The ABA Efficacy Study

FINAL REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study[1] is the result of independent scientific research carried out from July 2015 to December 2015. It is based on the analysis of test scores and questionnaires given to a random representative sample of ABA users for the purpose of demonstrating the efficacy of ABA English, for users to learn English as a foreign language.

The research involved a final sample population of 241 learners (the study's informants) from three countries, Brazil, Italy and Spain, enrolled in the ABA Premium (paid) Course.

Over a six-month period the informants for this study were given a **pre-test** (WebCAPE) to establish their knowledge of English before they started using ABA English, and also a **pre-questionnaire** to enquire about each learner's demographic information along with items designed to provide data regarding learner expectations and motivations. On finishing the ABA Course a **post-test** (also WebCAPE) was administered to establish learning progress, and, finally, there was a **post-questionnaire**, designed to analyse learner satisfaction. The pre- and post-tests were drawn from WebCAPE computerised adaptive placement tests (Perpetual Technology Group[2]).

This is the first study of this kind involving research in the efficacy of learning English online, i.e. distance e-learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Each learner used ABA English over a period of three months to study one of its levels (composed of 24 units). The tests were proctored and the improvement in language skills and knowledge was measured as the difference between the WebCAPE pre-test and post-test scores.

The efficacy of ABA was measured as the language proficiency improvement per hours of study and the proportion of ABA learners who could improve their level of language proficiency in terms of US college semesters after completing 24 ABA English Units (research data revealed that students took 40 hours' study, on average, to do the 24 Units).

The results show evidence of most students improving by one full semester, although the same results also show an improvement of up to two full semesters for nearly 50% of the learners. All of the participants in the survey were asked to complete 24 Units, but because nearly half of them improved by two levels it is safe to infer that these same students actually improved their English language proficiency by one College Semester level in about half the time (20 hours).

[1] The study was designed and conducted by Professor Ana Gimeno-Sanz.
[2] http://www.perpetualworks.com

MAIN RESULTS

Confirmed efficacy

For every 24 units of ABA English (EFL) Course, with level boundaries established for every 24 units, the following results are confirmed:

- 71% learners improved their proficiency by at least one College Semester, i.e. half an academic year's foreign-language tuition at a US university or college.
- 47% learners improved by as much as two College Semesters according to US college requirements for English as a Foreign Language (EFL).
- ABA English learners need—on average—40 hours' study time to complete and learn 24 Units (a full level) in a three-month period.
- As a result of the above we can state that just 12 ABA Units (completed in 20 hours) were needed for an improvement of a full US College Semester in nearly half of cases (more precisely, 47%).
- 100% of surveyed learners stated that they will recommend ABA English Course to their friends, as a measure of learner satisfaction.

SUPPLEMENTARY RESULTS

- ABA English efficacy is not affected by sociodemographic factors such as age or native language (L1).
- The average student using ABA English achieves 0.79 improvement points in WebCAPE per every hour of study.

User satisfaction

- 98% of users thought the ABA English course content is useful and relevant
- 87.5% of users thought ABA English is easy to use
- 97% were satisfied with being able to monitor their own progress

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1. Introduction

There is an ever-increasing offer of language-learning apps and online courses to choose from. Naturally, each one has its own claims about how good the product is and what it can do for you. Of course, it would be naïve to rely entirely on such claims coming from the companies in the sector, as they may be assumed to be influenced somewhat by marketing and advertising strategies. What is needed, then, are independent research studies and reports from scholars with renowned prestige and proven expertise in the relevant fields of study. Patrick Zabalbeascoa responds to this required profile of academic independence, having worked for almost three decades as a university lecturer and scholar in the areas of English as a foreign language, language-learning innovation and evaluation of language learning courses as well as teacher training experience also in the field of English as a Foreign Language. Additionally, he provides a long list of research projects and publications in translation studies and audiovisual and multimodal studies, including the use of captioning and subtitles in FLL, which are particularly relevant to the present study.

The present study is focused on the one claim that all of such products insist on the most: efficacy (or effectiveness) of the combined effect of the materials and methodology that characterise each course, in colloquial terms, "how fast can I learn the target language [in terms of study hours and counting months for the duration of the course]?". Other features and factors such as price and appearance are important but are frequently disregarded in the presence of compelling claims of efficacy, which is what users seem to value most, i.e. they are looking for results above all other considerations. Furthermore, efficacy lends itself to being isolated as a variable for such a study, although not entirely unproblematically.

The present study, therefore, sets out to achieve an independent, objective, scientifically valid evaluation of the efficacy of an exceedingly popular EFL online (e-learning) course, ABA[3].

[3] http://www.abaenglish.com/es/

2. ABA English: online and mobile distance EFL learning

ABA English 1.0 was founded in 2007 by Severo Figarola. It was the result of 4 years of development by a multinational team of philologists, linguists and IT experts who were given a dual goal: to develop a course with an excellent teaching methodology and to ensure that studying would be fun. It was created to provide high-quality English language learning via the internet. 2012 was devoted to defining, creating and developing the new website, a new campus and updated content. Much of the new course's audio-visual content, such as the high-quality short films, video classes, etc., is particularly innovative and distinctive. ABA English 4.0 was launched in 2013, adopting a *free trial* business model. International expansion began and generated exponential growth in the number of students already in 2013: the student base grew eightfold in year one, bringing the number to nearly half a million. 2014 consolidated the new model: the year ended with 2.1 million students from 170 countries. The student base grew fourfold compared to the previous year. In June 2015 ABA English launched its new app for iOS ("Learn English with films - ABA English") and in September the Android version ("Learn English with ABA English").

In December 2015, ABA English won the Best Educational App Award granted by Reimagine Education, an initiative co-managed by The Wharton School and QS Quacquarelli Symonds. These prestigious international awards are granted yearly in Philadelphia (USA) during a 3-day educational conference that brings together top level EdTech academics, university leaders and entrepreneurs. The Reimagine Education awards are considered the "Oscars of education".

At the end of May 2016 the number of students crossed the 10 million mark. An agreement with Cambridge English was signed in May 2016 whereby ABA English has become the first entirely digital school to provide Cambridge exams and certificates.

Students learn vocabulary and grammar which is structured by Units. The Units cover grammar items and pragmatic issues. The pattern and structure of the Units is always the same, divided into 8 parts or activities. The full ABA English Course covers 6 levels stretched over 144 Units: Beginners (A1), Lower Intermediate (A2), Intermediate (B1), Upper Intermediate (B2), Advanced (B2-C1) and Business (C1).

Some of ABA's key features:

- Video clip materials produced exclusively for ABA and provided with a selection of subtitle options for the student to choose from; subtitles in English, subtitles with a translated version of the English audio, or no subtitles.
- Interactive vocabulary and grammar activities, based on the video stories and scripts. The video stories are specifically written and directed to facilitate, support and pragmatically and culturally contextualise new vocabulary and grammatical explanations.
- Listening activities: for recognising the sounds of English, for oral comprehension, and as a model for oral production.
- Speech production activities and pronunciation, based on repeated viewing of the video clips and the possibility to listen to excerpts. The methodological pattern is Listen-record-compare. Students are motivated by being encouraged to record their own oral production as a simulation of film dubbing.
- Assessment: continuous testing activity at the end of every Unit, plus personalised feedback and answers from teachers online.
- Motivation and monitoring, provided by teachers online. This is the only EFL e-learning course and app that provides teacher guidance, even while you are on the move. Each student is assigned a teacher who provides follow-up and guidance and who also motivates students to persevere and improve their level of English.
- Full learning continuity is guaranteed by the online course[4], regardless of the device used: one can start the day by following the course on a tablet, continue on a smart phone during the day and in the evening complete the day's effort on a PC.

