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Research Paper

Lived Experience of Adult English Learners of Learning English on the Phone

Zahra Abdi *

*University of Southampton,
England*

Maryam Mohsenpor **

*Department of Educational Psychology,
Faculty of Education and Psychology,
Alzahra University, Tehran, Iran*

Abstract

In line with the technological advancement during the last few decades, virtual learning has been addressed more widely, which affected English language teaching and learning as well. Since Covid 19 pandemic, which has resulted in the long-lasting closure of educational settings worldwide, virtual learning as the alternative of traditional education has been developed unprecedentedly. An option for virtual learning specifically for language teaching is teaching on the phone which has been mostly neglected in educational research. The aim of this study was to analyse the lived experience of 16 adult English language learners who experienced learning English through one-to-one, audio call sessions. Due to the pandemic, semi-structured interviews were conducted on the phone, which were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed with a phenomenological approach. Many times revisions of the statements driven from the transcriptions resulted in six themes namely: a) learning on-the-phone as a new, satisfying experience, b) advantages, and c) disadvantages of one-to-one audio sessions, d) the participants' preferences, e) the requisites of on-the-phone-learning, and f) the expectations of on-the-phone teacher. According to the result of this study, some educational recommendations for improving on-the-phone teaching are: covering four language skills through developing individualised lesson plans based on each learner's needs and English language proficiency level; holding group video sessions along with one-to-one audio sessions; and using the facilities of messengers like WhatsApp to send audio, video and textual files to learners based on their needs and learning objectives.

Keywords: Virtual learning, Teaching/Learning English Language on the phone, Lived experience, Thematic analysis, Covid 19 pandemic

In fulfillment of the fast and continuous technological improvements in the 21st century, the possibility of worldwide communication and the necessity of a global lingua franca have made English as a universal language of communication, science, technology and tourism at the center of attention more than before (Rao, 2019). ‘English as a foreign language’ (Zairova & Reymova, 2020) and English as a ‘universal language’ (Melitz, 2016) have been studied vastly to explore different teaching methods and learning strategies as applied by many and various educators and learners worldwide. Moreover, accessibility to internet for ever more people has made noticeable changes to educational settings, as a result of which teaching and learning experiences in all fields of study have been changed (Crawley et al., 2009). Accordingly, virtual learning or e-learning as a distant learning have provided the opportunity for wider group of learners to continue their education by their chosen teachers in their own suitable time and space (Simpson, 2018).

Before the outbreak of Covid 19, virtual learning was mostly a part of blended learning, an option to enhance learning, or an opportunity for a special group of people who would prefer to take part in online sessions than attending traditional in-person classes. However, the long closure of educational settings in many countries including Iran due to Covid 19 pandemic has resulted in the unavoidable spread of virtual learning as *the viable* alternative to traditional education. Subsequently, researchers conducted studies to investigate the different aspects of this phenomenon globally and locally (Ali, 2020; Dhawan, 2020; Dung, 2020; Ghafoorifard, 2020).

Generally, e-learning or virtual learning refers to an “instruction in a learning environment where teacher and students are separated by time or space, or both” (Dung, 2020, 45). Virtual learning would include the

whole teaching and learning environment or a part of a blended approach combining in-person and digital elements (Lowerison et al., 2016). In virtual learning, the course materials are communicated via the Internet, different IT applications, multimedia resources, video or audio conferencing and the like. According to Shahzad et al. (2020), the main advantages of virtual learning are saving time and money, elimination of commuting, ensuring impartial and active learning, exposure to technology, and flexibility of educational setting. Some disadvantages include poor monitoring, improper assessment, lack of social interaction and practice, and unavailability of online facilities for all such as poor web connection which put the learning at stake.

Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) is a kind of virtual learning as one of the most recent approaches to teaching languages, especially English, through using mobile phones facilities. The rapid growth of mobile phone users and the day-to-day updating of its facilities made educators to make use of it in their educational settings as a part of blended learning (Hasan & Islam, 2020; Patil, 2018).

Teaching on the phone, as it was applied in this study, can be considered as virtual learning based on the above definition. It bears some similarities with MALL as some facilities of smart phones were used to communicate with the learners and facilitate the teaching process such as texting, sharing files or suggesting useful educational links through WhatsApp. However, there is a fundamental difference between on-the-phone teaching and MALL, as in the former the main medium of instruction was one to one audio-call through the whole teaching process. Therefore, unlike MALL, teaching on the phone could be regarded as an alternative to traditional, in-person education and not as a part of blended learning.

Quite a few researchers studied MALL around the world such as Thornton and Houser (2005) in Japan, Chen and Hsieh (2008) in Taiwan, Levy and Kennedy (2005) in Australia, and Salameh (2011) in Palestine,

among others. According to the findings of these studies, generally the students had a positive view toward MALL and found it useful in improving their English language learning. Some other studies such as Lu (2008) in Taiwan, Abdou (2014) in Dubai, to name but a few, reported the enhancement of students' vocabulary learning through messaging new words to students.

Some research has been conducted in Iran regarding MALL as well, which mostly focused on vocabulary learning such as Ayati and Sarani (2014), and Sarani et al. (2014). These studies reported the enhancement of vocabulary learning of the learners using short message sending service (SMS) and learners' positive view toward MALL. Some others conducted studies on grammar, such as Ghorbani and Ebadi (2020) which reported the development of the learners' grammatical structures in online chats, and Baleghizadeh, and Oladrostam (2010) that reported the enhancement of grammar accuracy as a result of the learners' recording the sessions by their mobile phones in the class and re-listening them at home.

