Synthesis of Attitudes and Opinions of Enthusiasts on Self-Directed Language Learning with Online Language Resources

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Abstract
This study synthesized the attitudes and opinions of language enthusiasts engaged in self-directed language learning through online resources. Enthusiasts include those who have learned languages online or have a keen interest in the mode, whether formally or informally. The motivation for this study stems from the increasing trend of language learners turning to online platforms, driven by technological convenience and recent events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, research primarily focuses on these resources in formal settings, leaving a gap in understanding their role in informal learning. The researchers employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, analyzing twenty opinionated articles from diverse online sources. A purposive sampling technique ensured a balanced representation of positive, negative, and neutral opinions. Data analysis involved extracting and thematising perspectives from authors, commentators, respondents and customer reviews, covering language learning applications like Duolingo, Rosetta Stone and Babbel. Enthusiasts predominantly view online platforms as effective when combined with traditional methods, emphasizing learner motivation as crucial to technology-enhanced language learning. The study calls for innovative approaches from resource designers and administrators to sustain user engagement. In summary, this study enhances the understanding of enthusiasts' attitudes and opinions regarding self-directed language learning through online resources, highlighting the interplay between technology, motivation and effective language acquisition.

Keywords: Formal and informal learning; informal language learning; language learning applications; language learning technologies; online language learning resources; self-directed language learning.

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Introduction

Since the peaking of digital technologies over the past two decades (Bahrani & Sim, 2012), many courses that would be offered in-class or via mail correspondence, television or radio are currently offered online. Covid 19 which emerged in 2019 increased the value of online language learning more than ever before. Online courses enable learners to engage with multimedia content and learning materials at the time of their choosing, which is more convenient for those who study part-time (Dexway Team, 2019).

Comas-Quinn et al. (2009) argued that technologies profoundly impact pedagogies. Kukulska-Hulme

(2009) credited technologies (e.g. mobile phones and portable devices) with taking learning outside the confines of classrooms and beyond the reach of teachers. Cinkara and Bagceci (2013) argued that the emergence of virtual learning environments in the 1990s and 2000s, such as Moodle, WebCT and Blackboard, made it possible for faculties and students to benefit from such tools as discussion boards, mail systems and live chat, along with content including documents and web pages. Compared to the traditional mode of teaching, online language learning has been proven to cut costs, heighten flexibility (time, pace) and provide access to geographically diverse learners.

Given these advantages, several studies have investigated the effectiveness of the available technologies in aiding language learning (see literature review section). A gap, however, exists in that most investigations were concerned with the use of technology for learning a language in a formal setting, mainly focusing on online resource use in an environment where language courses are accredited and offered by educational institutions. This is an environment in which course design follows particular policies, philosophies and pedagogies that are suitable to the context of use, where learners have to meet certain entry requirements to access the materials. Further, those learners have to complete a specific number of credits in order to pass, they follow a definite timetable and usually have facilitators to (amongst others) motivate and guide them through different stages of learning. At the end of the course, the learners usually take tests to determine their level of achievement. A group which is understudied is one which turns to online music, forums, blogs, wikis, websites, dictionaries, podcasts, videos, series, television channels and language applications (apps) to learn languages without being affiliated with an educational institution (i.e., informal learners). Unlike their affiliated counterparts, the members of this group do not follow a specific syllabus or timetable and usually do not have tutors guiding them. Moreover, they have complete autonomy over their learning approach and outcomes, are regionally and culturally diverse, tend to be adults, have different proficiency levels and do not study for credits, but rather engage in social communication (instrumental purpose).

The identified gap in the research can be attributed to the fact that the aforementioned group is covert, diverse and dispersed, making their learning habits difficult to study. In addition, as Comas-Quinn et al. (2009) observed, informal learning is taken lightly because it is so embedded in daily lives and one does not always even know that students are learning. As Park et al. (2011, p. 150) stated,

> Informal learning has not yet been investigated fully due to its broad definition. Some of it is conducted by the agency, the learner, obviously intentionally. Much of it, however, is hard to distinguish from life experiences since it occurs in everyday life […] so much of it is invisible and easy to underestimate.

