

Bridging Worlds:
Connection, Culture, and Design in Immersive Language Learning

Ethnographic Accounts of English Language Learners

Alan Tucker, David Tang, Madison Hobbs, Matthew Hadick, Sanchay Murugan

HCI 5900: Design Ethnography

Department of Human-Computer Interaction

Iowa State University

December 16, 2024

Table of Contents

Prelude	1
Introduction	2
Connection	2
Technology	3
Upward Mobility	4
Conversations	6
Methods	6
Review of the Ethnographic Method	6
Ethnography in HCI	7
Our Team’s Ethnographic Methods	7
Alan	7
David	8
Madison	8
Matthew	8
Sanchay	9
Sense of Community	9
Halloween!	11
Downsides of technology in language learning	13
The Double-Edged Sword: Technology and Language Learning in Modern Education	13
“Duolingo is boring!”	15
Career goals	19
Design	20
“Why this game?”	21
Conclusion	22
References	23

Prelude

Somu invited my wife and I for an evening dinner, so I found myself enjoying a fun night of conversation on a rainy Saturday evening. Somu is an extrovert with a vibrant personality, and he was trying to make friends after moving to the United States two months ago. Somu spends most of his time alone and without access to opportunities because of his immigration status in the U.S. He had explained to me beforehand that he was considering therapy because weeks spent with no one to talk to damaged his mental health. On top of that, he explained his addiction to his phone, and how much time it had taken away from him, but he was unable to stop scrolling.

Somu explained his deep love for poetry, and how much he enjoyed writing in his native language. English was very difficult for him to learn because he didn't enjoy speaking it, but it was important for him to find employment in the U.S. He struggled as much as he could to learn whenever he found the time. He could hold his own in conversation, but I always noticed his frustration as he was forced to translate his thoughts into English. He hadn't really found anyone who could speak of the things he wanted to speak about. Somu and I bonded over our shared interest in philosophy, which finally gave him the opportunity to explore the English language on a deeper level.

During the night, his wife said, "You only know half of Somu. He is a completely different person when speaking [his native language]." Somu replied with "I am a translated version of myself." This made me feel a separation from Somu, because of the language barrier, but I continued to ask questions trying to learn more about him.

Introduction

This paper details a collaborative ethnography study of the English language learning context. Throughout this ethnography, we found communities where immigrants/internationals could make connections in a foreign land. We dug deep into learning through context and had fun talking about Halloween stories. We figured out why technology apps like Duolingo weren't enough to learn English. We also got to understand the struggle to gain upward mobility in the United States. This paper seeks to expand these concepts in order to understand how to help immigrants and other non-native language learners acclimate to their new environment.

Connection

The U.S. is in the midst of a loneliness epidemic. The lack of social connection increases the risk of premature death as much as “smoking 15 cigarettes a day” (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023, pg. 8). The Department of Health and Human Services recommends that we strengthen our communities by supporting local institutions and providing resources for people. They cite volunteering as the primary method of connecting with the community. Most of our ethnographic field sites were hosted in local libraries and churches, dedicated to providing the much-needed space for community that our participants needed. Some even volunteered in his free time by helping the library to sort books, giving him a chance to escape the isolation of his one-bedroom apartment.

Context

Context plays an essential role in language acquisition, framing how learners engage with and codify a target language. We use language to share information. Without a valid interest in the information we want to share, it becomes difficult to attach to the subject matter (Anthony, 2008). Study abroad programs are found to be very effective, if not more effective, as a mechanism for second language acquisition than learning at home (Varela, 2017). Across field sites, participants in our study advocated for learning language via immersion. Study abroad programs allow learners to immerse themselves in the target culture, where they can use what they've learned in context and participate in the culture instead of learning via abstract narratives and rote training at home. It's about speaking and being a part of something meaningful.

