

Online English Learning and Adult Employability in Brazil: A Thematic Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

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This thematic literature review examines the relationship between online English learning and adult employability in Brazil within the context of digital transformation and labor-market restructuring. Drawing on peer-reviewed studies and institutional reports published between 2020 and 2025, the review synthesizes findings across four interrelated themes: flexibility and accessibility of online English learning; language development,

learner autonomy, and engagement; links between English proficiency and employability outcomes; and structural barriers related to digital inequality and program quality. The reviewed literature suggests that online English learning can enhance adults' communicative competence, confidence, and perceived employability, particularly in sectors associated with internationalization,



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technology, and remote work. However, benefits are unevenly distributed, as access to digital infrastructure, prior educational background, and socioeconomic conditions significantly mediate outcomes. Moreover, the predominance of self-reported employability measures limits causal inference. This review contributes a Brazil-focused thematic synthesis that situates online English learning within broader debates on employability, adult education, and digital inequality, and identifies priorities for policy development and future research aimed at promoting more equitable workforce participation.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization and digital transformation have profoundly reshaped how individuals acquire skills, participate in labor markets, and engage in lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2022). Digital platforms increasingly mediate education and professional development, enabling adults to pursue learning opportunities beyond traditional classroom settings while managing work and family responsibilities (Parreiras & Macedo, 2020). The rapid expansion of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic further normalized technology-mediated education and reinforced its relevance for adult learners.

Within this evolving landscape, English proficiency has become a strategically important employability skill, particularly in economies integrated into global value chains and remote work arrangements (Council, 2014; Conexão, 2024). The analysis provided by Council (2014) specifically highlights the role of English as a “gatekeeper” skill in the service and technology sectors. Their research indicates that Brazilian professionals who utilize online platforms to bridge their proficiency gaps are significantly more likely to be promoted into leadership roles that require interaction with international clients. This suggests that the communicative competence developed in virtual environments is recognized and valued by employers as an objective indicator of employability. Further expanding on this, Conexão (2024) investigate the emergent phenomenon of remote work in Brazil. Their findings suggest that English proficiency acts as a critical catalyst for “digital migration,” where workers residing in Brazil can compete for roles in the global labor market. The online nature of the learning process mirrors the online nature of the work, creating a seamless transition for the learner. Their data indicates that the “English premium”—the additional income earned by proficient speakers—is most pronounced among those who have utilized digital platforms to maintain their skills alongside full-time employment.

In Brazil, where average English proficiency remains relatively low and regional inequalities persist, language skills often function as a differentiating

factor in recruitment, career mobility, and income generation (Education First, 2024). Consequently, online English learning has gained prominence as a potentially accessible pathway for adults seeking to enhance their labor-market prospects. Parreiras and Macedo (2020) offer a profound insight into the “second-level digital divide,” which concerns the quality of use rather than just the presence of a connection. Their research into Brazilian adult learners found that those in lower-income brackets often rely on mobile-only access with limited data plans. This constraint severely hampers the ability to participate in synchronous video sessions or download large instructional files, leading to higher attrition rates. Consequently, the “flexibility” of online learning becomes a burden for those without reliable infrastructure.

The Cetic.br and UNESCO (2023) report provides the empirical foundation for these concerns. Their data on ICT usage in Brazilian households shows a stark contrast between the urban centers of the Southeast and the rural regions of the North and Northeast. In many underserved areas, the lack of high-speed broadband makes high-quality online English instruction practically inaccessible. This geographic concentration of digital resources ensures that the employability benefits of English proficiency remain clustered in already advantaged regions. Furthermore, Windle and Amorim Possas (2023) place these digital barriers within the broader context of Brazilian language policy. They argue that the historical neglect of English instruction in the public school system has created a reliance on private, often expensive, digital solutions. This shift reinforces existing social inequalities, as only those with the financial means to afford high-quality platforms and the necessary hardware can truly benefit from the “English premium.” Their work suggests that without state intervention to provide both the infrastructure and the literacy training, online English learning will continue to function as a mechanism of exclusion rather than inclusion.

