English Language Online Communities: Usage of Synchronous Chat Servers in Informal Digital Learning of English

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Abstract

This article investigates the Informal Digital Learning of English (IDLE) of users of synchronous text and voice chat enabled applications such as Discord. Thirty-one non-native English-speaking participants from a variety of geographical contexts took part in semi-structured interviews and follow-up questionnaires aimed at investigating their history with learning the English language through the internet, their usage of synchronous chat applications, and their use of digital tools in relation to synchronous chat applications. The results of the analysis indicate that participants followed varied but often comparable patterns with regard to IDLE, usually following a standard progression from passive internet usage to asynchronous usage, and finally to synchronous chat application usage. The overall usage rates of synchronous chat applications were extremely high, with most participants spending several hours a day using English in these venues. Users also took advantage of a variety of digital tools, such as voice or text chat, message editing, and online dictionaries to aid in their English communication.

Introduction

The advent and popularization of the internet was and continues to be the catalyst in arguably the greatest shift in human social structures in modern history. Through social media, people keep in touch with their friends and family, read about current events, and share their thoughts, pictures, and feelings with others. Additionally, the internet serves as a meeting place for online communities, where people from around the globe can come together to discuss hobbies, cultivate friendships, and share knowledge. One increasingly popular venue for communities such as this are synchronous chat server applications. While not as omnipresent as some social media, these function as more focused spaces for online hobby communities and have seen success as such, with the most popular of these applications, Discord, reaching over 200 million monthly users (Backlinko, 2025). These applications allow users to freely join and create servers to organize communities wherein groups of people can communicate through synchronous text channels as well as voice chat channels which use VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technology.

One major aspect of these online communities is that, due to their virtual nature, there is no geographical limitation in accessing them. This means that people can participate in these spaces at any time should they be carrying an internet-capable device, whether they are at home, on public transit, at work, or even in another social space. This became especially relevant during the Covid-19 pandemic, where the International Telecommunication Union noted a spike in internet usage accompanying the widespread lockdowns in 2020 which has not reversed in subsequent years

(International Telecommunication Union, 2024). Second, internet community spaces not being limited geographically allows these spaces to serve as international hubs where members from all corners of the globe can come together to converse with one another. For many of these spaces, English (as the current Lingua Franca) is the de facto community language, leading to a situation in which English language internet spaces often consist of a mix of both native and L2 English speakers. These L2 English speakers may be able to improve their language skills through consistent reading, typing, speaking, and listening opportunities which they encounter while utilizing these spaces, allowing them to immerse themselves in the English language from the comfort of their own homes, regardless of whether they have access to native speaker interlocutors in their offline life. This study aims to investigate the L2 English-speaking users of online chat servers to gain an understanding of their English usage and learning in relation to these spaces.

Literature Review

Affinity Spaces and Virtual Third Places

Affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) are spaces in which people come together due to a shared interest or hobby. Although often discussed in the context of online fan communities, the idea of an affinity space stems from the concept of communities of practice (Lave, 1993; Wenger, 1998), real-world places where groups of people learn about a trade or other skill through participation in some sort of community or social structure. Gee (2005) reconceptualized these as *semiotic social spaces* (SSS), which he defined as spaces in which people both receive and attribute meaning to signs. Gee went on to describe a particular type of semiotic social space which he dubbed *affinity spaces*. Similar to communities of practice, affinity spaces involve many kinds of learning, not only limited to knowledge about the interest that the space is situated around, but also of other, related skills. For example, an affinity space related to the game "The Sims" may involve the learning of how to play the game and knowledge about the game, but it could also involve the creation of mods (user-created modifications to the game), creative writing about in-game characters, typing skills needed to communicate online, and other aspects related to not only the game itself but the spaces surrounding the game (Gee, 2017).

Initially, Gee (2005) described these spaces using a list of 11 features, but this list has been iterated on both by Gee himself (Gee & Hayes, 2012) and Lammers et al. (2012), who created a similar list of nine traits they considered more suited to their research into fan-fiction communities (Curwood et al., 2013). For this study, we summarize a few of the primary traits of affinity spaces included in the lists mentioned above. Affinity spaces tend to be organized around a common endeavor rather than around traits of the participants such as race, gender, class, or disability. They also allow participants to both consume and produce content relevant to the endeavor the space is situated around, and they encourage the development and sharing of various types of knowledge. Roles in these spaces tend to be fluid, without a strong hierarchy other than perhaps discussion moderators. Finally, rather than being limited to the direct sharing of knowledge between participants, socialization plays a major role in the space.

Of note is the fact that an affinity space need not contain every single one of these features, as Gee (2005) himself pointed out in his original paper, stating "We do not have to see an affinity space as an all-or-nothing thing. Rather, we can say that any SSS that has more of these features than another is more of an affinity space" (p. 225). Although initially developed as a concept in relation to internet discussion forums (as well as real-life venues such as churches or clubhouses), affinity spaces can vary in their exact form, with more recent studies including even loosely defined groups such as the users of Twitter hashtags as affinity spaces (Dynel & Ross, 2022; Rosenburg et al., 2016). Synchronous chat applications such as Discord have yet to receive much attention when it comes to their potential as affinity spaces, but these servers, being quite similar to older discussion forum affinity spaces, often exhibit many or all the traits of an affinity space outlined earlier. In fact, because Discord servers have advanced features such as the ability to edit messages, search message history, embed images and videos, use a large variety of emojis, post GIFs from a large third-party database, and send voice messages, they may enable even more nuanced and holistic communication among users than older forms of online affinity spaces. Furthermore, server administrators can create custom emojis, stickers, and sound effects to accentuate the community's identity.

While there has been research on learners in somewhat similar affinity space contexts such as Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) and internet forums (Adris & Yamat, 2015; Krish et al., 2011), research has been limited on L2 English speakers who are users of synchronous chat server applications such as Discord. Existing literature tends to focus on the potential of Discord as a learning tool for classrooms (Aditya & Ekawati, 2024; Odinokaya et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2020) rather than a space for natural informal language learning.