No research has been conducted on MALL to investigate lived experience of language learners or deeply analyse learners' viewpoints. Similarly, teaching/learning English on the phone as a newly applied alternative to traditional education, in which audio call is the main medium of instruction, has not been studied so far. Investigating the lived experience of English language learners of learning on the phone would shed the light on this phenomenon as experienced and expressed by the participants to explore it from different aspects. The result would inspire the educators and researchers to consider it as an alternative to traditional, in-person teaching, practice it and conduct more studies to investigate it from various approaches. This is crucially significant considering the current Covid 19 pandemic and the unpredictable future, which necessitates paying close attention to all varieties of virtual learning to generate fruitful resilient education for all. To address this

urgency, the question this research was designed to answer was: ‘what is the lived experience of Iranian adult English language learners of learning English through one-to-one audio-call sessions?’.

Literature Review

Following the steady widespread technology and further accessibility to Internet for the public in the 21st century, educational environment has been transforming significantly in both formal and informal language learning settings (Hill et al., 2004). The use of mobile phones in English language teaching and learning can be considered as the most recent changes in this field (Turc, 2017). Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), coined by Chickering and Ehrmann (1996), is language learning assisted and improved through the use of handheld, portable devices including MP3/MP4 players, laptops, PDAs, iPods and mobile phones; recently, however, the term has been associated more with mobile phones (Hassan Taj et al., 2016).

Since two decades ago, MALL has been evolving as a “fashionable channel for language study” (Chinnery, 2006, p.14). As Chinnery (2006) reported, mobile phones were used for vocabulary practice, mostly through SMS (short message service), taking quizzes and live tutoring. Moreover, language learning materials were delivered effectively to learners through mobile phones (Thornton & Houser, 2005), and they were persuaded to spend more time on language learning (Gholami & Azarmi, 2012). In fact, texting information directly to learners, such as English idioms through SMS (Hayatiet al., 2013) or sending texts and comprehension questions via communication applications, such as WhatsApp (Gutierrez-Colon Plana et al., 2013) may push the learner into action thus add a new dimension to their language learning process (Stockwell, 2013).

According to Viberg and Grönlund, (2012), most studies support the usefulness of applying mobile phone technology mostly in boosting

learners' vocabulary acquisition, listening and speaking skills more than other skills. There are also some projects focusing on other skills, such as Baleghizadeh and Oladrostam (2010) in Iran who reported the significant improvements in high school students' grammatical accuracy as a result of using mobile phone to record the session in the class to be reviewed later at home. Moreover, there are some projects applying MALL more innovatively; for example, in a project implemented by Gromik (2012), Japanese learners were asked to video record short English monologues by their mobile phones. The learners made longer videos overtime which implies the positive effect of mobile phone use on their English speaking skill.

Regarding viewpoints toward MALL, most studies indicate that language learners had positive attitudes towards the mobile technology use (Viberg & Grönlund, 2012); for example, Azli et al. (2018) reported the positive attitudes of the vocational college students in Malaysia on the ease and usefulness of MALL. Al-Shamsi et al. (2020) also confirmed the positive effect of using mobile phones on increasing the university language learners' exposure to English, enhancing their motivation, expanding their vocabulary, providing easy access to learning and improving university students' listening skills in Oman.

Regarding the sudden transition to virtual education due to the Covid 19 pandemic since March 2020, more studies have been, and are being, conducted regarding English language teaching and learning; for example, Shahzad et al. (2020) investigated the impact of virtual learning on postgraduate English learners' attitude in Pakistan. The result of the study shows that the students welcomed virtual teaching as a new and happy experiment, and felt more committed and motivated. Teachers were easily accessible and their questions were answered on the spot or later. As the schedule was negotiable, they missed the sessions less frequently and could get access to class recordings in case they did. They also could save time and money as they did not have to commute and

they felt more self-confident and less stressed. There were some drawbacks such as lack of facilities, poor internet connection and the students' unfamiliarity with technology.

In another study, Yi and Jang (2020) provided an example by illustrating how two primary English teachers offered video-based English lessons in South Korea. Chung and Choi (2021) also explored the impacts of sudden transition to virtual learning and the language instructors' and students' level of satisfaction of language virtual assessment practices in South Korea. The result revealed that the students were highly satisfied while the level of the instructors' satisfaction was low.

Moreover, in 16 high schools in different cities of Indonesia, Atmojo and Nugroho (2020) explored the viewpoints of 16 English language learners on virtual education during the pandemic. They were asked to document the strategies they made use of and the challenges they faced in reflective diaries, which were thematically analysed while five of them were also interviewed. The findings showed that beside weak internet connection and shortage of smart phone facilities, the challenges were mostly due to the teachers' and students' lack of preparation, skill and experience of applying virtual education effectively.

As the future of the pandemic is not clear and it may last longer, many more studies are needed to explore alternatives for traditional in-person education so that education continues even more effectively. What follows is an attempt to investigate an alternative for online teaching-learning English as the Iranian adult English language learners experienced and expressed in the interviews.

Method

The aim of this study was to analyse the lived experience of 16 adult English language learners who experienced learning English through one-to-one, audio call sessions. Due to the pandemic, semi-structured

interviews were conducted on the phone, which were recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed with a phenomenological approach.

Participants

Thirty adult English language learners who had the experience of learning English on the phone were invited to participate in this study, from which 16, 13 women and 3 men, agreed to be interviewed on the phone. Some of the participant learners started on-the-phone learning prior to Covid 19 pandemic and some others did so after the pandemic. They were introduced to this program by an English language teaching institute in Tehran which has been offering on-the-phone teaching to learners with different language proficiency levels for more than a decade now.

Before the pandemic, the learners who joined this English language learning program were mostly adults who were too busy to take part in face-to-face sessions so they found this way of learning suitable as there is no need to commute and learners simply take part in 25-minute sessions twice a week. After the pandemic, however, wider group of learners chose this program as an alternative to continue their learning. Each semester includes twenty four sessions which is recharged should the learners be willing to continue. The focus of the sessions are supposed to be on speaking skill using the Select Readings series which are basically self-study textbooks consisting of reading passages, reading skills and related exercises. The learners were suggested to start from elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate or upper-intermediate level of the textbook series based on their English proficiency levels which were evaluated through an informal interview they had on the phone by one of the institute teachers prior to starting the sessions. The English teachers who are employed by the institute are free to apply their own teaching methods as far as the learners are content and willing to continue.

