

Voxy

Title	Voxy
Creators	Paul Gollash & Gregg Carey
Contact Information	sales@voxy.com 632 Broadway, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10012, USA
Type of Product	Web and mobile-based platform for learning English
Hardware Requirements	Any device (computer, tablet, phone) with internet access
Software requirements	An updated web browser (Chrome recommended); iOS or Android for mobile application
Price	Cost varies for institutional licenses. For individuals, typically \$20 – 30 per month for asynchronous features; \$225 – \$300 per semester for live instruction (six sessions of 30 minutes each). Cost varies based on geography, configuration, and other factors.

Introduction

Voxy is a web-based eLearning platform that aims to help English language learners (ELLs) build language skills, prepare for standardized language tests, and gain intercultural competence by offering both synchronous and asynchronous online courses. Voxy seeks to apply task-based and constructivist language teaching by using authentic materials and live instruction. This platform has gained a considerable presence around the world with four million users in 150 countries (Voxy, 2018) and is now being considered by some U.S. institutions as an alternative to individualized ESL instruction (University of Maryland Baltimore, n.d.). The intended levels of users are from novice to advanced.

General Description

One of Voxy’s defining features is its effort to personalize the language learning process. Once students create a new account they are directed to answer needs analysis questions regarding their learning objectives (see Figure 1), their perceived language proficiency level (see Figure 2), and their interests (see Figure 3). Voxy provides a 5-step study plan that includes the Voxy Proficiency Assessment (VPA), unit lessons, word banks, grammar guides, and live instruction. Based on learners’ interests and needs analysis data, the platform provides unit lessons and adjusts the learning materials to individual levels as they progress.

