

Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) Action Research Project

**Can language learning apps enhance the
classroom experience for ESOL learners?**

City of Bristol College – June 2022

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For further information regarding the Shaping Success Action Research programme and this project go to <https://ccpathways.co.uk/practitioner-research/otla-8/>.

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Can language learning apps enhance the classroom experience for ESOL learners?

City of Bristol College

SUMMARY

This project aimed to explore a digital language learning package to support ESOL learners in the city of Bristol. The digital tool decided on was FlashAcademy. The project team sought to gain honest, accurate feedback from their learners as to their experiences using the digital learning package, in addition to feedback from teachers on their impact. The project explored how to use the tools in and outside of the classroom in a blended learning format and through asynchronous activities. The project culminated in an event bringing all the project participants together: the managers, the teachers and the learners.

RATIONALE

Our project took place with five groups of learners over different ages, genders and levels. It took place within the ESOL department of City of Bristol College, both ESOL 16–18-year-olds and ESOL adults. The range of groups was Entry Level 1 to Level 1. The majority of the research took place within groups of more than 10 learners and one lecturer worked individually with learners. There were three lecturers in total and two project leads.

The project team wanted to find out how effective (if at all) language learning apps are to support learning both in and out of the classroom. The pandemic and subsequent forced use of online delivery served to bring the issue of digital language learning to the forefront of teacher discussions. Teachers of learners at all levels were taken by surprise at how well many learners coped with using their mobile phones to access their language learning. Towards the end of the last academic year, some teachers trialled a standalone language app with a small group to supplement their online lessons and wanted to extend this further with a different software package.

Other Contextual Information

City of Bristol College is the principal provider of ESOL courses in the city. The ESOL provision is large (approx. 1500 learners per year), extremely broad and aims to support all learners to gain language skills, qualifications and confidence to progress in their education, work and independent lives in the city.

APPROACH

We chose to use the FlashAcademy platform for this project as it had a number of different features that were attractive to the teachers, and we felt learners would enjoy using it. One learner log-in gave access to multiple devices which meant that they could use college laptops or their own devices. It was accessible in 30+ home languages and had content that fit the required levels including vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar. Behind the scenes, teachers could set specific lessons for their groups or the learners could work through the content. Teachers could track progress via the app's reporting settings and the learners could play games, allowing them to score points on a leader board.

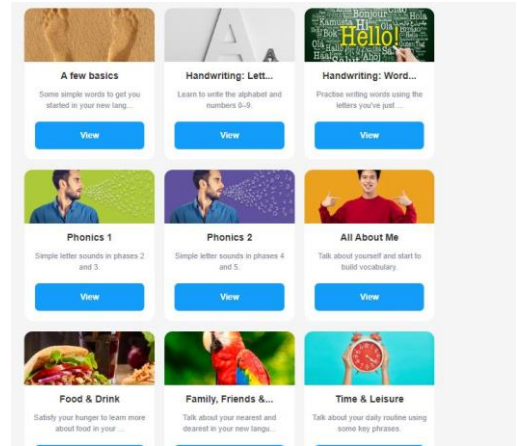


Figure 1: Some of the topics on FlashAcademy

Lesson Title	Class	Set by	Date set	Date due	Completed	Incomplete
Word types II	AD Green class	A. Nava	10/11/2021	10/11/2021	12	2
Harmful for the Environment	AD Green class	A. Nava	10/11/2021	10/11/2021	14	3
Forming questions	AD Green class	A. Nava	17/11/2021	17/11/2021	15	4
Auxiliary verbs	AD Green class	A. Nava	17/11/2021	17/11/2021	15	4
Looking for a job 2	AD Green class	A. Nava	24/11/2021	30/11/2021	11	5
Looking for a job	AD Green class	A. Nava	24/11/2021	30/11/2021	14	4
Employee qualities	AD Green class	A. Nava	24/11/2021	30/11/2021	14	4
What is a clause?	AD Green class	A. Nava	24/11/2021	30/11/2021	14	4
Employee skills	AD Green class	A. Nava	24/11/2021	30/11/2021	11	5

Figure 2: Lessons set by teachers

After spending time becoming familiar with the app and showing it to learners, the teachers decided to use the app in different ways. They used it to set tasks as homework or asynchronous lessons to supplement the learning in the classroom. Two teachers also used it as an extension activity for when learners finish tasks sooner in the lesson, or as an independent learning activity while they hold tutorials with individual learners.