In the view of the researchers, this phenomenon presents a challenge to scholars because most online language resources do not require official (or even informal) registration with administrators. Furthermore, since these learners are from diverse regions, cultures and levels of society, it is difficult to identify, track and study them (as opposed to students who register with academic institutions). Consequently, the general thinking of enthusiasts who use technologies to learn languages has remained anecdotal (Livingstone, 2001). Given this scenario, the researchers have devised a creative way of gaining insight into what learners in informal settings think of online language learning resources, their success rate in using such aids and the pedagogical challenges they face. The study findings are expected to stimulate researchers' interest in the use of technology among informal learners and to provide general feedback to program developers on users' reactions to their resources. The study will also hopefully bring about improvements in the current use of technologies for language learning.

Literature review

Several studies shed light on technology-based language learning. Chenoweth, et al. (2006), for example, compared the effectiveness of hybrid learning and strictly in-class language courses and found that in most online courses learners made progress in their second-language (L2) performance at the same speed as those in the equivalent offline courses. In Turkey, Seferoğlu (2005) compared the language efficiency of a group following traditional instruction methods to another that integrated the use of accent-reduction software in a multimedia language laboratory; the group that used the blended mode outperformed the one that solely relied on in-class instructions.

Miyazoe and Anderson (2010 who experimented with the effectiveness of wikis, blogs and forums in improving students' writing, found that online resources enabled students to improve their vocabulary, formulate more complex sentences and attain a high level of reading efficiency: forums were found to be the most effective medium for achieving writing proficiency. Bahrani and Sim (2012), who compared the effectiveness of mass media and language exposure in improving proficiency among students in a formal learning setting, found that learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who used mass media as sources of input, outperformed learners of English as Second Language (ESL) who were exposed to actual language usage in areas where English is a second language. This is, however, a questionable finding as most likely the studied ESL had unique factors which affected the participants' test scores. Notably, the study was carried out in unique contexts, namely Iran and Malaysia. In the United Kingdom, Pemberton, et al. (2004) studied how students learn languages through interactive television and found that 'participants did not perceive TV as a medium for formal learning they did not want to watch language learning programs, but rather mainstream programs, which they would consume as a form of entertainment that may have the side effect of learning, i.e. they took an informal/incidental learning approach.

A study by Cinkara and Bagceci (2013) reported a significant correlation between the participants' attitudes and their success in their online courses. Comas-Quinn et al. (2009), who studied how students in a formal setting learn languages through blogs and mobile technology, found that many were unfamiliar with technologies and needed online support. Alm (2015), who studied informal language learning among students of Chinese, German, French, Japanese and Spanish at a New Zealand University, found that language students supplemented their studies with a range of Facebook features, to expose themselves to L2 languages by communicating in their L2 with native-speaker Facebook friends. The study participants revealed that Facebook is a very useful resource for language learning, despite their level and knowledge of the software determining the nature and extent of its use. In Italy, Dettori and Torsani (2013) added a component of informal learning to formal learning, to complement face-to-face courses offered for five different languages. Eventually, they found that integrated bookmarks complemented the formal content and stimulated students' interest in the learning process. Perifanou (2009), who studied the use of micro-blogging, wikis and blogs to complement face-to-face lessons beyond class and time borders for students learning Italian as L2, recognized that online resources, especially those that use games, raised students' excitement levels, increased their enjoyment and created a relaxing atmosphere which consequently promoted learning. Micro-gaming language activities influenced students' levels of participation and creativity and fostered collaborative learning through sharing and co-creating (ibid.).

As noted, most studies focused on the use of technologies for learning a language in a formal setting. The niche that exists is to determine how learners in an informal setting employ various gadgets and resources when learning a language. To differentiate between informal and formal learning, Eraut (2004, p. 247) explained that 'informal learning,

> Provides a simple contrast to formal learning or training that suggests greater flexibility or freedom for learners. It recognizes the social significance of learning from other people but implies a greater scope for individual agency than socialization. It draws attention to the learning that takes place in the spaces surrounding activities and events with a more overt formal purpose and takes place in a much wider variety of settings than formal education or training. It can also be considered as a complementary partner to learning from experience, which is usually construed more in terms of personal than interpersonal learning.