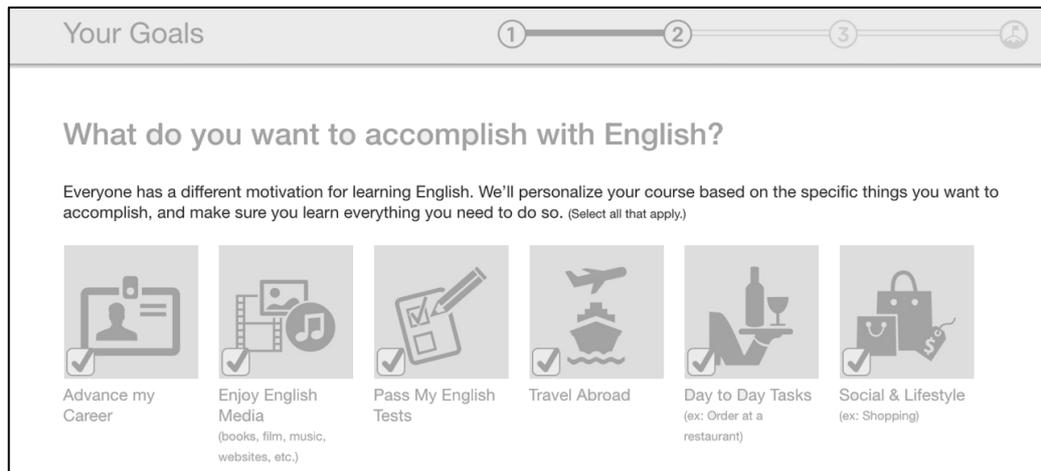


Figure 1. Needs analysis for study goals

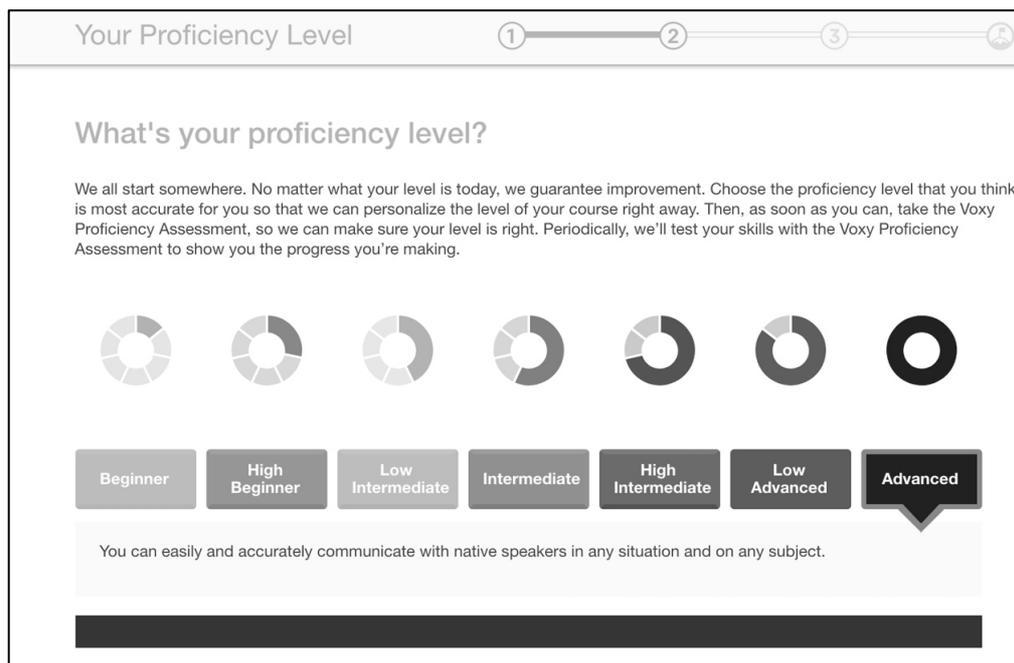


Figure 2. Needs analysis for language proficiency

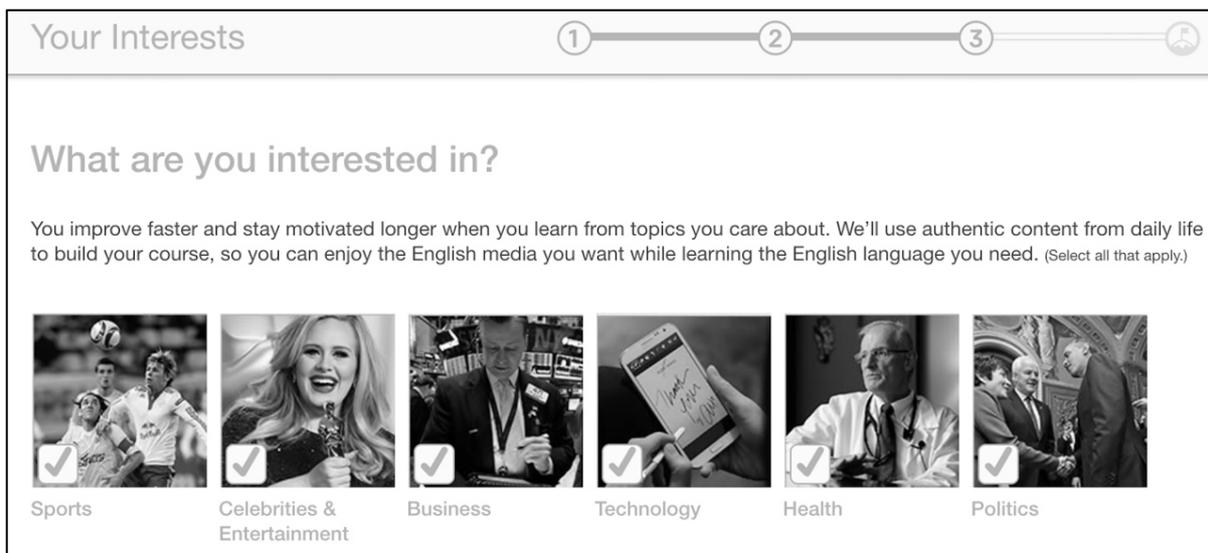


Figure 3. Needs analysis for student interests

Voxy Proficiency Assessment

The VPA is a tool intended to measure a student’s current proficiency level. This test takes approximately 30-60 minutes and includes grammar, listening, and reading comprehension questions. These questions are all multiple choice and rated automatically. A human-rated speaking section is also available as an optional paid component and is scored by two human