One way in which Discord servers may differ from other affinity space venues, however, is the fact that, due to the amorphous and customizable nature of the servers, communities may be found that are not formed around a common endeavor or interest, as is typical in affinity spaces, but rather are structured around expanded online friend networks. In these spaces, user activity might resemble interaction at a local bar or community center. Even within the more traditional affinity space servers that are generally focused around a common endeavor, discussions often depart significantly from the theme of the space, with regulars socializing and speaking about broader topics related to their lives or current events. This is aided by the fact that servers usually have many different text and voice channels that can have varying themes, such as an off-topic channel suited to more general socialization. In this way, these spaces have the potential to act as virtual third places.

The third place, first coined by Oldenburg and Brissett (1982) and later popularized by Oldenburg (1999) in his book *The Great Good Place*, is the idea of a space where one spends time and socializes that is neither home nor work. According to Oldenburg, third places inspire a sense of belonging and let those who participate in them meet and chat with other regulars on an even playing field, free from the hierarchy that may be present in their work or home life. In the last 20 years, the idea of a virtual third place has also gained some attention, starting with Soukup (2006), who discussed how, despite some barriers to participation (chiefly caused by the lack of internet penetration at the time), online spaces could nevertheless manifest many of the qualities of third places proposed by Oldernburg. Due to this potential overlap, we refer to Discord servers and other online synchronous group chat settings which exist in the gray area between affinity spaces and third places as online communities. More specifically, as the study looks at English language communities specifically, the phrase English Language Online Communities, or ELOCs, will be used to signify this concept.

Informal Language Learning and IDLE

Informal language learning (ILL) is usually understood as language learning that takes place outside of formal settings such as classrooms or tutoring centers and that is not being done at the express behest of an instructor. Various promising pathways to ILL have been investigated over the last 30 years, from television (d'Ydewalle & Pavakanun 1995; Muñoz, 2022), to video games (Thorne et al., 2009), foreign songs and music (Ludke, 2018), and even ILL through family members for learners of heritage languages (Kheirkhah & Cekaite, 2015). Since the advent of informal language learning through internet spaces such as massively multiplayer online games (Kongmee et al., 2011), fanfiction communities (Black, 2006), and YouTube (Wang & Chen, 2020), research into this area of ILL has become increasingly common, and various frameworks have been constructed to describe it.

One of the most commonly used frameworks when discussing online ILL is IDLE (Informal Digital Learning of English). IDLE is often defined in relation to the four dimensions of out-of-class language learning formulated by Benson (2011), with IDLE itself falling under two categories: extracurricular and extramural. While both forms are self-directed and take place outside of the classroom, extracurricular IDLE is intentional language learning by the student and is often semi-structured or tied to a certificate, while extramural IDLE is more naturalistic and unstructured (Benson, 2011). According to Gee's (2017) most recent accounts of online affinity spaces, most IDLE in these contexts qualifies as extramural, as learners improve their language skills in the process of participating rather than having a particular goal in mind, although some more intentional learning may also occur.

The touted benefits of IDLE are varied. Chief among them is motivation; informal language learning often involves the intrinsic motivation of the learner rather than non-internalized extrinsic motivation forced upon them by a teacher or other superior (Chik, 2019). This is especially true when it comes to extramural IDLE, as many learners simply improve at the language as a side product of some other activity. For example, a fan of English language superhero comics may spend their time reading these comics because they are interested in the contents, but in the process, they also learn new vocabulary and grammar through their extensive reading. After reading these comics, they may go to online affinity spaces where they communicate with other fans of the comics, likely in the same language that they are written in. In this way, language learning occurs without the learner ever having to decide to study anything, but rather as a natural part of an activity done for pleasure. This is an example of incidental learning (Hulstijn, 2013), as contrasted to the intentional learning that usually takes place in classrooms (although intentional learning may still occur during extracurricular IDLE). As a result of language learning being tied to hobbies and interests, another purported benefit of ILL emerges: Informal language learning may allow more extensive access to the language than standard formal language classes, with particularly devoted learners spending hours per day using the language involved with their hobby (Sockett & Kusyk, 2015).

Because of the nature of the internet, which includes opportunities for both speech and text communication in a variety of contexts, IDLE occurs through a multitude of venues, with a single learner often accessing the language in many different ways. This results in multimodal learning (Dressman, 2019) that can incorporate writing, reading, speaking, and listening, depending on the venues through which learners are using the language online. Furthermore, due to the nature of online text communication, unique and rich pragmatic expression can occur through creative usage of the written language medium (C. Lee, 2015; Yus, 2011).

One promising aspect of IDLE is the potential for the usage of tools specific to a digital context which may aid the learner in communicating and learning the language. These tools could be as simple as a Google search to check for grammar rules (Tavakoli, 2021) and online dictionary entries (Yurieva et al., 2021), or they could involve more in-depth English learning through resources such as YouTube (de Azevedo Fay & Matias, 2019). Many recent applications, including Discord, also include helpful tools such as an edit message feature that allows users to alter their utterances after they are sent, which may potentially encourage reflexivity.

To investigate IDLE in relation to ELOCs more holistically, the present study investigates not only the participants' current usage of Discord but their history with English learning and usage both online and offline, along with their perceptions of these experiences. Additionally, participants' usage of various digital tools is investigated to paint a more complete picture of how they use English in these spaces. Thus, the study was devised with the following research questions about L2 English users of ELOCs in mind:

Research Question 1: What experiences with English learning have participants had before and during their usage of online chat platforms such as Discord?

Research Question 2: What ELOC usage patterns are reported by the participants?

Research Question 3: Which digital tools and resources do the participants make use of when communicating in English in ELOC spaces?

Methodology

Participants

Participants for the study were recruited online from various hobby-related servers on the Discord application. The first author reached out to potential participants through direct messaging, explaining the goals of the study and asking whether they would be interested in participating. To be eligible, participants were required to meet the following criteria: a) English is not their native language, defined for the purposes of this study as them not having had extensive access to the language before five years of age; b) English is not a natively spoken language in their present community; c) they are 18 years of age or older.

Thirty-one participants meeting these criteria were recruited and interviewed. The sample was quite heterogeneous, with many countries of residence and native languages represented. There were 21 separate countries with representatives in the study (see Table 1) with 17 native languages (see Table 2). Twenty-nine participants were raised monolingual, with the remaining two being simultaneous bilinguals.