According to Frechette et al. (2020), in order to provide rich data considering different aspects of the intended phenomenon, what best suits the phenomenological analysis of lived experiences is purposeful sampling of target phenomenon-rich participants with maximum variation. As shown in Table 1, the participants were quite various regarding their age (21 to 65), education (high school graduates to PhD holders of different majors), occupation (housewives to company managers), and English proficiency level (basic to upper-intermediate levels). They also had different learning objectives but improving speaking skill was the common interest. Twelve of them have been, and still are, learning English on the phone twice a week for twenty five minutes since 18 to 6 months ago. Four of them had quit after two months but they were invited to take part in the study in order to investigate their experience resulted in leaving the course.

Despite these purposeful differences, all of the participants had experienced learning English previously in different English language institutes or private sessions so they could compare this virtual learning with the traditional in-person classes they had attended. Moreover, they all were taught by one of the researchers so that the phenomenon they experienced would be similar and comparable. Four of the participants, however, had experienced some other teachers' teaching on the phone before starting their sessions with the teacher-researcher. They were included in the study to enhance the variety of the experiences to be explored. The demographic data of the participants, which had been recorded by the teacher-researcher in her fieldwork, are presented in the following table.

Table 1.
Demographic Data of the Participants

Participants' code number	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	English language proficiency level	Objectives
P1	Female	50	High school diploma	House wife	Pre-intermediate	Improving General English with a focus on speaking skill
P2	Male	52	PhD candidate in Archeology	Self-employed	Pre-intermediate	MSRT preparation and Improving speaking skill
P3	Female	65	MS in Economics	Head of a company	Intermediate	Improving speaking skill
P4	Female	30	PhD candidate in Sport physiology	Primary school teacher	Pre-intermediate	Improving General English and MSRT preparation
P5	Female	21	Senior student of BS in architecture	Student	Pre-intermediate	Improving General English and IELTS preparation for student visa
P6	Female	30	BS in management	Manager of a company	Upper-intermediate	Improving speaking skill and IELTS preparation for student visa

Participants' code number	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	English language proficiency level	Objectives
P7	male	32	MS in Engineering	Manager of a factory	Intermediate	Improving speaking skill and IELTS preparation for student visa
P8	Female	34	PhD in pediatric dentistry	Pediatric Dentist	Upper-intermediate	Improving speaking skill and IELTS preparation for student visa
P9	Female	55	PhD in traditional medicine	Pharmacist	Pre-intermediate	Improving speaking skill
P10	Female	65	High school diploma	House wife	Basic	Learning General English
P11	Female	45	PhD in Chemistry	University teacher	intermediate	Improving speaking skill
P12	Female	34	MS in Physical education	tennis coach	Pre-intermediate	Improving General English With a focus on speaking skill
P13	Female	29	MA in psychology	Teacher	Pre-intermediate	Improving General English and PhD entrance exam

Participants' code number	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	English language proficiency level	Objectives
P14	Male	27	PhD student in Mechanics	Head manager of a factory	Pre-intermediate	Improving speaking skill and IELTS preparation for student visa
P15	Female	55	BS in accounting	Civil servant	Basic	Learning General English
P16	Female	25	MA student in Physiology education	Personal trainer	Basic	Improving General English With a focus on speaking skill

Instrument and Data Collection

In order to gather data, semi-structured interview, which is suitable for phenomenological analyses (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), was used. As suggested by Maffioli (2020), when in-person interview is not possible, it could be conducted on the phone. In-person interviews could have provided richer data; however, due to Covid 19 pandemic and in order to avoid any risk to the participants' health, semi-structured interviews were conducted on the phone and in Farsi, the participants' first language, as English would be a barrier for most of them whose English was not advanced enough to express themselves.

Prior to each interview, the participant's permission to record her/his voice was obtained. The interviews consisted of a general open question about their experiences, feelings, opinions of learning English on the phone in comparison with English learning they had experienced before in face-to-face classes at school, language institutes or in private sessions. The question was in the form of a request: 'please tell me about

your experience of learning English on the phone'. During the interviews, related questions were asked for more clarifications on the points raised. The interviews were recorded by Call Recorder software on the researcher's mobile, which were stored in password safe files in a password safe laptop and were transcribed by the researchers. Regarding anonymity and privacy, code numbers were used for the participants.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis with a phenomenological approach

After transcribing the audio-recorded interviews, thematic analysis was conducted following the process detailed by Saldaña (2016); first 362 meaningful statements were derived from the transcriptions which resulted in 59 natural codes. Then, the codes were reduced and refined through comparing and combining the similar codes. Finally, they were categorised under 6 themes which were translated in English then presented with interpretation and explanation.

As mentioned, one of the researchers of this study was the teacher of the participants, who has been teaching on the phone since spring 2019. This prolonged engagement is crucial in qualitative research so that the close rapport between the teacher and the participants, which had been developed through audio call sessions, fostered rich, deep and detailed responses, as Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted. The interviews were done by the teacher-researcher but the four participants who quit the course were interviewed by the other researcher to avoid any thing which might disturb the honesty and frankness of the participants in expressing their real experience.

Unlike most qualitative research in which reflexivity, i.e. the researcher's awareness of his/her values to avoid bias and subjectivity, should be taken into careful consideration (Mantzoukas, 2005), in phenomenological analysis, according to Rodgers (2005), the researcher's familiarity with the phenomenon under study is pivotal in

interpreting the phenomenon. In fact, far from being objective, the research is “an interested and subjective actor rather than a detached and impartial observer” (Lester, 1999) who needs to combine her/his perspective with that of the participants to provide a clear picture from different aspects. This provides the stepping stone toward the primary aim of a phenomenological analysis of lived experiences.

