



THE COMPARISON OF MOST POPULAR MOBILE APPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract:

Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) stimulates students' motivation and improves their foreign language skills. The primary aim of this paper is to compare the most frequently used mobile applications for learning foreign languages, primarily English, by students in Serbia. Additionally, we wanted to reflect on students' views and experiences. Qualitative research, in the form of a focus group, was conducted in order to determine the clearest possible picture of students' views concerning the usefulness of different language apps, primarily Duolingo, HelloTalk and WordUp app. The respondents are Singidunum University students who voluntarily agreed to participate in this research. The results showed that innovative ways of perfecting foreign languages, such as mobile applications, are captivating for students. In addition, they highly value visual and engaging materials. They believe Duolingo is the best app for improving vocabulary and grammar, whereas HelloTalk is an ideal app for developing speaking skills. WordUp is recommended as a dictionary and as a revolutionary app for learning new English words. Students agreed that the combination of all three mobile applications would be optimal, depending on their language level and learning goals.

Keywords:

Mobile Applications Comparison, Foreign Language Learning, Duolingo, HelloTalk, WordUp.

INTRODUCTION

When talking about foreign language learning and teaching, besides various learning strategies and second language acquisition approaches, factors such as personal learning styles, motivation, attitudes towards learning and language anxiety should be taken into consideration as well [1]. Teachers have a vital role in a learning process [2]. They are believed to be educators, leaders and role models with a sense of responsibility, independence and authority in their classrooms. However, outside the classrooms, students must find ways to improve motivation and develop their own learning styles.

With the rapid development of foreign language learning applications and popularity of various powerful mobile devices among students, they have become increasingly interested in multiple learning benefits the apps can provide. Mobile assisted language learning (MALL) is

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considered to be an efficient language learning tool used by both teachers and learners. It is a teaching method which uses mobile phone technology in order to encourage learner autonomy as it enables students, after they receive initial scaffolding by the teacher, to take responsibility for their own learning [3]. It stimulates students' motivation, their engagement as well as upgrades all language skills. Having such powerful devices available anytime, anyplace, provides tremendous opportunities for educational use. Nowadays, the tertiary learners face the challenge of which of the thousands of educational apps they should choose.

Spending more time at home due to corona virus related lockdowns or social distancing has made learning a foreign language in traditional contexts even more challenging. The popularity of language-learning apps has boomed around the world during the coronavirus lockdowns. US firm Duolingo says that its new user numbers soared in 2020, especially in the UK. It says that globally they were up 67% compared with 2019, while in the UK they shot up by 132%, almost double the worldwide average [4]. From apps to podcasts, COVID-19 has forced language learning online.

The advantages of these apps, which enable you to brush up on a new language for yourself, are numerous. Firstly, most of them is free to download. Depending on your learning goals, the apps can help you build your vocabulary in a target language, develop proper grammar or even become more fluent. Even seemingly similar, each app has a different focus. The apps simply accommodate your personal style and suit your current needs. Some people are visual learners. Some prefer audio. Some enjoy games and drills. Due to the fact that everyone learns in a different way, you may want to try using several apps at once.

According to Forbes, the best language learning app overall is Babbel, whereas Duolingo offers the best free language lessons [5]. Bloomberg journalists, who have tested and reviewed five most popular language apps, consider Duolingo to be the best one for a long-term commitment [6]. The results of all previous studies we have conducted on language learning mobile applications showed that students want to learn foreign languages in an innovative and fun way [7] [8] [9] [10] [11]. Students' enthusiasm even leads us to believe that mobile applications for learning foreign languages should be introduced into curricula.

2. MOBILE APPS FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

Recently, mobile learning apps exploded in popularity and there are so many of them that it seems a real challenge to narrow it down to the best one for you. The most frequently used internet platforms and mobile applications are Duolingo, Babbel, Rosseta Stone, Busuu and Memrise [12]. Duolingo is mainly used in European and South American countries while Rosseta Stone is very popular in the USA. In Russia and Asian countries, Duolingo and Babbel proved to be the most attractive ones. Interestingly, Babbel has the lowest departure rate. The best app for learning on the go is Pimsleur, an app that has an average rating of 4.7 of 5 stars. Pimsleur is specifically designed to help you learn vocabulary and listening comprehension quickly by listening to native speakers [13]. Kahoot! should also be mentioned as a game app which draws attention to the classroom and strongly encourages interaction. Six billion players have played on the Kahoot! platform cumulatively since its launch in 2013 [14].