Country	Number of Participants
Spain	5
Indonesia	4
Russia	2
Argentina	2
France	2
Serbia, Bosnia, Austria, Italy, Malaysia, Chile, Vietnam, Germany, Korea, Japan, Brazil, India, Dominican Republic, Poland, The Netherlands, The Philippines	1

Table 1. Participants' country of origin

Native Language	Number of Participants
Spanish	9
Russian	3
Bahasa Indonesia	3
Polish	2
Serbian, Bosnian, Italian, Mandarin Chinese, French, Vietnamese, German, Korean, Portuguese, Mizo, Dutch, Filipino	1
Bilingual Spanish + French	1
Bilingual Spanish + Galician	1

Table 2. Participants' native language

The median age of the participants was 26, with a range of 18 to 36. Twenty-four of the participants identified as male, six identified as female, and one identified as non-binary. All participants reported receiving some amount of formal instruction in English during their adolescence, and two had experience living in an English-speaking context, but all participants currently lived in contexts where a language other than English was commonly used, in line with the criteria. Participants were not compensated for their participation in the study.

Instruments

The study involved semi-structured text interviews carried out over the Discord application. Participants were asked to join a server made specifically for the purposes of the study and were informed of their rights as a participant (e.g., assured anonymity and the right to leave the study at any time), as well as the goals of the study prior to beginning the interview. The interviews were conducted through synchronous text chat, and the participants were encouraged to view the interview as informal and to communicate casually and naturally. Synchronous text interviews were selected in favor of verbal ones for two reasons. First, the participants were from online community spaces, where synchronous text communication is often the de facto standard of communication. Because of this, it was supposed that the participants would feel more comfortable communicating in English through the medium of writing rather than spoken language. This also lent the interview transcripts more ecological validity, as it allowed participants to use English in a manner more representative of how they might communicate while participating in ELOCs. Secondly, using textual interviews allowed the researcher to observe usage of text-specific communicative tools such as emojis, text modification, message editing, and written verbalizations.

The interviews generally took between 90 and 120 minutes, with the exact length depending on the communication speed of the interviewee, the length of their responses, and the amount of emergent questioning based on their responses. The interview questions were split into three categories: background and history of English learning, usage of digital tools and resources, and personal significance of ELOCs. The exact number and phrasing of the questions varied based on the previous responses of the participant, in line with the semi-structured nature of the interviews. Notes were taken while reading the transcripts after the interview, and some responses were coded manually using a Google Sheets spreadsheet in order to present them succinctly through statistics. Codes were developed after the interviews were completed and usually consisted of taking more general interview answers and summarizing them to make ordinal scales. For example, responses related to how often the user makes use of the edit feature were coded as the categories Very Infrequently, Infrequently, Sometimes, Frequently, and Very Frequently depending on their answers. Other codes counted the number of participants who mentioned a particular word or phrase during their response. Due to the relative simplicity of these codes and the nature of the transcripts (the interview chat logs located on a private Discord server), qualitative data software was not deemed necessary. Codes that required interpretation were validated by the second author, who had not previously participated in the interviews.

In addition to the interview, participants were administered a receptive vocabulary test. The test used was the most recent version of the Lognostics Yes/No test by Meara and Miralpeix (2016), which measures receptive knowledge of the first 10,000-word families in English by asking the participant whether they know the meaning of a collection of 200 words, half of which are actually pseudowords included to ensure the honesty of the participant.

Finally, participants were given a questionnaire with a formal consent form and 11 follow-up questions formulated to gather data on some topics that may not have been directly discussed in the interviews and to map a rough timeline of the participants' online English usage, as well as their estimated usage of ELOCs per day. Additionally, the questionnaire included questions asking the participants to self-rate their proficiency in English and to indicate how natural they feel when communicating in English as compared to their native language. These self-report measures were included to triangulate with the results of the vocabulary test and give insight into the self-perception of the participants. The questionnaire was created using Google Forms and filled out by the participants digitally.

Results

The findings have been split into three sections, each containing results relevant to one of the three research questions. The second section additionally includes the present English proficiency of the participants as measured by their results on the Lognostics Yes/No test and their self-ratings, which were included to paint a more holistic picture of the participants. Many portions of the results include direct quotes from the participants: Due to the textual nature of the interviews, these will be presented exactly as they were written. Any non-standard grammar, spelling, or punctuation has been retained.

Experiences with English Learning

While there was significant variance in the specific patterns of English learning experienced by the 31 participants in the study, some general trends emerged. Most commonly, the English learning journey of the participants began with passive exposure to English through media, whether video games, music, TV shows, or movies. Twenty-five participants clearly stated that they had extensive exposure to various types of English media during the period when they were reaching proficiency in the language, and a further two indicated moderate amounts. The remaining four participants did not clearly comment on the extent of their English media exposure. The most common types of English language media specifically mentioned to be consumed by the participants can be seen in Table 3. The preponderance of participants who reported playing video games in English may be explained by the higher proportion of participants who are male, as video games are documented to be a more popular avenue for informal language learning among males (Muñoz, 2020).

English Media Type	Mentions	% of participants
Offline Video Games	19	61.3%
Websites	14	45.2%
TV Shows	8	25.8%
Films	7	22.6%
Print Media	7	22.6%
Online multiplayer games	5	16.1%
Music	4	12.9%

Table 3. Mentions of English media types consumed during childhood

Participants tended to have very positive views of their learning through these experiences, with many saying that media exposure was how they gained a foundation in the language:

Participant 10

> yes at that period of time i had a ps1 and a bunch of games were in english
> i think i had good grades cause games "forced me" to learn the language

Participant 31

> My informal English exposure was weird. If I were to be honest, if it weren't because of watching old Youtube and reading online comics (as embarrassed I am to say this) and imitating them was where I practiced using english but only through online communication with foreigners. As for my consumption of media in English, as I've said, I did, starting from my youth. Besides what I've mentioned, movies, films and shows are included.

