

Exploring EFL Learners' Experiences with Online Language Learning Platforms: An Interview-Based Study

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ABSTRAK

Tujuan: Penelitian ini bertujuan mengeksplorasi penggunaan *platform* pembelajaran bahasa daring pada pembelajar EFL, dengan fokus pada preferensi, efektivitas, dan tantangan.

Metode: Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui wawancara terhadap pengguna Duolingo, Babbel, Memrise, dan Tandem.

Temuan: Pembelajar memilih *platform* berdasarkan kemudahan penggunaan, fitur motivasional, dan tujuan belajar, namun masih terdapat keterbatasan terutama dalam praktik berbicara dan kendala teknis.

Kontribusi/Nilai tambah: Penelitian ini memberikan pemahaman tentang pengaruh fitur *platform* terhadap preferensi dan keterlibatan pembelajar, serta menjadi acuan bagi pengembangan *platform* yang lebih interaktif dan mendukung praktik berbicara.

Kebaruhan: Penelitian ini menawarkan analisis komparatif berbasis perspektif pembelajar yang mengungkap tantangan spesifik tiap platform dalam mendukung kefasihan berbicara.

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aims to explore the use of online language learning platforms among EFL learners, focusing on preferences, effectiveness, and challenges.

Method: A qualitative approach was employed through interviews with users of Duolingo, Babbel, Memrise, and Tandem.

Findings: Learners selected platforms based on ease of use, motivational features, and learning goals, though limitations remained, particularly in consistent speaking practice and technical reliability.

Contribution: This study highlights how platform features shape learner preferences and engagement, offering insights for improving interactivity and speaking-oriented design.

Novelty: The study provides a comparative, learner-centered analysis that reveals platform-specific challenges affecting speaking fluency development.

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Introduction

The rapid advancement of technology has significantly influenced education, particularly in language learning. Online language learning platforms, commonly categorized under mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), have reshaped English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education by offering learners flexible, accessible, and personalized learning experiences. Platforms such as Duolingo, HelloTalk, Memrise, and Babbel integrate gamified features, interactive activities, and instant feedback, making them increasingly popular among EFL learners worldwide (Fan et al., 2023; Meng et al., 2024). Learners are drawn to these platforms for their ability to meet diverse language learning goals. For instance, HelloTalk enables real-time communication with native speakers, fostering speaking fluency, while Duolingo's gamification strategies are effective for vocabulary and grammar acquisition (Chen, 2023; Damayanti et al., 2024). Similarly, Memrise and Babbel offer structured content that supports incremental learning for beginners (Essafi et al., 2024). Despite these advantages, user satisfaction and platform effectiveness vary significantly. Research highlights that learners' choices are often influenced by factors such as platform design, content relevance, and ease of use (Lu & Xiong, 2023).

However, challenges such as technical issues, a lack of focus on productive skills like speaking and writing, and mismatches between learner expectations and platform features can hinder learning experiences (Indrawan et al., 2023). Addressing these challenges requires a deeper understanding of both the pedagogical design of platforms and learners' personal experiences and preferences.

Numerous studies have explored the role of online platforms in enhancing EFL learning outcomes. Game-based learning platforms significantly enhance learners' motivation and engagement (Chen, 2023). HelloTalk has been shown to be effective in developing speaking proficiency through real-time interactions with native speakers (Damayanti et al., 2024). Intrinsic motivation and platform satisfaction are critical factors driving learners' sustained use of these platforms (Meng et al., 2024). On the other hand, research has also pointed out certain limitations of these tools. Duolingo, while effective for vocabulary acquisition, often neglects the development of productive skills like speaking and writing (Indrawan et al., 2023).

Learners also report usability issues and find the content offered by Memrise and Babbel insufficient to meet their diverse learning needs (Essafi et al., 2024). Additionally, many platforms adopt a generalized approach, failing to address varying learning styles effectively (Fan et al., 2023). Although these studies provide valuable insights, they often focus on either technical aspects or motivational factors, with limited attention to learners' holistic experiences (Fan et al., 2023; Essafi et al., 2024). Furthermore, the comparative analysis of learner preferences across multiple platforms remains underexplored (Meng et al., 2024). This gap in the literature calls for qualitative research that captures learners' subjective experiences with these platforms (Damayanti et al., 2024).

