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REVIEW OF RECOMMENDED APP

An Evaluative Review of Mondly: A Mobile Language Learning Application

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Abstract

Mobile-Assisted Language Learning is a thriving research area in the field of Second Language Acquisition. Hand-held devices such as smartphones are increasingly and widely being used for second language teaching and learning purposes nowadays. With the great variety of language learning applications entering a competitive market comes a need for studies to evaluate these applications critically so that teachers and learners can choose wisely. The present study aims to evaluate a language learning application called *Mondly* through a framework proposed by Reinders and Pegrum (2016). The evaluation was carried out by six experienced English language instructors. The results indicate that although the app suffers from a number of weak points, it can be particularly beneficial for beginner second language learners.

Keywords

Technology, Second Language Learning, Applications, Mondly

Application details

Publisher: ATi Studios

Product type: Education

Language(s): Multilingual

Level: All

Media format: IOS & Android

Operating systems: Any

Hardware requirements: Requires iOS 12.0 or later & Android 4.4 and up

Supplementary software: None

Price: €4.99 – €191.99

Website: https://www.mondly.com/

1. Introduction

Technology is now an indispensable part of our daily life; one can see its trace in many areas including education. Using technology in language instruction has become essential as evident in the emergence of the field of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) which view technological tools as instrumental in the second language (L2) teaching and learning process (Blake, 2016; Kukulska-Hulme, 2020; Lin & Lin, 2019). Among the many available technologies, hand-held devices such as smartphones, tablets, laptops are especially popular with L2 learners as they offer them the opportunity to study on their own, at any pace, anytime and anywhere it is convenient. Many studies are showing how mobile and hand-held devices have contributed undeniably to L2 learning. According to Kukulska-Hulme (2020) some of the advantages of MALL are:

> Immediate access to information; flexible use of time and space for learning; continuity of learning between different settings; good alignment with personal needs and preferences; easy creation and sharing of simple content like photos, videos, and audio recordings; and greater opportunity for sustained language practice while carrying out activities such as walking, waiting, or commuting. (p.1)

The scale of rapid growth in the design and development of new language applications that are being introduced into the market almost on a daily basis has generated a level of competition in the app market. Developers try to update, refine, and introduce new features into their apps not only to meet learners' needs and but also to survive in a competing market. *Duolingo, Memrise, Busuu, 50languages,* and *HiNative* are just few of the mobile applications available for language learners to choose from. However, when faced with such variety, one needs to take into account both the opportunities and the challenges they present, as choosing a random application may be a waste of time and energy (Nushi & Eqbali, 2018). In order to make wise decisions, critical analysis of the available applications is required to make teachers and learners aware of both the advantages and disadvantages of these applications. The present study aims to review a mobile

language application called *Mondly* and explore the possibilities this application offers to L2 learning.

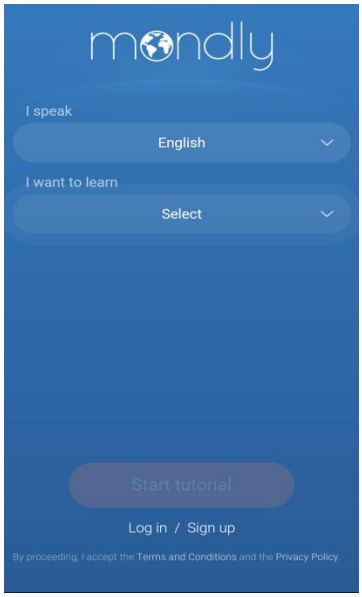
2. Description

Mondly is a subscription-based language application. It can be downloaded from Google Play for Android phones and the App Store for iOS users. A browser-based version is also available. The design of the app is easy-to-navigate and it makes it suitable for anyone with basic computer knowledge. However, no manual is available on either the website or the app. "Feedback" and "Statistics" icons are available on the app, it also includes two tabs: 1. report bugs, and 2. ask for support. In the ask for support tab, the users are provided with solutions to common problems, and a comment box for their specific questions.