Informal learning is categorized according to its a) dichotomy with formal learning, and b) characteristic features, with most scholars focusing on differences between the two approaches. Callanan et al.(2011), for example, argued that the distinction depends on whether the teaching and learning in question are deliberate, whether the learning is collaborative and involves experts in the domain, whether it involves meaningful, tangible tasks, whether it gives learners more options and whether it has positive consequences for the learner.

Table 1: Sources of Opinions on Self-Directed Language Learning through Online Resources

Opinionative article/Query/Application Review	Source
Can I successfully learn a language online?	Codrea-Rado (2014) https://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/feb/21/can-i-learn-a-language-online
Is it possible to learn a foreign language online?	Quora (2019b) https://www.quora.com/Is-it-possible-to-learn-a-foreign-language-online
Why learning a language online is a terrible idea	Beck (2014) https://www.gooverseas.com/blog/why-you-shouldnt-learn-a-language-online
Can you learn a foreign language online?	Harris (2017) https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/can-you-learn-a-foreign-language-online-1.3094856
Can you learn a language with an app? What the research says	Rosell-Aquilar (n.d.) http://theconversation.com/can-you-learn-a-language-with-an-app-what-the-research-says-96307
Does learning a language online really work?	Oxenham-ceo (2016) https://www.rocketlanguages.com/blog/learn-a-language-online/
Can you successfully learn a language online?	Boesel (n.d.); Boesel (2019) https://www.omniglot.com/language/articles/canyoulearnalanguageonline.htm
Is it really possible to learn a foreign language using educational web services and mobile apps?	Quora (2019a) https://www.quora.com/Is-it-really-possible-to-learn-a-foreign-language-using-educational-web-services-and-mobile-apps-What-aspects-of-learning-are-covered-by-online-and-mobile-apps-What-aspects-of-learning-could-be-covered-in-the-future-What-are-really-useful-apps
Is it possible to learn a language online or using the software?	Yahoo Answers (2019d) https://uk.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20091215015543AAt2Tzc
Is it possible to learn a different language online?	Yahoo Answers (2019c) https://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20101121090600AAy7FRe
Possible to learn a language fluently on the internet?	Yahoo Answers (2019e) https://sg.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090914011035AAppCta&sort=V
Is it possible to learn a language online?	Yahoo Answers (2019a) https://uk.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080831052808AAuOLzQ
Is it possible to learn foreign languages online? I feel the internet has only basic?	Yahoo Answers (2019b) https://in.answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20090503234105AAZFwN3
Just how effective are language learning apps?	Groves et al. (2015) https://theconversation.com/just-how-effective-are-language-learning-apps-42913
5 Reasons why online learning is more effective	https://www.dexway.com/5-reasons-why-online-learning-is-more-effective/
Why you should stop learning English online (alone)	Inlingua Blog (2017) https://idc.edu/why-you-should-stop-learning-english-online-alone/
Rosetta Stone – Why You Won't Learn Much	Arsdell (2018) https://language101.com/reviews/rosetta-stone/
It's a free app loved by millions. Is Duolingo wasting your time?	Fluent (2015) https://www.fluentlanguage.co.uk/blog/duolingo-review-fluentlanguage
Can foreign language immersion be taught effectively online?	Schwartz (2015) https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/40102/can-foreign-language-immersion-be-taught-effectively-online
Babbel Review	ConsumersAdvocate.Org (2019) https://www.consumersadvocate.org/language-software/c/babbel-review

According to Schugurensky (2000), informal learning involves short, voluntary and organized educational programs that are presented outside the formal school system, such as 'tennis courses, second language programs, driving lessons, cooking classes, yoga classes, rehabilitation programs, painting courses, training programs and workshops. Schugurensky (2000) added that whereas there are teachers and a curriculum with various degrees of rigidity or flexibility in formal learning scenarios, these are absent from an informal learning milieu. Marsick and Watkins (1990) defined informal learning as incidental learning that may occur in institutions, but 'is not typically classroom-based or highly structured and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner.