Towards the end of the research period, each teacher used a tutorial session to capture learners' thoughts using a semi-structured interview format. This enabled the teachers to capture the views of the whole class as not all were able to attend the wrap up event.

At the end of the research, the group decided to bring all of the learners involved in the research together for a final capture of evidence (see Appendix 3) and as a social activity to thank them for their participation. The teachers posed closed questions to the learners and got them to move around the room to the number that best reflected their answer. Following that, the learners were put into smaller focus groups and asked open ended questions. Prizes were awarded to the learner in each class that had scored the highest number of points and they were treated to a buffet lunch.

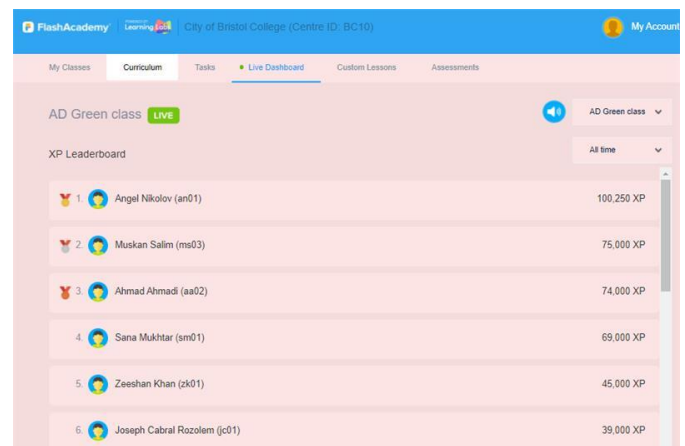


Figure 3: Leader board

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

From analysing the evidence, we found that learners mostly enjoyed using the app to supplement their learning and, in most cases, the content of the app supported what was being taught in the classroom. This enabled the learners to continue their learning at home. We asked learners questions about the level of challenge and most found content very easy. For the most part, learners found the app very easy to use and were able to navigate through its different functions. There was no difference in response between the adults or the 16-18s. When we asked how much they felt they learned from the app, the responses were very mixed and evenly spread between the markers. They felt it supplemented what they were doing in the classroom but they didn't learn much in the way of new content.

Within the appendices below, responses are shown for all questions, with some descriptive comments to give a feel for the numbers and statements. One thing that we were very surprised about was the fact that the majority of learners decided to use the app in English rather than their home language. One of the key selling points for the app was that the learners can access it in more than thirty home languages, but some outlined that there were mistakes in the translation and that if they are there to learn English – they wanted it all in English!

The learners particularly liked the gamification of the app, especially the 16-18 age group who are predominantly male. They explained that they liked the competition and moving up the leader board. This was less of a highlight for the adult groups.

Organisational Development

This academic year, the 16-18 and Adult ESOL teams were merged. This project provided a great opportunity for staff to work together who had previously never met as they worked on different campuses, within different departments and different age groups. Apart from the final event, we conducted the whole project remotely. The team worked collaboratively using a Microsoft Teams page, Teams meetings and shared documents to work effectively without having ever met.

Following on from this project, the team are currently exploring other apps and platforms to support language learning in the next academic year. We think that by involving staff in the decision-making process and the trial, there has been a greater buy-in and commitment to the platform. The developers were very keen to support us in this project and offered several training and troubleshooting sessions for the staff to help them get up and running with it.

One of the teachers stated “Normally, I don't use apps in my teaching/classroom as I have regarded them as a distraction from traditional teaching and potentially creating more work for me. However, since starting this research I have been pleasantly surprised that in FlashAcademy I can facilitate learning through technology by setting tasks/lessons based on classroom topics for learners. For some learners their natural curiosity has led them to do different levels and lessons independently. My adult learners have many commitments and use this app to fit around their busy lives.”

This teachers' full account can be found as Appendix 2.