[4] ABA English also has an app with all of the same features of accessibilty from different devices and all of the same contents.

3. Research objectives

The aim of this research is to discover the efficacy of ABA for the purpose of learning English as a Foreign Language. Efficacy (or effectiveness), here, refers to the amount of time (as a measure of effort, too) needed in order to make significant progress, which involves noticeable improvement in scoring on English Language Level tests. Milestones in scoring are reflected in "going up (jumping) a level". Levels are defined by a cluster of required linguistic and communicative competences, both oral and written, including grammatical accuracy, fluency, and vocabulary, as reflected in both comprehension and expression, oral and written, for general rather than specific purposes (ESP). The ultimate goal of language teaching and learning is largely agreed to be to improve in overall language skills and communicative competences; and improvement is usually measured in terms of going up from one level to another. Thus, levels are used as indicators of overall language proficiency. The language levels that are used as references in this study are the following. The Council of Europe's **Common European Framework of Reference for Languages** (CEFR) is a series of descriptions of abilities which can be **applied to any language**. These descriptors can be used to **set clear targets** for achievements within language learning, to help **define language proficiency** levels and to **interpret language qualifications**. It has become **accepted** as a way of benchmarking language ability, **not only within Europe but worldwide**, and plays a central role in language and education policy. Its basic structure is of 6 levels distributed into three large categories (A-C), thus having a high (A2, B2, C2) and a low level (A1, B1, C1) within each category. The categories are: A, for Basic User; B, for Independent user; C, for Proficient User. Another broadly accepted international standard (though, unlike CEFR, it is only for EFL) is Cambridge English Exams. It could be said that these two commonly recognised standards are gradually evolving towards diminishing mismatches between their level systems, although Cambridge's prestige is built on levels that have not changed in their definition or difficulty for years. Convergence is being achieved by offering a wider range of different certificates rather than moving the goalposts for the traditional ones. In this respect, the best known Cambridge levels are First Certificate (FCE) and Cambridge Proficiency (CPE). Cambridge First Certificate overlaps largely with CEFR B2, but may be said to be a bit higher, reaching into the early stages of C1. Similarly, Cambridge Proficiency is mostly the same level as C2,

possibly a bit more demanding in the actual test. Cambridge has introduced other certificates like Key (KET) and Preliminary (PET), which do have more direct correspondences to CEFR A2 and B1, respectively.

In US universities, Foreign Language courses are designated as **FL1** (first-semester college-level course), **FL2** (second-semester college-level course), or **FL3** (third-semester college-level course), and so on. Correspondences are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1. EFL LEVEL EQUIVALENTS

CEFR	ILR	ACTFL	College Semesters	ABA English
A1	0/0+/1	Novice: Low Mid High	FL1	beginners
A2	1+	Intermediate: Low Mid High	FL2 FL3 FL4	lower intermediate
B1	2	Advanced Low	FL5 FL6	intermediate
B2	2+	Advanced Mid		upper intermediate
B2/C1			undergraduate language major	advanced
C1	3/3+	Advanced High	undergraduate major with year-long study in target language culture	business
C2	4	S / Superior		
	4+/5	D / Distinguished		

The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) scale, Table 1 column 2, is a standard grading scale for language proficiency in the US Federal service. It was originally developed by the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR), which included representation by United States Foreign Service Institute. It grades people's language proficiency on a scale of 0-5. The designation 0+, 1+, 2+, 3+, or 4+ is assigned when proficiency substantially exceeds one skill level and does not fully meet the criteria for the next level. This totals 11 possible grades. Grades may be assigned separately for different skills such as reading, speaking, listening, writing, translation, audio translation, interpretation, and intercultural communication. For some of these skills, the level may be seen abbreviated, for example S-1 for Level 1 Speaking.

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines, Table 1 column 3, were created by the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages in order to provide a means of assessing the proficiency of a foreign language speaker. Distinguished is a name sometimes used for levels 4 and 4+ of the ILR scale instead of including them within Superior.

College Semesters are a common reference within the USA, but are more loosely defined as levels than the other test-based standards. Understandably, College Semesters are as much about dedication (study hours) and course duration (calendar weeks or months) as levels strictly speaking. This is so because there is a difference between taking a test which is totally independent from any tuition or course, as is the case of Cambridge Certificate Exams or the TOEFL test, and taking a course, regulated by a syllabus, with various forms of evaluation, including a summative assessment test at the end. In some US universities, the criteria for passing college semesters does not always depend exclusively on passing a final test as they also factor in classroom attendance and participation, group and project work, and personal development and improvement, and sometimes, even, self-assessment. This means that when we use College Semester as a measure it refers both to improvement of level and investment of effort and time, more precisely six months of university level work, all included.

4. Research methodology

The methodology used was to take a representative random sample of ABA students who had previously volunteered to participate in the study. The total amount of volunteers for this study is 241, coming from Brazil, Italy and Spain. They were given a pre-test and a pre-questionnaire before they started using ABA English. They were given a post-test and a post-questionnaire upon finishing the required amount of work with ABA English. The analysis is based on the data provided by results of the two tests and the two questionnaires[5].

The study was independently conducted over a period of six months, in order to achieve the desired number of volunteers, although each volunteer only participated for a three-month period, the time they were given to do the 24 Units. Volunteers were gathered from new enrolments in the fee-paying Premium course who accepted to participate voluntarily in the study. The system used makes it possible to know the exact amount of time each volunteer devoted to the course and exactly when they started studying. The system can even calculate student inactivity while logged in by timing out after 20 minutes of inactivity.

[5] The pre- and post-course questionnaires were designed by two of the members of the CAMILLE Research Group, Ana Sevilla-Pavón and Antonio Martínez-Sáez for their respective PhD dissertations, supervised by the researcher, Prof. Ana Gimeno-Sanz.

4.1. The research questions for this study

The specific goals of this study were to find the answers, if possible, to three main questions, presented below.

1. How effective is ABA English e-learning course in terms of language improvement over a period of three months for completing 24[6] Units (corresponding to a whole level) for a random selection of students from all levels?
2. Which students improved most when compared to their pre-test level after using ABA English e-learning course for the stipulated period of three months and having completed 24 Units?
3. What variables (e.g. motivation, bias or demographic) may have an influence on language improvement, at least according to the conditions of this study?

Improvement in general[7] English language skills and overall competence is measured here by comparing each participant's score in their pre-test to their post-test score. Both of these tests are actually WebCAPE placement tests. These tests are the basic methodological tool to help in the analysis required for answering research questions 1 and 2. Research question 3 has to be analysed by means of data produced by the pre- and post-questionnaires, which specifically ask each individual learner/informant about their age, sex, motivation and so on. One very likely variable is initial language level but this one has to be established, not through the questionnaire but by the WebCAPE pre-test score.