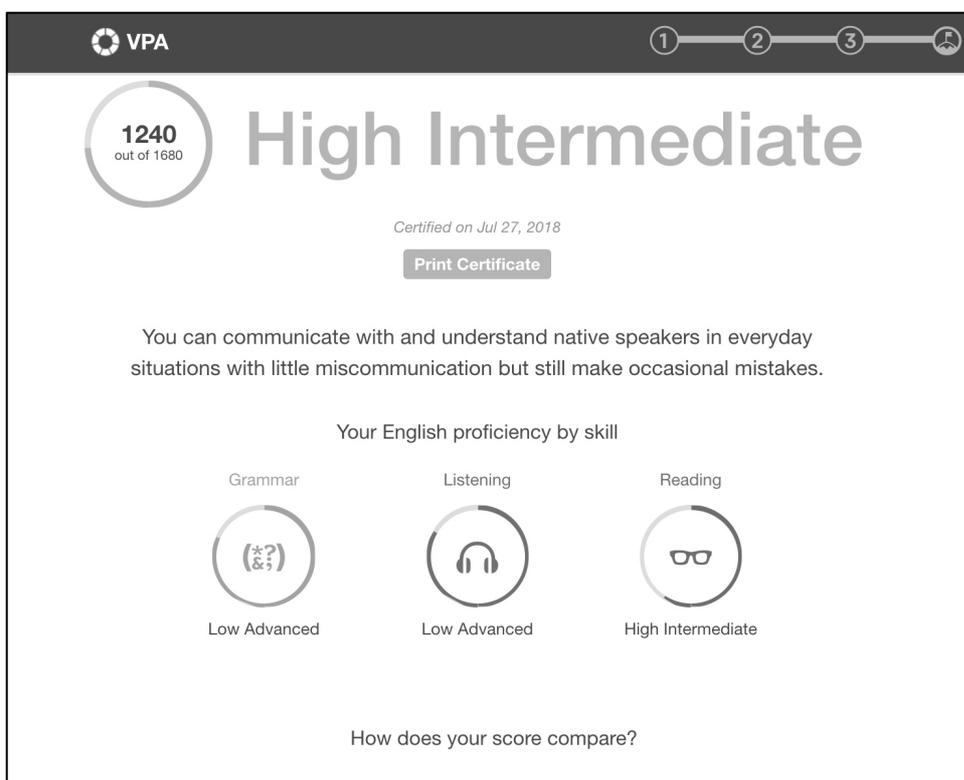


Figure 4. Sample Voxy Proficiency Assessment results summary

raters. Voxy recommends students take the VPA upon creating their account and then every three months. Students receive immediate results summarizing their performance, and the platform readjusts curricula to their language level (see Figure 4). Based on in-house analysis of test results (Voxy, 2018), the VPA scale is aligned with global standards (see Figure 5) and learners are able to use the VPA to predict their performance on these tests.