2.1. WordUp

WordUp is a mobile application for learning new English words and improving vocabulary in an innovative and fun way. There are numerous vocabulary applications, such as Vocab1, Vocabulary.com, Vocabulary Builder App and VocabMagic. However, WordUp is a unique educational app due to the fact that it has ranked all the words in the English language in order of how useful they are by using Computer-Assisted Corpus Analysis. Therefore, every user makes the most of their learning time because they focus on what matters the most [11]. This mobile application analyses millions of movies, TV shows, songs, stories, newspaper articles, famous people's quotes and similar captivating material in order to bring the most helpful, exciting and enjoyable examples for each word to its users. One of the main objectives is to learn in context; in other words, to learn how to use each word in real life, while truly enjoying the process of learning [15]. One of the features that make this application truly unique is personalisation. The WordUp first detects where the gaps in users' knowledge are and then creates a personalised learning plan that focuses on one word at a time, always ensuring that the users learn the most useful word first [15]. Users particularly like its "remember forever principle" and often describe the app as one of the best pastime activities. You can read news and other articles on the app as well.



Moreover, the app curates the news according to your liking and shows new articles every day [16]. You can also test your knowledge with exams. This option really stands out and is particularly suitable for intermediate and advanced English learners who want to take IELTS, TOEFL, PTE, GRE exams. It enables its users to get better scores by focusing on the exam vocabulary. In that way, users can prepare independently for every test previously mentioned using WordUp mobile application.

2.2. HelloTalk

HelloTalk is a mobile application for foreign language learning by chatting with native speakers all around the world. The app supports over 150 languages. Native speakers teach you their language, while you teach them yours [17]. It seems to make learning a foreign language a joyful and intuitive experience. HelloTalk allows its users to connect synchronously with their language partners, but asynchronously as well due to the fact that sending messages is possible even if a partner is offline at that moment. Once you find your perfect partner in language learning, you can chat with them via text, voice recordings, voice calls and video calls. It creates collaborative learning conditions. HelloTalk supports you through the whole learning process – built-in aids for translation (one-click translation service), pronunciation, transliteration, and corrections make conversations run smoothly [17]. All these functions help you keep conversations going. There are four categories: Talks, Moments, Search and Learn. One of the most popular activities is posting Moments which are public posts and can be seen by all native speakers of your target language. It helps users get a whole lot of extra exposure to the target language and creates an immersion environment [18]. Some researchers claim that this application is the first global language learning and culture exchange community, connecting you with native speakers of other languages for free [19].

On the other hand, it is worth being aware of the fact that some users view HelloTalk as a dating app so it is advisable not to share personal information when setting up a profile. In addition, the focus of this app is more on informal expressions and even slang, so it might not be suitable for those who want to improve their language for business settings.

To summarize, HelloTalk is a great app for connecting with native speakers of the target language all around the world, having real-life conversations and making cultural immersion, but one should be very careful when choosing language exchange partners.

2.3. Duolingo

With more than 500 million learners, Duolingo is one of the most popular language applications worldwide and definitely the most popular one in Serbia. This application helps you improve your vocabulary and grammar through daily lessons and quizzes. Important features are personalised learning, immediate grading, staying motivated with rewards and improving quickly – gamification is poured into every lesson [20]. Many teachers and even entire governments around the world already view Duolingo as the perfect blended learning companion for their classrooms [20]. Recently, a possibility of certifying your English proficiency has been introduced. You can take the test online and it is accepted by over 3000 institutions worldwide. Colourful interface and user-friendly layout should also be mentioned. Duolingo succeeded in becoming part of learners' daily routine.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. STUDY AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this paper is to compare the most frequently used mobile applications for learning foreign languages, primarily English, by students in Serbia. Additionally, we wanted to reflect on their views and experiences. Our previous studies in relation to mobile applications for foreign language learning analysed Duolingo, HelloTalk and WordUp apps. We have conducted several researches with the aim of determining these applications' usefulness as additional tools in foreign language acquisition at university level. This study is guided by the following research questions:

- ♦ List the main benefits and shortcomings of Duolingo, HelloTalk and WordUp mobile app.
- ♦ Why did you choose a particular mobile app? List your reasons.
- ♦ Can you compare Duolingo, HelloTalk and WordUp?
- ♦ Which app would you recommend to your friends and/or colleagues and why?



3.2. RESPONDENTS

The respondents are Singidunum University students who voluntarily agreed to participate in this research. They are fourth-year students of the Faculty of Informatics and Computing and the Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, as well as second-year students of the Faculty of Business in Belgrade. Qualitative research, in the form of a focus group, was conducted in order to determine the clearest possible picture of students' views concerning the usefulness of different language apps, primarily Duolingo, HelloTalk and WordUp. Six students who have used and/or still use these mobile applications participated in qualitative research; therefore, their opinion can be considered relevant. It should be noted that this is a deliberate, not a random sample, since selected students are talkative, open-minded, extroverted and motivated to learn foreign languages according to data from practice (active participation in the learning process and extra-curricular activities at the university). We opted for qualitative research considering it more suitable for expressing attitudes and describing experiences.