Some participants also discussed using the internet as a tool for accessing English language materials, whether through finding media online on movie, game, or book databases or simply through browsing English websites:

Participant 28

> So to begin with, I started to learn english as a primary schooler because I really liked computers and the internet, and I quickly realized that, specially back in the early 2000s, a lot of the content on the internet was in english. I didn't understand much at first but I'm pretty good at learning languages so at around 12 years old I was quite comfortable browsing the english-speaking side of the internet. From there on, I've been consuming english media on the regular, through the form of VO films (with and without EN/ES subtitles depending on the film), youtube videos, video games, and recently books.

In addition to this passive exposure to English media, all participants had formal English education in school. Of the participants, only eight went through more extensive formal English education, attending long-term special English programs or schools that otherwise focused on English instruction. Another seven had small amounts of English extracurriculars, such as short-term Cambridge exam test preparations. The remaining 16 participants had no formal English exposure other than their regular English subject at school, although the exact age at which they began their English learning varied significantly, with some participants beginning in kindergarten and others only having English as a subject starting in high school.

While not all participants commented on how much value they thought they received from their formal education, among those who did, outlooks were varied. Ten participants had overall negative opinions about their experiences, criticizing the teaching methods and describing them as having had limited usefulness. On the other hand, eight described their experiences as mixed and two as explicitly positive, with a common sentiment being that formal education helped build their foundation in the language:

Participant 15

> English - the subject taught at schools- wasn't that interesting to me due to how outdated the curriculum of foreign languages was at the time… It's more like attendance was mandatory, so I couldn't skip them. Frankly speaking, I'd have chosen to opt out had I been given a choice.

Participant 14

> My opinion on English learning at school vs online communities is that the former, really helped have all the tools I needed in grammar and the sort. That being said I would say online communities were I really learned to actually speak not like a robot or just expand my vocabulary. Normally in school you don't get a big lexicon so going out there and trying for myself is prob where I learned the most on how to actually apply the rules

Together, these two factors (formal education and media exposure) are what most of the participants attribute their foundational knowledge of English to, but there was also a small minority who had extensive exposure to English as children due to living abroad for several years or having non-native but English-speaking family members who helped tutor them in the language at home. Of these five participants, four fell into the extensive formal education category mentioned above. While all five have reached very high proficiency, none had extensive exposure to English before the age of 5, and all had lived most of their lives in non-English speaking contexts, so they were deemed eligible for the study.

The participants varied regarding how they described their preexisting English ability upon their first time participating in an ELOC space. Their responses were coded into five categories based on how they described their initial abilities: Novice (5 participants), Lower Intermediate (7 participants), Upper Intermediate (14 participants), Advanced (4 participants), and Highly Advanced (1 participant). These categories roughly correspond with the CEFR (Common

European Framework for Languages) A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2 levels, and a few participants mentioned these when defining their abilities, but participants came from many parts of the world, and most have not been certified in any manner, so this should only serve as a rough guideline. Many participants who placed themselves in the Novice category reported difficulty in following conversations or constructing sentences quickly at the beginning, but all participants claimed to have been able to use English well enough to generally communicate. Exact descriptions varied:

Participant 2

> P horrendous I'd say. Kid + English not being primary language. Even now I tend to see texts from a year ago with slight grammar mistakes I recognise and cringe at them.
> Can't imagine how bad they were back then.

Participant 12

> It was definitely a lot lower. This was about my last year or so of the equivalent of Highschool here, and I was still really testing the water on how doable it was to communicate directly in English to other people.

All but three of the participants reported that ELOCs have been helpful for their English development. Aspects frequently considered helpful included exposure to various new vocabulary not encountered in their formal schooling, being able to immerse themselves in English frequently and consistently, being in a low-judgment environment where the participant could gain confidence in the language, ability to apply grammar learned in school, and social connections fostering language usage. Specific descriptions of these benefits varied:

Participant 15

> Oh they've definitely enriched my vocab and lexicon by a considerable margin for sure, and I enjoy the information/culture diversity I've experienced thanks to such online interactions using English
>
> Thanks to English, I've been able to learn topics that I'll never be taught academically
>
> And that includes sexuality and gender, as well as a plethora of political topics/issues around the world and where I live

Participant 16

> I'd claim it helped me the most, even with all the slang thrown around there, though then less than now (and at a time where a lot more users where native English speakers). It was 1: natural 2: daily 3: recreative

A notable subset of the participants found the ability to participate in voice chats to be especially useful, as they were relatively proficient in written communication but still needed improvement in speaking and listening:

Participant 14

> I certainly did. It was more on the details, I would also just have a bigger vocabulary to refer to things or not write words incorrectly (Although this can be attributed to things like Discord just telling you the word was poorly written haha). I think the biggest improvement was on the speaking front

Participant 21

> the spoken part, yes
>
> speaking out loud. voice chat really helped me with my confidence.

When asked in the questionnaire how much they agree with the statement "When I am using English in online communities, I feel immersed in the language," most of the participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement (Figure 1). Of those who did not agree, only one actively disagreed, with the others claiming to be neutral.

Amount of Agreement	Number Participants	% of Participants
Disagree	1	3.2%
Neutral	3	9.7%
Agree	14	45.2%
Strongly Agree	13	41.9%

Table 4. "When I am using English in online communities, I feel immersed in the language"

At the time of the interviews, most of the participants still viewed ELOCs as actively helping them with their English development, but others noted that they feel there are limits to what they can gain from participating in these spaces, mostly because of the often-colloquial language, lack of highly infrequent vocabulary, and the loose grammar or spelling standards of most interlocutors:

Participant 3

> not really. I'm gonna risk sounding a bit snobby here, but in the average online chatroom, the english used in conversations is mostly slang and internetspeak.
>
> it'd probably help someone who was still learning the language

Participant 28

> to be sincere, not really. I think I've sort of hit a ceiling regarding how much I can improve my english without proper study or living in an English-speaking country.

Nonetheless, most participants who considered ELOCs to have limited continual benefits in terms of hard language skills still expressed that they believe ELOCs continue to help them learn new colloquialisms and slang and avoid attrition.