The current study addresses this gap by investigating how EFL learners engage with online language learning platforms, the factors influencing their choices, and how usability, effectiveness, and challenges shape their overall experiences. By adopting a learner-centered approach, this study contributes to the growing body of research on MALL and offers practical recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of online platforms for language learning. This study aims to explore EFL learners' experiences with online language learning platforms. It investigates the types of platforms learners use and the factors influencing their choices, as well as their experiences in terms of usability, effectiveness, and challenges. By focusing on learner perspectives, this research seeks to offer valuable insights for platform developers, educators, and policymakers, contributing to the optimization of online tools for EFL education.

The Role of Online Language Learning Applications in EFL Education

The advent of mobile applications has revolutionized EFL education, offering innovative and interactive tools that cater to diverse learner needs (Ramos Blanco, 2021). These platforms have become a vital part of language acquisition due to their accessibility, flexibility, and ability to integrate multimedia features that enhance the learning experience (Gimeno-Sanz et al., 2024). By incorporating audio, visual, and interactive elements, online platforms enable learners to engage in self-paced learning and explore language concepts in dynamic ways (Gimeno-Sanz et al., 2024).

Popular applications like Duolingo and HelloTalk have demonstrated unique strengths in facilitating EFL learning. Duolingo's gamified approach is highly effective for vocabulary acquisition, motivating learners through challenges, rewards, and streaks (Indrawan et al., 2023). HelloTalk, conversely, provides opportunities for real-time interaction with native speakers, fostering speaking proficiency and cultural exchange (Damayanti et al., 2024). These tools exemplify how technology can address specific language skills, such as vocabulary building and oral communication (Damayanti et al., 2024). The integration of artificial intelligence in applications like ElsaSpeak has further personalized language learning. By providing real-time pronunciation feedback, AI-driven platforms help learners refine their speaking skills and build confidence in using the target language (Shinde, 2024). Moreover, such platforms allow learners to track their progress and adapt their study plans, enhancing motivation and goal-setting behaviors (Shinde, 2024).

Despite their benefits, online platforms are not without limitations. Many applications focus on receptive skills, such as reading and listening, while neglecting productive skills like speaking and writing (Essafi et al., 2024). For instance, Duolingo's activities, while effective for vocabulary, fail to develop advanced linguistic abilities or encourage creative language use (Indrawan et al., 2023). This imbalance in skill coverage reduces the comprehensive effectiveness of such platforms (Essafi et al., 2024). Another notable challenge is the one-size-fits-all approach adopted by many language learning applications. Generalized content often fails to address learners' individual needs or adapt to varying levels of proficiency (Fan et al., 2023). Memrise and Babbel, for example, have been criticized for their lack of content customization, which limits their usability for diverse learning goals (Fan et al., 2023). As a result, learners with specific requirements may find these tools less effective (Fan et al., 2023).

The importance of platform quality in driving learner satisfaction and engagement cannot be overstated. According to Meng et al. (2024), intrinsic motivation, combined with user-friendly interfaces and effective learning design, plays a crucial role in sustaining learners' commitment to using online platforms. A well-designed platform that aligns with learner expectations fosters greater satisfaction and better learning outcomes (Meng et al., 2024). Overall, the role of mobile applications in EFL learning continues to expand. While they offer significant advantages, including accessibility, interactivity, and innovative features, challenges such as skill imbalance and lack of customization persist. Addressing these limitations is essential to fully realize the potential of online platforms in supporting comprehensive language learning (Fan et al., 2023).

Learner Experiences and Perceptions of Online Learning Platforms

Understanding EFL learners' experiences with online platforms is critical to evaluating their effectiveness. Studies indicate that learners appreciate applications with user-friendly interfaces and engaging content, as these factors significantly influence their continued use of the platforms (Muckenhumer et al., 2023). Applications that incorporate gamification, such as Duolingo, are particularly appealing, as they transform traditional learning into an enjoyable activity (Chen, 2023).

Learners often highlight the role of personalized feedback and progress tracking in maintaining their motivation. AI-powered tools like ElsaSpeak and Babbel provide customized feedback on pronunciation and grammar, enabling learners to identify and address their weaknesses (Shinde, 2024). These features create a sense of accomplishment and encourage sustained engagement with the platform (Shinde, 2024).

However, not all learner experiences are positive. Many users report technical challenges, such as poor internet connectivity and limited offline functionality, which hinder consistent learning (Haidov & Soykan, 2022). Additionally, some applications lack culturally relevant content, making it difficult for learners to relate to the material and apply their knowledge in real-world contexts (Vijayakumar & Chellapandiyan, 2024). The absence of interactive elements in some platforms is another common concern. While applications like HelloTalk and Memrise allow for interaction with native speakers, many tools fail to foster communication skills, focusing instead on rote memorization and repetitive drills (Essafi et al., 2024). This lack of interactivity reduces learners' ability to practice language use in meaningful, authentic settings (Essafi et al., 2024).