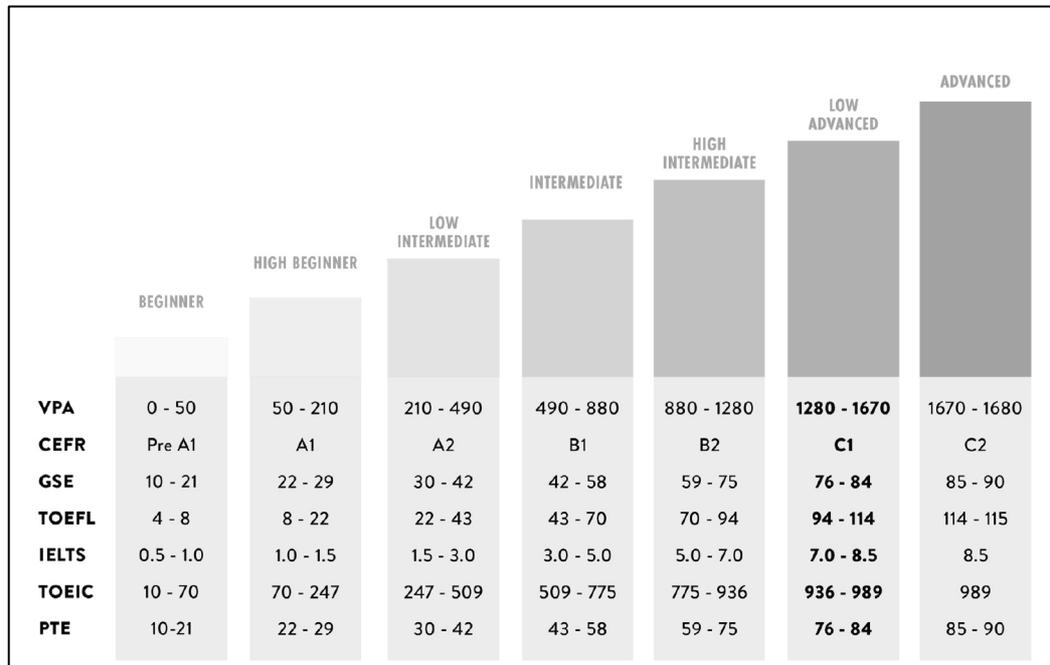


Figure 5. Voxy Proficiency Assessment's purported alignment with global standards

Curricula and Materials

Unit lessons. Voxy's unit lessons are made up of six 30-minute classes, and they recommend students complete one unit per week. There are three types of asynchronous lessons: first, sequenced lessons are designed using the global standards in Figure 5 to help students meet specific needs. A variety of courses based on learning objectives are available for selection, such as TOEFL preparation, workforce skills, and English for specific purposes. The second type of asynchronous lesson is personalized units organized around interest topics. During these lessons, the listening and reading comprehension tasks (see Figure 6), grammar exercises, and vocabulary activities are based on topics the student expressed interest in. After each lesson, students receive feedback and performance reports (see Figure 7).

The screenshot shows a lesson page from Voxy. At the top left, it says 'World News' with a globe icon. The main title is 'Why Aren't You Watching the World Cup?' dated 'JUNE 28, 2018'. Below the title is a video player showing a crowd of people at a soccer match. To the right of the video is a 'Listening Activity' section titled 'Watch And Learn'. It contains the instruction: 'Watch the video. Then, read the question and choose the correct answer.' Below this is a question: 'What does Noah mean when he says "Americans have no dog in this fight"?' There are four multiple-choice options: 'Americans have never seen a soccer competition.', 'Americans fight about which sport is best.', 'Americans aren't good enough at soccer to enjoy it.', and 'Americans have no reason to care about soccer.'

Figure 6. Personalized units for listening activity

The screenshot shows a performance report for the lesson 'Why Aren't You Watching the World Cup?'. It is labeled 'LESSON 1 OF 24'. Under 'Words Learned', there is a list of six words with checkmarks and speaker icons: 'comparable', 'draws', 'ignore', 'involvement', 'naysayer', and 'tremendously'. To the right, a bar chart titled 'Skills Improved' shows three bars: the first bar (with a speaker icon) is at 75, the second bar (with a speaker icon) is at 100, and the third bar (with an 'Aa' icon) is at 100. Below the chart, there is a section for 'Grammar Points Gained' with two categories: 'Modal Verbs' (Examples: should; Modal verbs are special verbs that are used to talk about possibility, ability, and necessity; they are often used with other verbs.) and 'Conditionals' (Examples: if; Conditionals describe possible results or consequences).

Figure 7. Feedback and performance report after personalized unit

The last category is “real media” lessons, with up-to-date, authentic multimodal content taken directly from Voxy’s content partners, including Financial Times, Bloomberg, and the Associated Press. Students learn about recent news by independently choosing these real media lessons (see Figure 8). Each lesson comes with pre-defined learning outcomes and is followed by multiple-choice comprehension check questions. As seen in Figure 9, some of the words in the passage are highlighted and underlined to make them more salient for learners; these words are then used in the vocabulary activities.

