could involve idly chatting with classmates about the game, rather than the task itself. In the context of an app, this might involve being active in the set-up process, or in chatting with other app users in a less directed manner (Andrade et al., 2016).

Future work in this field of study might be well advised to largely dismiss the inclusion of demographic data. This might seem an unusual recommendation, given that more data is often better than less, but in this particular case, there is a solid argument to be made. A higher number of questions that are in a given survey will increase probability of respondents concentrating on answering all of them. Barring a situation in which students have the incentive to fill out the entire survey by offering extra credit or a tangible benefit, slimming this sort of survey down should be a top priority. In view of the total number of students who had filled out the entire survey, the Cronbach Alpha results indicated that there was significant agreement between similar questions in any case, it may also be advisable to omit the repeated questions, as well in future iterations of these contents. Technological advancements have greatly contributed to the efficacy of language instruction and learning, and how future developments could be received and applied effectively through newly emerging educational tools, such as using enclosed virtual reality environments for individual self-study purposes, remain to be demonstrated, and evaluated accordingly.

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AUTHORS' BIOGRAPHY



Dr. Andrew Szanajda, is a Associate Professor, in the department of Applied English, Overseas Chinese University, Taichung, Taiwan, ROC.



Yu-Jie Li, was born in Nantou-Chunghsing New Village. Currently, I am pursuing a master's degree in the Graduate Institute of Children's English (GICE) at National Changhua University of Education (NCUE). Along with enhancing my teaching quality and abilities, I am taking teacher training courses to strengthen my practical experience in language teaching.

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