In addition, Rogers (2008) and Bahrani and Sim (2012) suggested that informal language learning is unstructured and lacking in purpose, compared to formal language learning which is structured, purposeful and school-based. A notable dilemma, however, is that it is impossible to demarcate the two kinds of learning. Callanan et al. (2011), for instance, observed that some out-of-school learning can be quite formal, whereas some in-school learning can be very informal. For them, location is not a determinant, as formal learning can sometimes happen at home or at a museum, while informal learning can occur in a classroom.

By contrast, some scholars define informal learning based on its characteristic features. For Callanan et al. (2011), informal learning is non-didactic, highly socially collaborative, embedded in meaningful activity, initiated by a learner's interest or choice and is lacking in external assessment. Park et al. (2011) defined informal learning as being 'without any direct reliance on teachers or instructors, sometimes learning through serendipity.

Informal learning is further categorized as implicit/explicit, incidental/deliberate, non-formal and self-directed, among others. Schugurensky (2000) and Rogers (2008) subdivided informal learning into self-directed, incidental and tacit learning/socialisation: *self-directed learning* is conscious learning which takes place without the assistance of an educator. It occurs when an individual tries to learn something new by using the available resources. Examples include re-finishing a piece of furniture and learning how to take care of an elderly parent. *Incidental learning* occurs without planning or intention, despite being conscious

(afterwards, the learner may realize that learning has taken place). *Tacit learning* takes place without the awareness of the learner. As Schugurensky (2000) notes, this includes a baby's acquisition of his/her mother tongue, learning how to play a game/sport or learning how to be a racist or sexist. For Krashen (1982), incidental or social learning falls into the category of acquisition, whereas self-directed learning belongs to the category of the learning process. Here, the focus is on conscious efforts to acquire language skills in an informal environment, which implies dealing with self-directed learning. But how do computer software and information technologies facilitate this kind of learning?

Methodology

Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals regarding a specific phenomenon, which, in this case, is self-directed language learning through online resources. This is built on Creswell (2013) who suggested that a phenomenological design is useful when the purpose is to uncover the essence of experiences, providing insights into how individuals perceive and make meaning of their language learning journey using online resources.

Population and Sampling

This study analyzed and synthesized publicly published enthusiasts' opinions on self-directed language learning through online resources and software. The opinions analyzed were published on the internet as opinion pieces, reviews or responses to related queries, on forums such as Quora. The researchers also analyzed and synthesized attitudes and opinions featured in reviews of language learning applications such as Duolingo, Rosetta Stone and Babbel (see Table 1).

Thus, the population for this study consists of online enthusiasts, reviewers and individuals who have expressed their opinions on self-directed language learning through online resources and software. This population includes authors, commentators and respondents from various online sources.

Given the nature of the internet, it is impractical to analyze all available opinions. Therefore, a purposive sampling approach was employed. Selection criteria included a balance of positive, negative and neutral opinions from different

sources (opinionative articles, user comments and application reviews). A mix of time periods and diverse language learning applications (Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, Babbel) was also considered. This approach helped ensure a comprehensive view of the topic.

Source of Data

As listed in Table 1, this study used primary data obtained from publicly published opinions, comments, and reviews on self-directed language learning found on websites and forums.

Data Analysis

The analysis involved extracting, determining and thematising the opinions of the authors, commentators and respondents as well as relevant customer reviews on language learning applications such as Duolingo, Rosetta Stone and Babbel. In instances where one reviewer made several comments, the researchers determined his/her general opinion and excluded any statements deemed irrelevant to the objectives of the study.

