Arist

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PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Type</th>
<th>Web-based, text-messaging course builder</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language(s)</td>
<td>English, but the app allows any language for course content. The course for this review teaches American Sign Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Novice to advanced, all ages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Create or take text-messaging courses on any topic. Reading translation, multiple-choice, one-word answer, open answer, vocabulary learning, receptive practice (listening/watching), comprehension, interactivity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media Format</td>
<td>Website, compatible with SMS, WhatsApp, with other platforms coming soon: Slack, Teams, Messenger, email</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operating System(s)</td>
<td>Web-based, iOS, Android</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hardware Requirements</td>
<td>Web-based, cross-platform, mobile device, SMS capable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Software or Hardware</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>Arist.co provides information on creating, launching, and tracking courses at <a href="https://www.arist.co/how-it-works">https://www.arist.co/how-it-works</a>. The company offers resources for creators, including an ROI calculator, white papers, and an AI course creator linked at <a href="https://www.arist.co/blog">https://www.arist.co/blog</a>. Case studies provide website visitors and potential adopters with specific examples of how teachers use text-messaging courses. Case studies are available at <a href="https://www.arist.co/case-studies">https://www.arist.co/case-studies</a></td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<th>Price</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The website runs on a subscription model and is scalable. It provides discounts for bulk enrollments, non-profits, and K–12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It also provides two payment models:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• student enrollment/pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• teacher/institution enrollment/pay</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arist.co handles payments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starter: free (first 50 learners per month are free), thereafter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$9 per learner/month</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth: $12 per learner/month</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enterprise: custom pricing</td>
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<tr>
<td>The website also offers text-message course-building services</td>
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<tr>
<td>Per course: custom pricing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content subscription: custom pricing</td>
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(All information gathered on June 15, 2022)

**General Description**

Arist.co ([https://www.arist.co](https://www.arist.co)) is a website that delivers text-messaging courses. A text-message course allows students to text back and forth using a computer app delivering teacher-created written and media-based content. In addition to content delivery, teachers can ask questions and create interactive exercises that students can respond to, and receive automated responses and reminders if they do not respond. Students participate by replying to the text message. Once the student texts back, they receive a new text containing immediate feedback and more content or another prompt to keep the course moving. Arist allows teachers to create interactive text-messaging courses and monitor student progress through the teacher dashboard.

Teachers can access the course builder page to write and design customized courses. Teachers can design lessons and deliver specific content according to a chosen preset schedule. Teachers can also decide the number of days a course lasts, and which questions to ask on a given day. In addition to webinars, podcasts, and articles, Arist provides “Arist’s Writing Guide” linked to the course builder dashboard to help teachers get started with building content and exercises quickly. Text messages can include an image (e.g., a company or school logo) as a header for each course, which will appear at the top of each text-message series, delineating each day’s work with a solid visual break in
the text stream. The content of each text can include written text, images, gifs, links to external websites, including YouTube, and emojis.

In addition to delivering learning content, the course can quiz users via text messaging. Question types currently offered include (1) multiple-choice, (2) one-word answer, and (3) open-ended questions. Question prompts support website links and emojis. Participants can respond to questions by replying to the text-message prompts and receive detailed feedback tailored to each possible answer. Student answers are available for instructor review through the administration “Analytics” tab which records course data.

Bringing the courses to an audience is easy, with many delivery options, including bulk uploads, embedding in websites or learning management systems (LMSs), or by sharing a link. Each delivery option has appeal, depending on the course purpose and teacher preference. Using Arist analytics, instructors can track courses, delivery, learners’ information, and responses. Teachers can also add administrators, such as co-teachers and teaching assistants.

Enrollment in courses is quick and easy for students. Arist provides different payment options, including payment by institutions/businesses or student purchases. Arist handles all the payment processing for teachers. Free-to-student courses have an easy onboarding screen that asks students to enter an email address, create a password, and choose a time to receive texts daily. Students can change delivery times as needed to accommodate schedule changes. Courses for sale require the user to enter a credit card number to gain immediate access to the course.