As the first step in using Mondly, one should choose their first language (L1) (Figure 1). This is the base language one will receive instruction in. Users can select from a variety of 41 languages including, English, Persian, Spanish, and Arabic. Next, they must pick a language to learn. Mondly is one of the few language apps that offers instruction in most of the languages one can choose to learn. It means that if the learners' L1 is not English, they have a chance to learn Italian via Persian, or German via Japanese. Used by millions of people around the world[1], Mondly offers one of the widest numbers of languages amongst other language teaching applications. As seen in Figure 2, the next step is selecting one's current level in the language that one wishes to learn. Since a placement test is not included, users must select their level, from beginner to advanced, based on their own self-assessment.

Figure 1

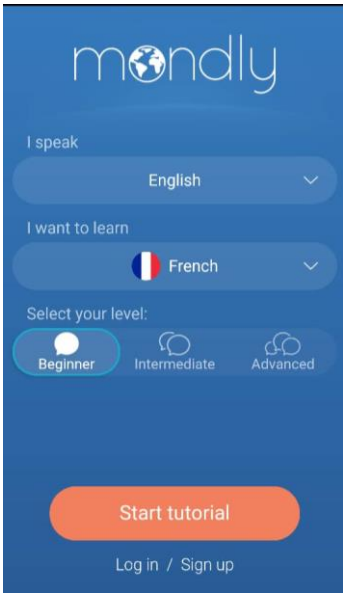
Choose your L1 and the target language.



[1] According to the data on Google Play accessed on May 17, 2021, the app is ranked 4.6, with 10 million installations.

Figure 2

Choose the level of difficulty in the target language.



After setting up their preferences about the language they speak, the language they want to learn and their proficiency in the target language, users are ready to start learning. In their first encounter with the homepage (a sort of map), learners can choose among three default free sections including *Hello*, *Daily Lesson*, and *ChatBot* (Figure 3). To access other landmarks with a crown on them as well as other updates, they must upgrade to the premium version. By choosing the first category in their list (i.e., Hello), they will be shown another page that includes three sections namely, Lesson, Conversation and Vocabulary (Figure 4):

Figure 3

Mondly homepage.

