

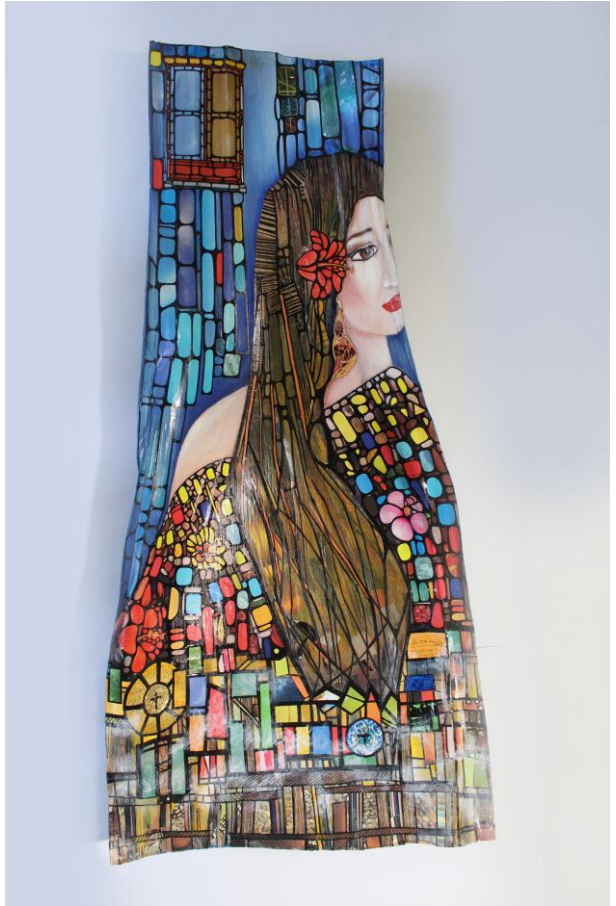
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# How effective are EFL software for English learning in Vietnamese education context?

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## Abstract

This study investigated the extent to which English Foreign Language software programs recently used to support teaching and learning English at the colleges and universities in the Center of Viet Nam. The five most widely used EFL (English as a Foreign Language) software programs or webpages of which technological features and pedagogical features were evaluated according to an interactive approach. Results indicated that Life and DynEd are the two EFL software programs having the biggest potential to develop learners' EFL skills. In conclusion, the individualized-learning features of these two software programs were highly evaluated and this, in turn, promoted English development in EFL learners.

**Keywords:** EFL, Technological Features, Pedagogical Features.

## ¿Qué tan efectivos son los programas EFL para el aprendizaje del inglés en el contexto educativo vietnamita?

### **Resumen**

Este estudio investigó la medida en que los programas de inglés de Lengua Extranjera se utilizaron recientemente para apoyar la enseñanza y el aprendizaje del inglés en los colegios y universidades del Centro de Vietnam. Los cinco programas o páginas web de software EFL más utilizados, cuyas características tecnológicas y pedagógicas se evaluaron de acuerdo con un enfoque interactivo. Los resultados indicaron que Life y DynEd son los dos programas de software de EFL que tienen el mayor potencial para desarrollar las habilidades de EFL de los estudiantes. En conclusión, las características de aprendizaje individualizado de estos dos programas de software fueron altamente evaluadas y esto, a su vez, promovió el desarrollo del inglés en los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera.

**Palabras clave:** EFL, Características Tecnológicas, Características Pedagógicas.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. Technological innovations and changes in education**

During the last few decades, the rapid development of Information Technology (IT) has strong effects on various aspects of our life, especially on education. IT can be considered as an unseparated vital part of the foreign language education in the modern life leading to considerable changes in foreign language teaching and

learning approaches in which Computer Aided Language Learning (CALL) has become a dominant one and implemented by language teachers worldwide during the progress of foreign language teaching and learning innovation. According to Ewa et al. (2012), technological innovations, at their best, can increase learner interest and motivation; provide students with increased access to target language (TL) input, interaction opportunities, and feedback; and provide instructors with an efficient means for organizing course content and interacting with multiple students. At their worst, the use of new technologies can result in inappropriate input, shallow interaction, and inaccurate feedback; student frustration with software and hardware; a distraction from the learning task; and a general over-emphasis on delivery modality over learning objectives.