Evaluation

Technological Features
The back end of the course builder is tidy, and the course-building process is highly intuitive. The website does not require any plug-ins, downloads, or extensions to function, but it does require internet access. The website does not offer a social media login. Instead, users must use an email and create a password to set up an account for both the creator and learner roles. Account creation and limited trials are free for teachers and students. Teachers can establish a repository of courses using the “Create Classroom” button. From the classroom, dashboard creators can access the “Course Builder,” “User Enrollment,” “In-Depth Analytics,” “Support,” “Integrations,” “Admin List,” and other settings. The course creation process is mostly clear, but the website is confusing, with an extra step going from “draft” to “pending” to “published” course. Overall, the course creation, classroom creation, and publication processes are easy to navigate.
When creating a new course, a teacher can name the course, provide the author’s name, select the course category, provide a course description, upload a logo, and edit the activation message learners will receive when they initiate the course (see Figure 1).

The “Course Builder” interface is very clean, and Arist provides some training and guidance documents to help new creators learn strategies for developing text-message courses. However, the app has some serious limitations regarding the media aspects. Unlike sending a link from phone to phone, videos and gifs do not load automatically. The first image or gif at the top of the text-message thread loads automatically, but any videos or gifs that appear within the course prompts or subsequent questions do not load in the text-message field. For some language courses, this may not be a serious limitation. Still, media struggles are a serious obstacle for teaching languages with a high visual requirement, such as American Sign Language (ASL). Rather than loading the video or gif directly into the text-message stream, the links open a browser to display the media (see Figure 2). Switching back and forth is extremely cumbersome and hinders a text-message course’s most appealing aspects, which are their ease of use and efficiency.

**Pedagogical Features**

Arist has both pedagogical advantages and drawbacks. The pedagogical advantages and drawbacks became apparent during the building, teaching, and administration of the Arist course used for this review. This review focuses on an ASL text-messaging course built as a proof of concept for students to learn the manual alphabet. Arist is appealing because existing mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) tools for ASL teaching are limited: “there are few examples of mobile apps that go beyond basic vocabulary review capabilities
and capitalize on the more interactive approach that is recommended in the literature” (Parton, 2014, p. 16). Arist presents a unique opportunity to create a MALL tool for ASL that provides affordances other mobile applications lack, in particular customization using outside media.

So, the ability to use custom media content is a major affordance. Instructors can include video content through YouTube, gif support, and interactive exchanges facilitated by the question-and-answer features. The variety of media options and potential activities sets Arist apart from other mobile learning apps available for ASL. For example, Sign Languages of the World (Parton, 2014) and SMARTSign (Weaver & Starner, 2012) limit the scope of the apps to vocabulary and basic phrase learning. In addition, some MALL tools for ASL are incompatible across platforms—some are only available on iOS and not Android, or vice versa. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, most ASL learning apps are not fully customizable on a platform compatible with any mobile device that supports SMS.

Another important affordance of Arist is daily contact, which seems particularly well suited to language learning. The Foreign Service Institute (2022) suggests it takes anywhere between 575 hours (category I languages) and 2,200 hours (category IV languages) for an English speaker to become proficient in a
foreign language. Research suggests that ASL may fall into category IV, requiring around 1,100 hours of study to reach general proficiency (Kemp, 1998). The rigorous nature of language learning means every minute spent engaging with a language matters. Providing daily contact with students through text messaging allows students to accrue additional time for learning—time that may help them become more proficient, while also providing motivation and engagement to encourage course persistence.