4.2. WebCAPE as a tool for testing levels

The main instrument for gauging the informants' level of English was the Web Based Computer Adaptive Placement Exam, also known as the WebCAPE test. It is an established computerised university placement test created in the late 1990's by Brigham Young

[6] On average students invested 40 hours, some less, some more; but 40 hours is a result of the research, not a condition imposed on the participants. What they were told to do was to complete 24 Units because 24 Units cover a whole level.

[7] We use the term "general English" here in opposition to "English for specific purposes" (ESP). When this is not specified one way or the other the default implication should be "general" rather than "for specific purposes".

University and maintained by the Perpetual Technology Group. It is offered for testing levels of EFL, Spanish, French, German, Russian and Chinese, and administered completely online. WebCAPE English Language Assessment has been calibrated in accordance with the standards of the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines: novice, intermediate, advanced and superior. These proficiency levels are defined separately for the ability to listen, read, and write. Over 650 institutions worldwide use WebCAPE today, making it the worldwide standard for ESL placement testing. WebCAPE's ESL placement test adapts each question to find the student's (or candidate's) proper English level (see section below). Placement is not based on classes, years of experience or tutelage of English as a foreign language. Assessment is strictly of language performance ability.

High Accuracy for Proper ESL Placement

Accuracy of WebCAPE's English placement exam is about 80%. It is among the most efficient methods available for predicting English foreign language proficiency. Error is uncommon, but when found is mostly conservative, meaning by this that error would always involve students being placed just one level below where they could have been. Only 1.7% of students, according to their teachers, were placed in an English level class too high for their ability. The test is adaptive, therefore the time required for taking it ranges between 20 and 25 minutes on average. The WebCAPE test gives a score in points, and the score determines the FL level.

The three sections of the English Language Assessment (listening, reading, and writing) are taken independently. Upon completion of one section, it is possible to continue to another section or stop and resume at another time.

ABA learners took one of the 6 ABA language levels available for their pre- and post testing with a time lapse of 3 months between one test and the other, or however long it took them to complete 24 ABA Units. Table 2 shows the correspondences between WebCAPE scores and ABA levels.

TABLE 2. WEBCAPE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEST CUT-OFF SCORES AND THEIR EQUIVALENTS

Scores (points)	WebCAPE **Level**	**Placement**	ABA **Level**
Below 100	0	ACTFL Novice Low / Mid	
100-392	1	ACTFL Novice High / College Semester FL 1	beginners
393-492	2	College Semester FL 2	lower intermediate
493-542	3	College Semester FL 3	intermediate
543-642	4	College Semester FL 4	upper intermediate
643-782	5	ACTFL *ADVANCED Low* / College Semester FL 5	advanced
Above 783	6	WebCAPE *CUT OFF* / College Semester FL 6	business

4.3. Level as a variable of efficacy: time, too

Making progress through the various levels is clearly the main component of the whole point of language learning. However, the amount of time required to make noticeable progress is also a very important aspect. Indeed, the very notion of efficacy is based on the condition of how much time spent studying is required to go from one level to the next. It has already been mentioned that WebCAPE does not take into account the time/effort factor. ABA learners, therefore, had to be monitored for the amount of time they spent studying English, to enable the study to correlate time and level change in each student. On this point, it is important to stress that both time and level change are objective and independent measures of efficacy, not influenced by any possible bias, given

that time is measured in hours and months, and levels are determined independently by WebCAPE.

College Semesters

Having said this, it is also interesting and important to point out that **College Semesters** are determined by level (somewhat dependent on each university) but also, more objectively, by time (six months), hence the name "semester". However, there is no 100% uniformity in how long a semester lasts, generally, 16 to 18 weeks long, for 45-48 contact hours in class plus an additional 3 hours' homework for every contact hour.

Semester: 1 course = 3 class hours per week = 6-9 hours study time per week

This kind of nomenclature (semester), therefore, presupposes a connection between levels and the normally expected time to jump from one level to another, and this does have an impact on this study, because the results of our research show that the normally expected time of six months can actually be cut down quite considerably if one uses ABA English given that its students average 40 hours using the e-learning course to jump from one level to the next.

4.4. Questionnaires: pre- and post-

While improvement in English language is measured by comparing each student's score in the WebCAPE placement tests (pre- and post-), the impact of a number of variables (such as motivation to learn or improve, that could bear an impact, one way or another, on the efficacy of ABA English are analysed by collecting student responses according to a pre-course questionnaire (pre-questionnaire).

For the same purpose of finding possible correlations, the same informants were asked to answer a post-course questionnaire (post-questionnaire) in addition to the WebCAPE tests.

The initial questionnaire included 34 items based on a 5-point Likert scale, divided into four parts, enquiring about the following:

1. Personal data and the student's perception on how good or bad they are at learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and how important they perceive EFL to be for their studies as well as their professional careers. (12 items)
2. The various uses and frequency in using ICT both as study tools and as leisure items. Their attitude toward technology as an educational tool. (7 items)
3. Their preferred learning styles, approaches to language learning and methodologies. (3 items)

The post-questionnaire included 50 items and was divided into three sections. It also used a 5-point Likert scale, plus five open-ended questions, overall to ask about the following:

1. General courseware features seeking data on student satisfaction regarding the graphical user interface; ease of navigation; clarity of layout and graphics; appropriateness of level; balance between theory and practice; adequacy of time allocation; degree of autonomy; satisfaction with tutor support; quality of media files, etc. (16 items)
2. Course contents: quality of instructions; usefulness of exercises to practise language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking); clarity of grammatical explanations and exercises; usefulness of vocabulary exercises; interest of topics; variety and originality of tasks. (14 items)
3. Student self-assessment and personal commitments: preferred learning styles; types of external sources used to complete activities; satisfaction working autonomously: perceived improvements in language skills; recommendations for improvements; recommendations for eliminating anything from or adding anything to the course; preferences in topics. (20 items)

Each variable was composed of a number of defining items and analysed qualitatively and quantitatively. Statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS predictive analytic software.

Each of the items was correlated to the results obtained in the WebCAPE test after each student took the 24–unit ABA course to analyse whether there was evidence of a

significant relationship. The findings are discussed below, in the section on results and analysis.

4.5. The learner sample population

The call for participation in the study was open for a period of two months, from 23rd July to 20th September 2015, to all ABA English Premium subscribers enrolling for the first time in the online course. Volunteers were offered an additional free subscription for themselves and a course gift voucher for a friend, as compensation for their participation. The sample population was not selected externally or biased in any way and would be totally random except for the fact that volunteers did so knowingly and after giving their consent.

The target informant populations were approached in Brazil, Italy and Spain since they have the largest number of ABA enrolments. In order to boost participation, new enrolments received 3 reminders (in October, November and December 2015) to encourage participation in the WebCAPE pre-test and submission of the pre-course questionnaire. The last WebCAPE post-tests were completed on 5th January 2016.

The initial sample population was comprised of 868 learners having set 900 as an overall target for attracting volunteers from all three countries, with 314 from Brazil, 270 from Italy, and 281 from Spain. However, learners of the initial population were excluded from the survey for one or both of the following reasons.

a) They did not complete 24 Units (i.e. one full level) of ABA English.
b) They did not complete each and every part of the 4-part survey, i.e. the pre- and post-test along with the pre- and post-questionnaire.