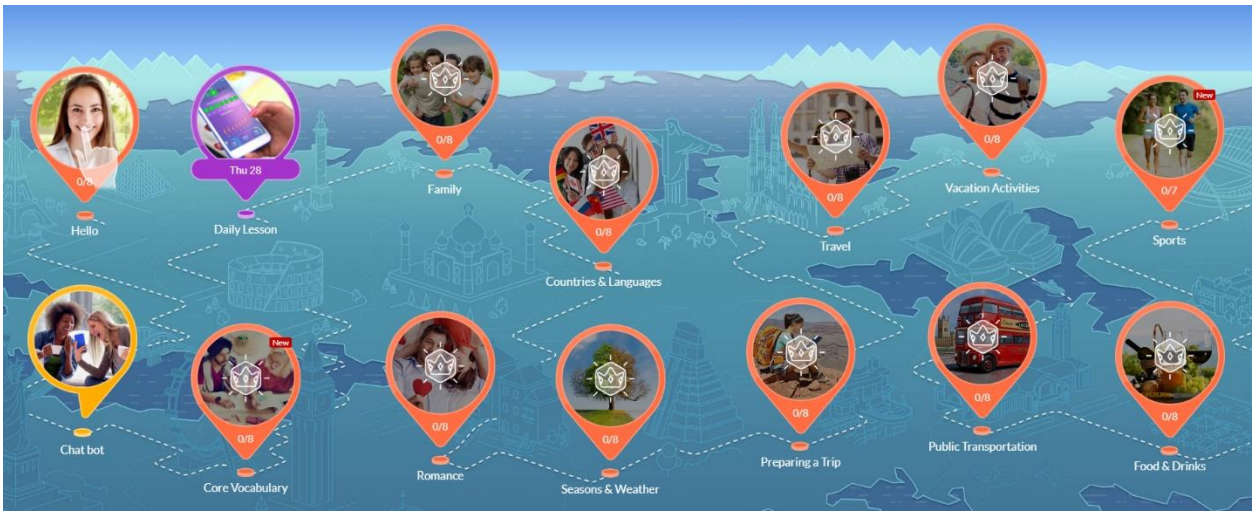
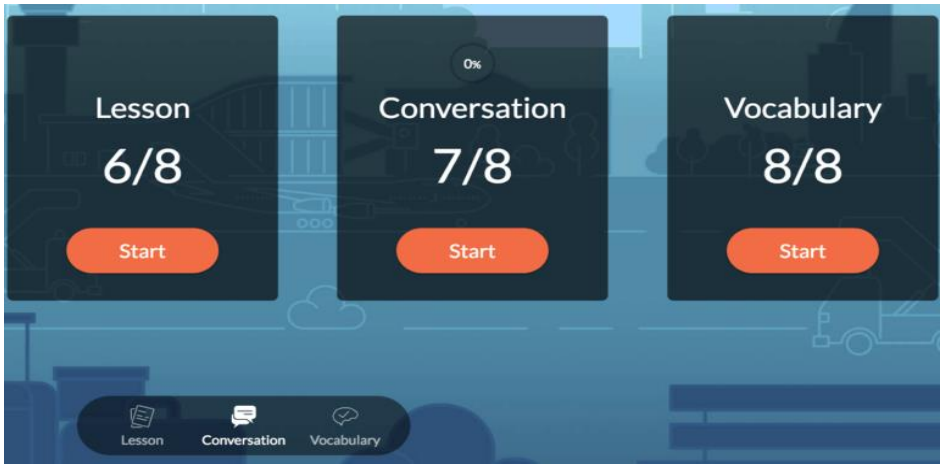


Figure 4

Lesson section.



2.1. Lesson

The Lesson section includes a variety of exercises. Brief descriptions of each activity type in this section are given in the following paragraphs.

2.1.1. Move the word to the correct answer

In this exercise, one must move the given word to match it with the correct translation. Four different words are shown from which the learner must select the right answer. As can be seen in Figure 5, each of these words has a picture as a hint.

Figure 5

A matching exercise.

2.1.2. Swipe up/down

This exercise is the same as the previous one but the difference is that it has only two options. Swiping up or down, one should select the right translation to go to the next exercise (Figure 8). The type of exercises that contain picture clues, or in which the new words are read for the learners while the words are visually shown to them, is ideal for learning. Glasser and Mamary (2000) believe that humans remember 10% of what they have read, 20% of what they have heard, 30% of what they have seen, and 50% of what they have seen and heard.

Figure 8

A matching exercise by swiping up or down.

2.1.3. Translate this sentence

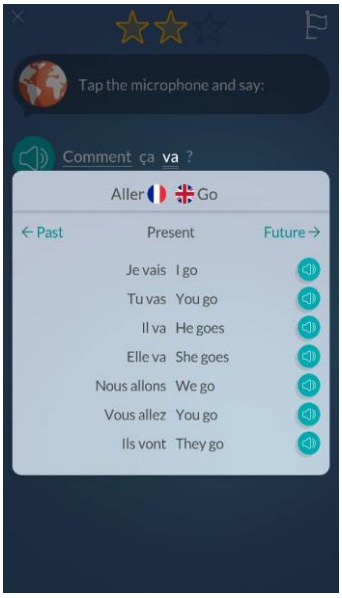
In this part, one must choose from given translations without any hints. This exercise comes in the form of words, phrases, and sentences. A speaker icon is shown next to each given phrase that pronounces the answer to the learner. As Figure 8 shows, one can also find conjugations of verbs by clicking on them. Learners may also be required to type the correct translation.

Figure 7

A translation exercise.