Some other highlights of Arist include its great accessibility, since cell phones and cellular data are widely available to Americans and abroad (Daso, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021). Also, Arist boasts high completion rates. The founders explain that they worked with students in Yemen to provide access to education in areas with limited internet access, but which did have cell phone coverage (Daso, 2021). This experience laid the groundwork for text-message courses as an accessible tool. In addition, Arist reports a completion and satisfaction rate of over 90% (Daso, 2021). These two factors make Arist an appealing teaching tool. Other research supports the efficacy of the Arist model, which delivers small amounts of content at a time.

For example, one study found that delivering “bite-sized” learning materials via WhatsApp improved student outcomes (So, 2016). The researcher used messages sent via WhatsApp as a supplement to regular classroom instruction. The study results suggest that achieving significant learning objectives is possible by delivering short instructional content blocks via messaging to mobile devices. Arist provides the same type of bite-sized content delivery, but it also provides additional features for tailored language teaching. Specifically, Arist includes a quizzing feature to facilitate student–content interaction. The quizzing tool provides three different question types for teachers and participants: multiple-choice, one-word answer, and open-ended questions. Participants receive immediate feedback when they text an answer. Teachers can build an entire course day by day and then drip content, questions, and responses that instruct and quiz learners (see Figure 3). After the initial investment of time to build the course, instructors can use the course repeatedly.

Arist provides several technological and pedagogical affordances. However, Arist has at least one major drawback: interaction limitations. Bernard et al. (2009) identified three types of interaction in online learning spaces: Student-to-teacher, student-to-content, and student-to-student interactions. Arist effectively implements student-to-content interactions, but it lacks both student-to-teacher and student-to-student interactions. This lack of person-to-person interaction can affect the quality of online instruction (Abrami et al., 2011; Anderson, 2003; Bernard et al., 2009; Popovich & Neel, 2005). Even though the course appears to have student-to-teacher interactions, preconfigured texts limit potential responses. Students feel like they are interacting
with the teacher, but the program is not in real time, and students cannot diverge from the preset curriculum. Spontaneous interactions and individualized learning opportunities are impossible.

In addition to limited student-to-teacher interaction, student-to-student interaction is missing entirely. Lack of student-to-student interaction may impede achievement of learning outcomes (Picciano, 1998), negatively influence student satisfaction and sense of community (Bolliger, 2004; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Swan, 2002), and prevent students from learning from each other, an identified difficulty in online learning spaces (Wut & Xu, 2021). Arist addresses student-to-content interaction extensively, but because the app limits teacher-to-student interactions and lacks student-to-student interactions, Arist is not pedagogically robust as a standalone learning experience. However, Arist may be an appropriate element of an online course if matched with other learning materials that address the interaction gaps. For instance, student-to-teacher and student-to-student interactions could occur in another LMS that provides opportunities for tailored teacher comments and discussion boards, while using Arist for content delivery or content reinforcement.

**Teacher Fit (Approach, Affordances, and Limitations)**

One of the great things about Arist is its flexibility. Teachers can develop the courses using the best approach for the specific content they want to deliver. The flip side of this flexibility is that it requires the teacher to be both a content
expert and a content design and development expert. The Arist application is not designed specifically for language teaching. Nevertheless, the app has affordances that are particularly well suited to language learning, such as frequent learner contact, the immediacy of feedback, the perception of authenticity, and reusable courses. Arist claims that the process is quick. However, course building is time-consuming. Even though the courses are reusable, they require substantial time to build. The time commitment is much like other LMS and quiz-building apps.

One significant negative aspect is the price. Arist is very pricey to use on a large scale. It might be reasonable for a teacher or institution to pay for a low enrollment teaching load. With limited funding, as is often the case for schools, funding may be unavailable. In some cases, teachers may ask students to pay the $3/semester enrollment fee, but in many cases teachers may want to avoid burdening students with the cost, even a minimal one. Another area for improvement is the need for language-specific materials. In the case of ASL, many supplemental materials are necessary to make Arist work. Integration of gifs and YouTube is not seamless and, for some purposes, may make the text-messaging benefit debatable, for example in areas with limited internet and, therefore, lower video streaming quality.