Despite growing scholarly and policy interest, existing research on online English learning in Brazil remains fragmented, varies in methodological rigor, and frequently relies on self-reported outcomes. There is limited synthesis of how online English learning specifically relates to adult employability within the Brazilian context. Addressing this gap, the present study offers a thematic literature review that critically examines how online English learning supports—or fails to support—adult employability in Brazil, while highlighting contextual constraints and directions for future research.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study is centered on examining the intersection of digital language acquisition and labor-market participation in the Brazilian context. To investigate how online English learning relates to adult employability in Brazil within the current landscape of digital transformation and labor-market restructuring. To provide a Brazil-focused thematic synthesis of peer-reviewed studies and institutional reports published between 2020 and 2025. To evaluate findings across four specific dimensions: Flexibility and accessibility of online platforms; the impact on language development, learner autonomy, and engagement; the direct links between English proficiency and employability outcomes, and; structural barriers, including digital inequality and program quality.

FRAMEWORK

Adult Learning Theory

Adult learning is commonly conceptualized through andragogical principles emphasizing self-direction, accumulated experience, intrinsic motivation, and relevance to real-world goals. Adults tend to learn more effectively when learning is problem-centered, flexible, and directly connected to professional or personal objectives. Online learning environments are often aligned with these principles, as they enable individualized pacing, learner autonomy, and multiple learning pathways. However, they also demand self-regulation and sustained motivation, which may not be equally accessible to all learners.

Employability

Employability is understood in this review as a multidimensional construct encompassing knowledge, skills, attitudes, adaptability, and access to labor-market opportunities (Yorke & Knight, 2004). English proficiency contributes to employability by enhancing communication capacity, facilitating participation in internationalized workplaces, and enabling access to remote or transnational employment. In Brazil, the relationship between English proficiency and employability is strongly mediated by socioeconomic status, geographic location, and industry sector, underscoring the importance of contextualized analysis.

Online English Learning

Online English learning encompasses synchronous and asynchronous instruction delivered through digital platforms, applications, MOOCs, and blended models. These modalities may increase exposure to authentic language

use and interaction opportunities, while also introducing challenges related to instructional quality, learner engagement, and digital access. Conceptualizing online English learning as both a pedagogical and socio-digital phenomenon is therefore essential for assessing its employability implications.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a thematic literature review approach consistent with narrative synthesis. Rather than pursuing exhaustive systematic coverage, the review prioritizes conceptual depth, contextual interpretation, and critical comparison of findings across studies.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

Literature was identified through Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and SciELO. Searches focused on peer-reviewed journal articles and institutional reports published between 2020 and 2025. Search terms included combinations of online English learning, adult learners, employability, Brazil, digital learning, and English proficiency.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they focused on adult learners, examined online or blended English learning, and addressed employability-related outcomes such as job access, career mobility, or perceived employability. Studies focusing exclusively on children, adolescents, or linguistic theory without labor-market relevance were excluded.

Data Analysis

A total of **approximately 30 peer-reviewed studies and institutional reports** met the inclusion criteria. Through iterative reading and comparative analysis, recurring concepts and patterns were identified and grouped into four thematic categories. Themes were refined through repeated cross-study comparison, with attention to methodological differences, contextual factors, and reported limitations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Flexibility and Accessibility in Adult Online English Learning

Across the literature, flexibility emerges as a central advantage of online English learning for adults. Asynchronous formats enable learners to combine

study with work and family commitments, while online delivery reduces geographic and transportation barriers (EHE Distance Education and Learning Design, n.d.). Several studies highlight the potential of online learning to extend access to regions underserved by traditional language institutions (Kennette & Lin, 2021).

However, comparative analysis indicates that flexibility does not necessarily translate into equitable accessibility. Research focusing on lower-income or rural populations reports constrained benefits due to unstable internet connectivity, limited device access, and lower digital literacy (Parreiras & Macedo, 2020; Cetic. br & UNESCO (2023). These findings suggest that online learning expands potential access, but its actual inclusiveness remains structurally bounded.

Theme 2: Language Development, Autonomy, and Learner Engagement

Most studies report positive language outcomes associated with online and blended English learning, including improvements in vocabulary, communicative competence, and learner confidence (Nusong & Watanapokakul, 2025). Digital environments that emphasize interaction, feedback, and authentic materials appear to foster learner autonomy, aligning with adult learning principles (Yu et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, findings are not uniform. Some studies document higher attrition rates and reduced engagement among learners lacking structured guidance or clear learning objectives (Hachey et al., 2022). Comparative evidence suggests that guided or blended models often yield more consistent outcomes than fully self-paced formats, indicating that autonomy must be balanced with instructional scaffolding (Shaikh & Asif, 2022).