After this exclusion process the remaining total number of learners comprising the sample population for analysis in this study is 241 (N=241). This total amount of volunteers who fulfilled all the necessary requirements to be counted as valid informants breaks down as follows: 74 from Brazil, 83 from Italy, and 84 from Spain.

A balanced distribution per country as well as per age was sought and achieved, as can be seen in the following tables (Table 3 and Table 4).

TABLE 3. DISTRIBUTION PER COUNTRY

	Country	Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
Valid values	Brazil	74	30.7	30.7
	Italy	83	34.4	65.1
	Spain	84	34.9	65.1
	Total	241	100.0	

TABLE 4. RESPONDENTS' AGE GROUPS

	Age*	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Valid values	under 18	4	1.7	1.7	1.7
	18 — 24	11	4.6	4.7	6.4
	25 — 34	49	20.3	20.9	27.4
	35 — 44	53	22.0	22.6	50.0
	45 — 54	57	23.7	24.4	74.4
	55 — 59	31	12.9	13.2	87.6
	60 and over	29	12.0	12.4	100.0
	Total	234	97.1	100.0	
Missing values		7	2.9		
Total		241	100		

Respondents' ages range from 10, the youngest, to 82, the eldest.

In terms of occupation, and according to their answers, the pool of eligible participants is shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5. STUDENT OCCUPATIONS

Occupation	Percentage
employed	56.5
seeking employment	17.5
retired	14.1
enrolled in formal education	3.1
unspecified	8.8

Only 32 of the participants (13.3%) report having an official English language certificate. The most commonly mentioned ones are Cambridge FCE, TOEFL, and IELTS, whilst the others are national certificates awarded by local institutions.

5. Main results and analysis

5.1. Effectiveness of the ABA English Course: main results

Out of the total number of students who took the placement test, 71% raised their level of English by at least one College Semester level, having completed 24 ABA Units (Table 6).

TABLE 6. TOTAL LEARNER IMPROVEMENT

	Frequency	Percentage
Jumped at least one level	**172**	**71.4**
Jumped 2 levels	113	46.9
Jumped 1 level	59	24.5
Stayed at the same level	69	28.6
Total	241	100.0

The scores achieved in the pre-test by the level-jumping group of 71% for each of the WebCAPE placement levels are shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7. SCORES IN THE PRE-TEST FOR STUDENTS WHO JUMPED AT LEAST ONE LEVEL.

WebCAPE Level	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Student percentage	27.87	54.10	11.48	0.0	3.28	3.28	0.0

No student scored above 783 points, which is understandable considering that this level is equivalent to near-native proficiency, so not only is it an extremely difficult level to reach (i.e. to find students who would have that level already before starting ABA English) but it is also hard for these learners to make any noticeable progress other than maintaining their level, which already requires a laudable effort, not to slip back as languages can be forgotten or "unlearnt", so to speak, a fact that is too often underrated and overlooked. High-level students often study or practise their EFL precisely as a means of simply staying at the level they have so effortfully reached, and not falling back. This is clearly an area that has not been researched enough: how much work goes into maintaining high-level EFL by non-native speakers or students.

Regarding improvement in terms of learner profile, no significant improvement correlated to variables such as age group (Table 8), country (Table 9), educational background or hours of study.

TABLE 8. IMPROVEMENT PERCENTAGES PER AGE GROUP

under 18	18 — 24	25 — 34	35 — 44	45 — 54	55 — 59	60 and over
0.00	6.78	20.34	10.17	33.90	18.64	10.17

TABLE 9. IMPROVEMENT PERCENTAGES PER COUNTRY

Brazil	Italy	Spain
29.51	34.43	36.07

In Table 9 we can see that there is a balanced rate of improvement in terms of language learning throughout the three geographical regions targeted in the study.

The mean difference in the scores achieved in the post-test compared to the pre-test for the total sample amounts to 69.52 WebCAPE points. There are no statistically significant differences in the mean difference of this variable according to country or age group.

The average number of hours devoted to course study amounts to 39.82 hours (Figure 1). No correlation was found between the number of study hours and language improvement. In other words, the empirical data shows that more study time does not necessarily have a greater positive impact on language improvement, especially because this relationship is largely dependent on the learner's cognitive capacity. In any case, no correlation has been found between these variables.

FIGURE 1. WEBCAPE IMPROVEMENT VS. STUDY HOURS

FIGURE 2. RATIO BETWEEN STUDY HOURS AND IMPROVEMENT IN WEBCAPE TEST RESULTS

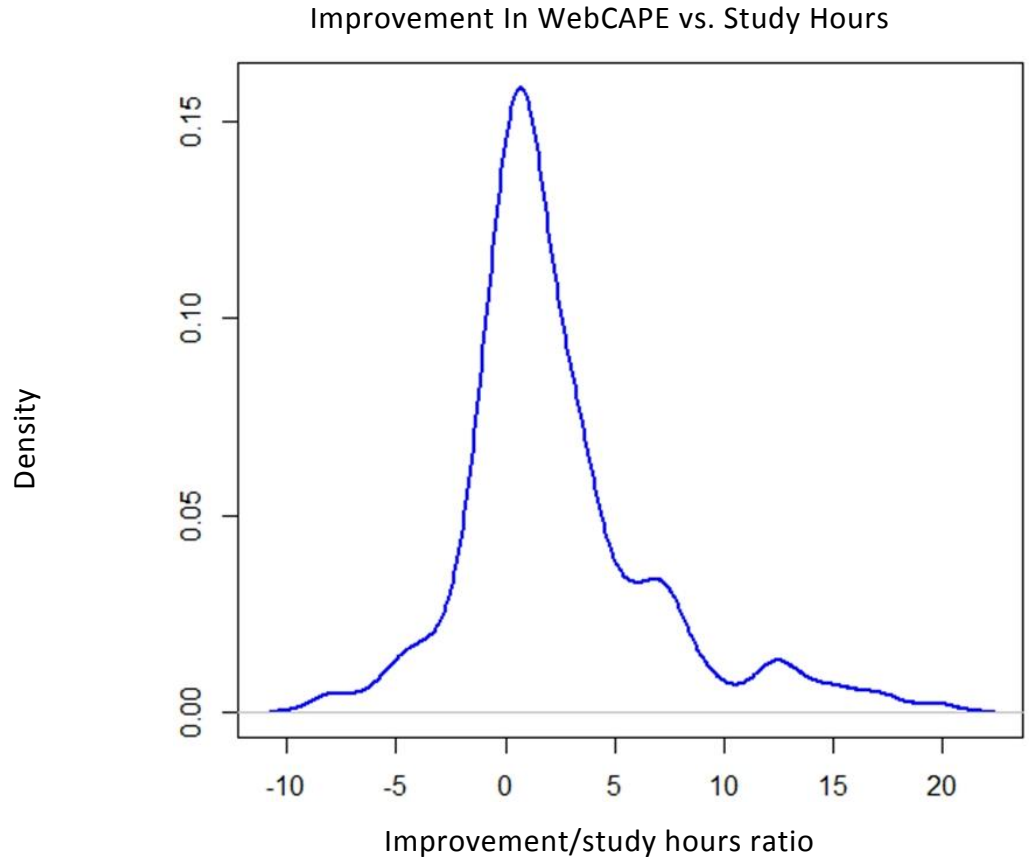
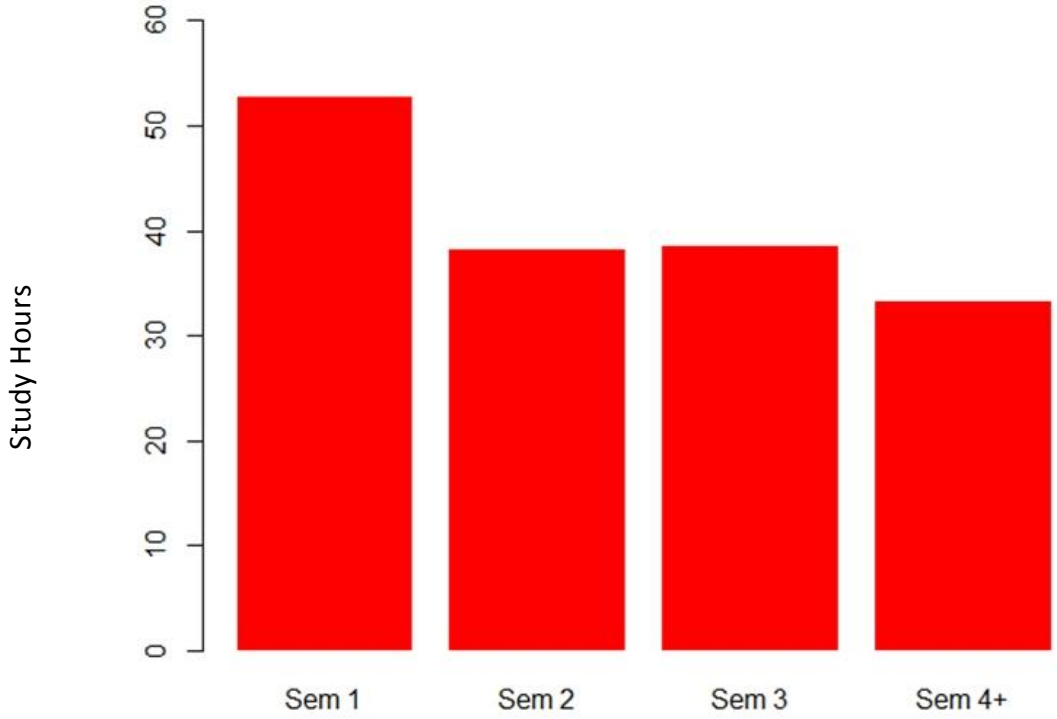