In order to enhance credibility, following Creswell and Creswell (2017), member checking was used i.e. the transcribed audio-recordings were sent to the interviewees to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions and add any points if they like. Moreover, ensuring credibility, which is the most important factor in establishing trustworthiness according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), triangulation of data sources was used by including a wide range of informants so that their viewpoints and experiences can be verified against each other leading to a rich, more detailed picture of the phenomena (Shenton, 2004). Moreover, audit trail, i.e. the collection of all the materials in the process of the study which documented the teacher- researcher’s decisions and assumptions, was reviewed by the other researcher to ensure drawing the same conclusions (Ryan-Nicholls & Will, 2009).

Results and Discussion

In this section, the themes and the related natural codes were presented in tables and then discussed through the samples of the statements derived from the transcribed and translated interviews.

Theme 1: On-the-phone learning as a new, satisfying experience

Table 2.

On-the-phone learning as a new, satisfying experience

Theme 1: On-the-phone learning as a new, satisfying experience	
Number	Natural code
1.	Popularity of the online education due to Covid 19 pandemic
2.	A novel experience
3.	A different experience
4.	A positive experience
5.	Curiosity to experience a new method
6.	Doubt about the efficiency
7.	Early sessions shyness
8.	Early sessions stress
9.	A challenging start
10.	An unprecedented experience
11.	A satisfying method

As mentioned, some of the participants started on-the-phone sessions before the pandemic; however, as most of them expressed, online education has gained popularity, inevitably though, after the pandemic (theme1-code1). For example, P.5 told: “after Corona, everyone started to teach this way”. Moreover, as expected, most of the participant learners considered this method as a novel experience (theme1-code2) as P1 stated:

P1: I had no experience of online learning or by phone before.

Regarding this aspect, some stated that they were curious to experience this new method (theme1-code2); for instance, P16 stated:

P16: I had no experience. I wanted to give it a try.

Being a new experience, some of them doubted its effectiveness (theme1-code3), such as P2:

P2: I really didn't think these sessions could be effective.

His doubt was due to his previous experience of learning English in several English language institutes as he failed to continue and had to quit because of his busy life style:

P2: I started to study English many times before but I had to quit as I was too busy and each time it was more difficult to start again.

He has been holding on-the-phone sessions regularly even during his business trips in Iran and abroad for more than a year. Another example is the P6 who had private in-person sessions with the teacher-researcher for about one year prior to one-the phone sessions. She expressed her doubt as well but for other reason:

P6: I'd had no online sessions before. I supposed education must be face-to-face so that I could ask questions. Mentally, I used to separate job, education and life settings.

According to the above quote, the P6 was doubtful about the efficiency of on-the-phone sessions. In fact, having been used to in-person setting, she was unaccustomed to the virtual environment and supposed that it could not be suitable for raising questions; she further explained:

P6: When I had to start on-the-phone sessions after Corona, I found out that unlike face-to-face sessions questions are not cultivated in my mind. But, after a while my mind got used to it so now I ask questions as I did before, which I found very important.

As she stated in the above quote, she could cope with this new experience and after more than one year of attending on-the-phone sessions regularly, she still considers the sessions useful and is willing to continue:

P6: Now it is nearly one year but it is still very attractive and new and I am eager to continue this way even after Corona issue is resolved.

P1 who started on-the-phone sessions before the pandemic was also new to online learning; she felt shy (theme1-code6) in the beginning:

P1: During the first sessions I didn't feel comfortable. I shied away talking to the teacher.

She also felt stressed (theme1-code7) so she had difficulty remembering the words:

P1: Early sessions, I felt I knew many words but they slipped my mind out of stress.

This was what she experienced in group in-person sessions:

P1: I am like this. I cannot talk in groups. I get embarrassed.

However, she could overcome her shyness:

P1: now I can talk to my teacher on the phone.

In fact, she considered this as one of the positive points of one-to-one on-the- phone sessions:

P1: Talking to your teacher privately is a great advantage.

Now after one year attending on-the-phone sessions, she could comfortably talk. Seemingly, talking to the teacher in one-to-one sessions improved her self-confidence so she could manage her stress:

P1: In institute monthly gatherings I could talk.

Moreover, P4 considers this new experience, unlike any experience she had before (theme1-code8):

P4: I found this experience very new and interesting. It is so different.

This is mostly due to one-to-one interactions of the sessions which, like for P1, reduced the stress she experienced in in-person sessions:

P4: I feel more comfortable here comparing to face-to-face sessions as you need to have eye contact and talk in others' presence which is so embarrassing to me.

Furthermore, some participants found the first sessions challenging (theme1-code9); such as P12:

P12: Not being able to see my teacher's face, I found the first sessions challenging.

According to the above quote, P16 found the audio sessions challenging for the fact that in the absence of visual aids, it solely relies

on listening- speaking skills. Being an unprecedented experience (theme1-code10) made P15 remain skeptical about its efficiency:

P15: As I did not have any on the phone teacher, I cannot compare and evaluate the quality of the teaching.

She left the course after 10 sessions believing she has some memory problem remembering the vocabularies and grammatical rules. She also stated that she would take on-the-phone sessions with some other teacher or try some other online learning to try her own memory and learning capacity.

It is noteworthy that all the participants including the ones who quit the course after a short period of time, stated that generally they found this method satisfactory (theme1-code11); as an example, P14 stated:

P14: generally speaking, it is rather effective.

The reasons why the participants found this method satisfactory were discussed through the following theme.

Theme No. 2: Advantages of one-to-one audio call learning

Table 3.

