

# Comfort-driven online learning: a case study

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## ABSTRACT

The current study employed a qualitative research design to explore learners' comfort levels in an online English learning environment using data from Reddit comments. Fifty publicly available comments were collected from five relevant Reddit discussion threads over a 6-month period, from October 2025 to March 2026. Keywords such as "learning English online," "online learning experience," "flexibility," "communication," and "challenges" were used to select relevant threads. Comments were selected according to thread relevance and content rather than publication date due to the lack of availability of post dates. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, starting with familiarization, coding, theme development, refinement, and interpretation. The analysis focused on learners' comfort, discomfort, perceived support, and challenges in online English learning. Findings indicate that learners' comfort in online English learning is shaped by a mix of flexibility, structure, social interaction, and instructional presence. Many commenters valued the ability to study at their own pace, review lessons, and adapt learning to work or caregiving responsibilities. However, others reported reduced engagement, weaker retention, and feelings of isolation when interaction and feedback were limited. Comfort increased when learners noticed progress, received prompt instructor feedback, and experienced visible teacher presence. Conversely, discomfort was linked to repetitive tasks, unclear course organization, poor responsiveness, distraction, prolonged screen time, and lack of commitment. These findings are of some importance to stakeholders as they highlight the importance of instructional design and teacher presence in promoting learner comfort, engagement, and progress in online English learning environments.

**Keywords:** English language learning, online learning, learner comfort, qualitative research, thematic analysis

## INTRODUCTION

Remote work saw a notable growth during the COVID-19 pandemic as organizations sought to keep the same level of productivity as working from the office (Al-Habaibeh et al, 2021), At the same time it was an attempt to bring social and psychological benefits to the employees (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020). This shift was not just a temporary measure but has led to lasting changes ranging from personal to professional, and across most industries leading to long term effects of unknown impact (Howe et al, 2021). In fact, the shift towards online work has proved to have both positive and negative impact.

In addition to enhancing companies' productivity and cost saving (Mohd Safril et al, 2024), remote work has allowed workers to have a better work-life balance thanks to working hours' flexibility (Mamatha & Thoti, 2023). Workers also reported improved feelings of emotional exhaustion leading thereby to job satisfaction and a greater sense of autonomy (Charalampous et al, 2019).

On the other hand, remote work has proved to impact employee's wellbeing negatively. In fact, both physical and psychological health problems ranging from musculoskeletal disorders, fatigue, and stress (Collins et al., 2016), to productivity (Ferrara, et al, 2022) were reported.

In the online educational field, learners' comfort level is much questioned due to various factors (Husky et al., 2020). In fact, online learning has had both positive and negative sides impacting the learning experience and learners' wellbeing. From a positive point of view, the shift towards online language learning has allowed the learners to have a convenient learning experience thanks to its flexibility, and a wide range of resources, which can positively impact individuals' self-confidence, cultural understanding, and sense of achievement (Ketebayeva et al., 2024). Furthermore, being immersed in the learning experience through virtual reality (Su et

al., 2024;), videos (Nguyen, 2024), Artificial Intelligence (Zhai & Wibowo, 2023; Ericsson & Johansson, 2023), or Social Networking Sites (Le et al., 2024; Buddha et al., 2024; Kim & Kim, 2024), the learners can feel that their learning experience is more enjoyable through peer learning and collaboration.

Conversely, online learning has proved to affect the learners' wellbeing negatively. Depression and anxiety disorders were among the issues undergraduate learners experienced (Fawaz & Samaha, 2021). Fatigue (Kic-Drgas & Kılıçkaya, 2024), eye sight problems (Buddha et al., 2024), and psychological concerns, like lack of concentration and negative attitudes towards enjoyment (Kic-Drgas & Kılıçkaya, 2024) were other problems the learners faced when engaging in online learning. Furthermore, ethical concerns about online platforms reliability, privacy (Meng et al., 2023) and identity theft (Chauncey & McKenna, 2023) were reported.

The wellbeing of online learners has emerged as a critical research priority amid the rapid expansion of online education (Douwes et al., 2023). Drawing on Ayachi and Jallouli's (2021) four-dimensional wellbeing framework—happiness, health, comfort, and quality of life—this study focuses specifically on the dimension of comfort. It investigates English learners' comfort levels when learning online, and identifies factors that shape that comfort. Understanding learners' comfort is essential for different stakeholders seeking to optimize online learning environments and structure.

This study employs thematic analysis of user-generated comments from Reddit. Three central themes emerged: (1) learners' satisfaction with online learning, (2) factors that enhance or diminish comfort, and (3) challenges that negatively affect comfort. To guide the analysis, the study addresses three research questions:

1. What are learners' perceptions of their comfort level regarding the online learning environment?
2. Which aspects of online learning increase or decrease learners' sense of comfort?
3. What challenges do learners face that affect their comfort in online English learning?

