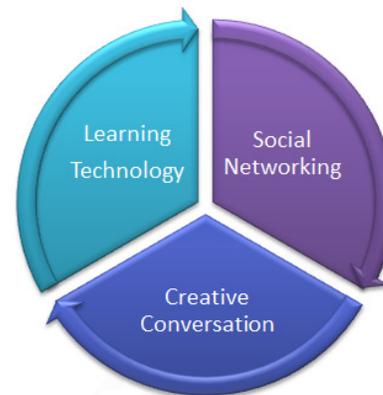


TheTalkList Learning Method Supports Best Practices for Language Learning



TheTalkList Learning Method

What is TheTalkList?

TheTalkList.com is a social e-Learning web site. It uses our unique methodology that is supported by best practices of language and social learning theory. TheTalkList 3-Part Method combines creative conversation, e-Learning technology, and social networking in a one-on-one learning system to help students attain English language proficiency. On TheTalkList, students select their own personal tutor and practice with native speakers of American English. TheTalkList makes this individual instruction convenient, affordable, and extremely effective.

TheTalkList Learning Method brings the theory of social learning into the digital age

Social learning theory holds that students learn faster and retain more when they work with tutors, or “models” who support the theory’s four components: motivation, attentiveness, reproduction, and retention (Bandura). The effectiveness of imitation or modeling to promote language learning is widely accepted (Cherry). TheTalkList Method turns social learning theory into social e-learning using the Internet. It matches directly to the four components of social learning theory.

- Motivation – TheTalkList connects students with personal tutors who encourage them. And TheTalkList has its own social media site that connects students with other students so they can create their own social networking support group.
- Attentiveness – TheTalkList’s concept of Creating Conversation lets students talk about things that interest them with people that interest them. It keeps them engaged.
- Reproduction – TheTalkList is a *modeling* interface that lets students and tutors *see, hear,* and *talk* to each other in the target language. Modeling is critical to accurately emulate a language.
- Retention – Because TheTalkList is a modeling interface, students get a mental picture or image that they link to what they are learning and helps with retention.

This paper looks at how TheTalkList’s Learning Method brings the best practices in language learning and the theory of social learning into the digital age.

Best Practices of Language Learning

Tutoring is the most effective kind of instruction

Current pedagogy recognizes that learning is more effective when the focus is on the learner. So, it's not surprising that research comparing regular classroom instruction with one-on-one tutoring finds that tutored students improved by two standard deviations (Paul). Tutoring achieves these gains by putting the student at the center of the learning process in the following ways:

- Tutors provide personalized instruction that adjusts to the student's natural rate of learning.
- Tutors model correct grammar and pronunciation.
- Tutors read the student's expressions to gauge comprehension and provide the encouragement and instant feedback so critical to learning.
- Tutors are flexible always looking for different ways to explain concepts and vocabulary.
- Tutors analyze and address difficulties as they arise.

These advantages of one-on-one tutoring are supported by Albert Bandura's theory of social learning. Bandura's research found that students learn faster and retain more when they are given positive reinforcement- rewards for correct responses. The tutor's ability to give students immediate feedback and encouragement serves several functions. First, it gives students correct information on pronunciation and grammar. Second, it motivates by rewarding the student with verbal encouragement and appreciation for the student's efforts. Third, it actually speeds the learning process by rewarding and reinforcing correct responses and not incorrect ones (Bandura, *Social Learning Theory*).

We know that individualized tutoring is best for language learning, but no teacher in a traditional classroom can provide this kind of personalized instruction.

Tutoring is especially effective in meeting the special challenges of language learning

Motivation is key to all learning and it's essential for language learners who must deal with the frustration of limited communication, learning plateaus, and the length of time it takes to reach fluency. Researchers estimate that it takes 600 hours of intense instruction and individual attention to reach proficiency (Jackson & Kaplan). Mastery of language, while mysterious in some ways, basically comes down to practice. The more you speak, the faster you learn. Yet, in the typical classroom the average student will spend less than 5% of class time actually speaking in the target language or nine minutes in a three hour class. And it's even worse when the teacher isn't speaking in the target language. If, for example, a teacher is teaching Spanish speakers English by conducting the class in Spanish, the students will not even have the opportunity to develop their "ear" for the target language.