Professional Development

Professional Standard	How our project outcomes demonstrate this standard
<p>1. Reflect on what works best in your teaching and learning to meet the diverse needs of learners.</p>	<p>We utilised the electronic resource with a wide variety of learners, gathered feedback in various contexts and reflected on that feedback to inform how we could best meet future needs of similar groups of learners. For example, noting that an option to allow some learners to receive instruction in their mother tongue aided some learners (but not the majority who preferred the simplicity of having both instructions and learning in English as the language being learned.) This may inform our future use of similar electronic resources.</p>
<p>5. Value and promote social and cultural diversity, equality of opportunity and inclusion.</p>	<p>Our project involved learners from a range of backgrounds including age, gender, ethnicity, disability etc. All were supported to participate and those who struggled with the technology were provided with additional support. When we brought the learners together at the end of the project, they were able to socialise and meet people from other classes usually based on other campuses. We managed to connect three learners who had come from a minority ethnic group within Afghanistan who swapped numbers and have become friends.</p>
<p>15. Promote the benefits of technology and support learners in its use.</p>	<p>Not all of the teachers involved were keen users of technology in the classroom. One in particular used it very little. This project has given her the confidence to reflect on her practice and to work with more 'techy' colleagues to trial new things in her classroom. While the teachers work in the same department, it is very large and they didn't know each other so it has provided the opportunity to share practice and resources.</p> <p>One of the other teachers sits in the middle and uses some tech but, during the project, she applied for an internal position of 'digital champion' to support college staff with developing their digital skills.</p>

LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT

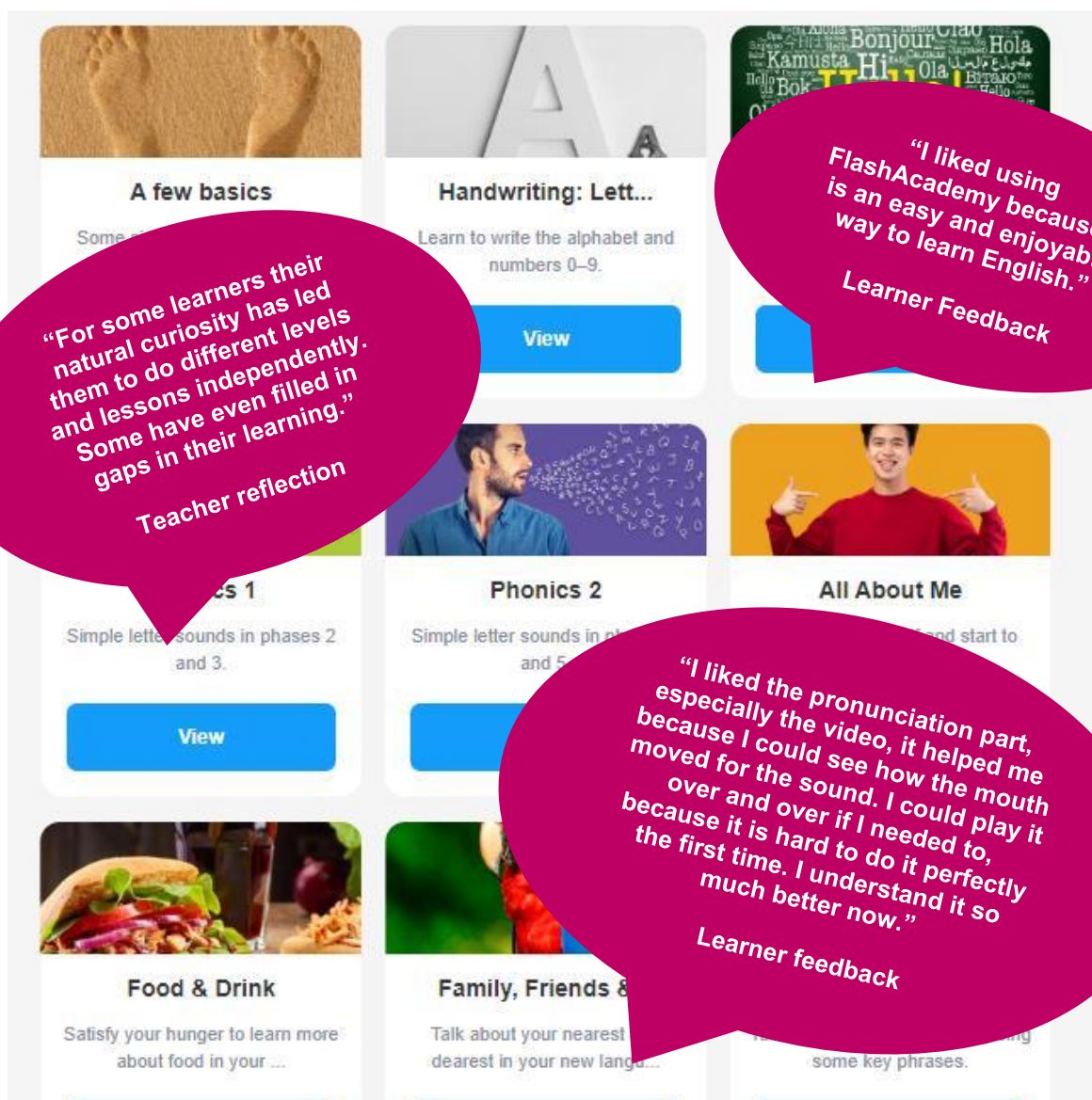
Reflecting on the use of online platforms and apps and what led us to make choices for ourselves and the learners has been a useful exercise. Some of the learners appeared to enjoy the attention of being part of a research project and having their opinions being valued too. This is something that we are keen to take forward as a college; having regular learner engagement events to discuss different topics will add a lot of value.