Advantages of one-to-one audio call learning

Theme No. 2: Advantages of one-to-one audio call learning	
Number	Natural Code
1.	Saving commute time
2.	Saving money
3.	Saving physical energy
4.	Time and place flexibility
5.	Learning perseverance
6.	Increased concentration
7.	Reducing stress
8.	Improving self -confidence to talk
9.	On-the-spot written responses
10.	Possibility of being in touch beyond sessions
11.	Possibility to record
12.	Individualised sessions
13.	language skills improvement

Regarding the advantages the participants stated about this method, saving time came first as the learners did not need to commute (theme2-code1). This is of great importance especially in big cities like Tehran because of heavy traffic and air pollution. For example, P9 told:

P9: For people with a busy life style taking part in face-to-face classes is rather time-consuming. Here you save all the time.

As there is no need to commute, it resulted in saving money as well (theme2-code2):

P6: it is more affordable as you do not spend money going back and forth.

Similarly, physical energy is saved (theme2-code3):

P15: I am a full time employee. Lots of time wasted in high traffic. I was exhausted and got disappointed and simply quit all English learning courses I started in different institutes.

Furthermore, the learners were offered different time slots to choose based on what best suit their time (theme2-code4); this is what some, such as P9, found convenient:

P9: The strong point is that you can schedule your sessions based on your available time.

Similar to other forms of distant learning, learners are not limited and can hold the sessions nearly anywhere (theme2-code4); this suits some learners, such as P2, whose job requires them to take trips frequently:

P2: Even in my business trips I did not cancel my sessions.

Time and place flexibility (theme2-code4), saving commute time (theme2-code2), saving money (theme2-code2) and physical energy (theme2-code3), resulted in learning perseverance (theme2-code5). Therefore, it is more possible for some learners to continue their learning despite their busy life style:

P2: I used to go to different English learning institutes as Iran-America and Shokooh in my teenage. I used to study English for a

while and then I quit. I could continue learning since I started audio-call sessions.

Moreover, some could enhance their concentration (theme1-code6) as a result of the need to listen attentively all through the audio call sessions:

P10: I am more focused.in fact no way out. I must focus on listening one hundred percent otherwise I am lost.

Additionally, having been one-to-one, the learners felt less stressed (theme2-code7):

P4: There is no stress here. It is just you. I feel this virtual learning has reduced my stress.

Likewise, some felt more self-confident to talk during the sessions (theme2-code8):

P9: I feel more self-confident. I think I can talk in groups in case.

Another positive point, according to the participants' experience, was the teacher's making use of WhatsApp, the messaging application; for example, the teacher typed some words or phrases during the session. The on-the-spot written responses (theme1-code9) made the sessions more effective especially for the learners in the basic level, who had problems spelling.

P10: Whenever I cannot write a word or sentence, I ask her (the teacher) to text it in WhatsApp.

Moreover, based on each learner's need, the teacher sent PDFs, audio and video files, shared links or suggested software or applications. The learners also could ask their questions. This extended the interactions between the teacher and the learners beyond the sessions (theme2-code10):

P8: You shared audio clips, video clips, PDFs, Novels. I also shared magazines couple of times.

Further, the possibility to record the sessions by the use of Call Recorder on their mobile phones (theme2-code11) let them not only save

note-taking time during the sessions, but also listen to the session again and review in their own convenient time.

P5: I can review as I can record the sessions. It is really useful.

Additionally, the teacher could individualise the teaching (theme2-code based on each learner's need, objectives and learning style:

P2: It is very good that the teacher teaches based on what you need.

Last but not least, improvement in one or more language skills (theme2-code 13) is among the main advantages that the participants found satisfactory, including:

- Listening improvement:

P4: One of its great advantages is that my listening skill has improved noticeably.

- Speaking improvement:

P7: I don't have any chance to speak English but in these sessions. I don't speak English anywhere. I have just conversations with her. It affected my speaking skill a lot. Audio-call sessions caused me to speak much better.

- Reading improvement:

P4: I study reading passages. I learned different reading strategies and tips. So any pronunciation or grammatical problems are corrected.

- Writing improvement:

P4: When she (the teacher) assigned me some writing then I read them to her. I was challenged to make use of grammar and words to write a text and it was really useful.

- Grammar accuracy

P8: She comments and teaches when I have any grammatical mistakes and I found it very useful.

- Learning new words

P3: I learned new words which I found very useful for my memory.

- Remembering forgotten words

P8: Many times the words I forgot were activated again in my mind so this method was really good.

Theme No. 3: Disadvantages of on-the-phone learning

Table 4.

Disadvantages of on-the-phone Learning

Theme No. 3: Disadvantages of on-the-phone learning	
Number	Natural Code
1.	Lack of social interaction
2.	Lack of competition
3.	Shortage of motivation
4.	Lack of comparison
5.	Slow progression
6.	shying away talking in groups

Although all of the participants preferred this virtual learning to traditional in-person classes, most of them considered the lack of social interactions (theme3-code1) as the main disadvantage of this method:

P1: In class, you can talk to others but here you only talk to your teacher.

Lack of social interaction, which is also among the disadvantages of virtual education by Shahzad et al. (2020), resulted in lack of competition (theme3-code 2) which some of the participants found disadvantageous:

P5: This is the only problem; there is no one to compete with.

Similarly, one to one sessions seemed less motivating to some of the learners as P3:

P3: In group you are more motivated.

In a similar line of reasoning, in the absence of social interaction there is less opportunity for the learners to compare their progress; this needs to be addressed according to P5:

P5: it would be good to have one or two group sessions monthly so that we could compare our improvements with others.

Lack of social interaction and its possible consequences would slow down learners' progression; for example, P3 told:

P3: I think private sessions are not as effective as group sessions. In group sessions you can improve more than just listening to your teacher.

In fact, this was the main reason she took part in the course only once. Interestingly, despite the fact that some learners found one-to-one sessions effective in reducing their stress (theme2-code9), improving self-confidence to talk (theme2-code10), and improving speaking skill (theme2-code14), the same feature could have a negative effect as P2 mentioned:

P2: I think talking in group, you stop shying away as you have talk to more people.