## **1.2. The trend of application of IT in EFL education in Viet Nam**

Since the year 2008, the Foreign languages teaching and learning for Vietnamese citizens 2008-2020 project has been implemented at all schools, colleges and universities in Viet Nam. The project prioritizes English as the most important foreign language and emphasizes that there will be a big improvement in teaching and learning English at tertiary level by 2015, and almost all graduates should be able to confidently communicate in English by 2020. Thus, EFL education has been given favourable opportunities, such as an increase of training hours for English in the whole curriculum, more

teachers of English being trained in English speaking countries, and more capital in building infrastructure for English training (Tue, 2015). Yet, there are discrepancies between the goal and the methods of EFL teaching and learning in higher education. While the explicitly expressed goal in English education is to develop students' communicative ability in English, existing teaching and learning methods do not seem to enhance students' development of communicative ability (Canh, 2011; Hoa, 2009; Kramsch & Sullivan, 1996; Ezebuilo, 2014; Šehidić and Junuz, 2016; Jayakumar, 2016; Alhawiti and Abdelhamid, 2017; Dandan and Marques, 2017; Frima and Ghina, 2017 ; Anyi, 2017; Muthuselvi and Ramganes, 2017; Adedoyin and Okere, 2017; Houcine and Sofiane, 2018).

To fill this gap and reach the target of the project, the Ministry of Education and Training (the MOET) has released a series of documents to provide higher education institutions with guidance on utilizing ICT in teaching and learning. And as the result, various EFL software programs, webpages or online EF courses were approved by the MOET to combine with the main EFL courses regularly conducted in the classrooms at colleges or universities. However, there appears to be a substantial gap between what computer technology can do to support language learning and the way actual software programs provide for language learning. Therefore, there might be programs on the market which claim to be interactive but their design may lag behind ESL/EFL pedagogy - The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching. This is the significant reason for this study to be carried out to investigate the extent to which EFL software programs

recently used to support teaching and learning English at the colleges and universities in Viet Nam develop language skills according to the Communicative Approach to Language Teaching and an interactive approach to computer use for language learning (Pan, 2014).

## **2. MAIN STUDY**

### **2.1. Research design**

To assess the extent to which EFL software programs develop EFL skills according to the Communicative Language Teaching principles and an interactive approach to computer use for language learning, this study attempted to find out the answers to the three questions: a) Do the EFL software programs present the technological features associated with interactive CALL?; b) Do the EFL software programs incorporate the learning / teaching principles of the principles of Communicative Language Learning /Teaching? c) How does each EFL software program promote English development in EFL learners? Both the descriptive and quantitative methods are used for accomplishing the goal of the study. Basing on the materials or documentation, the descriptive method describes the technical and pedagogical orientation of the software programs. The quantitative method is applied with the investigating tool of a questionnaire to collect the information of the students' assessment on technological and individualized-learning features of the EFL software programs,

and on their attitude toward the effectiveness and convenience as using them.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study involved nine EFL software programs as listed in table 1 below

Table 1: List of EFL software programs used in colleges or universities in the Center of Viet Nam and analysed in this study

	EFL software programs	Language skills developed	Multi-level (M) / Single level (S)	Places where software programs are being used and analysed
1	DynEd	4 language skills	M	Da Nang University of Foreign Language Studies,
2	Life	4 language skills	S	Da Nang Economics University, Da Nang University of Science and Technology, Hue College of Foreign Language – Hue University
3	Skilful	4 language skills	S	Da Nang University of Foreign Language Studies
4	Dualingo	4 language skills	M	Students self-study
5	Speak English	Listening and Speaking	M	Students self-study
6	Elsa Speaking	Pronunciation Listening and Speaking,	M	Students self-study

7	Memorise English	4 language skills	M	Students self-study
8	Online courses designed on platform Moodle	4 language skills	S	Da Nang University of Science and Technology, Quy Nhon University

The eight EFL software programs above are all meet the principles of the Communicative Approach which require them to be designed for learning and teaching communicating skills - listening and speaking skills, or all four basic language skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

### **3.1. Participants**

This study involved 568 students from 11 colleges and universities in the Center of Viet Nam. The eleven colleges and universities are Da Nang University of Foreign Language Studies (with 215 student participants), Da Nang University of Science and Technology (with 120 student participants), Da Nang University of Economics (with 86 student participants), School of Communication and Technology - University of Da Nang (with 15 student participants), School of Medicine and Pharmacy - University of Da Nang (with 24 student participants), Duy Tan University (with 25 student participants), Pham Van Dong University (with 18 student participants), Quang Nam University (with 17 student participants), Da Nang University of Education (with 14 student participants), Hue



College of Foreign Languages (with 11 student participants) and Quy Nhon University (with 23 student participants).