Research shows that learners demonstrate deeper proficiency when language acquisition occurs in these contextual, lived experiences. Situations that encourage meaningful interaction and practice language in a social and emotional context – such as discussing art or sharing personal stories (just two examples from our observations) – foster stronger cognitive and emotional connections to the material (Shadiev & Wang, 2022; Kaney, 2019). Our ethnographic research supports these findings, highlighting the value of situated learning environments over isolated academic exercises. Based on all of this, it is our contention that designing language learning experiences that leverage the power of meaningful contextual learning can enhance a learner's ability to use a target language effectively in practical environments.

Technology

The integration of technology with language learning contexts is well-documented, and it presents both opportunities and challenges. This was reflected in our review of existing literature

and our field observations. Technology proves capable of providing personalized, accessible, and gamified learning experiences. For instance, Duolingo leverages a gamified design to keep users engaged while reinforcing basic vocabulary and grammar for a target language (Kittredge et al., 2024.) However, as detailed below, our findings indicate significant limitations to such tools. This aligns with Xu et al. (2020) review, which noted that language learning games often lack the quality and depth necessary to enhance the communicative capacity of learners.

While other technologies, like Google Translate and other live transcription platforms, have the potential to enhance learning, it also opens the door for distractions and inequities. For example, Chandana's (2023) study asserts that overreliance on digital technologies and support tools might undermine learners' ability to engage deeply with target language tasks. This double-edged nature of technology was prevalent throughout our observations, where individuals both used live transcription tools to support their learning and expressed frustration with existing tools.

In order to maximize the benefits of technology while mitigating potential drawbacks, language learning platforms should provide experiences that are not only interactive but immersive. Rintaningrum (2023) emphasized the potential of using AI and extended reality to facilitate authentic, real-time conversational experiences that provide meaningful cultural and linguistic interactions. The effective integration of technology into language learning in a way that maximizes a sense of connection and community requires balancing the use of and reliance on digital tools with authentic human interactions.

Upward Mobility

Immigration is a distinct social phenomenon where people find themselves in a new country, often to pursue economic mobility. This mobility is crucial, as people desire new

opportunities to provide for themselves and their families. Through an understanding of the everyday experiences of migrants who seek to learn the native language, we can offer fresh perspectives on the challenges that migrants face when pursuing economic mobility.

In the U.S., we often understand migration through statistics, such as Ward et al.'s analysis of the "historic" period in U.S. history, in which the number of immigrants in the U.S. is rising rapidly (Ward et al. 2023). Although these statistics can help us understand trends, they suggest we analyze social phenomena from a single dimension. People are reduced to data on a graph, and through this analysis, we rely on the categorization of characteristics. Statistics cannot encapsulate the holistic nature of the immigration phenomenon. Immigration is not a static process but rather a dynamic, continuous, and complex process that involves the flow of individuals, families, cultures, ideas, labor, and capital. Deleuze coined these terms "flows" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972). Flows represent the dynamic movement of different components that shape our reality. Humans migrate for complex reasons, whether that be to pursue economic opportunities (Holmes, 2013) or to escape climate change (The International Organization for Migration, 2024). When they end up in a new country, they begin a process of cultural acclimation.

People who migrate to a country without prior experience often arrive with limited cultural capital. Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital encapsulates individuals' cultural knowledge, skills, and educational credentials that are leveraged for social or economic mobility (Bourdieu, 1971). Without an understanding of the language or the cultural norms, people are often blocked from upward mobility. Undergoing this process is no easy task, as people need to study the language, find employment or educational opportunities, and establish credible documentation. We aim for our research to aid designers in their pursuit of technological

interventions that provide assistance for communities of people who desire upward mobility in a new country.

Methods

Our ethnography sought to understand English language learning in meaning-based, naturalistic settings. By exploring diverse learning environments, such as discussion groups, language classes for various ages, and social gatherings, we can uncover how learners engage with language. Ultimately, our goal was to share insights to inform the design of products and environments that facilitate more effective, immersive, and engaging language-learning experiences.