Learning in context focuses on what is important to the student

One of the great breakthroughs in language learning is the realization that students learn a second language faster when they aren't focused on learning it. While this may seem illogical, it works precisely because it follows learner centered best practices. ESL programs across the country are experimenting with teaching English in the context of other studies – computer training, certification programs in everything from plumbing to carpentry to cooking. These programs work because the emphasis is on communication around a subject that students care about. Students learn English without even realizing it. They are learning the vocabulary of a profession in a real-life situation. This is the same way a child learns his/her first language rather than an artificial classroom environment. "Teaching a subject using English as the medium can bring more meaning

to the English and less focus on the English as a subject in itself” (Boer). Learning in context takes some of the pressure off students. It provides a “safer” more relaxed environment for communicating in a new language.

TheTalkList Learning Method builds on these best practices

TheTalkList 3-Part Method employs all the best practices in language learning and builds on them.

- Creative Conversation puts students at the center of the learning experience.
- Tutors use the concept of Creative Conversation to engage students one-on-one and improve their performance and retention through modeling, live, interactive video-conversations, demonstrations, and immediate feedback.
- Creative Conversation also puts language learning “in context.” Tutors talk to students about what interests them.
- TheTalkList e-Learning technology connects e-Learners with tutors through a visual and easy to use inviting interface designed to reduce anxiety and increase speaking time.
- TheTalkList expands on these best practices by supporting student interaction through its own social network creating a unique social e-Learning experience on the Internet.

Creative Conversation- Part 1 of TheTalkList Method

Creative Conversation helps students learn at their own pace

The pace of instruction is extremely important in language learning. The stages of learning students go through, while similar, are not identical (Krashen). Some students learn faster than others, but in traditional classrooms, teachers can’t pace instruction individually. It’s also known that that people learn more effectively when their encounters with information are spread out over time, rather than massed into one marathon study session (Paul). ESL classes sometimes run three hours straight. That’s a long haul especially if you’re struggling to express yourself. Language study can be exhausting, and it can also be intimidating.

Many language students go through a “silent period,” a period of time when vocalization is extremely difficult. This “silent period” is associated with performance anxiety. This anxiety is compounded in the traditional classroom environment where students are competing for the teacher’s attention and where students may not feel safe enough to make the mistakes language learners need to make to improve.

On TheTalkList, tutors and students talk in 30-minute sessions. These one-on-one conversations remove the largest barriers for language learners. They provide a safe, learner-centered environment where the student’s efforts are supported. Students sit at their own desks, in front of their own computers, in their own homes – environments which dramatically reduce performance anxiety and which motivate students to break through the language barrier.

Creative conversation also addresses issues of usage and grammar

Researchers are fascinated by the ways people learn language. After much study, observation, and classroom practice, they still can’t explain why an individual reaches a certain point and becomes fluent - capable of using vocabulary they haven’t consciously memorized. Researchers also can’t explain why some grammatical structures come easy and others, that appear simpler, take a long time to master. For example, students master the “ing” constructions of the progressive tenses in English – *I’m speaking, and you are listening* - but often make mistakes with verb changes in the third person present tense – *She speaks* English very well. He *does* his homework every night.

We do know that there is a difference between the ways people learn and are taught their first and their second language. And the recognition of these differences has changed the approach of savvy language teachers. Consider the way children acquire language. Daddy comes home and the delighted child screams, “Daddy home!” No parent would dissipate this glee by reminding the child that the third person single requires “is” after the subject. The parent simply says the sentence correctly, “Yes, daddy *is* home.” After hearing this construction many hundreds of times, not only will the child learn the proper form, but once mastered he/she will never make the mistake again (Chomsky).