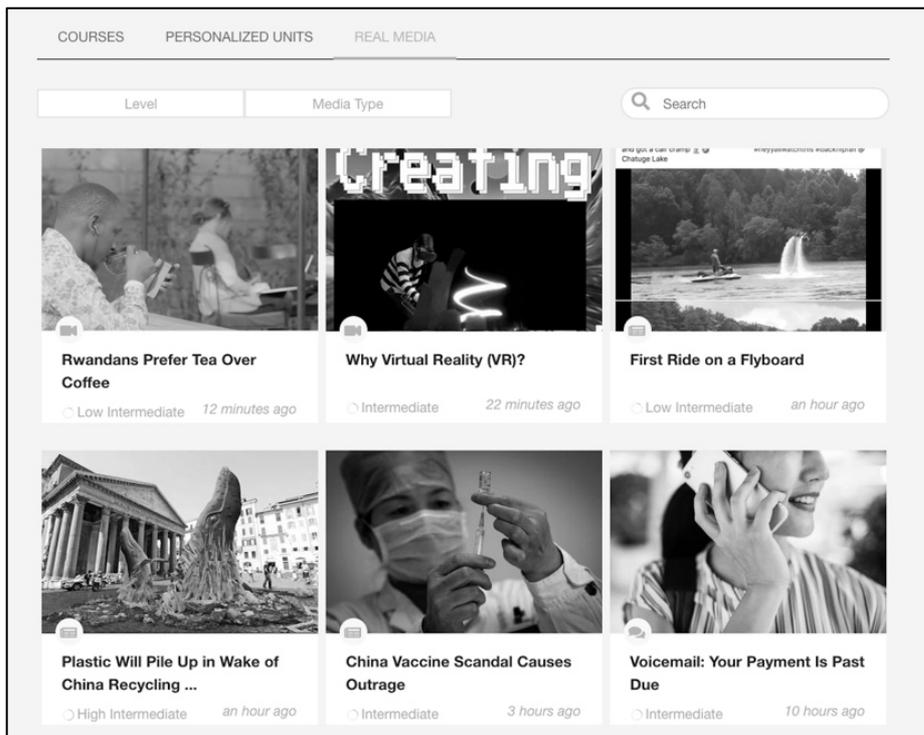


Figure 8. Real media lesson selections

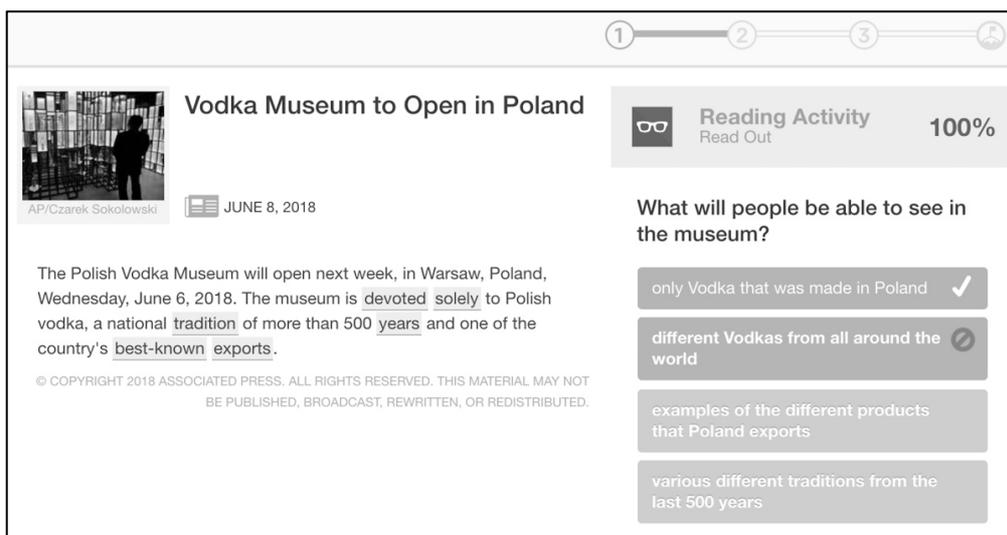


Figure 9. Real media course reading activity

Word bank. Voxy’s word banks collect all the vocabulary students have learned in their lessons and provide activities, including pronunciation practice with immediate automated feedback (see Figure 10). Some vocabulary terms are selected using the Phrasal Expressions List (Martinez & Schmitt, 2012) while others are selected using an algorithm based on relevance to the text and topic.