Review of the Ethnographic Method

The ethnographic method, broadly described, is the pursuit of conceptual frameworks via disciplined inquiry and systematic analysis (Atkinson, 2015). Ethnography contains methods of research, but it cannot be defined by those methods. Culture is a dynamic process that is happening at every moment, and as humans exchange, culture changes. Man finds himself spun in webs of meaning (Geertz, 1973). Through the ethnographic method, using disciplined inquiry and systematic analysis to approach people's everyday lives, we explore possibilities unexplainable in a test environment.

Ethnography in HCI

HCI has made significant contributions to the different methods of Ethnography. Although we must keep in mind the true spirit of ethnography, as described above, we can also

draw from ethnographic methods in HCI. This ethnography was done by multiple people using rapid ethnography.

Multi-Sited Ethnography

Multi-sited ethnography involves analyzing English conversational learning across various locations and contexts rather than being confined to a single site of study. This approach allowed our team to explore the connections between different places, people, and processes. This gave the research a broader scope, allowing the team to find similarities and differences in time and place.

Our Team's Ethnographic Methods

Alan

Alan spent four weeks attending English Conversations meetups at a local public library in Ames. During this, he participated in conversations as an English Language Learning mentor. After these classes, he regularly ventured to different sites where the community would meet, such as churches, restaurants, and food pantries. He met Somu, a man from Bangladesh with whom he traveled throughout the city. He also got to visit Somu's house and family.

David

David spent four weeks attending English Conversation classes at a local church in Ames and in an office space at Iowa State. The participants were mainly international students/workers at Iowa State or spouses who tagged along. He employed participant observation as his primary method to gather data from these classes. He established a good rapport with the participants in

the classes. He conducted a contextual inquiry with one of the participants, Pin, and asked her to use a mobile app (HelloTalk) to capture her thoughts on the technology.

Madison

Madison spent four weeks observing a variety of different classes at a local elementary school, all with students whose first language was not English. She immersed herself in the class by sitting among the students or next to the ELL specialists, to observe and partake in activities helping these students to learn English. She also conducted interviews with the teachers to gain more insight into the pain points around technology being implemented in elementary schools to help enhance or support learnings for ELL students. She discovered opportunity areas to inform better technology designs that have low learning curves for young children and allow them to feel immersed in the process.

Matthew

Matthew spent four weeks attending English language learning and conversation classes conducted by the Benicia Public Library in Benicia, California. The participants were all female immigrants from a wide variety of home countries. Participant observation was his main method of gathering data; he participated in a number of group activities and held conversations in individual and group formats with study participants.

Sanchay

Sanchay dedicated four weeks to a local church, engaging in group activities with a diverse group of learners. The majority of these participants were women from around the world, all attending English lessons with a native speaker as their tutor. Additionally, Sanchay took part in participant observation during a weekly event designed for both local and international

residents to socialize and practice their English skills. This event featured games and had a different theme each week.

Sense of Community

While walking around the town with Somu, chatting about past experiences, Alan learned about Somu's deep depression. He had moved away from home and lost all of his friends. He wasn't legally allowed to work, so he volunteered when he could. This made him feel like an outsider. This was often the case with many other participants, especially older participants, who felt a need for community connection. They would show up every week at a language learning conversational meetup and have fun talking to people while learning the language. This is something that most technological interventions don't provide.

Beyond the primary goal of language learning, fostering a sense of community with fellow language learners and program facilitators proved to be of utmost importance to individual participants across field sites. The group dynamics observed during participant observation played a principal role in fostering a sense of trust and mutual support that motivated students to engage with class content and more effectively learn language concepts; in many cases, beyond the goal of mere knowledge transmission, it was clear that learners were seeking connection with others.

Researchers across field sites witnessed individuals working together to support one another in learning. This behavior had a twofold purpose: first, it provided meaningful scaffolding that supported individuals in completing discrete tasks and engaging with content. Next, it helped engender the aforementioned sense of community. These purposes seem to be intertwined: the interplay between the learning environment itself (which encompasses the

emergent sense of community) and the collaborative tendencies of participants created a feedback loop that enhanced both learning outcomes and social integration.