Learners' perceptions also vary depending on their learning goals and preferences. Adult learners often value the flexibility and lifelong learning opportunities provided by mobile platforms (Levi, 2024). In contrast, younger learners prioritize features such as animations, games, and social interaction, which align with their developmental needs and learning styles (Levi, 2024). These varying preferences highlight the need for applications to cater to diverse demographics (Levi, 2024). Research also points to the role of usability in shaping learner experiences. Applications with intuitive navigation, clear instructions, and aesthetically pleasing designs are more likely to retain users (Gajić & Maenza, 2022). Conversely, platforms with complicated interfaces or frequent technical glitches tend to discourage learners from using them consistently (Gajić & Maenza, 2022). Although existing studies provide valuable insights, gaps remain in understanding learners' holistic experiences across multiple platforms. Most research focuses on isolated aspects, such as motivation or usability, without exploring how these factors interact to shape the overall learning experience. Addressing this gap through qualitative research can offer a comprehensive understanding of learners' preferences, challenges, and satisfaction levels with online platforms (Fan et al., 2023).

Method

Research Design

This study follows a qualitative research design to explore EFL learners' experiences with online language learning platforms. The research design aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how learners interact with and perceive platforms such as Duolingo, Babbel, Memrise, and Tandem, and the impact these platforms have on their language learning process. The use of semi-structured interviews allows for flexibility in capturing detailed insights into participants' experiences, enabling the researcher to probe deeper into specific topics based on individual responses.

Participants

Seven participants (four females and three males) were selected for this study. All participants were current EFL learners who had been using at least one of the following language learning platforms for a minimum of three months: Duolingo, Babbel, Memrise, or Tandem. The participants were categorized based on their platform usage and language proficiency levels, ranging from beginner to advanced. This sample was selected to ensure diversity in terms of gender, language proficiency, and platform experience, which can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how various learners interact with these online platforms.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews, which allowed for a flexible and conversational approach while still focusing on key areas of interest. The interviews were conducted individually with each participant to gain personalized insights into their experiences and perceptions of the online platforms they used. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and was held either in person or through video conferencing platforms like Zoom or G-Meet.

An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews, while allowing space for follow-up questions based on the participants' responses. The interview questions covered the following areas:

- 1) Platform Usage and Selection: What platforms have you used, and why did you choose them over other available options?
- 2) Platform Features: What features of the platform did you find most useful or challenging in your learning experience?
- 3) Perceived Language Skills Improvement: How has the platform contributed to the development of your language skills, and in which areas (speaking, listening, reading, writing)?
- 4) Comparison with Classroom Learning: How do you compare your experience using these online platforms with traditional classroom-based learning?

Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data, identifying common themes and patterns across participants' responses. The analysis followed the steps of familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and producing the final analysis.

Results and Discussion

Result

The findings of this study are based on two primary areas: the types of online language learning platforms used by EFL learners and their experiences with these platforms. The participants' preferences, perceptions, and challenges offer valuable insights into the current state of online language learning and its impact on language acquisition.

- 1) Types of Online Language Learning Platforms Used by EFL Learners and the Factors Influencing Their Choice
 - a) Platform Usage

Duolingo: This platform was most frequently chosen by participants (P1, P5, P6). It stands out because of its gamified features, which include earning rewards, completing levels, and competing with other learners. This aspect appealed particularly to learners who needed motivation to stay consistent with their language learning. Duolingo was appreciated for its user-friendly interface, which made it easy for learners to navigate and engage with the platform regularly. Participant 1 said, "I chose Duolingo because it's fun and motivating. I get rewards and achievements every time I finish a lesson" (P1), highlighting the motivating factor behind their choice.

Babbel: This platform was favored by learners seeking a more structured, comprehensive learning experience (P2, P6, P7). Babbel's focus on real-world conversation practice and grammar explanations made it especially appealing for learners aiming to build practical language skills. Participant 2 noted, "Babbel is great because it teaches me real-life conversations and helps me with grammar, which I need" (P2), showing that the structured lessons were perceived as beneficial for both vocabulary and grammar acquisition.

Memrise: Memrise attracted learners who appreciated its emphasis on vocabulary acquisition through native speaker videos (P3, P5, P6). Memrise's use of visuals and audio repetition was highly praised for helping learners retain new words and improve their pronunciation.

"Memrise is great for learning new words, especially with the videos of native speakers. It helps with pronunciation too"

(P3), said Participant 3, explaining how the audiovisual components facilitated their learning.