This resulted in one of the preferences stated by the participants, namely inclusion of group sessions, which was discussed along with other codes under the next theme in the following section.

Theme No. 4: Learners' preferences

Table 5.

Learners' Preferences

Theme No. 4: Learners' preferences	
Number	Natural code
1.	Preferring virtual learning to in-person traditional classes
2.	Preferring the inclusion of group audio sessions to one-to-one audio call
3.	Preferring female teacher
4.	Preferring video- call to audio- call
5.	Preferring audio-call to video-call
6.	Preferring inclusion of both audio and video call
7.	Preferring longer sessions

Generally, all the participants would prefer audio sessions as a kind of virtual learning; to name but a few, P2 said:

P2: Comparing to traditional method this is much better and complete especially during Corona period.

However, regarding the main disadvantage of lacking social interaction, most of them would welcome the inclusion of group sessions:

P9: It could be more useful if we could have some group discussion sessions on Skype.

Regarding the type of the call, audio or video, there was no consensus among the participants; some preferred the former, such as

P15: I think audio-call is more comfortable. I'd rather not be seen as I may not be well dressed or you (the teacher-researcher) may not feel comfortable to be seen. Maybe your husband would not like it.

Some preferred the latter such as P14:

P14: Generally video-call is better than audio-call as not seeing you (the teacher) reduces the efficiency. If good internet connection is available, through video calls, the sessions were simulated better as a real class and could be more effective.

And some a mix of the two, as P2:

P2: I would prefer some audio sessions then one or two video sessions once in a while.

The other noticeable preference of most of the participants was having a female teacher; some female participants stated that they felt more comfortable and intimate and less stressed with the same gender teacher:

P8 (female): I do prefer female teacher. I don't feel comfortable with male teacher on the phone.

For the two of the male participants who stated that they prefer female teacher, however, the reason was staying committed to study with a female teacher rather than a male teacher with whom they tend to make

friends and get close, as a result of which they would not take the sessions seriously enough:

P7 (male): First I had a male teacher. We become friends soon and I didn't take my studying serious. I think female teacher is better for me.

However, one of the female participants stated that she had no preference regarding the gender of the teacher and the teacher's skill was her priority.

P12: What matters me most is how skilled the teacher is. Man or woman makes no difference to me.

About the length of the sessions, some of the participants stated they would prefer longer sessions (longer than 25 minutes) so they had more time to practice.

P6: I think it is short. We have no time to do the exercises. It seems time flies in online classes.

Theme No. 5: The requisites

Table 6.

The requisites

Theme No. 5: The requisites	
Number	Natural code
1.	Spending enough time to study
2.	Being highly motivated
3.	Self-adapting
4.	The necessity of having a teacher

According to the participants' experience of this virtual learning, there are some requisites; the first one, which most of the learners mentioned, was the necessity of spending enough time to study (theme5-code1); for instance, P7 stated:

P7: It is very important to spend more time. I was so busy so I could not make time to study enough.

As discussed under the second theme, the main advantage of this method, according to most of the participants, was saving time as a result of not commuting; however, many of them considered spending enough time to study a requisite to benefit from it. In fact, the lack of enough time to study as a result of a busy life style was why the three of the participants quit after two months.

According to P4, the learners need to be highly motivated (theme5-code2) study enough and get required results:

P14: this method is effective if you are highly motivated so you spend enough time to study well. Otherwise, just having weekly sessions makes no difference.

Moreover, as this method was new, different and challenging for most of them, some tried to apply different strategies to adapt (theme5-code3). For example, P10, who started with basic English language proficiency, tried to adapt herself this way:

P10: as I am not fast enough to write down the words, I write them in Penglish (using Farsi alphabet) and then after the session check them in the dictionary. I am getting better though. I gradually can spell more words.

The other requisite mentioned by some of the participants, such as P10, was the necessity of a teacher (theme5-code4):

P10: I am sure that there should be a teacher. If all could study on themselves, there was no need for teachers.

In fact, although there are numerous self-study resources available in many and various forms including different textbooks, software, applications, websites and channels, some would feel the need for a teacher to make them motivated and stay committed to study and guide them in the process of learning to get a suitable result. This was discussed more in the next theme.

Theme No. 6: Expectations from the teacher

Table 7.

Expectations from the Teacher

Theme No.6: Expectations from the teacher	
Number	Natural code
1.	To be Skillful
2.	To guide learning process
3.	To create a sense of commitment in learners
4.	To hold sessions on-time
5.	To be flexible for changing class time
6.	To make use of technological facilities
7.	To teach actively
8.	To include four language skills
9.	To be patient
10.	To provide gentle feedback
11.	To assess progression

The last theme derived from the interviews was what the participants expect from the teacher in this virtual learning. From their viewpoints, a skillful, experienced teacher (theme6-code1) is needed to guide them in the process:

P9: The important point is that the teacher should be skilled, in all aspects, the pronunciation and grammar. Some are not skilled so you do not achieve your goal.

As some of the participants expressed, a qualified teacher could guide learning process based on their needs and objectives so they would progress satisfactorily:

P14: We are more persistent with a teacher because there is a program, a procedure based on which we progress. This way you are clear where to start and where to head.

Moreover, though the participants were adults and they took the course voluntarily, some of them expected the teacher to apply some strategies such as assigning them tasks to make them committed (theme6-code3) to study; such as P14 who said:

P14: it is important to assign me tasks to do and make me do them for the next session so I have to do them no matter how busy I am.

In addition, they expected on-time sessions (theme6-code4) as there is no need to commute; therefore, common reasons to delay holding in-person traditional classes seem not valid in virtual learning:

P11: I think it is very good that sessions are held on-time.