Contrast this to traditional second language learning where students are presented with grammar rules, writing exercises, and drills. This isn’t how people learn language. They learn by listening and by speaking – by modeling. “Although modeling variables play an important role in the development of most social behaviors, their position with respect to language structures is unique. Since individuals cannot acquire words and syntactic structures without exposure to verbalizing models, it is obvious that some amount of modeling is indispensable for language acquisition” (Bandura, *Principles of Behavior Modification*). With TheTalkList the tutor essentially takes the place of the supporting parent, the model, who instinctively knows the important thing is to get the child to talk!

NOTE: Self-learning systems like Pimsleur and Rosetta Stone also provide on demand practice, but they aren’t personalized and don’t give students the kind of individual feedback they need to stay motivated. While these systems model speech, students can’t “see” their tutor, and they don’t get the reinforcement they need. Tutors guide students’ efforts, offering tips and encouragement and helping students regulate feelings of boredom, frustration, and confusion. A computer or CD player can’t spot a furrowed brow or posture that suggests discouragement (Paul). A critical ingredient is missing from these systems – other people. Language is very difficult to learn alone. (Knowles, Holton, Swanson).

Creative Conversation is learning in context

Because students can choose their own tutor from TheTalkList tutor profiles, they have the ability to select someone who shares their interests, someone they can talk to about things they want to talk about. This reduces anxiety and gives the student the motivation to continue to practice. The freedom to choose a tutor, try another tutor, or work with different tutors again puts the student in the center of their learning experience. And the ability to select a tutor who shares your interests supports another best practice of language learning – language learning in context.

Teaching in context addresses some of the difficulties of learning grammar. We know there are many aspects of the English language that do not lend themselves to teaching by drilling the rules of grammar into students. For instance, how would you explain to Russian learners, who do not have articles in their native language, why it is *the* United States but simply Great Britain and Canada? Prepositions are also problematical. There are simply no rules for some constructions and no logical explanation for why we say *I got on the plane*, but *I got into the car*, or why we say, *I live on Main St.*, but *I live in San Francisco*. Even though students want rules, the explanations for grammar are sometimes best done in context (Boer). In a class on pastry making, students are not presented with drills on articles or prepositions. They learn usage by hearing it and speaking it in the context of learning something else.

TheTalkList is language learning in context. Because students are selecting tutors from detailed profiles, they are making connections with people who share their interests. And their conversations can go beyond hobbies and sports. Students studying technology may connect with a

TheTalkList tutor who has a background in engineering. Students looking to eventually work or study in the U.S. can talk to tutors in regions of the country where they hope to live. TheTalkList tutors come from all kinds of backgrounds and live all over the U.S. When they connect with a student over TheTalkList they share not only their language but their culture and their experience. Tutors are not drilling students on grammar; they are talking to students about something they want to know more about.

E-Learning Technology – Part 2 of TheTalkList Method

TheTalkList tutors raise students' level of fluency through practice and example

TheTalkList technology is easy. Any Internet user will be comfortable navigating the TheTalkList site – registering, searching for a tutor, scheduling a session, and calling. Students and tutors speak through a custom webcam interface. The ability to see facial expression is critical both to the student and to the tutor. Students need to see how the mouth moves to master pronunciation.

Online conversations can now be augmented by other information feeds. This is common with any web browser usage and now everyday smartphone interaction. People are stimulated by real time news, weather, maps, texts, and tweets with automatic feeds. Although TheTalkList is focused on conversation, the topic of conversation is now augmented by some of these feeds in the Vee-Dashboard. To assist in carrying on a half hour conversation, members will have access to widgets that provide automatic feeds of chats, images, news, translations, and dictionaries. The younger generation is no longer satisfied with solely talk. And this style of TheTalkList e-Learning technology is very attractive.