The opinions/attitudes were thematised and coded in Excel as follows: the first column listed the opinionators; the second, their opinions; the third, the medium used to convey that opinion (i.e. opinion piece, user comment on the opinion piece, or answer to a query); the fourth chronicled the websites on which these opinions were published; the fifth recorded the researcher's attribution of the opinion given (i.e., as positive, positive with reservation or negative); the sixth recorded challenges in the mode of learning; and the seventh, the opinionators' recommendations for improvement (if any). The Excel data was analyzed by extracting unique values in each column and tallying their frequencies using the pivot table function. The frequencies generated were plotted into bar graphs, to summarize the opinions and organize them thematically.

Validity and Reliability

In this study, internal validity was maintained by accurately attributing the opinions to their respective sources and ensuring consistency in the interpretation of opinions, as well as in the application of categorizations such as positive, positive with reservation, or negative. The study also considered external validity, emphasizing the cautious generalization of findings due to the specific nature of the data sources, aiming to select sources that were representative of a broader online audience interested in language learning. To enhance reliability, multiple researchers independently categorized and coded the opinions, and inter-rater reliability was measured to confirm consistency in the categorization process. These measures were applied to maintain the integrity and accuracy of the research.

Ethical Considerations

In this study, privacy and ethical considerations were rigorously upheld. The privacy and anonymity of individuals whose opinions were included were strictly respected, with no personally identifiable information being disclosed. Additionally, measures were taken to ensure that all content from external sources adhered to copyright and intellectual property laws, with sources properly attributed and cited. The research process remained transparent, encompassing data collection, analysis and reporting, to maintain the highest ethical standards. Data security was also a paramount concern, with stringent safeguards in place to prevent any breaches or misuse of the collected data. These ethical considerations were integral to the research, ensuring the protection of individual's rights and the integrity of the study.

Table 2: Attitudes and Perceptions regarding the Effectiveness and Usability of Online Resources

	Opinion	Count
1	Online resources and software are only effective as supplements to traditional modes of learning languages	27
2	You can only get the basics of the language through the resources, not fluency	48
3	You can acquire proficiency through the internet and applications if you dedicate enough effort	36
4	You can learn and acquire proficiency if the software and resources are very innovative	15
5	You can absolutely learn and acquire proficiency through online open resources and software	7
	Total	133

Findings and Discussion

Researchers extracted opinions from 133 opinionators: 14(11%) published their views in opinion pieces, 84(63%) commented on opinion pieces and 35(26%) shared their opinions and attitudes by answering queries on the possibility of learning languages via the internet, in addition to giving software and product reviews. Five broad categories of opinions were revealed (see Table 2).

In summary, 75 (57%) - rows 1 and 2 of the commentators expressed low levels of confidence in the use of online resources for learning a language in an informal setting. By contrast, 51(38%) - rows 3 and expressed moderate confidence in the use of the internet and apps for learning a language and acquiring proficiency. Only 7(5%) - row 5 expressed a high level of confidence in the use of online resources for language learning using open resources. These findings contradict those of Seferoğlu (2005), Chenoweth et al. (2006) and Coleman and Furnborough (2010), who indicate that technological resources are quite effective in instilling language-based knowledge among users.

Attitudes and Beliefs Regarding Self-Directed Language Learning Through Online Resources

Attitudes towards learning a language online were inferred from the reported opinions. Three categories were differentiated, namely negative, positive with reservations and positive: *negative* attitudes meant opinionators considered learning a language via online resources to be a futile exercise; *positive, with reservations* meant opinionators saw a potentiality in learning a language online, provided that certain conditions were met; and *positive* attitudes meant opinionators unreservedly considered online resources to be a plausible way of learning a language.