Figure 2 illustrates an interesting fact when considering the ratio between the number of study hours and the learners' improvement in WebCAPE test results. The average ratio is 0.79 and its median is 0.34, which means that the average student achieves 0.79 improvement points in WebCAPE per every hour of study and that 50% of students achieve 0.34 points improvement per hour (or less) of study.

No statistical significance was found in the difference between the number of study hours and the placement assigned to students upon taking the WebCAPE pre-test (Figure 3).

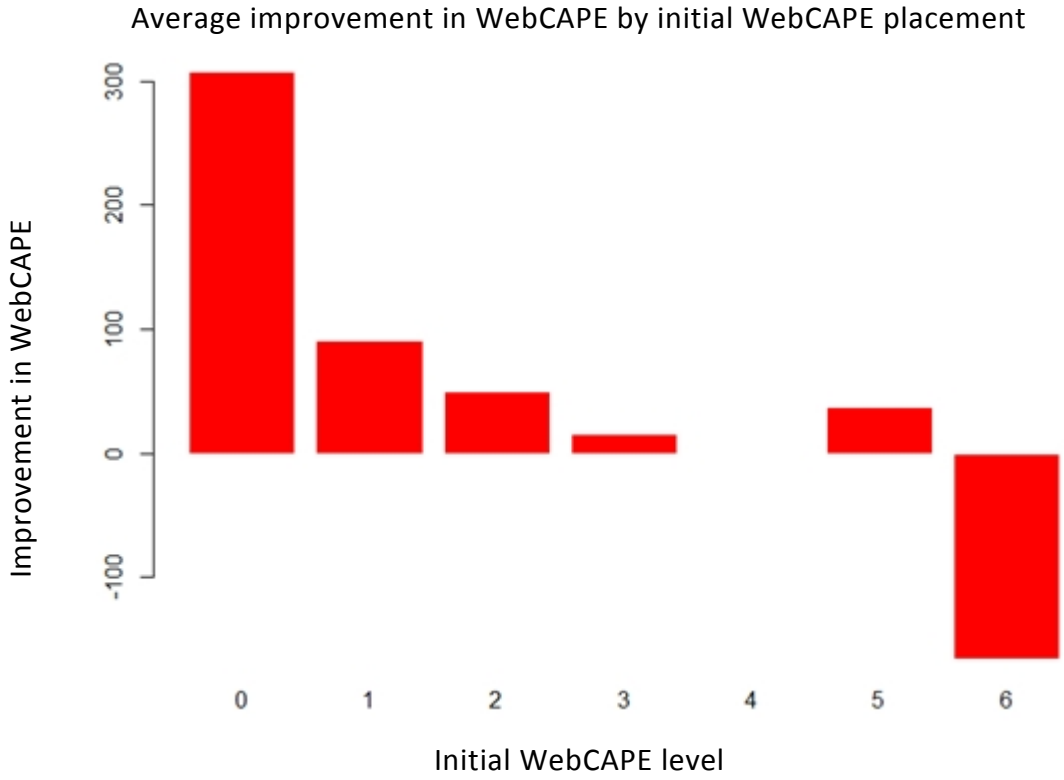
FIGURE 3. AVERAGE STUDY HOURS AND INITIAL WEBCAPE PLACEMENT TEST RESULTS



Level / placement assigned according to pre-test results for WebCAPE

The mean difference of the WebCAPE results did show statistically significant differences depending on the placement levels assigned according to the results of the pre-test. In other words, there is evidence that students initiating the ABA English course at lower levels made more noticeable progress than those starting at higher levels (Figure 4).

FIGURE 4. IMPROVEMENT RELATIVE TO INITIAL LEVEL ACCORDING TO THE WEBCAPE PRE-TEST



A characteristic of WebCAPE that might influence different demands involved in jumping from one level to the next can be seen in the following Table 10.

TABLE 10. WEBCAPE SCORES AND POINTS RANGE WITHIN EACH LEVEL

Scores (points)	WebCAPE Level	Points Range	ABA Level
Below 100	0	100	
100-392	1	292	beginners
393-492	2	99	lower intermediate
493-542	3	49	intermediate
543-642	4	100	upper intermediate
643-782	5	139	advanced
Above 783	6	undefined	business

One can see that there is a clear tendency to try and keep the range at a change in level for every 100 points scored, illustrated by levels 0, 2, and 4, in particular. If this is the case, level 3 is quite striking in its narrowness, meaning that a student could presumably jump from level 2 to level four with an improvement of just 50 points (i.e. from 492 to 542). In stark contrast, at least in terms of point-scoring for WebCAPE, a student could improve from pre-test to post-test by as many as 292 WebCAPE points (i.e. from 100-392) and still remain within level 1.