The environment helped individuals feel secure in self-expression – participants were encouraged to explore the nuances of English without the fear of being unfairly judged or admonished. This trust not only enhanced language acquisition but facilitated emotional connections, reducing the feelings of isolation that some participants made explicit.

Sanchay was participating in the “Coffee, Tea and English” conversation class, and one of the topics on that day was about family. Looking around the class, he noticed that every English learner was deeply engaged in their conversations and radiating with smiles. Sanchay believes this could be because the questions were designed to touch upon the participants' childhood and family experiences. These topics are often overlooked in our busy lives. When were you last asked about your favorite activity with your father? He also observed a glimmer of happiness when Riz shared about his father. Riz recounted how his father worked far away from home and would make a strenuous journey every weekend to visit his family.

Riley, aged 75-80, who was at Sanchay's class that day, also became emotional when he shared a childhood memory with his grandfather. He recounted, "My grandfather was a drinker, and I was eight at the time. One day, he pulled me aside and asked me to get a beer bottle from the cooler. He told me to take a tiny sip, but not more than that. My mom didn't know about it, and I felt like I was officially included in my grandfather's club." As he finished speaking, he briefly gazed into the distance as if he had traveled back to relive that moment.

These interactions show how important it is to design learning environments that go beyond the mere facilitation of knowledge transfer. Communal learning experiences, where personal narratives and shared challenges are essential to the learning process, are valuable and

effective. A language learning experience, then, can serve as a bridge, not only as a means of acquiring useful linguistic knowledge but as a way to help immigrant populations stave off a feeling of isolation by sparking meaningful social connections.

Halloween!

The conversation class facilitator asks Grace what she has been up to recently, and a puzzled look flashes across her face. She struggles to remember – she mentions she had been studying English at home, but the room can tell this doesn't quite capture what she's been up to. Suddenly, Grace grabs her phone, "Ah!" she exclaims, "Halloween!" She turns her phone around and shows everyone a video tour of her home, adorned with all kinds of Halloween decorations. She pauses the video on a view of a Storm Trooper statue next to her door: "Star Wars!" she says.

Marj seizes the opportunity. "Yes, 'May the Force Be With You'", she says, to the bewildered group. She turns around and writes it on the board. "This is something that we say to each other all the time in America – it means, 'Be good! Be strong!'" Lena writes it in her notebook, with a question mark next to it.

Fostering learning experiences that center on relevant topics of interest creates opportunities to connect language acquisition with familiar and meaningful subjects related, ideally, to the target culture. By using relatable themes as a foundation, learners are able to trace connections between existing knowledge and schemas to new linguistic concepts. This emotional connection enhances both comprehension and retention for language learners.

This approach allows participants to practice language skills in natural and meaningful ways, making the learning process more enjoyable and relevant. This approach can also be

practiced independently; some students told researchers how they would engage with media in English at home, a practice that further reinforces the topical approach, integrating new words and expressions into everyday routines.

David went to the English classes hosted at Christ Community Church on the day of Halloween. He arrived on time and went to the classroom, knowing where the class was located after going there the first time last week. The same students from last week were already there, with the exception of one Chinese lady. Elizabeth was writing on the whiteboard with some discussion questions for the day. David sat down as the class started.

The first topic that was discussed was Halloween. Elizabeth asked if anyone knew about the history of Halloween. She looked at David, thinking that he might know. He answered that the holiday came from a Celtic tradition that believed that spirits could return to earth and haunt people. People and kids would dress up in scary costumes to ward off these spirits and use candy or sweet cakes to appease them. She was satisfied with his answer and said that she didn't like Halloween. She mentioned that she didn't like the notion of it and it is a day that people play pranks on each other and vandalize others' property. She chuckled and said that it is a day when dentists are happy, they all laughed at her statement.

These two stories demonstrate that in most, if not all, of our English language conversation meetups, the facilitators attempted to immerse the students in the current events of the time. Since our Ethnography was done during October in the U.S., many of the classes revolved around Halloween topics such as costumes, ghosts/spirits, and trick-or-treating. It is important that we connect the language learning material to lived experiences, fostering connections and applicable language proficiency. Through these conversations, participants not only learned the language but cultivated insights into American culture.