The goal of this research is also to emphasise modern trends in learning a foreign language and to discuss advantages and disadvantages of the apps listed above in order to incorporate one or all of them into teaching curricula in the most effective way.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

When asked to comment on some of the most attractive mobile applications for foreign language learning, students agreed that Duolingo is the most popular and reliable one. They all use Duolingo for learning different languages, mainly Russian, French and Turkish. The possibility to learn languages other than English is one of the most significant features of this app. Students believe that Duolingo is an ideal mobile app for beginners. They also liked its grammar explanations and exercises. The app has been constantly improved so it has become less predictable and more amusing. It encourages competition – some students believe they stay motivated with rewards, game-like features and fun challenges. With the introduction of Leagues, Duolingo aroused the competitive spirit of its users and encouraged them to use it on a daily basis. One respondent noted she prefers the computer version of Duolingo as opposed to the mobile app. Respondents also believed an excellent Duolingo's marketing strategy to be one of the factors

that greatly contributed to the status of this app today. To conclude, it mainly improves your vocabulary and grammar knowledge.

On the other hand, WordUp is aimed at those who want to improve their English. It is highly recommended for intermediate English learners. As its main advantage, students stated its usefulness. They found the app more relevant and reliable than the most popular translation platform, Google Translate, and believed it should be included as one of the English dictionaries on the Google Play Store. However, the app's creators believe the mission of WordUp is not to be just a dictionary. This app is primarily focused on the most useful words based on how frequently they are globally used [15]. Respondents believe one of the main advantages of the application was its wide range of topics, the learning in context concept, knowledge gap detection and personalized learning plan. The possibility of choosing between British and American English proved to be really popular as well. Words and phrases are visually presented, via photos and pictures. It facilitates the process of learning and memorizing. Respondents especially like regular reminders option. They can choose the best time of day to learn English (just woke up, around breakfast, way to work / school, around lunchtime, way back home, in bed), as well as the amount of time they want to dedicate to the app, depending on the set goals (casual, regular, serious, champion). Lack of communication with other people is one of the most mentioned disadvantages. Another con is the fact that WordUp is intended only for learning English. Respondents would like to learn languages other than English in the same way. In conclusion, it mainly improves your vocabulary but also develops your listening skill.

Discussing HelloTalk mobile application, students said that it offers a unique opportunity to learn a foreign language for free by chatting with native speakers around the world. The idea itself is great, language acquisition the natural way, learning a language, exploring new cultures, and making friends around the world, but it also triggers concerns. It has been reported that some users sometimes behave as if HelloTalk platform was a social media site or even worse a dating site, so learners, especially female learners, often feel uncomfortable and find themselves in awkward situations. Learning experience depends completely on language exchange partners. In order to overcome the problem previously mentioned, one can join group chats for a collaborative learning experience. In conclusion, it mainly improves your speaking skill. By chatting with



native speakers, you learn how to use informal foreign language expressions and practise casual conversations. According to respondents, HelloTalk can be very helpful in reducing foreign language anxiety. Communication with real people who are willing to provide almost instant feedback and share knowledge is seen as one of the app's greatest advantages.

The participants unanimously said that they would recommend all three language applications. They would recommend WordUp as a dictionary and as a useful, modern tool for English language learning. Duolingo would be the best option for learning languages other than English. It is also seen as a great pastime activity. Finally, students would recommend HelloTalk to those learners who would like to improve their foreign language fluency and catch the spirit of the language being taught. At the same time, they would advise them to be very careful when choosing language exchange partners. Generally speaking, respondents mainly view mobile language applications as an additional tool for improving foreign language skills. However, they still believe foreign language teachers and class interaction to be irreplaceable.

5. CONCLUSION

This research explicitly confirms that innovative ways of perfecting foreign languages, such as mobile applications, are captivating for students. They have the opportunity to combine the best aspects of traditional and m-learning thus enjoying innovative and entertaining lessons. An important pedagogical implication of this research is to acquaint students with innovative ways of learning a foreign language and specially to maintain their interest in learning. Foreign language teachers have the opportunity to contribute to making classes more engaging and interesting. Gamification plays a significant role when studying topics that students do not particularly like or do not find challenging. The competitive spirit, which many mobile applications develop, stimulates the learning process and hopefully makes it more enjoyable.

Due to the fact that even seemingly similar apps offer slightly different approaches, students agreed that the combination of all three mobile applications would be optimal, depending on your language level and learning goals. In that way, learners would benefit from varied exposure to language being learned. As technology changes society, attention spans have also changed for students, especially for those belonging to Millennials

and Generation Z, compared to other age groups. In order to keep their attention, teachers are trying to design classes and adapt the course delivery methods and pace. These modern students want to be challenged, and they value interaction [21]. One of the ways to challenge them is to introduce intensive but short activities. By using mobile language apps, students stay in touch with the language on a daily basis and maintain continuity in their work. We suggest that various activities, available through foreign language learning mobile applications, should be introduced into teaching curricula either as icebreaker activities or as homework.

By regularly using language learning mobile applications, we believe students can improve all language skills, expand knowledge, achieve their academic goals and overcome specific language challenges.

6. REFERENCES

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