Within our organisation, like most, funding is always a struggle. As much as we would like to invest in digital platforms, often teachers source their own or search out free equivalents. The teachers found that many of the features of this app were useful e.g. being able to track learner progress via

a dashboard, being able to use one log-in on multiple devices and having content that broadly followed the ESOL curriculum. However, they did find that it was occasionally glitchy. Some learners lost all of their 'points' and so were back at the bottom of the leader board despite their best efforts. They also found that the app had a facelift halfway through the project which confused both staff and learners when they logged back on.

Getting the balances between giving learners something to do versus something that is relevant and useful to current topics/skills and between ease of use and usefulness is difficult. If an app is difficult to use or unreliable, it is no good to the busy teacher. FlashAcademy falls down in some areas at the moment although it does have its merits too which come out in the research feedback and there were more positives from the more motivated adult learners.

Following on and inspired by the work on this project, we are considering which apps or platforms we would like to offer for our staff and students for the next academic year. This project has given us the tools to critique the different features they offer. We quickly challenged our own assumptions around digital learning and technology and will be spending time with the rest of the team so that they can see its benefits and be prepared for the year ahead.



APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The Project Team

Project Role	Name	Job Role	Contact
Project Lead	Carolyn Nye	Head of Dept	Carolyn.nye@cityofbristol.ac.uk
Project Deputy	Amy Woodrow	T&L Manager	Amy.woodrow@cityofbristol.ac.uk
Project Team	Andrew Nava	Lecturer	Andrew.nava@cityofbristol.ac.uk
Project Team	Munira Hashmi	Lecturer	Munira.hashmi@cityofbristol.ac.uk
Mentor	Chloë Hynes	Trainer, mentor, creative development	Chloe.hynes@ccconsultancy.co.uk
Research Group Lead	Rachel Öner	English Specialist	rachel.oner@btinternet.com

Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies

“I liked using FlashAcademy because it is an easy and enjoyable way to learn English. Also, it is very accessible for everyone, as you just need a phone to download the App. I love that there is not mandatory order to complete the exercises and that you can directly do those subjects that you need to improve on, skipping the most basic exercises that you already know. I learnt new vocabulary and I improved my pronunciation thanks to phonics exercises. It is a good resource to link with what you're doing in class. I would definitely recommend it for those who are learning a second language, but specifically for those who are at Entry Level/beginner level.”

(Learner from Munira’s L1 class).

“Normally, I don’t use apps in my teaching/classroom as I have regarded them as a distraction from traditional teaching and potentially creating more work for me. However, since starting this research I have been pleasantly surprised that in FlashAcademy (FA) I can facilitate learning through technology by setting tasks/lessons based on classroom topics for learners. They can then independently complete the tasks and get immediate feedback without too much direction from me. What I like about FA is that I don’t necessarily have to use it as a tool during the class. It is a supplement to the topic and learning point we are doing in class.