Downsides of technology in language learning

The Double-Edged Sword: Technology and Language Learning in Modern Education

During visits to a conversational meetup at a library, Alan was talking to Somu about his methods for learning the English language. Somu showed Alan his phone browser, and it was filled with multiple different blogs on different concepts, such as past, present, and future verbs, or how to use different words in different contexts. Somu explained that if he had a question, he asked Google and found different blogs. He said that it helps him, but he also finds himself too distracted on his phone. “I used to be able to hike into nature and read for hours. Now, I can barely focus for two minutes. And it's because of this phone”, Somu explained. This showed Alan how learning via technology can often be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can provide you with many learning opportunities, but on another hand, it can distract you, lowering your attention span to learn. Across our field sites, we learned about many different technologies that enhance language learning. However, technology also has the potential to distract.

David set up a meeting with a student, Pin, from one of the classes that he attended. She is a visiting scholar, and her whole family came with her while she was learning about different cultures, as her major is Cultural Anthropology and Sociology. She is very determined to improve her English, as she always attends the classes, pays close attention to them, and is not afraid to ask questions about things that she does not quite understand in English. David decided to conduct a context inquiry with her as she seemed like the ideal candidate, and he could communicate with her in her native tongue as her English wasn't too good. They explored the app HelloTalk. This app is different from Duolingo as it allows learners to practice the language with real people, like a language exchange partner. There is also a function in the app called

“English AI,” where the AI gives prompts and asks questions to the users, who can try to respond in English.

After using the app, David asked Pin more questions about her thoughts on the app and the AI feature. She thought that the questions asked by the AI were not relatable. For example, a question that was asked was, “Do you study better in the morning or at night?” She thought that the question was silly, as most of the time when she studies, the schedule is not dependent on her but on the class time and the teacher’s schedule. David asked her if she would have answered the AI the way she answered him, that the time she studies is not dependent on her but on when the class is happening. She responded that she would not have answered the AI the way she answered him, as the AI already laid out the question, and she was given directions to answer. But if it were a conversation with a real person, she would have answered differently and provided more details and clarification when needed. She also thought that since it was an AI and not a human, she thinks that there was no real interaction when talking to it, as she had no feelings and emotions when interacting with the AI.

These two stories showcased how technology is a double-edged sword, revealing both the advantages and limitations of digital tools in the pursuit of linguistic proficiency. In Somu's case, we see how technology provides easy access to a wealth of language-learning resources, allowing for on-demand information about various aspects of English. However, this convenience comes at a cost, as the constant use of digital devices can lead to decreased attention spans and reduced ability to engage in deep, focused learning.

Pin's experience with HelloTalk and its AI feature demonstrates another facet of technology in language learning. While AI can provide structured practice opportunities, it lacks the nuance and flexibility of human interaction. Pin's reluctance to engage fully with the AI,

preferring instead the depth and authenticity of human conversation, underscores the irreplaceable value of genuine human connections in language acquisition.

Both stories converge on a crucial point: while technology can be a powerful tool for language learners, it cannot fully replicate the richness of human interaction and the contextual understanding that comes with it. The ideal approach to language learning likely lies in striking a balance between leveraging technological resources and engaging in meaningful, real-world conversations.

“Duolingo is boring!”

Alan was at an English conversation meetup, making bookmarks at the local library with a younger woman, Azza, and a few others. When asked about using Duolingo, Azza explained that “Duolingo is just boring.” She had just arrived a few weeks ago after getting accepted into a high school study abroad program. She wanted to explore the opportunities available, and wasn’t sure what her plan was. She liked American music and TV and had used that as a way to explore the language. She had tried Duolingo but didn’t find it very engaging. She joked about how the Duolingo owl annoys her. It always showed up in her phone notifications, making vague threats to learn the language. Duolingo is not engaging to her, and it doesn’t really teach anything of significance that helps her communicate. Learning a language, to Azza, is much more than learning how to say basic things like “He,” “She,” or “Bread.”