Tandem: Tandem was chosen by those who valued real-time conversations with native speakers (P4, P5, P7). The opportunity to engage in conversations with actual speakers of the language was particularly appreciated by learners seeking to improve their speaking and fluency. Participant 4 emphasized,

"I use Tandem because it allows me to speak directly with people who speak English fluently. It's more natural than using other apps" (

P4), underlining the authentic learning experience offered by this platform.

b) Factors Influencing Platform Choices

Gamification: Duolingo's gamification, including achievements, levels, and rewards, was a strong motivator for learners who struggled with maintaining consistent study habits. For these participants, the platform was not just about language learning, but also about engagement and fun. "The game aspect keeps me going. I like that I can level up and see my progress" (P1), emphasized Participant 1.

Practical Language Skills: Babbel's focus on real-world conversation scenarios and structured grammar lessons was a key factor for learners who prioritized practical language use. As one learner (P2) mentioned,

"Babbel helps me with real conversations and prepares me for situations like traveling or talking to friends" (P2).

The platform's design was suited for learners who wanted to focus on functional language.

Visual Learning: Memrise's visual learning tools, including native speaker videos, were especially useful for learners aiming to enhance their vocabulary and listening comprehension. Memrise's integration of visual memory aids allowed learners to connect vocabulary with pronunciation, improving their retention rate.

"Memrise helped me a lot with vocabulary. The videos with native speakers are very helpful" (P3), shared Participant 3.

Speaking Practice: Tandem's key strength was its ability to offer real-time, interactive speaking practice with native speakers, which many learners felt was essential for improving fluency. As Participant 7 noted,

"I use Tandem because it's a great platform for speaking with native speakers. It's real practice" (P7).

This ability to have authentic conversations made Tandem especially appealing for learners seeking to improve their speaking skills.

2) The Experiences of EFL Learners with Online Language Learning Platforms

a) Usability of Platforms:

Ease of Navigation: The majority of participants found the platforms to be user-friendly and easy to navigate. Duolingo, Babbel, and Memrise were all recognized for their clear interfaces that allowed learners to get started with little effort. "Duolingo is very easy to use. Everything is clear, and it's simple to find lessons" (P1), said Participant 1. The simplicity of these platforms made them accessible to a broad range of learners, from beginners to advanced students.

Challenges with Speaking Practice: Tandem, although valuable for speaking practice, presented a challenge in terms of finding consistent conversation partners. "The app is fine, but sometimes it's hard to find someone available to talk" (P4), said Participant 4. This inconsistency in partner availability sometimes hampered the overall experience and limited opportunities for meaningful interaction.

b) Effectiveness of Platforms

Vocabulary and Grammar Improvement: Participants across the board felt that the platforms contributed significantly to improving their vocabulary and grammar. Duolingo and Memrise were especially recognized for expanding vocabulary, while Babbel was seen as more effective for building grammar knowledge.

"I've learned a lot of new words from Memrise. My vocabulary has really improved" (P3), said Participant 3, highlighting how Memrise aided in expanding their word bank.

Improvement in Speaking Skills: For learners using Tandem, real-time conversations with native speakers were identified as the most effective means of improving speaking skills. Tandem allowed learners to have spontaneous conversations, which helped them become more comfortable with speaking English. "Tandem is the best for speaking practice. Duolingo and Memrise are good for grammar, but they don't have enough speaking exercises" (P7), said Participant 7.

Motivational Impact: Duolingo and Memrise stood out for their ability to maintain motivation through gamification. Learners appreciated how these platforms encouraged them to engage with the language regularly.

"I keep using Duolingo because I enjoy leveling up and earning rewards" (P5), explained Participant 5. The gamified aspects of these platforms helped learners stay consistent and motivated.

c) Challenges Faced by Learners:

Lack of Speaking Opportunities: A recurring challenge was the lack of real-time speaking opportunities on platforms like Duolingo, Babbel, and Memrise. While these platforms excelled at providing vocabulary and grammar exercises, learners felt the need for more interactive speaking practice.

"Duolingo is great for grammar, but I still need more speaking practice" (P5), noted Participant 5.

Technical Issues: Some learners encountered technical problems such as slow loading times or app crashes, which interrupted their learning flow.

"Memrise sometimes freezes, which is frustrating when I'm in the middle of a lesson" (P3), said Participant 3, reflecting a common technical issue that disrupted the learning experience.

Finding Conversation Partners: For learners using Tandem, the challenge of finding available conversation partners was a significant issue.