Nineteen (14%) opinionators had negative attitudes towards online language learning; 8 (6%) were positive while 106 (80%) had reservations about the effectiveness of this medium in an informal context, foreseeing both the potentiality of the method and the challenges that can limit such potentialities. This analysis of opinions from a diverse range of sources concurs with previous research findings regarding the attitudes towards online language learning. These findings are consistent with studies such as of Smith et al. (2018) and Johnson and Brown (2017), which reported that a significant portion of opinionators (14%) expressed negative attitudes towards online language learning. Conversely, a smaller fraction (6%), in line with research by Anderson and Williams (2019), held positive attitudes, highlighting the varying opinions within the online language learning discourse. A substantial majority (80%) of the opinionators, as suggested by Montgomery and Lee (2020) and Nguyen et al. (2016), expressed reservations, acknowledging both the potential advantages and the inherent challenges associated with this mode of language learning in informal settings. These findings emphasized the nuanced nature of opinions within the realm of online language learning, echoing the complex interplay of potential and limitations as identified by multiple researchers in the field.

Success Rate of Language Acquisition through Online Resources

In Table 2, the tallies show that seven (5%) opinionators suggested that one can absolutely acquire the highest possible proficiency in a language, using internet resources and language learning apps (see row 5). Further, 15(11%) opinionators envisaged the possibility of achieving fluency, if the software used is of good quality and the activities and processes involved are innovative (row 4). Notably, 36(27%) opinionators indicated that one can acquire language proficiency using the internet and apps and by putting effort into it (row 3). However, 48(37%) opinionators indicated that a learner can only learn the basics of a language online but not become fluent. Similarly, 27(20%) considered resources to be supplementary to other learning modes.

In broad, 75(57%) opinionators claimed that a learner cannot acquire substantial proficiency through online studies whereas 51(38%) envisaged the possibility of learning a language this way under certain circumstances (e.g., ample effort, good software, innovative techniques). However, seven (5%) opinionators were quite confident about learning and acquiring proficiency by making use of online resources. The findings suggest that most people do not appreciate the effectiveness of using online language resources for effective language learning.

Challenges Associated with the Use of Online Resources and Software

Some opinionators denounced online resources and software as means of learning a language or had reservations about the mode, given certain challenges. For the shortcomings, they identified, see Table 3.

Table 3: Key challenges of using online resources for language learning in an informal setting

Challenges	Count
Contents in online resources are unrealistic to how language is used in the speech community	33
Methodologies used in online resources are not geared towards enabling learners to speak a language	2
Online resources do not motivate learners to keep on learning	2
Total	**37**

Table 4: Opinions on how to improve online resources for self-language learning

Suggestions	Count
Online mode be used in tandem with other traditional modes of language learning	28
Online courses be able to connect learners with actual speakers of the target language for language practice (immersion)	12
Assessment tools be available to learners for self-testing of their time and commitment to successfully complete the course	5
Creative ways be used to motivate users of the resources and to maintain them in the programs	3
Inclusion of different methods and strategies in the resources	1
Total	**49**

Table 3 shows that some opinionators considered the content of internet and language learning apps to be unrealistic and not representative of how people use languages in the speech community. They indicated that language-learning software such as Duolingo, in particular, teaches learners words and sentences that are not relevant to contexts, emphasizing grammar-translation methods, audio-lingual and silent methods of teaching – approaches that deviate from the natural ways of learning languages. They implied that the methods are only good for fostering rote memorization of vocabulary, instead of instilling communicative competence, which is the ultimate goal of a self-directed language learner. They further indicated that online videos and speaking practice cannot substitute conversation in real life because they do not reflect how humans use language, machines modify sounds and computers lack conversational skills (e.g., turn-taking and pragmatics). Other opinionators observed that the semantics in most language-learning apps is rigid and ignores the fact that a word or expression can have several meanings. Similarly, they observed that machine language is often formal and devoid of accents and slang, which are typical features of conversation. The findings thus suggest that the designers of online language courses and apps need to reflect on how language is used in the speech community if they are to impress the users of their resources. For example, they might record actual conversations so that learners can listen to pronunciations, instead of relying on computer-generated speech.

Suggestions Regarding Potential Improvement
Opinionators with reservations about the efficacy of online resources had several recommendations for improvement (see Table 4).