#### **4. DATA COLLECTION**

The data collection and analysis for this study were conducted simultaneously in the second semester of the academic year 2016-2017. To get the student participants' feedback and evaluation of the EFL software programs they used as taking regular EFL courses at their schools, a questionnaire including ten main questions relating to ten issues as follows: (1) how the program helps learners move through the content and sequence of activities, (2) how the media technology differentiates feedback, (3) how the integration of different types of media facilitates learning, (4) how the use of the program is made easy for learners, (5) how attractive the media technology makes the program, (6) the degree and type of individualization of instruction the program provides, (7) how content is presented and sequenced, (8) the type and quality of language-learning activities, (9) how the program motivates learning, and (10) how the EFL software programs improve their language skills. These ten issues are grouped into three categories: the technological features (with issues number 1 to number 5), the pedagogical features according to the principles of Communicative Language Teaching of EFL software programs (with issues number 6 to number 8), and the improvement in language skills of the EFL learners (with the two last issues). Each issue was rated from value 1 (very bad or strongly disagree) to value 5 (very good or strongly agree). The average total and percentage of high rating

(value 4 and 5) for the issues of each category refer to the quality of that category of each EFL software program.

## 5. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The student participants' evaluation of the technological features of each EFL software program is presented in table 2 below.

Table 2: Student participants' evaluation of the technological features of each EFL software program

	Software program	Number of participants	Percentage (%) of high rating for issue					Total percentages of 5 issues
			# 1	# 2	# 3	# 4	# 5	
1	DynEd	68	79.4	91.2	58.8	58.8	70.6	358.8
2	Life	107	67.3	56.1	78.5	81.3	70.1	353.3
3	Skilful	90	73.3	65.6	50.0	70.0	62.2	321.1
4	Dualingo	34	32.1	19.4	28.4	43.3	26.1	149.3
5	Speak English	28	60.7	71.4	57.1	50.0	64.3	303.6
6	Elsa Speaking	36	33.3	80.6	61.1	86.1	33.3	294.4
7	Memrise English	18	72.2	66.7	61.1	55.6	50.0	305.6
8	Online courses on Moodle	122	45.1	12.3	47.5	31.1	26.2	162.3
	Total	503	463.4	463.1	442.5	476.2	402.8	

With the total percentages of five issues shown in the last column of table 2, we can find that only two programs were rated

higher than 70% (more than 350 high ratings among total 500 ratings) - DynEd rated 71.8% , Life rated 70.6% for the five issues together. The three other programs were rated above 60% include Skilful (64.2%), Memorise English (61.2%) and Speak English (60.8%). The rest programs were rated below 50% for the five issues together. The results indicated that most analyzed ESL/EFL software programs considerably incorporate of the technological features associated with an interactive CALL. The strongest feature associated with the level of interactivity afforded by the analyzed EFL software programs is the possibility of making easy for learners (issue 4) when they are learning English online. This may be due to the second strongest feature - integration of plenty of media such as text, images, sound, video and/or animations, comprehensive study guide and user guide documents, and hypermedia (issue 1) which can help users / learner easy access to various links within a program. DynEd includes a very comprehensive study guide and user's guide. Both DynEd and Life provides learners with lots of visual, oral and auditory practice designed in the real world learning environment. The dialogue from the video segment is transferred to the computer screen where the student is guided through a series of learning activities that include listening vocabulary, phrases, grammar, culture and pronunciation.

Feature feedback of DynEd, Life and Memorise English is the one which got many high ratings from the student participants. The Voice Recognizer built in these software programs provide users/learners with the ability to record and immediately compare one's intonation and phrasing to a native English speaker, visually present all

pronunciation mistakes and give learners as many chances to correct them as possible. And thus, this is an interesting and very useful way for EFE learners to practice listening and speaking skills and improve their pronunciation as well. In concerned with the pedagogical features of these EFL software programs, table 3 below shows the student participants’ evaluation of this category.