This might account for a number of ABA learners appearing as not jumping a level, for those placed from the outset at the lower end of level 1.

5.2. Effectiveness of the ABA English course: results according to learner profile

There are few instances where the effectiveness of the ABA English e-learning course related to the volunteers' answers in the pre- and post- questionnaires. This can already be seen as a positive result which can be interpreted to mean that ABA English is not

restricted in its efficacy to certain well-defined groups of learners defined by a set of clear-cut characteristics, but rather, that ABA English can be a productive means of EFL for all sorts of people. This is also true for learners of any language background, because L1 is not a variable that influences improvement either, at least for the L1 languages involved in this study.

There are a few statistically significant differences which are related to motivation and the need to learn the language, in item 9 in the pre-questionnaire. These findings lead us to believe that motivation is no doubt one of the leading factors to influence learner performance. This has been manifest throughout the study, where we have been able to determine that learners believe that their job prospects can improve considerably if they can raise their EFL level. Students are therefore willing to put more effort into achieving the goals they set for themselves. Motivation can be linked to career goals more clearly than other motives, such as family or leisure. This finding is in agreement with other studies such as Sevilla-Pavón, 2013, Martínez-Sáez, 2015; and Gimeno, 2015.

It is noteworthy that there is a very similar value between the percentages of learners who stated in the questionnaire that they did **not consider themselves good at learning English**, specifically 25.7%, and the amount of students, 29%, who did not improve their English language proficiency by at least one level, in contrast to the other 71% who improved their level after 24 ABA Units. Although we cannot prove a direct correlation between the two figures, it is in keeping with important expectancy studies, starting with Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson as far back as 1963, that claim that negative expectations usually have a negative impact just as positive self-image provides a boost in the learning curve in general education.

Another interesting finding relates to the relationship between higher success rates and learner attitude towards ICT (Information and Communication Technologies). When asked about the reasons for using ICT in their daily lives and the frequency of use learners who opted for “to socialise and keep in touch with other people” achieved a significantly higher performance rate and better scores in the post-test, compared to those who opted for “never”.

Replies to item 3.5, "What do you think your level of English is?"[8], also have a significant relation to learner improvement rates. Students who claimed to have a beginners' level achieve significantly higher scores compared to those who claim to be at an intermediate level of EFL. There were very few learners who reported having an advanced level, so, despite having a remarkably high score, the WebCAPE scoring differential penalizes this kind of learner. The analysis of results drawn from this item lead us to believe that lower-level learners make more visible progress in their learning compared to the ones who start at higher levels, not because the course is better suited to a particular level but because of the specific characteristics of foreign-language learning. The learning curve, indeed, is not linear but follows a logarithmic scale with inevitable diminishing marginal returns. In other words, as a learner acquires more knowledge, skills and competences in a foreign language, it becomes more and more difficult to make noticeable progress. As a learner moves up the level scale there are diminishing returns proportional to the amount of time and effort that is invested.

Interesting findings came to the fore upon analysing the participants' preferred modes of tuition. When asked what they thought was the best way to learn a foreign language[9], the most popular answer from nearly half (115 users / 48.32%) was "an online course with assistance from a teacher", in line with their decision to use ABA English Premium subscription course. Next in preference, with 23.11% was "a face-to-face course using technology in the classroom". These answers are in tune with the 81.09% responses reporting that their preferred language-learning modality was blended learning, that is a combination of distance learning and face-to-face guidance. Those who preferred completely autonomous learning without any tutor support amounted to 7.56%.

[8] Participants could choose from: beginner, lower-intermediate, intermediate, upper-intermediate, advanced, or business.

[9] The options to choose from were: a) A face to face course in a classroom with a teacher; b) A face to face course using technology in the classroom; c) An online course with assistance from a teacher; d) A self-access online course, working by oneself.

6. User Satisfaction

The post-course questionnaire made it possible to gather relevant information about learner satisfaction after completing the three-month study period and a full ABA English level. Table 10 summarises the most important findings of the data analysis, for which ABA learners answered that they either agreed or strongly agreed with. Items from the questionnaire are ordered according to relevance and importance in foreign-language learning.

TABLE 10. OVERALL USER SATISFACTION PERCENTAGES FROM THE POST-QUESTIONNAIRE

Percentage of *agree* or *strongly agree* to statements in Pre-questionnaire	
98[10]	ABA English course content is useful and relevant
87.5	ABA English is easy to use for someone with minor computer skills
95	the situational films that characterise ABA English are useful and relevant
85	the theoretical and grammatical explanations are sufficient
98	navigation is intuitive and easy to use
71.5	feedback received from tutors was useful and relevant
97	satisfied at being able to monitor their own progress
81	the practice content is sufficient
61.5	received help from a tutor when needed
79	the audio input is clear and loud enough
97.5	the ABA graphical interface is user-friendly
93	ABA English encourages autonomous and independent learning practices
98	the graphics/symbols are clear
95	the layout is appealing

[10] Figures rounded to the nearest 0.5 for the purpose of readability.

Satisfaction regarding contents

Respondents were highly satisfied with the contents of the course as shown by their answers to fourteen items that asked about this aspect, summarised in Table 11.

TABLE 11. SUMMARY OF POST-QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES TO ITEMS ASKING ABOUT CONTENT

Post-questionnaire item	% sum	% very satisfied	% satisfied
Clarity and precision of the instructions	**96.94**	34.93	62.01
Usefulness of the listening comprehension activities (ABA films, video lectures...) and exercises	**96.07**	37.55	58.52
Usefulness of the writing exercises	**88.21**	42.36	45.85
Usefulness of the speaking activities and exercises	**89.96**	38.43	51.53
Usefulness of the grammatical explanations (video lectures, interactive grammar tools)	**93.89**	51.97	41.92
Usefulness of the role-play activities and exercises	**85.15**	32.75	52.40
Usefulness of the vocabulary sections	**87.33**	38.86	48.47
General interest and relevance of the topics in the ABA films	**95.2**	41.92	53.28
General interest and relevance of the tasks and exercises	**90.79**	31.58	59.21
Variety of contents and tasks	**91.19**	30.40	60.79
Originality of contents and tasks	**91.19**	30.40	60.79
Using films as the basis (with and without subtitling) to learn English	**97.38**	63.32	34.06
The natural method of ABA English is an effective way to learn	**93.45**	41.92	51.53
Listening to different English accents is useful in the learning process	**86.78**	44.93	41.85

All of the values are above 85% satisfaction. This is evidence of a high degree of learner satisfaction with the ABA English course content and the methodology that goes with it. An added value to the ABA films is the feature that empowers students to watch them with or without subtitled captions. It is noteworthy that students respond favourably, and overwhelmingly so, to all of the post-questionnaire items.