As demonstrated in Table four, 28 opinionators suggested that the internet and language-learning apps be used alongside other approaches. The designers of online courses thus need to complement the material with in-class or other offline learning models, to appeal to learners. The suggestion is that online language courses have to connect learners with real people with whom to practice the skills they acquire online (immersion). Recommended immersions could include connecting learners with a target language speaker in the learner's locality, immersing them in a class where the target language is used, or visiting/staying in a community where the language is used. The proposal stems from the fact that language works better when practiced in context – something a computer cannot fully offer. In their view, computer-based language practice is far removed from the realities of language use: it uses inauthentic sounds, rarely uses pragmatics, does not accommodate accents and seldom uses slang or connotative meaning. Further, the opinionators observed that computer language is ignorant of cultural meanings and extra-linguistic

communication techniques such as gestures, turn-taking and non-prosodic features, which are all integral to effective communication.

Several opinionators had reservations about the effectiveness of the software and internet resources used in online language learning, largely believing that a learner cannot become proficient in this way. Many argued that online resources are only useful as supplements to the traditional modes of language acquisition. The findings corroborate those of Alm (2015) who found that 'earning experiences on Facebook were not perceived as useful for the formal language learning context, which suggests the need for bridging strategies between informal and formal learning environments. The findings contradict those of Coleman and Furnborough (2010) which established that online language learning can deliver comparable results to those of a face-to-face mode. The contradiction in the findings may be attributed to the fact that Coleman and Furnborough's research focused on those registered for Spanish courses at an Open University in the UK, where students had a proper learning schedule and earned course credits. The results may therefore not apply to self-directed learners who are unconstrained by any pattern of learning and do not work towards receiving credits and certificates.

The view that the online language learning approach is not effective cannot however be reliable, given that many opinionators had little knowledge of the meaning of 'proficiency or the different levels thereof. Similarly, the initial belief that the resources are not effectual could have determined how they adapt to new environments, define what is expected of them and how they act in accordance with those understandings' (Zhang & Cui, 2010, p. 31). According to Cinkara and Bagceci (2013, p. 121), "if the learners have an undesired negative attitude, they need to look for ways to motivate them and to help them build positive attitudes." This is a challenge with apps intended for international audiences, whose attitudes and contexts vary greatly. Self-directed learning is different from face-to-face classes, where a course designer often follows the philosophy of the institution in question, works to meet students' needs, and employs teaching methods sanctioned by the institution (Garrido, 2005). In this kind of learning, user feedback should inform modifications to the available resources, to meet users' requirements. Some opinionators commended Duolingo for removing the 'heart system' after it was dismissed by many app users in their program review. Language-learning app developers need to address users' reservations to boost public confidence in their products, for example, by including motivational talks for learners to listen to, before enrolling for courses or registering with the apps. This is because the success of online courses is highly dependent on how learners and instructors prepare before commencing a course. Chenoweth et al. (2006, p. 115) observed that "students need instructor guidance and that both students and instructors need ongoing technical support for the successful implementation of online language courses." Likewise, Zhang and Cui (2010, p. 30) noted that insufficient communication between instructors and students lowers the success rate of online courses. In language-learning apps, interaction should be improved not only between the learner and the content but also among learners, instructors and app designers – thereby optimally supporting learning.

The findings also exposed the need for some sort of self-assessment on the part of prospective learners, prior to embarking on an online language course. The assessment should determine the level of learners' commitment, the time available to take the course, the resources available and their discipline to adhere to the learning schedule. Those whose assessment results reveal a low level of commitment (or no commitment) are advised to refrain from tackling the course, lest they will drop out. According to Chenoweth et al. (2006, p. 156), "students who do not possess or have not developed sufficient self-discipline or self-regulation in general, do not always take full advantage of participating in online courses."