Table 3: Student participants’ evaluation of the pedagogical features of each EFL software program

	Software program	Number of participants	Percentage (%) of high rating for issue			Total percentages of 3 issues
			# 6	# 7	# 8	
1	DynEd	68	95.6	60.3	102.9	258.8
2	Life	107	72.9	75.7	67.3	215.9
3	Skilful	90	57.8	63.3	84.4	205.6
4	Dualingo	34	20.1	33.6	32.1	85.8
5	Speak English	28	46.4	57.1	35.7	139.3
6	Elsa Speaking	36	41.7	50.0	52.8	144.4
7	Memorise English	18	66.7	77.8	55.6	200.0
8	Online courses on Moodle	122	39.3	28.7	50.8	118.9
	Total	503	440.5	440.5	481	

As the results of rating for technological features, DynED, Life, Skilful, and Memorise English are the four programs were rated higher than 70% (more than 200 high ratings among total 300 ratings) for the three issues of category pedagogical features. The two other programs

were rated over 30% and below 50% are Speak English (46.3%) and Elsa English (48.5%). The two programs got the smallest number of high ratings for their pedagogical features are Dualingo (28, 6%) and online courses designed on platform Moodle (39.6%). The results indicated that a half of these EFL software programs well incorporate the learning/ teaching principles of the principles of Communicative Language Learning/ Teaching. Among the four four programs rated higher than 70% of category pedagogical features, DynEd and Life had the best individualized-instruction features. The learning path or process for each EFL learner is particularly set based on the results of the English Placement Test, on the results of each learning session and the learning frequency of the learner, with an automatic feedback – giving tool named tutor in DynEd or named Grade book in Life which could flexibly propose the most suitable learning strategy for the next session to improve the learning outcomes of each learner. For the presentation and sequence of the content of lessons designed in these EFL software programs, Life and Memorise English got the highest satisfaction from the student participants. Especially, with the presentation and decoration similar to a magazine, Life brought EFL learners a strong impressive, attractive and exciting way of expressing to the learners. In contrast, the presentation and sequence of Dualingo and that of online courses designed on platform Moodle were underestimated although Moodle has good technical features in terms of hyperlinks that could facilitate students to quickly and easily connect to other EFL learning sites with logical layouts and better presentation form. This weak point may depend on the teachers' technology skills and experiences on designing online EFL courses.

DynED, Skilful and Speak English reached the middle position because their presentation style is not as monotonous as Duolingo, but much less impressive a than Life. The final results of this study relating to the degree the influence of the eight EFL software programs on the learning motivation and language skill improvement in EFL learners are presented in figure 1 below.

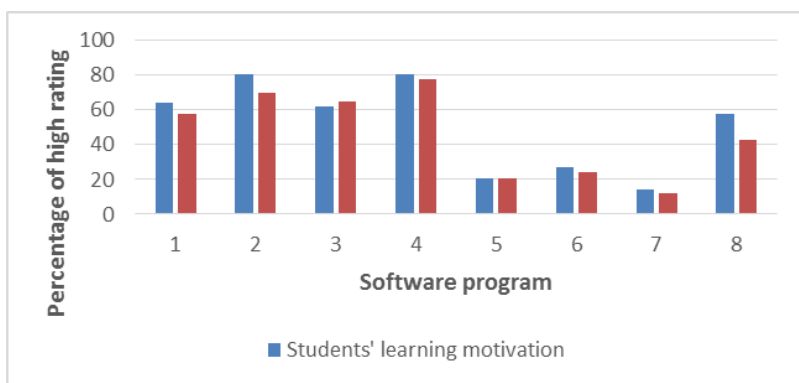


Figure 1: Participants' evaluation of the influence of the EFL software on their learning motivation and language skill improvement

## 6. CONCLUSION

Although each EFL software program has their own strength and weak points, most of them do present some technological, or some pedagogical features, or both, and have a positive influence on raising learning motivation and improving communicating skills (listening and speaking) of EFL learners. Among the eight EFL software programs analysed in this study, Life and DynEd have the biggest potential to

develop learners' EFL skills due to their high incorporation of technological features associated with interactive CALL and pedagogical features of the CLT approach. Besides, the individualized-learning features of these two software programs were highly evaluated and this, in turn, promoted English development in EFL learners. Other EFL software programs such as Speak English, Elsa, and memorize English which is not compulsorily integrated into regular EFL courses at these colleges were analysed and got positive feedback about their effectiveness and convenience from EFL learners.

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