A rough timeline of the participants' internet English usage, including the first time they were exposed to English online, the first time they communicated in English online in any way, and the first time they communicated in English specifically in synchronous chat ELOCs was gathered using the questionnaire. The median ages of the participants upon reaching these three milestones were 11, 14, and 16, respectively. The individual timelines of the 31 participants can be seen in Figure 1.

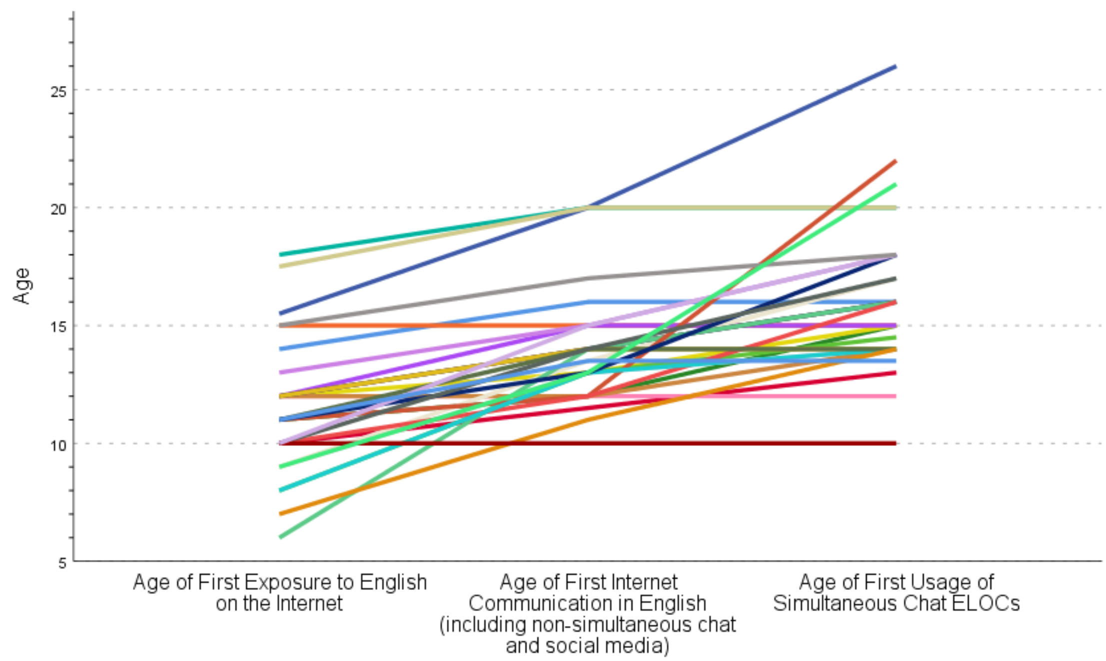

Figure 1. Individual English internet usage timelines of the participants

ELOC Usage and Proficiency

When asked about their present English usage outside of the internet, most participants indicated limited real-life exposure to the language, with their exact answers being coded into six categories: Never, Very Infrequently, Infrequently, Sometimes, Frequently, and Very Frequently (Table 5). Despite this general lack of offline exposure, when asked on the questionnaire whether they agreed with the statement "Communicating in English feels more natural to me than communicating in my native language," with Neutral meaning that both languages feel equally natural, most participants indicated that they indeed consider communicating in English to feel at least as natural to communicate in as their native language (Table 6). Of note is the fact that a sizable minority of the participants (29%) consider English to be *more* natural to them than their native language. This is despite the fact that of these nine participants, only one fell under the Frequently or Very Frequently coding of offline English usage.

Reported Frequency	Number of Participants	% of Participants
Very Infrequently	13	41.9%
Infrequently	7	22.6%
Sometimes	5	16.1%
Frequently	2	6.4%
Very Frequently	4	12.9%

Table 5. Coded frequency of offline English usage

Reported Agreement	Number of Participants	% of Participants
Strongly Disagree	1	3.2%
Disagree	4	12.9%
Neutral	17	54.8%
Agree	4	12.9%
Strongly Agree	5	16.1%

Table 6. "Communicating in English feels more natural to me than communicating in my native language”

On the questionnaire, most participants claimed to be extremely active in ELOCs, with the majority spending an average of over two hours per day (Table 7). The extent of their ELOC usage became even clearer when they were asked how many hours per day on average they had spent on them during the period in the past when they were most active (Table 7). Over 60% of the participants reported having used them for over five hours a day, and only a single participant claimed to have used them for less than an hour a day during that period. Additionally, most participants reported having been active in these spaces (defined by the researchers as 30 minutes or more of usage daily) very consistently; when asked to rate the consistency of their ELOC usage on a scale of 1 to 5, no participant reported a consistency of 2 or less. Nineteen participants reported a consistency of 5, six a consistency of 4, and another six a consistency of 3.

Reported Time Per Day	Number of Participants	% of Participants
<30 Minutes	1	3.2%
30~60 Minutes	4	12.9%
1~2 Hours	5	16.1%
2~5 Hours	13	41.9%
>5 Hours	8	25.8%

Table 7. Average time spent per day in ELOCs

Reported Time Per Day	Number of Participants	% of Participants
30~60 Minutes	1	3.2%
1~2 Hours	5	16.1%
2~5 Hours	6	19.4%
>5 Hours	19	61.3%

Table 8. Average time spent per day in ELOCs during the period of most active usage

To gain a more complete picture of the participants, their present proficiency was measured by receptive vocabulary and self-ratings. In the questionnaire, participants reported their present English abilities as fairly advanced, with no participants rating themselves less than 5 out of 10 (with 1 being “novice” and 10 being “highly advanced") and the majority considering themselves 8 or higher (Figure 2). Their results on the Lognostics Yes/No test seemed to corroborate this confidence; according to the creators of the test (Meara & Miralpeix, 2016), scores of 7500 and above indicate “very high levels" of proficiency, and 26 of the 31 participants scored in this range. Additionally, 10 scored over 9000, within the range of a highly educated native speaker, and only two of these 10 were in the small group of participants with extensive formal English education. The mean score was 8279.48 (SD=1145.54), and the median was 8614. See Figure 3 below for a scatterplot comparing the Lognostics Yes/No results to the self-ratings of participants.

