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## Italki: [www.italki.com](http://www.italki.com)

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Before the advent of and developments in technology, language learners and teachers used to consider the classroom context as the only milieu for learning and teaching. Now, with technological innovations, the classroom is not the only place for teaching and learning. Emphasizing the importance of computers and mobile phones in language learning, Ogata and Yano (2004) suggest that technological devices can fundamentally increase learners' ability "to physically take their own learning environment with them." *Italki*, with its motto, "italki is changing the way the world learns foreign languages," is an ideal website for the purpose of ubiquitous learning, providing ample opportunities for language learners and teachers of any L1 background to learn/teach any L2. Both language teachers and learners can sign up for free on the website and begin teaching/learning a target foreign language. Language learning and teaching in *italki* happens either asynchronously on the website itself in sections like notebook entries, articles, discussions, and language exchange, or synchronously via Skype or other video chat software.

The website has certain distinctive features from which learners can benefit. The first feature is "customized learning" by means of which learners can choose from over 10,000 teachers on the website for one-on-one lessons based on their goals and interests. The second feature is "pay for lessons" which lets the learners only pay per lesson and at the price that meets their budget. Finally, the "ubiquitous learning" feature enables the learners to take online lessons at the time and place that suits them.

Learners can take their lessons by going through a number of steps. After signing up on the website and completing their profile information, they can choose a teacher to schedule a lesson with based on a number of criteria. Students can find teachers by their names, the languages they teach, their availability, their hourly rate, and whether they are professionals or community tutors. Online teachers can also be chosen based on whether they are advanced non-native users or native speakers of a given language and based on the levels (i.e. beginner, intermediate, advanced) they teach and the courses (i.e. ESP, EAP, business English, etc.) they

offer. After choosing a teacher, students can take their lessons on Skype or other video chat software.

The website also provides some extra options for both teachers and students. For example, the teachers' performance can be evaluated by their students. Therefore, those teachers who have received more positive reviews by their previous students have a higher chance of lesson requests by other students. *Italki* also provides teachers with both professional development and business opportunities. They can specify a fee in USD for every hour of instruction they provide and a fee for a half hour trial instruction. Prospective teachers have to upload a sample video of their language instruction on the website to showcase their teaching skills. These videos will be available to student users of the website and help them choose their ideal teacher. Students can also check the information on teachers' profiles which include the tuition fee they have specified, their Curriculum Vitae, number of lessons they have given, the languages they can speak and teach, the specialties they have, and their available times in a calendar based on the viewers' time zone.

There are two types of teachers in *italki*; professional teachers and community tutors. The former are those with certificates or degrees in education (uploaded and publicly available to student users) while the latter are those who are only passionate about teaching and can only provide speaking practices. An advantage professional teachers have over community teachers is that apart from teaching lessons, professional teachers can prepare sale packages of learning for students on different topics they are skillful to teach, like conversational English, job interview preparation, essay writing, proofreading, legal English, etc.

Additionally, *italki* has four unique sections, namely, notebook entries, articles, discussions, and language exchange, that can benefit both learners and teachers. Teachers on *italki* can share their pedagogical experiences and challenges with each other by adding notebook entries. The article section contains articles written and shared by the teachers about the techniques they have used in their instructions, the innovations in their daily practices, the challenges they have overcome, etc. Article titles like "10 study abroad tips you need to know," "10 fancy sentence forms to use in your essays," and "master four tones to perfect your Chinese" are but only a few of the titles shared by the users. New teachers are encouraged to be both consumers of such articles written by other teachers, and contributors by providing their own insights about language teaching. Moreover, in the discussion

section, teachers can ask their questions, start discussions on their challenges and invite other teachers to contribute to their discussions. On top of that, students can also share their own experiences of language learning, the personal strategies they use, the preferences they have, and their recommendations with other learners in this section. Finally, in the language exchange section, both learners and teachers can find a language partner to whom they can teach their native language and from whom they can learn a foreign language.

All in all, *italki* has many advantages among which are its cost-effectiveness as compared to private face-to-face tutors or many offline schools. Also, the learning convenience it provides is precious since learners can decide to learn anytime, anywhere regardless of the constraints of time and place. Most importantly, learners can take their time and learn at their own pace, and since the lessons are one-to-one between the teacher and the learner, the anxiety created as a result of the classroom environment and peer pressures is significantly reduced. Besides, *italki* can provide professional development opportunities even for those teachers who are teaching at schools and institutes as well. Such teachers (who may not necessarily be *italki* members) can improve their teaching practices by drawing from *italki* teachers' experiences, challenges, techniques, and strategies in sections like notebook entries and articles and put them into practice in their own classrooms. At the same time, *italki* can complement learning that happens in the classroom by providing the learners with ample out-of-class opportunities for practice (e.g. in the language exchange section). Furthermore, the learners can benefit from the wide range of courses available (e.g. EAP, business English, legal English etc.) along with their language classrooms at schools or institutes where such courses are not usually provided for the interested learners. Moreover, *italki* can also be used as a mobile phone app, available for free download both in Android and IOS versions. Its IOS version is compatible with iPhone, Ipad, and iPod touch.

Among the shortcomings of the app, based on reviewers' comments, is its constant requirement to log in every time you close the app. Besides, deciding on whether a teacher is qualified enough is not an easy job as many teachers have not provided enough information as to their skills. The authenticity of the teachers' certificates and CVs is also difficult to verify. Moreover, what *italki* teachers lack are some synchronous E-learning tools like online whiteboards, collaborative editing and proofreading tools and public pads which allow for better interaction and

save classroom materials. Finally, another downside of the app/website might be the technical/technological failures that may disrupt teaching/learning, and the fact that learning styles and strategies of some learners may not well dovetail with such methods of learning.

### Reference

Ogata, H., & Yano, Y. (2004). Context-aware support for computer-supported ubiquitous learning. In *Wireless and Mobile Technologies in Education, 2004. Proceedings. The 2nd IEEE International Workshop on* (pp. 27-34). IEEE.

### About the Reviewer

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