While they expected the teacher to hold the sessions on time, they expected her to be flexible about modifying class time in case (theme6-code5); P8 said:

P8: the first on-the-phone teacher I had was very strict, she never accepted to change class time. I asked her several times due to my university classes, she never accepted. But you are flexible and I do appreciate it.

Some of the participants expected the teacher to make use of technological facilities to improve the quality of teaching (theme6-code6). In fact, some would like to receive English learning materials through WhatsApp so that they were exposed more to English and got motivated to spend more time practicing. This point was uttered by P9 as follows:

P9: The teacher had better send learning materials based on each individual's need, like some texts, some exercises, to make them more engaged. For example, English songs, short sentences, short movies with subtitles so the learners are exposed more to English.

Some, as P3, also expected the teacher to teach actively (theme6-code7), i.e. to ask questions and run the sessions more dialogic so they engaged in the process of their learning actively:

P3: I like her way of actively challenging me to talk and be responsive.

Moreover, as most of them expressed, the teacher needed to include four skills (theme6-code8) while focusing on speaking skill:

P8: You (the teacher-researcher) include all skills, you apply various methods. I like it so much. You teach grammar, send me topic to discuss. You are not limited to the textbook or simply conversation.

The teacher's being patient (theme6-code9) and providing gentle feedback (theme6-code10) were two positive features which P10 and P8 pointed out respectively:

P10: I am lucky to have a patient teacher. If she wanted to just teach to fill the class time, I would not get good results.

P8: When I make a mistake, you (the teacher-researcher) correct me very nicely. My former teacher was so tough which embarrassed me a lot.

Lastly, P9 and two others would like to be assessed so that they could evaluate their progression:

P9: I know we are interviewed when we enroll. But it is good to take some pre-test, post-test so that the learner can assess her progression. I know the teacher knows but the learner had better know as well.

Discussion

Considering the derived themes as a whole picture, some common points could be found in the participants' lived experiences despite their differences in age, gender, education, occupation, English language proficiency level, learning objectives, and the length of experiencing this kind of virtual learning. For example, all of them expressed their general satisfaction of this type of learning, the main reasons of which were the time saved for not having to commute, and the progression in language skills especially listening and speaking. The other common point was what they considered as the requisite of making the learning beneficial namely, spending enough time to study to be prepared. Moreover, they

mostly stated that having a mix of one-to-one and group sessions would enhance their motivation and efficiency of the sessions.

It is noteworthy that the participants' preferences including having a mix of both one-to-one and group sessions and also their expectations from the teacher are in line with constructivism which, according to McCombs (2000), is a learner-centered approach based on which teachers need to design the learning challenges in accordance with the learners' level, provide a flexible education in a rich interactional setting and consider learners' diversity. Virtual learning, as Lowerison et al. (2016) state, is flexible, versatile, and customisable, and there are many and various instructional materials available online thus teachers could apply a constructivist approach to make a learner-centered setting in online teaching.

Despite the commonalities, as expected, there were also differences in the participants' lived experiences, which could be due to the individual differences resulted in their unique way of experiencing the phenomenon. For example, some preferred audio sessions, some video sessions and some others the mix of both. One other noticeable difference was related to how the participants considered the teacher's gender; some of the female participants preferred having a female teacher as they felt more comfortable and intimate, while two of the male participants preferred a teacher of different gender as, according to their previous experience, the closeness and intimacy with the male teacher in one-to-one sessions caused them not to take the sessions seriously and as a result they failed to stay committed to study. This also could be understood regarding the individual differences as one of the female participants stated that she had no gender preference but the skill and proficiency of the teacher mattered most.

About the length of the sessions, which was 25 minutes, some would like to have longer sessions but one of them stated that she could not stay focused longer than the assigned time. The other noticeable difference

was the various strategies the participants applied to adapt themselves to this new method; for example, focusing all their attention uninterruptedly on listening skill during the sessions, or note taking of new words using Farsi alphabet and trying to look them up in their cellphone's dictionary later.

These differences highlight the necessity of considering individual learners' uniqueness in developing an effective syllabus. Although including uniqueness of each and every learner in crowded classes seems not practical, in one-to-one sessions, paying attention to the participants' special needs was among what the participant learners expected from the teacher. In fact, according to Kubat (2018), teachers' knowledge, expertise and experience not only of the educational content they teach but also of the different teaching methods are essential to enable them adapting their teaching method to their learners' special, unique needs.

The themes derived from the participants' lived experiences could be discussed further by considering four different aspects of this teaching-learning, namely audio-call learning English as a foreign language, on-the- phone learning as a virtual/distant learning, one-to-one learning, and using mobile phone facilities, as summarised in the following table:

Table 8.

Four Aspects of the On-the-phone English Eanguage Teaching, Related Themes and Codes

Four Aspects of on-the-phone ELL	Theme	Related Codes
1. Audio-call learning English	Theme 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A novel experience (code2) • A different experience (code3) • Curiosity to experience a new method (code5) • Doubt about the efficiency (code6) • A challenging start (code9) • An unprecedented experience (code10)
	Theme 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased concentration (code 6)

Four Aspects of on-the-phone ELL	Theme	Related Codes
	Theme 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language skills improvement (code13)
2. On-the-phone teaching as a virtual/distant learning	Theme 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popularity of online education due to Covid 19 pandemic (code1)
	Theme 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saving commute time (code1) • Saving money (code2) • Saving physical energy (code3) • Time and place flexibility (code4) • Learning perseverance (code5) • Possibility of being in touch beyond sessions (code10)
	Theme 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferring virtual learning to in-person traditional classes (code1) • Preferring video- call to audio- call (code4) • Preferring audio- call to video- call (code5) • Preferring inclusion of both audio and video call (code6) • Preferring longer sessions (code7)
3. One-to-one learning	Theme 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing stress (code7) • Improving self-confidence to talk (code8) • Individualised sessions (code12)
	Theme 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of social interaction (code1) • Lack of competition (code2) • Shortage of motivation (code3) • Lack of comparison (code4) • Slow progression (code5) • shying away talking in group (code6)
	Theme 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language skills improvement (code13)
	Theme 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preferring the inclusion of group audio sessions to one-to-one audio call (code2)
4. Using mobile phone facilities	Theme 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-the-spot written responses (code9) • Possibility of being in touch beyond sessions (code10) • Possibility to record (code11)

As summarised in the above table, most of the codes under theme 1 were related to audio call sessions such as what made this method a novel and challenging experience, what made learners doubt about its efficiency, and its being different and unprecedented. Moreover, increased concentration, and listening improvement, the codes under themes 2, were also related to this aspect of on-the-phone teaching.