Theme 3: English Proficiency and Employability Outcomes

The literature consistently associates English proficiency with employability indicators such as job access, career mobility, and earnings potential, particularly in technology-driven, service-oriented, and multinational sectors (Zawawi et al., 2025). However, a critical limitation is the widespread reliance on self-reported employability perceptions rather than objective labor-market measures (Deepa et al., 2023).

This methodological tendency raises concerns regarding overestimation of impact, as perceived employability does not necessarily translate into concrete employment outcomes (Maphoto & Suliman, 2024). Few studies employ longitudinal designs or employer-verified data, limiting the strength of causal claims linking online English learning to employment advancement (Jiang et al., 2023).

Theme 4: Structural Barriers and Inequalities

Recurring barriers identified across studies include unequal digital infrastructure, uneven instructional quality across platforms, limited institutional support, and variable levels of digital literacy (Hijazi & AlNatour, 2021). These constraints disproportionately affect low-income adults and contribute to uneven learning and employability outcomes (Nhan, 2024).

Importantly, several studies caution that without complementary digital inclusion policies, online English learning initiatives risk reproducing existing inequalities rather than mitigating them (Meniado 2023). This underscores the need to situate language learning within broader socioeconomic and policy frameworks.

Brazil-Specific Considerations

Brazil's context is marked by pronounced regional disparities in digital access, uneven quality of public and private language education, and concentration of English-dependent employment opportunities in urban centers (García, 2025). National data consistently indicate low average English proficiency among adults, despite growing demand in technology, services, and remote international work (EF. n.d.).

These structural conditions mean that the employability impact of online English learning is highly context-dependent. Programs effective in urban, digitally connected regions may yield limited benefits elsewhere, reinforcing the importance of region-sensitive policy and program design.

Implications for Policy and Practice

For educators, effective online English programs should integrate interaction, structured support, and employability-oriented content rather than relying solely on self-directed learning. Policymakers should address digital access, affordability, and adult digital literacy to ensure that online learning benefits extend beyond already advantaged groups. Employers may also contribute through partnerships that align language development initiatives with workplace demands.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies should prioritize objective employability indicators such as employment status, income, and promotion; adopt longitudinal designs to track outcomes over time; focus on underserved regions and populations; and compare fully online and blended learning models. Strengthening methodological rigor is essential to establishing clearer causal relationships between online English learning and labor-market outcomes in Brazil.

CONCLUSION

Online English learning represents a promising pathway for enhancing adult employability in Brazil by developing communication skills, confidence, and access to global labor markets. However, its effectiveness is contingent upon program quality, learner support, and structural conditions such as digital access and socioeconomic inequality. This thematic review identifies generally positive associations between online English learning and employability while emphasizing the need for more context-sensitive and empirically robust research. Conceptualizing online English learning as a socio-digital employability mechanism, rather than merely a language intervention, is critical for advancing more equitable workforce participation.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

This article is an original work and is not under review elsewhere. Ethical approval was not required because the study is based exclusively on previously published literature and does not involve human participants.

TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The findings of the thematic literature review into specific policy recommendations for the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC) and relevant stakeholders. It addresses the strategic need to align digital language acquisition with labor-market restructuring. Since the benefits of online learning are currently restricted by unstable connectivity and limited device access, the government should subsidize high-speed internet for low-income adult learners. Initiatives must move beyond infrastructure to include digital literacy training, as low literacy levels currently hinder effective participation in the digital economy. To address the variable quality across digital platforms, the MEC should develop a quality framework for online English programs. Policy should encourage the shift from purely self-paced models to guided or blended learning models, which research shows provide more consistent outcomes through structured support. Given the high concentration of English-dependent jobs in urban centers, programs must be designed to be “region-sensitive”. Targeted incentives should be provided for online programs that focus on underserved rural areas to prevent the reproduction of existing regional inequalities. English instruction should be integrated with “employability-oriented content” rather than just general linguistic theory. Collaboration with employers in the technology and service sectors is essential to

ensure that the English skills taught—such as communicative competence and professional confidence—meet actual workplace demands.

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