The final section of the post-questionnaire (20 items) is about self-perception of students' EFL progress, their enjoyment of the course, and a request for their suggestions on what aspects of the course might be improved. The findings from the analysis of the sample population's responses are the following. More than half (59%) reported that they found e-learning more motivating than otherwise, and over three quarters (77.5%) felt more comfortable learning online (distance e-learning). Almost nine in ten (88%) said that they enjoyed learning languages online. Taken together, these three figures constitute clear evidence of the learners' high degree of motivation and favourable attitude and their commitment toward completing the paid course, confirmed at the completion of the stipulated time. The fact that 65.48% confirmed that their motivation to learn is influenced by the medium of instruction is difficult to correlate because the answer cannot rule out students who may actually be biased against e-learning, who could likewise be influenced, even though this is unlikely among students who have paid for an e-learning course. As mentioned above, however, expectations, regardless of where they are aimed, can be a powerful force, so those who have positive expectations about e-learning as deduced by the four questionnaire items just mentioned, are somewhere about 70% percent, and, again, this figure is revealing, or symptomatic because it coincides so much with the **71%** figure of improved proficiency by at least one College Semester after completing 24 Units of the ABA English course. Stated from the opposite point of view, there is a coincidence in the percentage of learners who do not take a positive attitude towards e-learning (as comfortable, motivating and/or enjoyable, or as being influenced by the medium) and the amount of learners (29%) who were not able to improve by one College Semester after 24 Units.

Two thirds of the surveyed learners (65.5%) productively used the tools and resources provided by the courseware designers, so this figure also reveals that about a third (34.5%) of the students do not take full advantage of these resources as they should,

although this figure also includes those who simply express no opinion for this item, as well as the ones who claim they have not used them. Nevertheless, all but a few (94%) found it easy to work autonomously / independently, regardless of whether they used all of the tools available to them.

The flip-side of the "expectations" coin is self-assessment, which is a parameter that has gained ground among learning and teaching experts. If expectations (teacher and learner) are a key factor towards progress and performance, self-assessment is just as important in terms of student satisfaction and acceptance of external means of evaluating a learner's progress. Self-assessment and self-awareness are also deemed to be important learning factors. The data revealed in our research describes an undoubtedly favourable picture of learner perception through self-assessment. Personal satisfaction with overall EFL improvement rises as high as 93.5% among ABA students, about the same figure as self-perception of improvement in the specific areas of grammar and vocabulary. However, when it comes to asking about any of "the four skills" (reading, writing, listening and speaking), their satisfaction is clearly lower (about 70% improvement) while 59% are satisfied with how their speaking has improved. There is almost total unanimity (99%) in expressing satisfaction regarding the length of the course covering 24 Units, which means that 3 months is enough time to complete 24 Units, i.e. a language level.

Finally, here is a brief summary of the analysis for the responses given for the open-ended questions. Firstly, and most noticeably, there are no harsh criticisms and no areas where a large number of students are demanding improvement or suggesting shortcomings for the same aspect or feature. For example 24.5% said they would like to see more exercises or content, and this can be interpreted as either "not enough" or "we simply want as much exposure as possible". 20% wished they could interact more with a live teacher or with fellow students through a web-conferencing system. This is not necessarily significant but it is an understandable desire coming from people who are obviously interested in social skills and communicative competences, as is the case of independent language learners.

Finally, to conclude this section, there is actually total unanimity among the sample population (100%) that they will recommend ABA English to a friend.

For a detailed table describing these results, please see Appendix 3.

7. Limitations of the Study

Typical studies of language learning revolve around the four traditionally defined skills (oral and written expression and comprehension). But because modern society, including language-learning technology such as ABA's, is becoming increasingly multimodal and audio-visual, there is a need for language proficiency placement tests that can take into account multimodal communicative competences and skills. The ABA English course is well suited to this type of tuition, through exercises and activities that involve hands-on dubbing and subtitling, whereas WebCAPE does not actually test the use of English in multimodal environments but is still very deeply rooted in monomodal rather than multimodal skills, such as writing on paper rather than writing on screens in different formats, and aural skills (listening/speaking) rather than audio-visual/multimodal skills (watching, voice recording, subtitling) which show integrated polysemiotic and pragmatic skills of language usage and social interaction.

It is still an undeniably positive experience and precedent to have carried out such a study and to benefit from the increased knowledge provided by its output, especially considering that an efficacy study of an EFL online course such as this one is unique and therefore unprecedented. General English language proficiency improvement was measured by an external reliable testing tool and time was controlled and measured objectively. Precisely, this advantage might also be considered a drawback, since the testing system was not tailored to the specific learning tool. This means that there are inevitable gaps on both sides, i.e. aspects of the tests that the course may not cover, and likewise, elements of the ABA English course that are left untested by WebCAPE. ABA English is not a course that is designed to pass third-party tests, such as WebCAPE or TOEFL or Cambridge, as some courses are. So, although ABA English is meant to enable its students to improve their level of English to a general degree of proficiency that makes it perfectly possible (as the evidence shows) for them to pass external language tests, such as Cambridge Certificates, it is not merely aimed at or solely restricted to covering questions that might be asked in such tests. This is probably why there is a visible discrepancy in the figures of passing at least one level 71% and overall satisfaction with ABA English, finding its content useful and relevant, and its navigation easy to use (98%).

It probably also explains the intriguing discrepancy of why nearly half of the students did extremely well, jumping two levels (47%) while 29% percent stayed within the same level. Maybe if the participants had been tested for general English language proficiency improvement by means of an independent test more in tune with ABA English then results would not necessarily have been better but more uniform and conclusions would have been easier to reach and would have stood on more solid grounds (with correlations). Tests are valuable as an independent tool for evaluation in comparing language level progress across different apps and e-learning courses, although it must be said that they do not provide a complete measure of the exact progress of the users for any individual language learning tool.

The number of students in certain age groups prevented a picture of significant percentages. This was particularly the case of learners in the younger age brackets. Students under 45 (divided into four different age groups) made up only 48.6% of the total sample population, with under 18's as the smallest group of all providing just 1.7% of the volunteers. Students aged 45 and older accounted for 51.4%, including 12.4% aged 60 and older. Although age has not revealed itself to be a factor a more balanced distribution of age groups would have been more desirable.

The fact that all participants in the pre- and post- tests and questionnaires were asked to do precisely 24 units means that it is not possible to make claims about how many hours

students using ABA English need to actually jump from one level to the next. Similarly, students were given a three-month period to complete the 24 units, so the data yielded by this study cannot tell us how many students could improve a level over an even shorter period of time. However, because nearly half of the students improved by two levels it seems quite a relevant research question to ask.

Although there seems to be a correlation between language level and difficulty to improve language proficiency by a full level there was an insufficient number of high-level students to say anything too categorical about this or how a finer point may be put on such a correlation. It must also be noted that WebCAPE is better suited for testing lower levels anyway, and that is an important consideration.

8. Conclusions

The results show unequivocally that overall learner satisfaction is extremely high among the sample population of the study. For example, 100% of them reported that they will recommend the course to a friend and 97.4% were satisfied with the use of short films as the pivotal methodological material to learn English through activities and exercises—and evaluation—based on the film input.

Empirical data provided evidence that, after completing 24 units over a three-month period, 71.4% of the learners improved their English language skills by one level, equivalent to a full US College Semester, i.e. studying at an American university for a full term. An additional figure is 47%, the empirically proven amount of students out of the total sample population to progress the equivalent of two College Semesters, according to the improvement of their scores in the WebCAPE EFL pre- and post-tests. These two figures might be said to be the most objective measure of ABA English efficacy over a period of three months, for which students averaged 40 hours to complete 24 units. This answers our first research question, i.e. How effective is the ABA English e-learning course in terms of EFL language improvement over a period of three months?