I realise learners need a variety of modalities to supplement learning as it helps engage their curiosity on a topic. Importantly, as teacher I know from experience, learners have different learning styles and need a variety of input (visual, auditory etc) to stay stimulated and apps like FA provide this variety and input.

For some learners their natural curiosity has led them to do different levels and lessons independently. Some have even filled in gaps in their learning. For example, they have explored phonics (from lower levels) which is helping their spelling and pronunciation.

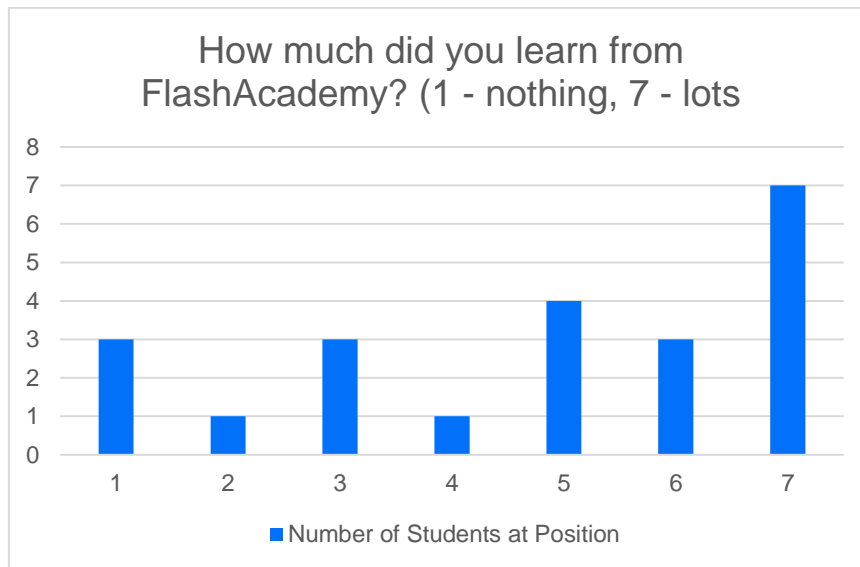
A learning app like FA enables mobile language learning so it’s quite convenient and fits into twenty first century living. My adult learners have many commitments and use this app to fit around their busy lives.

ESOL teachers like me who are a bit hesitant to use technology with learners, fearing it may increase the workload because new ways of teaching will have to adopted or new resources created, may find FA just the right app.”

(Munira, Teacher).

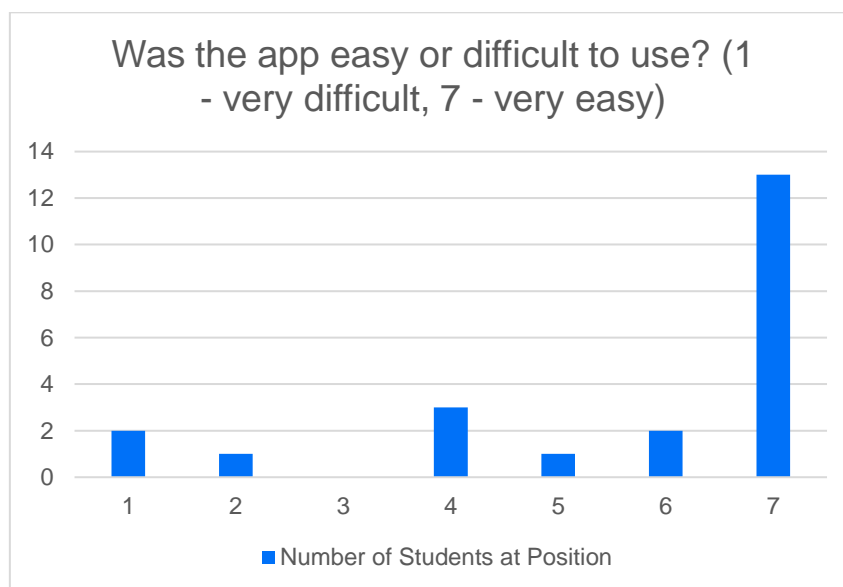
Appendix 3: Learner Feedback

Question 1:



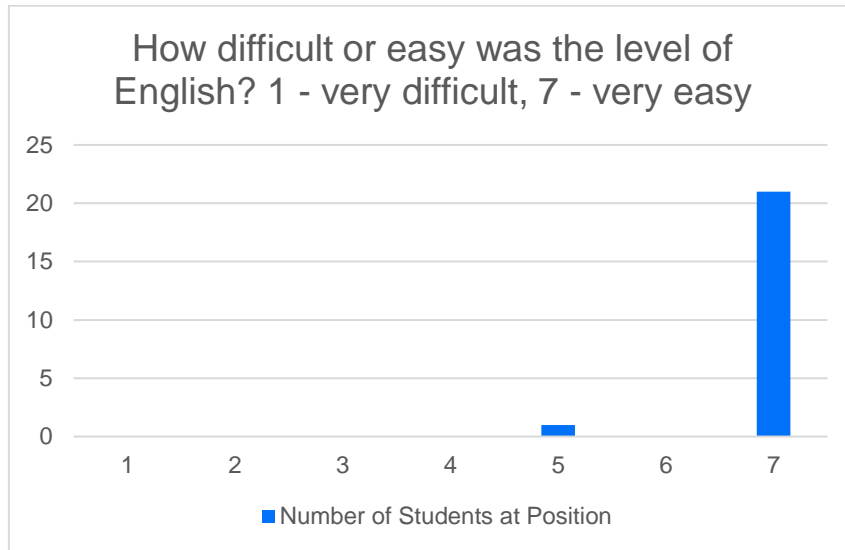
Most of the learners in the groups were using the app regularly as it was threaded through both class and non-class time. We thought they would all say lots in order to please us so was surprised at this response. The ones at the lower end of the scale claimed that they didn't learn anything new but it helped to reinforce existing learning.

Question 2:



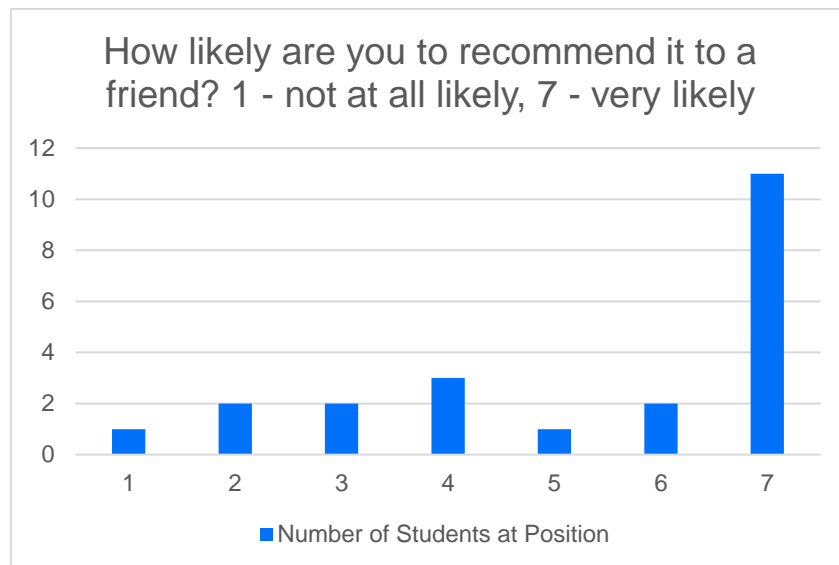
Students reported that the app was sometimes glitchy, crashed, were logged out etc. About halfway through, the developers updated the interface which confused some of the students.