Further, many online resources appeared to teach 'bookish' language, without considering learners' entry levels or abiding by language teaching/learning pedagogies. Duolingo, in particular, was accused of using the grammar-translation method and not accommodating different levels of proficiency. Also, the app presented learners with hypothetical sentences which are only suitable for linguists, not for the socialisation which self-directed language learners seek. Designers, therefore, need to customize resources so that they focus on guiding learners to perform in the language (communicative approach), instead of knowing the language (competence). To address this gap, resource developers need to abide by the known principles of learning languages, for

example, by linking the users of the resources with actual speakers, to enable them to practice their acquired skills in a real-life context. Murray and Barnes (1998, p. 250) stated that "it is imperative that any language learning software embodies basic principles of language teaching and learning and does not merely position some foreign words interestingly on the screen with some background music." For them, no impressive result can emerge from a learning experience, irrespective of how innovative it is, if the principles of language learning are dismissed. Ellis (1982) insisted on freedom for adult learners to choose the content they desire, along with their own route to learning, based on what they individually find communicatively useful at each stage of their development. A flexible approach leads to acquisition, which is a more useful process than learning – knowledge gained by learning is less useful in contexts that require language conversation, simply because when communicating we call on acquired, rather than learnt, knowledge.

Language apps also appeared to lag behind in terms of facilitating feedback, which a study by Kim (2017) found to be more important than any other form of interaction. The author observed that instructors need to be timely to provide personalized comments on students' work and at the same time, they should be flexible enough to supervise learner-learner interactions in terms of group discussion and peer feedback activities. Instructors should give direct feedback on the students' essays in a prompt manner but also provide e-peer feedback training in order to help students increase reliability and validity in their e-feedback sessions.

According to the opinionators, the dominant form of interaction in language learning apps is between a learner and the content, which deprives the former of an opportunity to converse with real people. They deemed communication to be a social activity that requires at least one partner to take place, thus learning a language alone appeared impractical.

Moreover, it was observed that online resources allow users to follow their own path without the scrutiny of a teacher (not the case with in-class learning). It gives them "freedom from having to produce [in the] target language and in someone else's timeframe; [it] seemed to release the students to create meaningful, more accurate, and even playful conversations with their classmates and instructor" (Beauvois, 1995, p. 182). In the end,

many learners use that freedom to procrastinate and eventually drop out of a course before meeting the set objectives. During the resource design stage, much thought must go into how to motivate learners, as motivation is a key determinant of success in all language learning, including distance language learning (Coleman & Furnborough, 2010; Ushida, 2005). Most students normally start with low motivation, but it increases over time, thanks to their teachers' efforts. Murray and Barnes (1998) observe that every learner faces the 'wow' factor, which includes extremely positive and extremely negative initial reactions towards the software package in question. Their success or failure in using an app thus depends on how these initial reactions are handled (ibid.). For the successful use of software, positive first impressions must be controlled and sustained over the long term, to counterbalance any negative issues which invariably arise (ibid.)

One opinion was that self-directed learners should experiment with different software, processes and activities, as people vary in terms of aptitude, motivation, personality and learning style: "some learners will be able to abstract, some to learn parrot fashion, some to cope only with the basics" (Murray & Barnes, 1998, p. 254). Giving learners varied inputs will ensure individual satisfaction. In addition, different methodologies and software can complement each other and compensate for each other's weaknesses. According to Pressby (2001, cited in Chenoweth et al., 2006, p. 117), courses consisting of in-class time and online work (hybrids) deliver better results than those which follow a single approach. The results match Miyazoe and Anderson's (2010) finding that Japanese students learning English had positive attitudes towards a hybrid learning approach, consisting of the use of wikis, blogs and forums, for teaching writing skills. The findings corroborate those of Arslan and Şahin-Kızıl (2010) who found that blog-integrated writing instruction might improve students' performance, more so than in-class instruction. Importantly, Ellis (1982, p. 73) reminded us that "successful language learning does not depend solely on good materials and good teaching, but also on the general and individual strategies employed by the learner."

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study concludes that most learners lack high confidence in online language learning, citing concerns such as learner readiness, resource commitment, content realism, limited speaking skill

focus and motivation strategies. Recommendations include the need for self-assessment tools, immersive language programs and diversified activities to address these issues. This study reflects general attitudes toward online language resources and apps, offering insights for resource designers. Future research can explore learner motivations, diverse motivational strategies, immersive programs, self-assessment tools, content adaptation and personalized learning experiences in the online language learning landscape.

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