Learner Fit (Design)

Despite the many affordances of MALL, “namely flexibility, continuity, accessibility, and adaptability” (Hoi, 2020, p. 2), ultimately, the student experience matters most. How the student experience plays out for a text-messaging course may mirror the most positive experiences reported for MALL learning, but it is not guaranteed. Hoi (2020) contests:

Without a positive attitude toward the use of mobile devices in language learning as well as a critical awareness of the educational affordances and the effectiveness of MALL, learners may be reluctant, and ultimately resistant to that learning approach. (p. 2)

One way to maximize a positive experience is to coach students on choosing the right time to receive text messages. If messages arrive when the learner is busy, the text may be ignored and not revisited. Reminding students who are not participating that they can adjust the receiving time of the messages might help students persist and so improve course retention. If the institution or instructor picks up the costs, the cost will not directly affect the learner. However, if the learner must absorb the cost, this might be an enrollment deterrent or create stress for the learner, if prohibitive. Alternatively, students who pay for the technology may participate more because of the financial investment.
Arist has taken steps to ensure a positive student experience from the outset. Registration is easy—students use a link to enroll if the instructor or institution pays for the course. Alternatively, if students pay, they use a link to join the class and receive a prompt to enter a credit card for the purchase. The course delivery is via SMS text messaging and is very user-friendly. Cell phones are highly accessible, with 97% of Americans reporting ownership of a cell phone and 85% reporting ownership of a smartphone (Pew Research Center, 2021). Using SMS means that a smartphone is not required, only a cell phone of some type. Nearly all students can use SMS easily, and students who cannot are a rarity, making the courses highly accessible and intuitive. If a rare instance arises of a student who does not own a cell phone, the materials could be made accessible in an alternative format.

Text messaging lends a sense of immediacy and authenticity because of the delivery mode. Text messaging is a form of communication many people use daily for authentic communication; using the same avenue for learning another language lends a sense of authenticity to the interactions. The use of emojis and rapid responses possible via text provides additional engagement (see Figure 4).

![Example of a multiple-choice question using emojis and text.]

![Student Response- multiple choice]

![Detailed feedback based on student response.]

**Figure 4:** The use of emojis, rapid responses to texts, and detailed feedback lends a sense of authenticity to the user’s experience.
Significantly, the reality that authentic communication is not truly occurring can cloud any sense of authenticity. Students interact with teacher-generated content delivered by a computer program. Students do not interact with the teacher or other students. The ability to suspend disbelief makes the illusion of authentic communication possible, but it may only happen for some.

Summary

Arist is a promising concept for language course delivery, but building content and activities requires substantial work. The application itself needs work. Although the application is fully functioning, some elements are still in the beta phase, and others do not work perfectly. For example, the class preview simulator does not reflect how the course looks when delivered to a device. The learning approach of constant contact through text messaging may appeal to or benefit only some students. The quiz functionality is limited, particularly for question types and media handling. The text-messaging course seems well suited to student-to-content aspects of language learning, such as exposure to vocabulary, short content lessons, and review segments. However, the lack of student-to-teacher and student-to-student interactions limits authentic communication and community building, vital aspects of language learning. It would be worthwhile for the developers to continue refining integration capabilities and enhanced media handling to create more seamless user experiences, and to consider expanding functionality to include opportunities for authentic interactions among class participants.

References


So, S. (2016). Mobile instant messaging support for teaching and learning in higher education. *Internet and Higher Education*, 31, 32–42. [https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2016.06.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2016.06.001)


**Producer Details**

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**Reviewer Information**

Hannah Cheloha is pursuing a doctoral degree in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics at Arizona State University. She specializes in teaching American Sign Language as a second language and computer- and mobile-assisted language learning. She is currently the ASL program coordinator, an assistant teaching professor, and an online curriculum developer for online ASL classes in the School of International Letters and Cultures at ASU.