The findings offer practical insights for improving learner comfort and, by implication, overall wellbeing in online English language education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Online education, historically called distance education, dates back to the late 1800s and expanded rapidly with the online revolution of the late 1990s (Kentnor, 2015). It refers to teaching and learning conducted primarily over the internet using digital technologies (Culduz, 2024), with content delivered synchronously or asynchronously (Zeng & Luo, 2024). Online learners need adequate support to succeed, and the quality of that support has been questioned (Fawaz & Samaha, 2021; Kic-Drgas & Kılıçkaya, 2024; Lemay et al., 2021).

This section reviews studies on online learners' comfort across three dimensions: the learners' perception of logistical convenience and self-management (Abid et al., 2022; Totanan, 2022), factors affecting comfort (Tomás et al., 2023; Maksum et al., 2025), and challenges learners face (Hollister et al., 2022).

### Logistical convenience and self-Management

Learners' comfort with a learning environment arises from interrelated factors: logistical convenience and the ability to manage learning alongside personal commitments (Permann-Graham et al., 2025). Flexibility is consistently reported as a key advantage of online and blended formats. Features such as studying from home, 24/7 access to materials, and opportunities for self-directed study reduce the need to commute and allow working adults to schedule study around employment and family responsibilities (Abid et al., 2022; Tosto et al., 2023; Totanan, 2022). This temporal and spatial flexibility not only reduces barriers to participation but also lowers stress, making engagement with course tasks more sustainable over time (Hrastinski et al. 2025). Equally important is the control learners have over the pace and rhythm of learning. The ability to pause, replay, and review recorded lectures or digital content supports metacognitive strategies and gives learners tangible ways to monitor progress, which in turn reinforces self-efficacy and comfort with the learning environment (Stavnezer & Lom, 2019).

## Factors that affect comfort

Comfort depends on the extent to which the experience is productive and socially supportive. Learners' subjective evaluations of outcomes strongly shape acceptance of the learning modality: when students perceive clear gains in knowledge, skills, or performance, they are more likely to value and prefer the format that produced those outcomes (Sharif Nia et al., 2023; Siddiqui et al., 2024). Instructional presence is a key driver of perceived productivity and support. Clear supervision, frequent check-ins, and prompt feedback make courses feel organized and secure, whereas limited guidance produces ambiguous tasks and raises stress (Rabby et al., 2025; Xiao et al., 2024; Yu & Cai, 2022). Interactive elements—regular feedback, small-group discussions, collaborative tasks, and real-time opportunities to ask questions—help maintain attention and motivation and give learners tangible ways to monitor progress (Maksum et al., 2025; Stavnezer & Lom, 2019; Tomás et al., 2023). Visible instructor presence and peer interaction reduce isolation and increase involvement and satisfaction, indicating that social presence is central to learners' peace of mind (Liang & Ren, 2025; Roque-Hernández et al., 2024; Xia et al., 2024). Conversely, messy, redundant, or poorly moderated courses undermine motivation and perceived learning, eroding comfort despite any logistical convenience (Dow et al., 2024; Ranadew et al., 2023). In some fields—particularly medicine and other practice-based disciplines—students continue to rate online formats as less effective for interpersonal and practical skills (Bączek et al., 2021). Overall, comfort increases when learners feel in control, supported, and meaningfully engaged, and declines when the environment feels isolating, ambiguous, or inert (Churchman et al., 2024; Nagesh & Siva Murugan, 2025).

## Challenges of online learning

Research indicates that learner comfort in online environments is shaped not only by instructional design and social support but also by cognitive, social, mental, and physical factors. Cognitive distraction from smartphones, social media, and multiple browser tabs fragments attention and undermines sustained task focus, thereby complicating collaboration and goal attainment (Gazzaley & Rosen, 2016; Xia, 2024). Multitasking, similarly, reduces the quality and certainty of contributions and weakens learning gains, a problem that is particularly acute in skill-based domains such as language learning where active practice is essential (Haverkamp et al., 2024; Liu & Gu, 2020; Wang, 2022; Wang et al., 2023). In addition, reduced nonverbal cues and fewer spontaneous interactions can produce social disengagement and feelings of isolation, lowering motivation and participation (Roque-Hernández et al., 2024; Xia, 2024). Prolonged screen time and virtual fatigue are linked to sedentary behaviour, eye strain, headaches, and worsened mental well-being, all of which diminish comfort and study persistence (Ayachi, 2024; Devi & Singh, 2023). Inequities in home learning conditions—noisy environments, unreliable connectivity, or inadequate hardware—further exacerbate these challenges by creating uneven opportunities for focused engagement (Easterbrook et al., 2023).