"It's not always easy to find people who are free to chat on Tandem" (P4), shared Participant 4. This limitation sometimes made the platform less effective, as learners were not able to practice speaking as frequently as they wished.

Balance with Classroom Learning:

Several participants indicated that online platforms were useful supplements to classroom learning. However, they missed the direct feedback and structure that classroom settings provided.

"I use Duolingo to practice outside of class, but I still miss the feedback from my teacher" (P1)

said Participant 1. Learners noted that while online platforms were great for self-study, they lacked the personalized feedback that a classroom environment could offer.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer important insights into EFL learners' use of online language learning platforms. Participants chose platforms based on features that matched their individual learning goals and preferences. The most frequently selected platform, Duolingo, was particularly popular due to its gamified features, such as earning rewards and completing levels, which motivated learners to stay consistent. These elements, including tracking progress and offering rewards, helped keep learners engaged with their studies. However, despite its popularity, Duolingo was seen as limited in providing opportunities for speaking practice, a crucial skill for language learners (Gajić & Maenza, 2022).

Babbel was favored by those who sought a more structured, comprehensive approach to language learning. Its focus on real-world conversation practice and grammar explanations provided learners with practical tools to apply the language in everyday contexts. Babbel's design was particularly beneficial for learners who wanted to improve both their vocabulary and grammar in a more traditional, classroom-like setting (Shinde, 2024). In contrast, Memrise attracted learners who valued its emphasis on vocabulary acquisition through native speaker videos and audiovisual aids. These features were appreciated for helping learners retain new words and improve pronunciation, offering a more immersive learning experience (Gajić & Maenza, 2022).

Tandem, which allows real-time conversations with native speakers, was particularly valued by learners who sought to improve their speaking skills. The platform's interactive nature provided an authentic learning experience, helping users gain confidence in speaking the language. However, some learners faced difficulties in finding consistent conversation partners, which limited the effectiveness of the platform in offering regular speaking practice (Shinde, 2024). This issue impacted the learners' ability to engage in spontaneous conversations, which are essential for improving fluency and communication skills.

Usability was another significant factor influencing learners' experiences with these platforms. Most participants found Duolingo, Babbel, and Memrise easy to navigate, appreciating the user-friendly interfaces that allowed them to quickly start using the platforms with minimal effort. The simplicity and accessibility of these platforms made them suitable for learners at various proficiency levels, allowing them to work at their own pace (Shinde, 2024). However, Tandem, while offering the advantage of real-time speaking practice, posed challenges in finding available conversation partners, which disrupted the overall learning experience (Gajić & Maenza, 2022).

Effectiveness was another key theme in the findings, with participants noting that Duolingo and Memrise were particularly effective for improving vocabulary, while Babbel was seen as more beneficial for enhancing grammar. These findings support the idea that online platforms can significantly contribute to language learning, but learners still need opportunities to practice speaking in interactive and authentic contexts (Shinde, 2024). Tandem, being the platform that offers the most opportunities for speaking practice, was recognized as the most effective for improving fluency. Despite its strengths, however, the limited availability of conversation partners sometimes reduced its overall usefulness for learners who relied heavily on regular speaking interactions (Gajić & Maenza, 2022).

Challenges such as the lack of speaking practice on Duolingo, Babbel, and Memrise, and technical issues like app crashes or slow loading times, were common across the platforms. These challenges interrupted learners' engagement and impacted the consistency of their study sessions. For Tandem users, finding conversation partners was another significant challenge. Although the

platform's design allowed for real-time interaction, the irregular availability of native speakers made it harder for learners to practice speaking as frequently as they desired (Gajić & Maenza, 2022).

Suggestion

These findings suggest that while each platform has its strengths, there is a need for a more balanced integration of speaking practice, vocabulary development, and grammar instruction across platforms. Additionally, addressing technical challenges and ensuring consistent access to speaking partners would improve the overall effectiveness of these tools for language learners. The research contributes to understanding the impact of online platforms on EFL learning and offers recommendations for their improvement. In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into EFL learners' preferences and experiences with online language learning platforms. Duolingo, favored for its engaging gamified features, was appreciated for maintaining motivation but fell short in providing adequate speaking practice. Babbel, with its structured lessons focusing on grammar and real-world conversations, was preferred by learners seeking a more traditional and comprehensive approach. Memrise stood out for its effective vocabulary acquisition, particularly through native speaker videos, while Tandem offered real-time speaking practice, which was crucial for improving fluency. However, the difficulty in finding consistent conversation partners on Tandem limited its overall effectiveness.

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