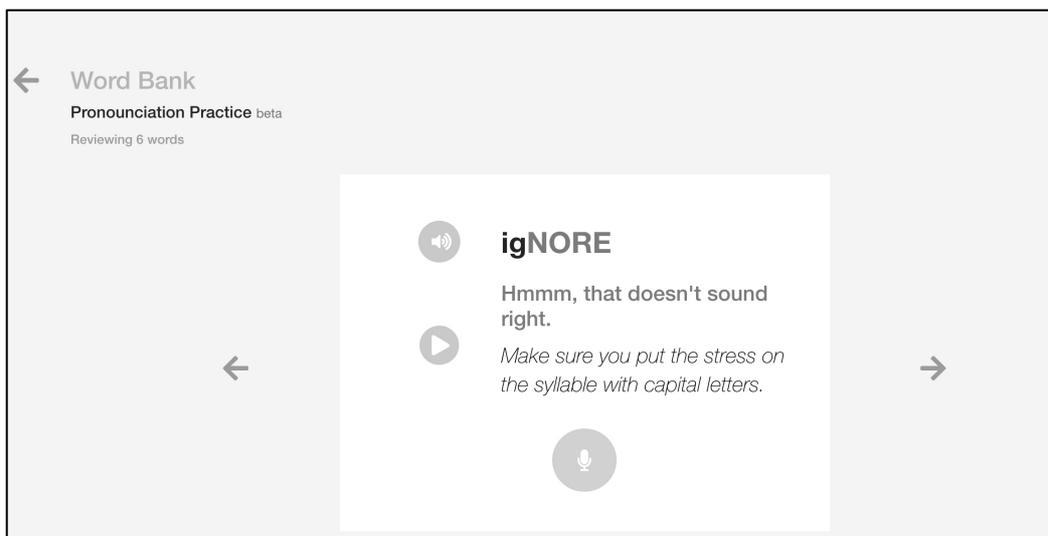


Figure 10. Word bank pronunciation practice

Grammar guide. This feature allows students to review and practice a myriad of grammar topics according to their VPA language level. These guides provide students with grammar rules, examples, and practice tasks (see Figure 11).

Citizenship



When a person passes a citizenship exam, they must promise to follow the laws of their new country. Each man or woman must raise his or her right hand and repeat words read by an official. After the ceremony, the citizens will receive a certificate.



Reading Activity
Read Out

▼

Read the question and **choose** the correct answer.

Men and women raise their hands _____ they repeat the words read by an official.

while

after

even though

before

Figure 11. Grammar guide for subordinate conjunction grammar practice

Live instruction. Voxy offers two types of live instruction for students to interact with certified instructors, both of which are available around-the-clock. The first is 30-minute group classes, where students sign up for a class based on a topic of their choice at their proficiency level. The other option is private lessons, where students can book a one-on-one appointment and select the domains they want to work on. Students can schedule classes from 15 to 60 minutes. The instructor provides immediate and direct feedback based on the student's performance in specific areas (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, listening).

Evaluation

For all language learners, there is a cost-benefit analysis between formal courses and live instruction on the one hand and self-learning platforms on the other. Formal courses and live instruction have many benefits but are expensive, while self-learning platforms are more affordable or even free, but are much more limited in feedback and interaction. For many students, live, formal courses simply are not an option due to financial or geographic constraints. Voxy represents a middle ground between formal courses and self-learning platforms, affording learners some benefits from each. This review evaluates Voxy's curriculum design and pedagogical features through the lens of learner autonomy theory.