Question 3:

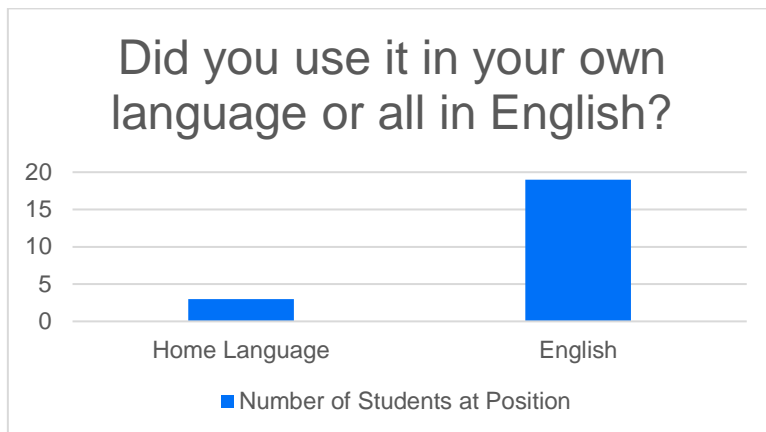


We wondered if perhaps the app could have been a bit more challenging for the students.

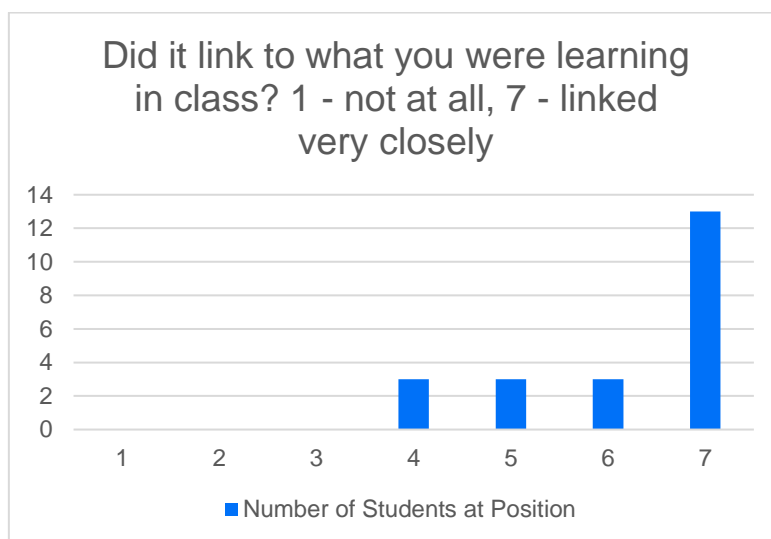
Question 4:



Question 5:



Question 6:



Has FlashAcademy helped your learning?

Question number	Comments	Number of learners said similar things
1	<p>I learned new words (vocabulary) and phrases</p> <p>Like mortgage and employee</p> <p>I didn't know 'sink and wash basin' are names for the same object</p>	6
2	<p>I liked the pronunciation part, especially the video, it helped me because I could see how the mouth moved for the sound. I could play it over and over if I needed to, because it is hard to do it perfectly the first time. I understand it so much better now.</p>	4
3	<p>The pictures with the vocabulary really made it clear what the object was. It helped me remember the vocabulary. In the past I wasn't always sure</p>	2
4	<p>On FA I can investigate other levels and other topics.</p>	1
5	<p>I can review lower levels</p>	2
6	<p>I learned a lot of new verbs</p>	1
7	<p>I can keep reviewing levels without getting embarrassed as it can be in class with others</p>	1
8	<p>I can review difficult grammar over and over, like word order which I always find hard</p>	3
9	<p>Phonics (in lower levels) helps me understand spelling and pronunciation. We don't do phonics in higher level classes.</p>	1
10	<p>Sometimes I want to know the name of something. In FA I am able to take a picture of it and ask FA what it is.</p>	1

Appendix 4: Participants and Stakeholders

No of learners?	35	No of staff?	6
No of organisations?	1	No of employers/ stakeholders?	1

Appendix 5: Research/ Evaluation Approach

Participant/observer (e.g. practitioner reflective accounts, logs)	X	Interview/survey (e.g. polls, questionnaires, learner interviews)	X
Observation of practice (in person, video, observation notes)		Document analysis (e.g. learner work, session plans, annotated resources, policies)	X
Custom test/assessment (of knowledge, skill, attitude, participation) for your 'intervention'		High-stakes learner assessment (e.g. A Level results, End Point Assessment, BTECs)	
Before/after assessment (e.g. measures of progress or change in attainment, participation)		Comparative trial (e.g. comparing participants' outcomes against a 'control' group)	
Other (specify):	Action Research.		

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