Regarding the second aspect, i.e. on-the phone learning as virtual learning, most of the codes under theme 2 were related to this aspect so they can be valid for other kinds of virtual learning as well, such as saving commute time, money and physical energy, learning perseverance and possibility of being in touch with the teacher beyond sessions. These are in line with the advantages of virtual learning as listed by Shahzad et al. (2020). Preferring longer sessions, or preferring audio or video or mix of both under theme 4 could be related to virtual aspect of on-the-phone teaching-learning as well.

Regarding the third aspect namely, one-to-one learning, codes under theme 2 including reducing stress, improving self-confidence to talk and individualised sessions and speaking improvement; codes under theme 3 such as lack of social interaction and its by products including the lack of competition and comparison and possibility of more progress in group sessions were all related to this aspect. Lastly, the possibility of being in touch beyond sessions, on-the-spot written responses, and possibility to record were related to the fourth aspect, namely using mobile phone facilities. Of course, as this aspect is in common with MALL, it could also be valid for virtual learning in general. Some other codes which were not mentioned in the table 8 such as spending enough time to study and the expectations from the teacher can be related to learning generally and not to any of these aspects specifically.

Conclusion and Implications

This study was an attempt to shed light on different aspects of on-the-phone teaching English as a type of virtual education by analysing the lived experience of adult English learners of learning English through one to one audio call sessions. Prior to starting on-the-phone sessions, the participants had attended English courses in different English language institutes for some time or had private sessions; however, they could not reach their desired proficiency levels. All of them found this method of learning a new and different but satisfying experience. This is in line with the findings of Shahzad et al. (2020) in which the participants found virtual English learning during the pandemic a new and happy experience.

As the teaching was delivered through audio calls, the participants needed to listen attentively and with uninterrupted focus, which they found challenging first. In fact, it took them some time to adapt themselves and overcome the stress or shyness to talk. Despite the unfamiliarity with this method, the challenges they faced and the doubt they had about the efficiency of this method during the early sessions, all of the participants experienced it as satisfactory and advantageous. This is also true about the three participants who quit because of their busy life style; in fact, they expressed their willingness to start this method in future when they can find enough time to study. Generally, the participants approved of English learning on the phone as a kind of virtual education and preferred it to in-person, traditional classes. The main reason for this preference, according to the majority of the participants, was the time saved as a result of not commuting, which, along with flexibility of time and place, made it possible for them to continue learning despite their busy life style.

However, they mostly preferred to have group online sessions as well so that they could compete with other learners, compare their progress and enhance their improvement as a result of being motivated

through interacting with other learners. It is also noteworthy that despite the fact that some learners stated they could concentrate more and enhance their listening skill through audio-call sessions, some would prefer video-call or a combination of both; video-call would simulate the in-person environment of traditional education to which the learners were accustomed and might let them feel more connected; however, it requires high quality of the internet connection of both sides. Two female learners stated that they would prefer to continue through audio-sessions only, for cultural reasons or the necessity to get dressed for video-calls.

The findings of this study can be compared to the result of the studies on MALL regarding the two aspects of on-the-phone teaching which they have in common, namely on-the-phone teaching as a virtual/distant learning and using mobile phone facilities. Regarding the former, the main advantage of on-the-phone teaching was due to saving time, money and physical energy; this in in line with the findings reported by Shahzad et al. (2020) in Pakistan in which the students welcomed virtual learning and found it useful as they could save money and time as they did not have to commute. Regarding the latter, on-the-spot written responses, possibility of being in touch beyond sessions, and the possibility to record are all in line with the findings of the same study. Furthermore, lack of social interaction which was also listed by Shahzad et al. (2020) as disadvantages of virtual learning was also noticed and expressed by the participants of this study.

Additionally, the participants considered spending enough time to study necessary to make sessions beneficial. In fact, the main reason brought by the three of the participants, who quit the course after two months despite their satisfaction, was shortage of time and failing to spend enough time to study. Furthermore, according to the participants, a desirable teacher needs to be skilled and experienced to guide learning process, improve a sense of commitment in them to study, include all four skills and utilise various instructional tools such as the features of

online messaging applications as WhatsApp. Lastly, the learners expressed their satisfaction with being more focused, more self-confident, less-stressed and the improvement of the different language skills especially listening and speaking which are also compatible by the result of most of MALL studies such as Al-Shamsi et al., (2020); however, as the teaching methods were different, this compatibility may be related simply to virtual learning in general.

In closing, the result of this qualitative study would help educators and learners to enhance their understanding of this phenomenon thus improve the quality of the education and deal with the challenges they face practicing virtual learning more effectively. More research on lived experiences of both teachers and learners of virtual learning in different fields of study are needed to explore the different aspects of this ever expanding phenomenon to develop flexible and resilient education systems to deal with the unpredictable future successfully. Some educational recommendations for improving on-the-phone teaching are: covering four language skills through developing individualized lesson plans based on each learner's needs and English language proficiency level, holding group, video sessions along with one-to-one audio sessions, and using the facilities of messengers like WhatsApp to send audio, video and textual files to learners based on their needs and English language proficiency levels.

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