Learner Autonomy

Using Holec's (1981) definition of learner autonomy, "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (p. 3), this section evaluates the Voxy platform according to five key principles of learner autonomy in language courses (Cotterall, 2000):

- (1) the course reflects learners' goals in its language, tasks, and strategies;
- (2) course tasks are explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language learning process;
- (3) course tasks either replicate real-world communicative tasks or provide rehearsal for such tasks;
- (4) the course incorporates discussion and practice with strategies known to facilitate task performance;
- (5) the course promotes reflections on learning. (pp. 111-112)

Voxy provides individualized content-based instruction. Students are able to select lessons based on a variety of themes that interest them, encouraging them to become autonomous, active agents in their learning process and potentially leading to higher motivation (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003), positive attitudes towards learning (Benson, 2001), and self-direction (Kessler, 2013). This meets the first criteria of Cotterall's (2000) framework, since the materials and curricula are based on the needs-analysis data (Figures 1, 2, 3) and VPA results to create personalized unit lessons and adjust content to better fit individual needs. Students are able to take charge of their own learning because the curriculum design reflects their goals.

For the second criterion, Cotterall (2000) claims that in order to become autonomous, learners need to understand the basic language learning process. Learners should be able to question

and challenge the input texts and tasks, to try alternative strategies and learning methods, and to be proactive about seeking feedback from peers and instructors. Without this learning process model, language learners may turn into passive agents in their language development. In the Voxy platform, the opportunities to challenge and question the input texts and tasks are limited because the asynchronous unit lessons are pre-generated and selected from a database. Students are able to try alternative strategies on their own with very limited facilitation.

As to the third criterion, real media lessons offer students an opportunity to explore authentic media in a real-world context. Voxy's size and success has allowed them to form partnerships with several news sites and industry journals, leading to lessons built around authentic, relevant, and topical multimedia catered to students' interests. However, this type of asynchronous unit lesson is less interactive. The majority of exercises are multiple-choice questions that lack productive-skill practice. Students need the live-instruction sessions to participate in real-world communicative and social contexts, which can be accomplished within Voxy but for an extra cost.

For the fourth criteria, during unit lessons, students engage in grammar, listening, and reading comprehension activities and quizzes. This approach attempts to keep students engaged with the material, providing immediate and corrective feedback and comprehension checks. These features increase learner autonomy by allowing students to progress at their own pace, independent of an instructor or classmates. However, all of these activities fall victim to the drawbacks of tasks that are rated automatically: selected-response questions make for easier rating but do not encourage students' use of productive language skills, and feedback is limited when compared to that of a human instructor. But again, this represents the trade-off between costs and benefits. The practice tasks in unit lessons are not able to provide discussion and foster conversation. The lack of interactive discussion and feedback has to be compensated for through live instruction sessions where students are able to receive not only corrective and evaluative feedback from instructors, but most importantly interactive and cognitive feedback. Cognitive feedback plays an essential role in learner autonomy development because it provides specific guidance for further improvement and facilitates students' self-regulated learning (Jang & Wagner, 2018). Instead of merely summarizing the overall quality of student performance, cognitive feedback explains students' conceptual errors, cognitive gaps, and cognitive strategies. Voxy could provide more opportunities for student production, even asynchronously, and help train students to evaluate their own responses through rubrics and models.

Regarding Cotterall's (2000) fifth criterion, diagnostic assessments offer students information that encourages them to reflect on their learning and take remedial action to improve their language development (Alderson, 2005). The VPA tests reading, listening, and grammar, but not productive skills, though there is an optional paid speaking component scored by two human raters. Furthermore, after taking the test, students receive a brief summary of the test results but are not provided detailed feedback or the opportunity to revisit the tasks, review errors, and make corrections. According to Alderson's (2005) definition, diagnostic assessments are designed to identify language learners' strengths and weakness within the target language. These tests "should enable a detailed analysis and report of responses to tasks and must give detailed feedback which can be acted upon" (p. 256). Voxy can give

detailed feedback but only in special circumstances, such as when a learner has been using the platform consistently but has not made any progress.

Conclusion

Despite the limited productive language tasks, Voxy has the potential to help learners who do not have access to formal courses improve their language learning. The wide range of course content, interactive practice, immediate feedback, informal and formal assessments, and live instruction allows learners to explore the target language and culture in a variety of settings. It will be interesting to see if Voxy can develop more detailed feedback and find ways to build more learner autonomy into the asynchronous activities in the future.

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