Figure 8

Verb conjugations.



2.1.4. Select the correct translation

Figure 9 shows another translation exercise. In this part by clicking or touching on the given phrase or word, the correct answer will appear next to it. Again, while choosing the answer, the learners will have the answer read to them. Translation exercises have always been a part of language learning. As Widdowson (2014, p. 229) explains that while "translation may be assigned no role in language teaching, it clearly plays a crucial role in language learning."

Figure 9

A translation exercise.

2.1.5. Tap the microphone and say

In this exercise, learners must pronounce the given phrases or words. They should tap the blue mic icon (Figure 10) and pronounce the required word or phrase. If they wish to hear the pronunciation, they can click on the given word or phrase that has been underlined. The exercise is designed to improve the learners' pronunciation.

Figure 10

A speaking exercise.

2.2. Conversation

In the conversation part, a statement or question is read and shown to the learners. Using their mic, they should pronounce it (Figure 11). Again, Mondly's developers claim that this section improves users' pronunciation and prompts language production.

Figure 11

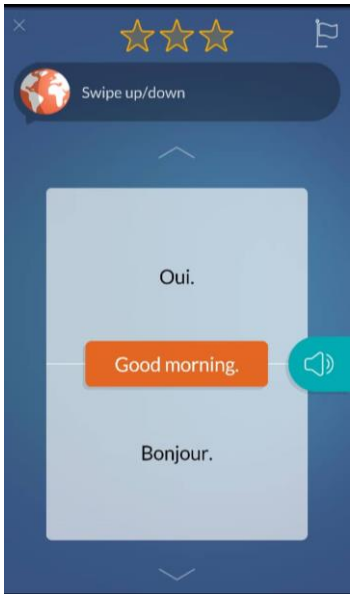
Conversation section.

2.3. Vocabulary

To choose the correct answer in the vocab section, the user must swipe up or down (Figure 12). Additionally, the answer will be read to them if they touch the blue speaker icon. This exercise is the same as the matching exercise in the lesson section.

Figure 12

Vocabulary section's matching exercise.



The order, difficulty, and type of exercises differ slightly based on the learners' self-identified language level. There are also three golden stars above the exercises whose gold color fades as a penalty for each mistake one makes. On losing all the stars, one will have to either start the lesson again or end it. After completing each part, learners will once again see and hear every word and phrase that they worked with through the lesson.

On the left side of the homepage (Figure 13), if one chooses "Daily lesson", similar exercises in addition to the lesson section will be given to them every 12 hours. A calendar also keeps track of one's lessons. This part also includes weekly quizzes and monthly challenges.

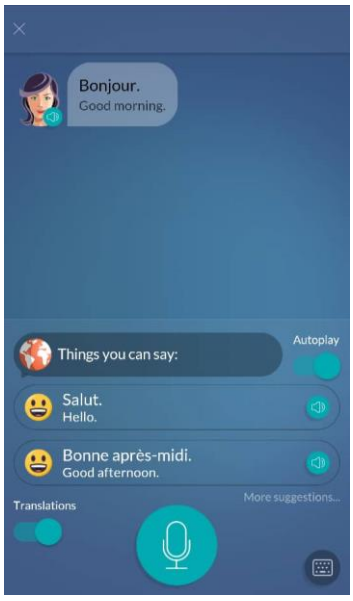
Figure 13

Daily lesson.

In the Conversational Chatbot, the learners are presented with real life situations and they start a conversation in target language with an artificial partner. The users are asked to tap and hold the microphone icon to record their replies. Throughout the conversation, they are provided with a set of possible responses to choose from, along with their pronunciation (see Figure 14). Although learners can craft their own responses, the system's ability to capture those statements is very restricted for now. As a result, the nature of the output is restricted to a set of pre-formulated responses.

Figure 14

Chatbot section.