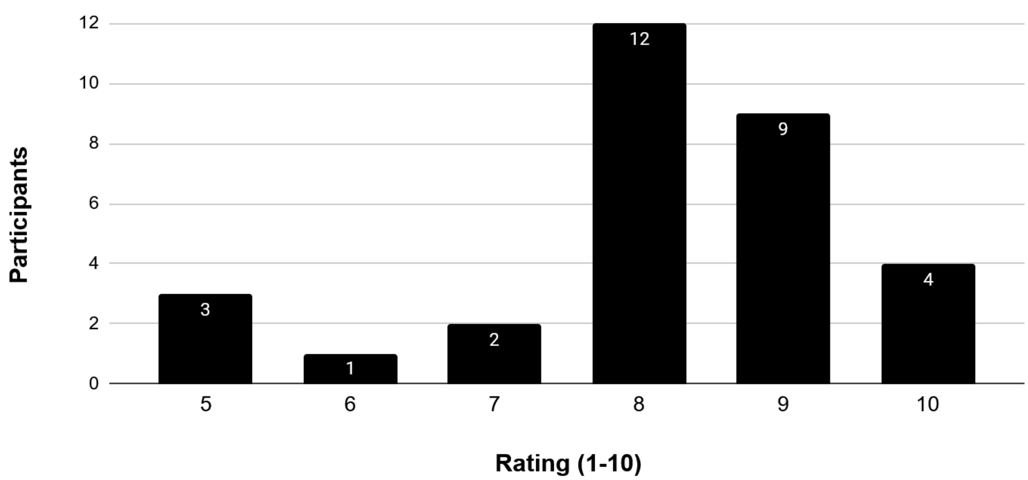

Figure 2. Participants’ self-rating of their English ability

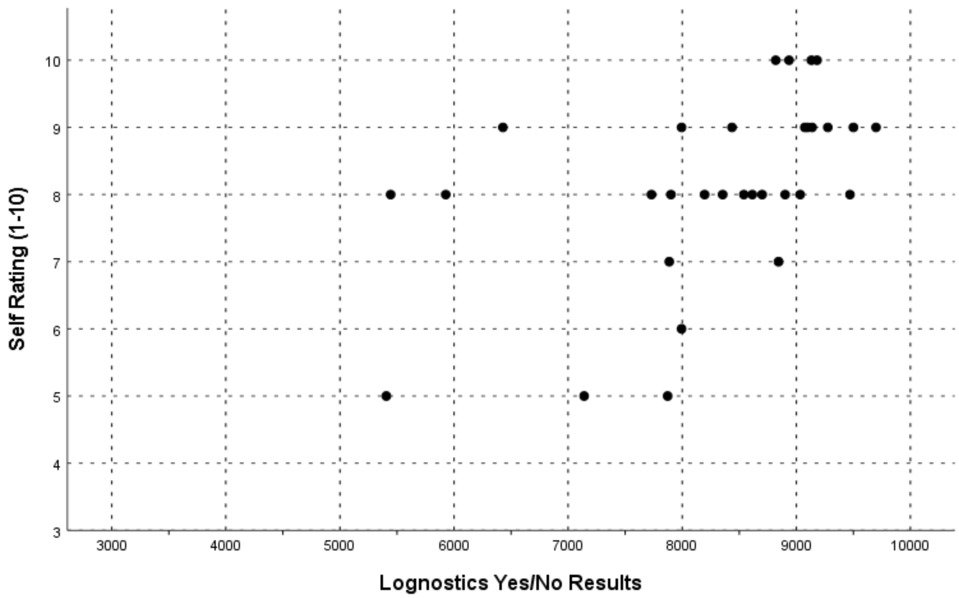

Figure 3. Scatterplot of self-rating and Lognostics Yes/No results

There were a few outliers, with some participants rating themselves much higher or lower than their Lognostics Yes/No scores would suggest. This could potentially have to do with the fact that the Lognostics Yes/No test uses an older British corpus, which may have contained words that some users more accustomed to contemporary US English would not be familiar with. Despite this, there was still a moderate correlation between the two measures ($r(28) = .59$ $p < .001$).

Tools and Methods of Interaction

Participants were asked about their habits regarding text chat vs. voice chat, and their responses were coded into an ordinal scale from 0 (meaning all voice chat and no text chat) to 6 (meaning all text chat and no voice chat). Most participants reported using text chat more often, with none indicating that they spent more time using voice chat, but as can be seen in Figure 4, only two of the participants indicated that they never use voice chat, with the majority participating in both methods of communication to some extent. For some participants, this was a result of them not feeling as confident speaking in English due to embarrassment over their non-native accent or lack of spoken fluency, but for others, it was not a problem of proficiency, but rather just that text communication was more comfortable for them, regardless of language:

Participant 16

> Overwhelmingly text chat, which correlates to a diminished confidence in voice. I've managed to avoid sounding like a walking German stereotype, but it's still far off from a natural sound, I assume. I also have trouble consciously trying to imitate accents.

Participant 20

> In general, writing makes me feel a lot more comfortable than talking..... being able to put as much care as I want into thoughts feels comfortable, and voice chats feel a bit rushed and somehow impersonal at the same time...................? But I don't think I ever associated those discomforts with a specific language - I also feel uncomfortable with voice chats in Portuguese e.e