There are no hard data to correlate variables that might account for the 28.6% who did not improve as much as the majority. However, here are two highly plausible reasons in the absence of irrefutable proof. One can be found in a limitation in the research methodology and the other in reasons of personal profile. The former has to do with the mismatch between WebCAPE design and its emphasis on certain aspects of language, or even on metalinguistic awareness (such as the need to have a thorough drilling in explicitly presented grammatical explanations) and the whole ABA approach based on a more natural, intuitive and communicative approach to language learning and use. In this respect, ABA provides students with ample opportunities to develop intercultural competences and awareness due to the feature of translated and non-translated

subtitles. Such important features of communication and language proficiency improvement are not tested by WebCAPE in any way.

The other possible reason has to do with the nature of the learners' personalities, interests, confidence and concentration[11]. As stated below for research question three, there is a certain correlation between having a clear motivation and making better progress, and likewise (or even more so) for frequent use of ICT in socialising (e.g. being active in social media). So, it seems quite likely, although it remains unproven, that students who progress less remarkably were not motivated enough and/or were less inclined to online, anyway, for other purposes. Even though no direct correlation was found between age and performance, there might be a relation between age and less frequent presence in social media, on the one hand, and possibly a diminished motivation to learn a language for professional reasons, either because such people are already well established in their professional careers, or because they are close to retirement or even retired already.

The second research question (what initial language level improved the most by learning English with ABA English e-learning course?) has been answered above in the discussion in section 5.2, particularly around Figure 2. The findings clearly indicated that learners at lower levels experienced the best results in terms of improvement and more advanced learners progressed more slowly.

The third research question (what variables, such as motivation, bias or demographic ones, may have an influence on language improvement within the scope of this study?) was answered by two variables showing up as factors that affect a learner's progress: one is motivation, as a positive influence; the other one is their use of ICT, the fact that they used technology to socialise and keep in touch with people at least once a week returned the biggest improvement.

Some figures are surprisingly coincidental even if no empirical correlation can be established. For example, the figure showing how many volunteers did not feel they were good at learning a foreign language coincides very much with the amount of students who

[11] Given the on-the-go nature of the course, surrounding noise and distractions are probably a factor worth researching more.

did not progress as well as expected. We do know from well-established research that confidence in one's own abilities and self-perception as a [language] learner are crucial factors towards failing or succeeding as a student.

We can sum up the findings of the post-questionnaire as follows.

Regarding general course features:

Most features are valued extremely positively by the students surveyed, especially in key areas such as ease of use for people with minor computer skills, the usefulness and relevance of the ABA films as of the course contents, including grammar and theory, and, crucially for this kind of course, how much they enjoyed the freedom to organise time in their own way. One of the few items that did not receive such undiluted enthusiasm is reflected in 21% by adding "disagree" (10%) and "neutral" (11%) when asked if they thought the audio is clear and loud enough, and this may have to do with such variables as each student's own online device and its audio features. The only other item where students showed some reservations can be seen in almost 25% "neutral" response and 3.9% "disagreeing" with the idea that the feedback they got what was useful and relevant. As for the other item, this one may also be explained partly by the student's personal expectations as to how and when feedback is given in an online course.

Regarding course content

Every item on this part of the questionnaire receives tremendously high percentage points by adding the "agree" and "strongly agree" responses, most of them comfortably above 90%, both in general EFL features, like "clarity and precision of instructions", and "general interest and relevance of the topics", and also in those features are closer to the core of the ABA natural method, like "using films as the basis to learn English (with and without subtitles)" (97.3% agreeing or strongly agreeing), or "the natural method of ABA English is an effective way to learn" (93.5%).

Regarding self-assessment and personal comments

In this section of the post-questionnaire, too, answers are quite positive in the degree of agreement with positively phrased statements as questionnaire items. So, here, instead

of highlighting all of the positive responses, as done for the other sections, we will stop to look at some potentially interesting coincidences, as mentioned above, that might have some relation with WebCAPE improvement statistics for ABA students, i.e. 71.4% improving by one level as opposed to the remaining 28.6% who did not improve so visibly, and the 47% who jumped two levels, although no correlations can be proven.

More or less coincidental, and/or possible connection with 28.6% of students who did not improve so visibly:

- 37% of respondents were undecided as to whether e-learning is more motivating than traditional language learning.
- 77% agreed or agreed strongly that they felt comfortable learning in an online environment.
- 23.5% were undecided as to whether their motivation to learn is influenced by the medium of instruction.
- 12% did not enjoy learning languages online.
- 23.4% strongly agreed that they preferred a face-to-face course with a teacher in the classroom.
- 81% agreed or strongly agreed that the best way to learn a language is an online course assessed by a teacher.
- 34% admitted (12%) or were undecided (22%) that they had not used ABA's online Campus tools.
- 27% were "undecided" or claimed they had "not improved much" their reading skills. Here it seems relevant to point out the important difference between reading (from) a book, and ABA's natural approach, where reading is often done on subtitles and always on the screen.
- 29% were undecided or thought they had improved their writing skills "somewhat". Here, too, it must be pointed out that writing on the screen is different in many ways to traditional composition exercises. So, both for reading and for writing, it would be very useful to test students through more modern multimodal standards, of multimodal writing or multimodal reading, an aspect that WebCAPE lacks in its present form.

- 29% is also the amount of students who thought they had improved their listening skills “not much” (0.9%) “somewhat” (10.5%) or “undecided” (18%). Again, here it would be important to update testing methodologies to include AV listening (Zabalbeascoa, Sokoli, Torres 2014, *ClipFlair Theoretical Framework*) as a distinct skill.

  These figures must be contrasted with items in the questionnaire that ask about overall satisfaction and self-assessment. For reasons of brevity, now, we will only point out one, albeit a highly representative one: 99% of the students thought that their English had improved after doing the ABA English course, either a lot (21.3%) or a little (77.9%).

Finally, it is important to go back to four revealing issues.

- The overwhelming positive feedback for user satisfaction regardless of improvement according to WebCAPE measures. This probably means that weaker performances from some students are more personal than related to ABA, and that ABA actually does a lot for these people even though it does not show up, for whatever reason, in the tests (which are not infallible and can be revised). For one item in the questionnaire (After doing the ABA course, do you think your English has improved overall?) on self-awareness of improvement, the favourable answers amounted to 99% of the students surveyed.
- The interesting fact that nearly half the sample population jumped two levels. This certainly raises more questions than it answers due to the limitations of the study. Even so, it is encouraging (possibly the most positive empirical result of the whole research project) and it invites further research in order to reveal the ways in which ABA can best prove its efficacy.
- It is undoubtedly more difficult to jump from one level to the next as levels get higher. This has two implications. One is that this is a factor that is true beyond ABA and has to be taken into account in similar efficacy studies carried out on other EFL courses. The other goes back to the 47% of students jumping two levels

and makes their achievement all the more remarkable (in particular for the second jump in level, as it will always be harder than the first).

- There are clearly other skills involved in learning a language than the ones tested by WebCAPE, some of which are actually very well addressed by ABA's natural approach, using audiovisuals and multimodal forms of expression, comprehension and explanations. These skills include, for example, translational skills, and pragmatic communicative competences, which are present in the national curriculum for language learning in many countries already, especially in Europe.

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11. Appendices

Upon request