While many studies discuss challenges met in online learning in general, the present study, using learner-generated discourse on Reddit, particularly sheds light on learners' perceived comfort level as a distinct construct. It captures informal but insightful experiences of online English learning with particular attention to:

- the learning environment and its flexibility and accessibility,
- the quality of interaction with teachers and peers, and
- learners' perceptions of their physical and psychological comfort during online learning experiences.

This approach enables an in-depth exploration of how online learning conditions influence learners' sense of comfort in line with the study's qualitative research design and objectives.

## METHODOLOGY

The current study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at exploring learners' comfort levels in an online English learning environment—namely, Reddit. The approach allows for an in-depth understanding of attitudes,

perceptions, and experiences. A manual data collection approach was used. Relevant Reddit threads were identified using keywords such as "learning English online," "online learning experience," "flexibility," "communication," and "challenges." The data was collected from fifty publicly available comments drawn from five relevant Reddit discussion threads related to English learning and online education. Data collection was conducted over a 6-month period, from October 2025 to March 2026, to secure a representative sample of learner experiences. Comments were selected based on thread pertinence and content rather than publication date, as the posts' dates were unavailable. Reddit comments were cited without direct URLs because the original permalinks were unavailable at the time of collection. Comments relating to online English learning experiences, learners' comfort levels or discomfort, factors influencing comfort, and challenges affecting comfort in online learning were selected and analyzed until thematic saturation was reached.

The collected data was analyzed using thematic analysis, following a structured process. The first stage consisted of reading and getting familiar with the data. Then relevant ideas were coded with a focus on learners' comfort levels, including expressions of comfort, discomfort, ease of learning, and perceived support in online environments. After that codes were grouped into themes specifically related to learners' comfort in online English learning, factors influencing comfort, and challenges affecting comfort. The themes were then refined to ensure they accurately displayed patterns related to comfort levels and influencing factors, while removing irrelevant aspects. Finally, the findings were interpreted in relation to the research objectives, focusing on how online learning environments shape learners' comfort, experiences, and observed challenges. The findings were cross-checked by comparing repeated patterns across multiple Reddit discussions to ensure consistency and reliability, and avoid redundancies.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Learners' perceptions of comfort of the online environment

Reddit comments reveal a complex picture. In line with Abid et al. (2022), Totanan (2022), Dow et al. (2024), and Bączek et al. (2021), many users appreciate the flexibility and convenience of online learning—studying from home, accessing materials at any time, and pausing or replaying lessons. One commenter noted: "I love that I can pause the lesson when my kid starts crying or replay the grammar explanation ten times until it clicks. That's impossible in a live classroom." Others, as noted by Churchman et al. (2024) and Nagesh and Siva Murugan (2025), however, reported lower engagement, difficulty retaining material, and a lack of instant responses and interactions compared with face-to-face classes saying "It feels so cold. I miss looking my teacher in the eye and getting instant feedback. By the end of the week, I've forgotten half of what we 'covered.'"

The complexity of the picture is further confirmed by contradictory comments from the same learners. Several commenters emphasized that the ability to control pacing helps reduce stress and supports learners with work or caregiving responsibilities as one learner commented: "As a nurse working night shifts, being able to study at 3 a.m. after my shift is a lifesaver. I'd have dropped out otherwise." Yet the same participants often reported problems with focus, motivation, or connection to peers and instructors: "I start every course motivated, but by week three I'm just watching videos with no one holding me accountable. It's too easy to drift off."

Confirming research by Dow et al. (2024), Siddiqui et al. (2024), and Stavnezer and Lom (2019) a clear pattern emerged across threads: comfort increases when learners perceive measurable progress, as some noted: "after two months, I finally held a 10-minute conversation without switching to my native language. That's when I felt like this was actually working." Comfort decreases when the experience feels isolating, repetitive, or poorly structured as indicated by others "It's just the same canned exercises over and over. No real conversation, no feedback, just clicking 'next.' I feel like I'm talking to a robot."

### Key factors affecting comfort

The Reddit data echo prior findings from the literature showing that flexibility alone does not guarantee learner comfort. While learners valued self-direction and the ability to study at convenient times, true comfort depended on perceived effectiveness, clear structure, and social support (Liang & Ren, 2025; Mamatha & Thoti, 2023; Maksum et al., 2025; Nagesh & Siva Murugan, 2025). Without meaningful interaction, courses were described

as monotonous or disorienting, reducing engagement and increasing dropout risk (Perryman et al., 2024; Ranadew et al., 2023). Commenters indicated this plainly: “It’s just recording after recording. No one ever responds to my questions. After a month, I stopped logging in. What’s the point?” and “I feel like I’m wandering through a maze with no map. The course jumps around, and there’s no clear path forward.”