Social Networking – Part 3 of TheTalkList Method

On TheTalkList, social networking is social e-Learning

In any learning environment, students learn a lot from their peers. Peer relationships can dramatically improve motivation, interest, and involvement in learning (Casey). One of the drawbacks to online education is the isolation a student might come to feel. TheTalkList is designed to support students with one-on-one conversation; still, they may miss the ability to connect informally with other students struggling with English. TheTalkList social network fills the gap here. Students become resources for each other and take control over their learning by building their own learning communities. TheTalkList takes advantage of the popular quality of social media to create a collaborative learning environment where students can communicate about anything at any time.

There is currently a lot of research being done on the educational value of social networking. One popular social networking site, Ning, was used in a study of college students. The study results showed that teachers and students felt that social networking “appreciably enhanced” communication and collaboration and improved the learning experience. Students used Ning to host blogs, discussion forums, and exchange personal information. The students believed that social networking encouraged community-building, and they felt the public nature of the site allowed for modeling and peer feedback (Navarrete, Veletsianos). In other words, social networks require students to participate, think, contribute, and become active learners. TheTalkList’s tutoring method puts students at the center of their learning experience. Simultaneously, TheTalkList social network puts them at the center of their own network of peers.

Other Barriers to Learning: Time and Money

TheTalkList's learner centered approach also addresses another barrier to learning – time

Traditional classes meet at certain times and places. This inherent inflexibility works against student learning. In adult education especially, there is the problem of scheduling study around work and family obligations. And if students miss a class, they fall behind and frequently lose their motivation to continuing coming to class.

Given the amount of time language acquisition requires, scheduling flexibility is critical, and advantages of TheTalkList approach cannot be underestimated. The flexibility of the Internet makes it possible for TheTalkList students to connect with tutors at times that are most convenient for them. Students can log in whenever they have a spare half-hour or schedule regular sessions around their busy lives. TheTalkList fits into their schedule maximizing learning time.

Students must be able to practice every day, but if they have to take a day off, with TheTalkList, they aren't missing important lessons as they would in a standard classroom. They set their own pace, their own time, and their own place. Not only is instruction personalized, it's on demand.

TheTalkList pricing structure makes one-on-one language learning affordable

The vast majority of students can't afford to hire a personal tutor. Cost becomes a barrier to learning. TheTalkList gives students the opportunity to carry on meaningful, interesting conversations with native speakers of American English. Tutors set their own rates, and students chose tutors from TheTalkList profiles based on their price range and their shared interests.

Conclusion

TheTalkList has created a platform for learning that brings the best practices of language learning and social learning into the digital age. TheTalkList has a 3- Part Method. First, it uses Creative Conversation to connect students with their own personal tutor. Creative Conversation puts the conversation in "context." Conversations are about subjects and topics students are interested in. Students are motivated to keep talking and keep calling back to practice speaking in the target language. Second, TheTalkList technology platform makes it easy for students to connect. The interface is inviting and fun. Modern students are used to working on the Internet. Logging on to do your language learning is becoming popular as a daily routine. And thirdly, TheTalkList method builds on social learning theory to forge its own social e-Learning advancement. It makes it easy for students to develop their own peer-to-peer network, and gives them the opportunity to learn from each other. Compelling in its execution and revolutionary in its scope, TheTalkList makes one-on-one language learning available to anyone with an Internet connection and a desire to learn.

Glossary of Terms

ESL – English as a second language is often used instead of “teaching English as a foreign language” when talking about immigrant learning populations – people who are moving to an English speaking country vs. travelers or tourists.

Target Language – The language the student is trying to learn.

Learner Centered Learning - the pedagogy that focuses on student as opposed to learning traditional systems which employ rigid curriculums in teacher-centered classrooms.

Social Learning – A learning theory developed by Bandura that stresses the importance of the social element in learning. The theory argues that people can learn by watching other people and modeling their behavior. The four components of social learning theory are: Motivation, attentiveness, reproduction, and retention.

Self-directed learning – Learning that relies on the student to take charge of the learning process. On line learning is often self-directed.

Learning in Context – Learning a language not by focusing on language instruction but by teaching another subject in the target language.

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