3. Evaluation

Mobile technologies play an essential role in our daily lives and naturally they have made their way to educational settings as well. Teachers are required to adopt technology in their foreign/second language classrooms. The adoption of technology in language learning is accompanied by some benefits such as an opportunity to learn anytime and anywhere (Liu, 2009). Technology can also overcome the limitations and obstacles of a traditional classroom, such as a lack of language use opportunities, individualised learning, feedback and interactions (Ahn & Lee, 2016). However, as Kenning (2007) states, although employing these educational technologies could increase learner engagement to a great extent, it can still confuse users and lead to unexpected distractions. Having this in mind, it is essential for both teachers and learners to evaluate technological innovations before using them. Many studies have emphasised the necessity of a careful approach to employing these innovations and the importance of finding their strengths and weaknesses (e.g., Motiwalla, 2007; Rodríguez-Arancón et al., 2013; Serra et al., 2015; Welch & Brownell, 2000). Moreover, with the abundance of different educational technologies on the online market, we cannot presume that they all have adopted a reliable educational or theoretical approach, therefore, an in-depth evaluation of these materials is advisable (Rodríguez-Arancón et al., 2013). This increases the need for designing or using a trusted theoretical framework for evaluating educational technologies, and in the case of this article, mobile learning applications.

Unfortunately, there are not many applicable frameworks for analysing educational apps. Rosell-Aguilar's (2017) framework that includes four categories, namely, *technology, pedagogy, user experience,* and *language learning*, is one among the few. Several reflective questions are provided for each category that can be responded to by language teachers and learners. There are, however, no precise suggestions about how these questions should be evaluated or how an obtained score by an application is to be interpreted. In the present study, we adopted Reinders and Pegrum's (2016) evaluative framework. Their framework consists of five categories divided into criteria that can be rated by the researchers resulting in an overall score that can reach a maximum of 150 points (Appendix A). Each category is explained briefly here (for a detailed explanation see Reinders & Pegrum, 2016). We asked six experienced English language instructors with an academic education and previous experience of using Mondly to answer the questions (see Appendix B for their demographic information). Before filling in the evaluation form, we clarified each category for the raters during an online meeting. The mean for each category and a general mean is estimated for the evaluations. Moreover, Cohen's kappa coefficient was used to estimate the inter-rater reliability, which turned out to be 0.86.

3.1. Educational Affordances exploited in learning design (37.5/50)

Reinders and Pegrum (2016) believe the uses to which each technology lends itself is its affordance. Among the six features of affordance in this framework, Mondly receives a higher score on mobility as it can be reached easily via smartphone devices anywhere and anytime. The criterion of mobility is of utmost significance in Category 1, since with a high level of mobility a technology is more likely to support contemporary pedagogical approaches (Reinders & Pegrum, 2016). Meanwhile, global learning, episodic, extended, and personal learning got acceptable scores on affordances. The raters also agreed that the application leaves little room for local and social learning as there is no way for learners to be engaged with the local environment and other learners that are using this application.

3.2. General Pedagogical Design (27.4/50)

Reinders and Pegrum (2016) emphasise the importance of discovering how "MALL learning design relates to established pedagogical approaches" (p. 5). To investigate the general pedagogical design of language learning applications, they have designed a spectrum with room for nine categories. Having analysed Mondly through the spectrum, it is evident that like most other educational apps, Mondly is student-centered and boosts autonomous learning. Although this application offers some innovations such as the Chatbot, it does not encourage critical or

collaborative learning. Mondly includes formal learning but informal learning is largely neglected. The lessons offered by Mondly, containing picture clues and using animated format, are to a great extent situated. Therefore, embodied learning, as another aspect of language learning, is not promoted. However, this may be acceptable due to the nature of language learning applications.

3.3. L2 pedagogical design (7.5/15)

Mondly's pedagogical design is inspired by competency-based language teaching (CBLT) which is "an approach that has been widely used as the basis for the design of work-related and survival-oriented language teaching programs for adults" (Richards, 2005, p. 410). In line with this methodology, Mondly teaches learners the basic skills they need for situations they face in everyday life with a main focus on achieving learning outcomes (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Hence, Mondly tries to develop language skills that are needed to function in situations that language learners are likely to encounter in their real life, such as attending sports events or school, travelling, etc.