Responding to this, a child sitting with the group said, “I have a 30-day Duolingo streak.” This child was very proud of the fact, but her mother, an international woman who speaks many different languages, said that her child did not want to engage with the language outside of Duolingo. “She had every opportunity to learn the language while in school but refused. Explain

to me why she didn't want to learn the language at a young age and why she still doesn't speak it," the mother explained.

Despite the child's success in mastering the Duolingo streak, she often doesn't use the language, even if it's spoken at home. Her mother explained that you cannot learn through apps, you must learn through confidence in speaking. You have to jump into a different country and learn the language by talking to people. She seemed a bit frustrated with her daughter, as her daughter chose the app over learning the language through conversation.

For the mother, confidence is paramount. She explained to me that you must find others who are not "pedantic" about the language and let you make mistakes. You must try, or you will never learn. She has never used a language learning app and is a multilingual person.

Despite these expressed misgivings around Duolingo, it is nonetheless the most popular language-learning platform on the planet as of 2024, based on the number of downloads across operating systems (Ceci, 2024). "Duolingo makes use of a highly gamified environment in which language acquisition is made fun and competitive" (Kori, 2021), but despite its engaging design, it is nonetheless lacking a holistic language learning experience, especially from a linguistic perspective – and, in our research, most of our participants either did not use it at all or used it only sparingly as a secondary method. A 2017 article from Bajorek provides a list of limitations, specifically around how the app handles pronunciation. Principal, amongst them, a lack of meaningful feedback on pronunciation. Duolingo relies on a binary feedback system that does not guide users on how to alter their pronunciation to address speech errors. Additionally, the article speaks to the prevalence of inauthentic content in its curriculum, "pragmatically absurd utterances" that do not lend themselves to real-world contexts. Duolingo emphasizes formal grammar and vocabulary training, categorical knowledge-building exercises that don't require

the user to actually use the language, minimizing the role of speaking exercises and even allowing users to disable them.

Such a design contravenes the foundational tenets of language acquisition, particularly around the concept of immersion, echoed in the literature (Rintaningrum, 2023) and reinforced by our ethnographic observations. In order to maximize language learning, learners should be exposed to real-world materials that help familiarize them with practical language use; additionally, active engagement in the language is necessary via some kind of social interaction. Immersive language learning environments emphasize cultural elements, which are critical for understanding the nuances of a language in context and improving practical communication skills.

Across field sites, we observed a pattern: learners who engaged with these kinds of authentic materials and participated in group conversations demonstrated more comfort and willingness to speak English, even if it was hard to say whether or not their technical proficiency was progressing. One learner remarked on the effectiveness of watching subtitled movies to learn common phrases, which helped them gain confidence to experiment with speaking, allowing them to worry less about grammatical perfection. Another participant remarked that the low-pressure environment helped them to find their voice and practice speaking without being unfairly judged.

Despite the limited scope of our observations, the idea that immersion promotes language development was clear – again, not because we observed people making progress from a technical standpoint, but because observed changes in learners’ perceptible effect demonstrated enhanced readiness to engage with the language. The informal, topically resonant, and culturally grounded interactions witnessed across field sites demonstrate the value of fostering spaces that

prioritize comfort and practicality over rote learning and precision.

As such, future language learning designs should not be focused merely on grammatical formalism but should instead seek to emulate or replicate environments that emphasize community bonds, authentic cultural exchange, and a sense of grounded security to maximize the learning groups' collective willingness to practice speaking the language and make mistakes. As we continue to integrate technology into language education, it's essential to recognize its limitations and complement digital tools with human-centric learning experiences. This balanced approach can help learners like Somu, Pin, and other participants in our field sites harness the benefits of technology while maintaining the crucial skills of deep focus and authentic communication that are fundamental to true language mastery.