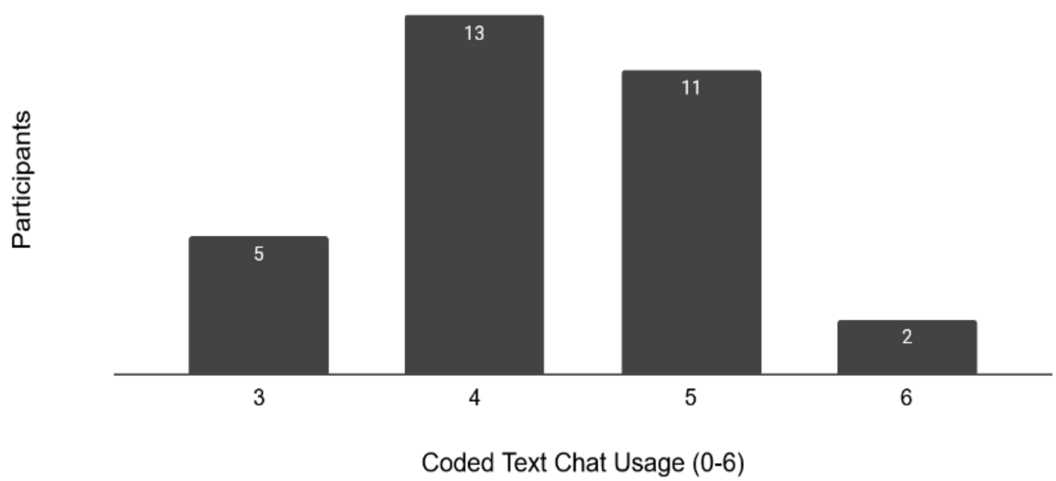

Figure 4. Reported usage of text chat versus voice chat

When asked about their usage of online tools and resources, only six of the 31 participants claimed to have ever used online resources for intentional English study, such as grammar guides, YouTube English tutorials, or digital flashcards, and of these six, only three indicated having used them extensively. When participants were asked what they do (or have done previously) when they encounter English words or phrases that they do not understand, the most mentioned strategy was to look it up using a search engine (30 mentions), followed by asking the interlocutor or another peer directly (7 mentions) or guessing from context (5 mentions).

While some participants mentioned using Google Translate as an online bilingual dictionary of sorts, only six participants mentioned having used it or other online translation tools to translate full sentences. Participants most commonly cited a lack of trust in machine translation accuracy or concern that the output could make them sound unnatural. Of those participants who did mention using translation websites for other than single words, most still claimed to avoid translating full sentences from their L1 to English, preferring instead to utilize the resource for back-translation of their written English to their L1 to check their phrasing:

Participant 8

> If I could be honest here, sometimes when I try to make statuses online, I had to translate it with gooogle translate to bahasa indonesia first to see if it makes sense or not.

Participant 9

> I've definitively used them all. DeepL/Google Translate mainly to check if something I'm writing would also make sense in Italian. Sometimes also to check on the structure of a sentence I'm writing… I very rarely translate from Italian -> English.

When it comes to the participants' usage of the edit message feature present in many modern venues for ELOCs, the majority of the participants reported using it at least somewhat frequently, with only five claiming to use it infrequently or never. Additionally, as Discord marks when messages have been edited, the researcher was able to observe the number of edits made by the participants during the interviews themselves. Overall, the participants edited messages during the interview a median of two times, with the exact frequency ranging from 0 to 17. All but eight of the participants edited at least one message during the interview.

A reflexivity rating was coded for each participant based on their response when asked how often they look over their messages after sending them in addition to their indicated amount of editing. Participants who indicated frequently rereading their messages after sending them, especially if they also claimed to frequently edit their messages, were categorized as High, with participants who only sometimes looked over their messages or edited them being categorized as Medium, and those who rarely did so being categorized as Low. Overall, 22 of the 31 participants showed High reflexivity, five had Medium reflexivity, and four had Low reflexivity. Participants in the High category often expressed that they were vigilant due to being wary of making mistakes or causing misunderstandings, though some also mentioned a propensity to reread messages simply because of the less ephemeral nature of text-based communication, where one's utterances linger on screen after having been posted.

General Discussion

As one might expect given the high number of interviews, participants were not monolithic, and their lived experiences varied significantly. Still, when considering the vast number of native languages and countries of residence represented by the participants, the number of common trends was surprising. Due to these similarities, it is possible to synthesize some core ideas that provide clear responses to the three research questions presented earlier.

Concerning our first research question about the experiences of the participants with English learning, we can construct a generalized English learning journey of ELOC users using the data gathered through the questionnaire and their responses in the interviews. This journey is by no means shared by all users of these spaces, but it seems to be a common pattern among users of ELOC spaces. It usually starts with exposure to English language media such as video games and television, followed by passive extramural IDLE on the internet starting at around 11 or 12 years of age. This is typically supplemented by basic English grammar instruction in school, with these informal and formal sources of exposure to the language combining to produce a basic level of English competence, where participants are proficient enough to be able to generally understand and construct sentences but lack fluency and strong communicative skills. Around age 14, they begin participating in extramural IDLE more actively, this often being their first experience communicating casually in English outside of simulated conversations in school. This usually begins in asynchronous contexts such as internet forums, YouTube comment sections, or other social media rather than chat applications, perhaps due to the lack of time constraints imposed by asynchronous communication. This pattern of early usage of English language media and virtual community participation leading to basic levels of English literacy has also been found in previous research on online informal language learning such as Sockett and Toffoli (2012), but due to the differences in the landscape of modern-day online community venues, some aspects in the current study differ; after an average of roughly two years of asynchronous online English usage, participants start using synchronous chat applications such as Discord. In these venues, they can communicate in real-time English outside of formal settings. Additionally, the more centralized community style of these applications gives the participants their first exposure to English-affinity spaces, where they might be able to form bonds with fellow users in their community. At this point, many of our interviewees considered themselves as somewhere between lower intermediate and upper intermediate, usually with what several participants described as a lopsided linguistic profile favoring reading and writing abilities over speaking and listening.

Through the use of ELOC spaces, their English seems to benefit significantly, permitting them to bridge the gap between intermediate and advanced English. Many participants claimed to have improved their speaking and listening skills, in particular, through the voice chat functionality available due to Discord's VoIP functionality. Most participants are now quite confident in their English abilities, and given their highly impressive results on the Lognostics vocabulary test, their confidence appears well-founded; the majority scored well over what the test creators consider a high level of English, with many scoring in native speaker ranges. While previous studies have generally not included an operationalized measure for proficiency, some research into game-related affinity spaces (Sylvén & Sundqvist, 2012) has found similarly high proficiency levels in their samples.