3.4. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Design (15/25)

In the fourth category of this framework, Reinders and Pegrum (2016) indicate a need to investigate how technologies are related to SLA core principles, which include comprehensible input, comprehensible output, negotiation of meaning in interaction, and noticing of new language. The role of these principles can be explained in Mondly's Conversational Chatbot. Comprehensible input is provided by the slow-paced speech of an artificial conversation partner and L1 translation of the input. As learners are encouraged to produce accurate and clear responses, comprehensible output can be reached. However, opportunities for negotiating meaning are missing. Furthermore, although learners can produce comprehensible output in the Chatbot, the nature of the output is restricted to a set of ready-made responses that learners are required to choose from.

3.5. Affective Design (8.4/10)

The significant role of affective factors such as motivation is not new in language studies. Many scholars (e.g. Kim, 2012; Schumann, 1975; ShayesteFar, 2020) have emphasised that these factors must be taken into consideration while designing teaching methods and designing language learning apps is not an exception. This category provides criteria to assess affective factors in language learning apps.

Due to the nature of educational apps which leave almost no room for assessment by teachers, it can be said that using this application does not cause much, if any, anxiety. This can be a positive point when compared with real-world classroom assessment. Offering various and interesting exercises that have been mentioned above and sending daily notifications besides the precise daily lessons' calendar, increases student engagement with the learning process.

Overall, Mondly was awarded 96 out of 150 marks. Although this is not a desirable score, having not applied this framework to other language learning applications, we cannot judge the appropriateness of this score. This highlights the need for creating more reliable frameworks for evaluating and comparing language learning applications.

4. Conclusion

Mondly is a user-friendly, text and audio-based language learning app as well as a web-based program that offers more than 30 languages to millions of users. Evaluating this application through Reinders and Pegrum's (2016) framework, the present study revealed some of the weak and strong features of this app. Besides the points mentioned in the evaluation section, some other advantages and disadvantages can be discussed. Based on the user reviews on Google Play and Apple's App Store, one can get a clear sense of the great variety of languages this app teaches. Its free membership has also made Mondly a popular choice among users. Moreover, the exciting design of this app with great graphics and animations makes the process of language learning

interesting and fun. The speech recognition system, the Chatbot, which allows learners to record their replies, is another desirable feature of this app. Another merit is that Mondly uses L1 translation in the learning process as well.

Like any other language application, Mondly too suffers from a number of problems and limitations. Although the app offers free membership and never-ending daily lessons, many of the other features need to be purchased. Grammatical lessons in Mondly are limited only to the information offered as verb conjugations. However, since this application promotes an inductive method that focuses on learning by doing, this lack of explicit grammatical lessons cannot be counted as a serious drawback. Even in the literature of grammar teaching there is not strong evidence proving the effectiveness of explicit instruction in acquisition of new grammatical features (Ellis, 2020).

The main drawback of Mondly is the lack of a placement test for determining the users' initial proficiency which then leads to other problems. The app makes a poor differentiation between the three proficiency levels of beginner, intermediate, and advanced which is evident by the similar language input and the type of activities offered to learners at the various language levels. For instance, in Conversational Chatbot the native speaker speech is slower than natural speech regardless of the learner's level. This may help low proficiency learners to comprehend the input, but it may lead to communication problems in real-life situations. The provision of an adjustment button to control the speech pace based on the learner's proficiency could be a solution to this problem. With this point in mind and considering the limited range of expressions and situations in Conversational Chatbot and Dialog lessons, Mondly may be appropriate for L2 learners at the initial stages of language learning, and it cannot meet the needs of L2 learners at higher levels of proficiency.