Career goals

Many immigrants and internationals in this study came to the US to either further their studies, get better job opportunities, or accompany their spouses in pursuing these goals. English being the primary language of the US means that they would need to learn English in order to assimilate into the country with ease. Without the knowledge of English, they would have many troubles communicating with local citizens, let alone being able to be successful in their endeavors to advance their studies and careers.

No man is an island. We can see the importance of community to people, especially internationals and immigrants, in the "*connection*" and "*sense of community*" section of this paper. Even while learning the English language, they tried to band together and encourage each other, fostering this community environment. They were longing for this sense of belonging;

being far away from home and family, they lost their familiarity and had to grab onto these opportunities for fellowship with others.

Community is even more critical for internationals/immigrants in terms of job search/advancement. A survey conducted by LinkedIn in 2017 gathered that about 80% of workers think that professional networking is crucial to being successful in their careers. They also found that about 70% of workers who got their jobs at their respective companies already had an existing connection with someone at that company in 2016 (LinkedIn, 2017). This shows that connection and networking are important for an individual who is trying to search for a new job. This is challenging for internationals/immigrants as they are not from the country originally, and they likely do not have many connections or networks that can help them in their job search.

The intersection of language learning, immigration, and prospects for career advancement shows the wide variety of challenges – as well as opportunities – encountered by individuals immigrating to new cultural and professional environments. Language acquisition plays a key role, clearly, not just as a tool for communication but as a means of advancing one's material station and assimilating into the community. A lack of language proficiency only compounds existing challenges faced by adjusting to life in an unfamiliar place. Our observations in the field showed that, while for the most part, participants were not explicit about their career aspirations, they nonetheless maintained clear motives for learning English tied to broader material goals, like securing jobs, furthering their education, or supporting their families.

Design

Alan designed a multiplayer video game called “TalkTown Adventures [working title].” This video game utilizes Unity, a popular game engine, to create an immersive experience for the

player. This game is the design intervention that our team came up with since this project came into existence, with Alan at the forefront of this idea. We chose this intervention because we all think and feel that there are not many good technological resources for English Language Learners and English as a second language. We also feel that conversing in English is key for internationals/immigrants to learn and improve in the language. This design provides an interactive medium to the players, allowing them to join the game and chat with others.

After setup and loaded into the game, you are immediately launched into the middle of a town square that has a Halloween makeover. The town is filled with a lot of houses, with a vibe that resembles the Salem Witch Trials. Right outside the town, there is a cornfield resembling Iowa. If another player joins the same server of the game, you are able to voice chat when in close proximity to them in the game. Although there isn't much to do besides exploring the town and the surrounding areas and talking to the players in the game right now, with more time, we can develop more elements into the game, such as mini-games that spark teamwork and conversations, interaction with NPCs (Non-playable character) that can give you quests to use the English language to complete a task, frequent events such as a revamped townscape in a specific holiday-theme (Christmas, Thanksgiving, 4th of July), current real-life events (U.S elections, Olympics, World Cup) and other events for players to have themed conversations.

“Why this game?”

With our ethnographic research and the themes that we found, we think that this game can solve many, if not all, of the themes that were present. As previously mentioned, there were not many good technological resources for learning English for internationals and immigrants who are new to the US. Through this game, we can foster connection by creating online

communities in the virtual world and provide online learning through events that mirror real-life stories. The game can be used as instructional technology or as an accessible consumer product for all types of language learners. It can provide online learning alternatives for those with physical disabilities. Through the use of this game, we can add more engaging methods to attain the literacy required for upward mobility.

Tom Boellstorff (2015) considers the virtual community as another extension of humanity in trying to dispel the myth that virtual communities are less “real” than online communities. We would use his research to inform our design practices, giving our game room for people to express themselves. We would create events and places, such as Star Wars or Halloween-themed worlds, that would allow players a chance to interact with each other in an immersive way, allowing them the opportunity to express themselves and learn the language through interaction with others. We could also work with language teachers in order to build interactive lessons and adventures that could help integrate our tool into the learning pedagogy.