Timely instructor feedback, visible instructor presence, live interaction opportunities, and small-group or peer activities were repeatedly cited as elements that sustain attention, motivation, and belonging as reported by Kedia and Mishra (2023) and Tomás et al. (2023), and make learners feel secure and supported as noted by Rabby et al. (2025) and Xiao et al. (2024). Learners’ comments supported this: “my teacher sends a 2-minute voice note every time I submit writing. That tiny bit of personal feedback makes me feel like someone actually cares,” “the weekly live Q&A sessions are the only reason I keep going,” and “the group discussion pods changed everything for me. Finally, I’m practicing with real people, not just talking to a screen,” “every Monday I get a welcome video from my instructor outlining what we’ll cover. That small thing makes me feel prepared and less anxious.” “When I posted a question at 10 p.m., my instructor replied by 8 a.m. the next day. That kind of responsiveness made me trust the course.

### Challenges in online English learning

Several interrelated challenges emerged from the sample. Distraction—primarily from smartphones, social media, and household interruptions—was a frequent complaint and was reported to fragment attention during synchronous sessions and independent study, as reported by Gazzaley and Rosen (2016) and Xial et al. (2024). One Learner noted “I’ll be in a live Zoom class and suddenly my phone buzzes with a notification. Next thing I know, I’m scrolling Instagram and I’ve missed the whole explanation.” Another one noted: “with kids running around and the doorbell ringing, it’s impossible to focus. In a real classroom, none of that exists.”

Issues related to repeated practice, interactive feedback, and active processing are essential for progress in language learning as stated by Liu and Gu (2020) and Wang et al. (2023) In this regard one learner commented: “language learning needs conversation, not just videos. I need someone to correct my pronunciation in the moment, not three days later if at all.” Another one added: “I can’t just read about grammar. I need to use it, make mistakes, get corrected, and try again. That’s how you actually learn.”

In addition, several comments linked prolonged screen time to fatigue, eye strain, and reduced wellbeing, indicating that comfort has cognitive, social-emotional, and physical dimensions, as observed by Ayachi (2024) and Devi and Singh (2023). Relevant comments have been extracted as follows: “after three hours of screen time, my eyes are burning and my head is pounding. I can’t even focus on simple exercises anymore.” “I feel mentally drained by the end of the day. Staring at a monitor for hours is exhausting in a way I didn’t expect.” “my back hurts, my eyes are tired, and I’m just emotionally burnt out. Online learning is taking a toll on my whole body.”

Overall, the Reddit findings confirm the literature: flexibility and convenience increase satisfaction and make online learning practical for many learners, but comfort depends on a number of structural, social, and psychological factors. Courses that combine flexible delivery with clear structure, visible teacher presence, prompt feedback, interactive activities, and community-building practices are more likely to produce comfort, engagement, and significant progress. In contrast, technically convenient but poorly designed courses may result in isolation, boredom, and drop out. These results suggest practical implications for course designers and instructors. The main goal would be to prioritize clear learning goals, regular formative feedback, opportunities for real-time and small-group interaction, and control over negative effects related to screen use.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

### Conclusions

This study explored online English learners’ comfort levels through thematic analysis of Reddit comments. Comfort emerges as a multidimensional concept encompassing cognitive, social-emotional, and physical dimensions. While learners value online learning’s flexibility, especially for work-life balance, flexibility solely

does not assure comfort. Rather, comfort depends on perceived efficiency, clear course organization, timely feedback, visible teacher presence, and significant social interaction.

Learners reported higher comfort when they observed tangible progress and when instructors provided clear guidance, regular feedback, and prompt responses. Comfort was reduced when learners felt isolated in their learning experience, doing redundant tasks, or when they faced distractions, and were subject to screen-related fatigue. These findings corroborate existing literature and highlight the interdependence of structural, social, and psychological factors shaping comfort.

### Limitations

The present study is not without limitations. The first limitation relates to the small, non-representative sample. In fact, the findings cannot be generalized from 50 Reddit comments from five threads. Second, the manual data collection, and the selected key words may have left out relevant discussions. Third, the study focuses only on one single wellbeing dimension, not the other three -happiness, health, and quality of life- from Ayachi and Jallouli's (2021) model.

### Recommendations for future research

The current study lays the ground for future research. Future studies can explore larger samples from different online learning platforms and apps. A mixed method approach can be employed combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis to better explore comfort predictors and their relationship to progress. Besides, examining all four wellbeing dimensions, including happiness, health, comfort, and quality of life and their collective influence on the online learning experience would give a more comprehensive picture of learners' perceptions of their wellbeing in an online learning environment.

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