In summary, it would be fair to say that Mondly is an effective application for novice learners as a general introduction to the target language they would like to learn. To prove useful for all learners at different levels and to increase the potential of this app for foreign language learning, the Mondly team needs to work on the downsides and limitations of this application.

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Ethical Statement

We, the authors, consciously assure that the manuscript titled “An Evaluative Review of Mondly: A Mobile Language Learning Application” is our own original work, which has not been previously published elsewhere and is not currently submitted for review to any other journal. The authors have been personally and actively involved in substantial work leading to the paper and will take public responsibility for its content.

Appendix A. The evaluation framework.

Criteria	Evaluation continuum	Score

Category 1. Educational Affordances exploited in Learning Design (__/50)

Local learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	little potential for local learning <–> much potential for local learning					
Global learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	little potential for global learning <–> much potential for global learning					
Episodic learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	little potential for episodic learning <–> much potential for episodic learning					
Extended learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	little potential for extended learning <–> much potential for extended learning					
Personal learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	little potential for personal learning <–> much potential for personal learning					
Social learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	little potential for social learning <–> much potential for social learning					
Mobility*	4	8	12	15	20	
	devices mobile <–> devices & students mobile <–> devices, students & learning experience mobile					

*** Note:** it is suggested that this criterion should be scored more highly than the others in this category, since it is arguably the most important.

Category 2. General Pedagogical Design (__/50)

Constructivist learning	2	4	6	8	10	
	behaviourist learning <–> social constructivist learning					
Situated learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	abstract learning <–> situated learning					

Embodied learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	disembodied learning ‹–› embodied learning					
Informal learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	little informal learning ‹–› much informal learning (may be alongside formal learning)					
Student-centred learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	teacher-centred learning ‹–› student-centred learning					
21 C skills: Creative learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	uncreative learning ‹–› highly creative learning					
21 C skills: Critical learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	uncritical learning ‹–› critical learning					
21 C skills: Collaborative learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	uncollaborative learning ‹–› collaborative learning					
21 C skills: Autonomous learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	student dependency ‹–› student autonomy					

*** Note:** it is suggested that this criterion should be scored more highly than the others in this category, since it is arguably the most important pedagogical approach and, in some senses, opens up the potential for many of the others.

Category 3. L2 Pedagogical Design (__/15)

Communicative learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	non-communicative learning ‹–› communicative learning					
Task-based learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	no meaning-based task focus ‹–› meaning-based task focus					
(inter-) cultural Learning	1	2	3	4	5	
	no cultural element ‹–› cultural learning ‹–› intercultural learning					

Category 4. SLA Design (__/25)

Comprehensible input	1	2	3	4	5	
	little comprehensible input ‹–› much comprehensible input					
Comprehensible output	1	2	3	4	5	
	little comprehensible output ‹–› much comprehensible output					
Negotiation of meaning	1	2	3	4	5	
	little negotiation of meaning ‹–› much negotiation of meaning					
Feedback (nature)	1	2	3	4	5	
	automated feedback ‹–› human feedback ‹–› automated & human feedback					
Feedback (detail)	1	2	3	4	5	
	limited feedback ‹–› detailed feedback					

Category 5. Affective Design (__/10)

Engagement	1	2	3	4	5	
	unengaging ‹–› highly engaging					
Affective filter	1	2	3	4	5	
	anxiety-inducing ‹–› anxiety-reducing					

Total	*Overall score out of maximum 150 points*	

Appendix B. Demographic Information.

	Age	Academic Degree	Years Teaching	Duration using Mondly
Rater 1	24	M.A. TEFL	6 years	2 months
Rater 2	28	PhD TEFL	5 years	2 months
Rater 3	23	M.A. TEFL	1 year	4 months
Rater 4	24	M.A. TEFL	2 years	4 months
Rater 5	23	M.A. English Literature	5 years	2 months
Rater 6	30	PhD English Literature	2.5 years	2 months