Conclusion

As we’ve explored throughout this paper, language is more than a series of formal rules and symbols – it is an essential tool and information layer that enhances connection and fosters community. Human beings seek connection and yearn for community, and the impulse towards both is often strong enough to motivate the construction of improvised bridges across language divides. Language learning environments and supportive technologies should stimulate a sense of immersion and facilitate emotional connection amongst learners, leveraging this inclination towards connection as immigrant populations seek stability and self-improvement in a world that often fails to accommodate their needs. Our online video game sought to provide such an experience, aiming to blend topical learning, community engagement, and cultural immersion.

Nonetheless, this is only a starting point: the interplay of topical learning, context, community, and connection is fertile ground for further research and design considerations, an opportunity to work towards interventions that prioritize humanity and inclusivity in language learning.

References

- Anthony, A. R. B. (2008). Output strategies for English-language learners: Theory to practice. *The Reading Teacher*, 61(6), 472–482. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.61.6.4>
- Atkinson, P. (2015). *For ethnography*. SAGE.
- Bajorek, J. P. (2017). L2 pronunciation in CALL: The unrealized potential of Rosetta Stone, Duolingo, Babbel, and Mango Languages. *Issues and Trends in Educational Technology*, 5(1), 24-51.
- Bourdieu, P. (1971). Reproduction culturelle et reproduction sociale. *Social Science Information*, 10(2), 45–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847101000203>
- Boellstorff, T. (2015). *Coming of age in Second Life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400874101>
- Ceci, L. (2024, August 29). Top language learning apps by downloads 2024. Statista. <https://statista.com/statistics/1239522/top-language-learning-apps-downloads/>
- Chandana, U. S. (2023). The impact of technology-enhanced language learning on English proficiency: A comparative study of digital tools and traditional methods. *International Journal of Environment, Agriculture and Biotechnology*, 8(6). <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijeab>
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (2012). *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Continuum.
- Eighty-percent of professionals consider networking important to career success. (2017, June
- LinkedIn News. (2017, June 22). *Eighty percent of professionals consider networking important to career success*. LinkedIn.

<https://news.linkedin.com/2017/6/eighty-percent-of-professionals-consider-networking-important-to-career-success>

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.

Holmes, S. (2013). *Fresh fruit, broken bodies: Migrant farmworkers in the United States*.

Berkeley: *University of California Press*. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520398641>

Kaney, L. G. (2019). *An ethnographic study of English language learners who received services under IDEA 2004 while attending American public schools* (Order No. 13806687).

Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

<https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/ethnographic-study-english-language-learners-who/docview/2195515345/se-2>

Kittredge, A., Peters, R., Neumann, F., & Jiang, X. (2024). Duolingo learners can start a conversation after 4–6 weeks of app use.

https://duolingo-papers.s3.amazonaws.com/reports/Duolingo_whitepaper_language_conversation_2024.pdf

Kori, S. (2021). Usability evaluation on the application of gamification of the language learning app Duolingo for tertiary learners. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.18021.88800>

Rintaningrum, R. (2023). Technology integration in English language teaching and learning:

Benefits and challenges. *Cogent Education*, 10(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2022.2164690>

Shadiev, R., & Wang, X. (2022). A review of research on technology-supported language learning and 21st century skills. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 897689.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.897689>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2023). Our epidemic of loneliness and isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's advisory on the healing effects of social connection and community.

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>

Varela, O. E. (2017). Learning outcomes of study-abroad programs: A meta-analysis. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 16(4), 531–561.

<https://doi.org/10.5465/amle.2015.0250>

Ward, N., & Batalova, J. (2023). Frequently requested statistics on immigrants and immigration in the United States. Migration Policy Institute, 14.

Xu, Z., Chen, Z., Eutsler, L., Geng, Z., & Kogut, A. (2020). A scoping review of digital game-based technology on English language learning. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 68(3), 877–904. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-019-09702-2>

The International Organization for Migration. (2024). From climate change to food insecurity: Compounding and direct drivers of human mobility. *World Migration Report*. <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-7/climate-change-food-insecurity-compounding-and-direct-drivers-human-mobility>