While most participants had overall positive perceptions of ELOCs, some expressed concern with the overall colloquial nature of the language used there, as well as the potentially disproportionate lack of low-frequency vocabulary. Indeed, according to the participants, most ELOCs feature a mix of native and non-native English speakers of various ages, and not all utterances encountered in these spaces follow regular grammatical rules in the way that utterances they might encounter in an academic context would. Many of their interlocutors may also have limited vocabulary sizes, and thus the words they encounter may largely consist of higher-frequency words and slang terminology. This limits their amount of exposure to more formal register vocabulary items which participants who wish to use English to attend higher education, read literature, or participate in formal occasions may desire to learn. While certain participants thought of this exposure to colloquial English as a positive aspect of ELOC spaces, others mentioned their concerns over their English becoming overly casual. A few of the more advanced-level participants also noted that they feel that they have reached a ceiling of the amount their English can improve through these spaces, given the general lack of infrequent formal or academic vocabulary items. This is not surprising, however, as even many native speakers of the language may not know infrequent academic vocabulary items without expressly participating in a context where they are used. This question of the impact of quality in IDLE has been raised before by J. S. Lee (2019), and while the findings of that study seem to suggest that quality is more important than quantity for IDLE, their operationalization of quality related to the diversity of input and whether the IDLE was form-focused or meaning-focused rather than the actual grammaticality and vocabulary frequency bands present in the input. Further research may be necessary to investigate the effects that the mixed correctness of input and generally high-frequency vocabulary items present in ELOCs might have on learners.

Perhaps the exceptional results on the vocabulary test are not surprising, given the usage patterns shown by the participants, the topic of our second research question. While most participants use English sparingly in their offline lives, the high volume of their ELOC usage, which they largely indicated as being consistent through the years since they first began using them, lends credence to the idea that ELOCs are providing them with consistent English exposure. Furthermore, as participants largely discussed participating actively, ELOCs may also provide them with a stable and significant community space where they can use the language in holistic and communicative ways. The finding that most participants consider English to be on par with or even more natural to use than their native language indicates that for some, these spaces may be an integral part of their day-to-day routines, or perhaps even a locus of their social lives, which supports the idea that they may act as virtual third places.

While the idea of virtual third places has been explored in the context of MMORPGs (Moore et al., 2009; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) and in some other online contexts such as Twitter (Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Markoç, 2019; McArthur & White, 2016), this is the first study to document the phenomenon in relation to synchronous chat applications such as Discord. We might also connect this phenomenon to the Self-Determination Theory of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), as it fulfills the psychological need for "relatedness," which allows learners to experience integrated regulation, considered the ideal form of internalized extrinsic motivation and a form of the "autonomous motivation" put forward by Ryan and Deci. Given the fact that many users of ELOC spaces are often intrinsically motivated, another form of autonomous motivation, there is a strong case to be made that these spaces create an optimal motivational environment for language learning.

Regarding the participants' usage of digital tools, our third research question, the majority described primarily using tools that assisted them in communication, such as looking up word definitions, message editing, and translation software. On one hand, these tools may aid the learners in a Vygotskian sense, acting as mediational artifacts that allow a form of self-scaffolding (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). This, combined with their often highly proficient interlocutors, which allows them to improve their language skills through a form of collective scaffolding (Donato, 1994), shows potential to be a valuable aspect of learning English in ELOC spaces. On the other hand, few participants made use of tools aimed expressly at improving their English abilities, such as grammar guides, YouTube English tutorials, or digital flashcards. This is in line with what one might expect given the incidental learning nature of extramural IDLE mentioned by Benson (2011). The participants themselves corroborated this incidental nature by emphasizing the social and hobby aspects of ELOC spaces, with improvement in English often considered to be simply a useful side benefit.

Aided by these communicative tools, participants reported high levels of reflexivity during text communication, usually expressing that they frequently read over their messages after sending them and use the edit tool to directly alter and correct their previous utterances. Search engines allowed the participants to quickly and conveniently find the meanings of unknown words and phrases, acting similarly to how a gloss might in prepared learning materials. A notable minority of participants also utilized translation software to check their phrasing and grammar directly, helping them to feel confident before sending their constructed messages. Although text chat was generally the preferred and most common method of online communication for the participants, the majority took advantage of the voice chat functionality of these servers as well, reinforcing the multimodal nature of communication in ELOCs.

Conclusion

The present study took an exploratory approach to investigating L2 English users of ELOC spaces, and the interviews touched on a large variety of topics. These factors resulted in a rich and holistic data set, which in turn has revealed the perceptions of users of ELOC spaces as well as their usage patterns of both the spaces themselves and the digital tools used in concert with them. With the growing popularity of chat servers, this information is a vital first step towards a complete understanding of IDLE for learners who make use of these spaces. Additionally, as there is a lack of previous studies that have looked at long-term IDLE usage patterns, the current study serves to open a line of inquiry into this topic for future research. These future studies would benefit from a more focused design of a longitudinal nature, as the primary limitation of this study was that the data gathered relied solely on the retrospective accounts of the participants. If we were to be able to observe users of ELOC spaces directly in a more ethnographic manner over the course of several months, we could more definitively capture the types of interactions English learners are having with others inside of these spaces. Additionally, over the course of the semi-structured interviews participants frequently discussed their perceptions of ELOCs as virtual third places, their own sense of identity in relation to ELOCs, and their usage of pragmatic tools such as emojis or reaction images within ELOC spaces; this data was not investigated in depth in the current study in order to create a more focused scope, but it would benefit from further exploration in the future. Another avenue of further research would be to use a quasi-experimental design in order to observe the nature and extent of the language development of participants using statistical analysis. This would be useful, as it would allow us to measure the actual gains made by users of ELOCs, rather than relying on their perceptions of learning. Applications that allow the creation of online voice and text chat-enabled communities have become increasingly prevalent as social spaces and online homes for internet users in recent years; their significance was well stated by one of the participants of this study:

Participant 19

> If I say they mean "the world" to me that would sound way too cheesy. They have an important place in my heart because I can connect with people from other parts of the world who also have similar experiences than me and enjoy more or less the same type of games, comics, manga, tv shows, movies and share the same type of humor and more or less a similar agreement in terms of politics and social values.
> [...]
> They mean connection... with others and shaping a world that's at least a bit nicer to everyone even if it's in a little small space.

Because of their potential role in the development of English as a Second Language, as well as their social significance for people around the globe, these online spaces show great promise for future research into informal language learning and online socialization.

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