

# A Study on the Use of Mobile Apps for Learning English

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**Abstract**— We live in a fast-moving environment, and technological advances are occurring at such a pace that we have trouble following. With the introduction of smartphones, the mobile market has changed drastically in just a few years, and the number of people who own such devices is growing rapidly, especially among young people. A new mini-software market called apps (short for applications) has arisen with the smartphones and is rising at an incredible rate. Apps can be easily accessed online. This research aimed at investigating the availability of devices teaching English as a second or foreign language. In addition, the aim is to analyze and compare some of the applications and figure out what they are learning and what they are doing well.

**Keywords**— Language, Learning, Mobile Applications

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The apple app store and the Google Play app store launched in 2008 and now, just a few years later, Google Play is selling over a million applications and the iTunes app store has over 90,000 apps available to consumers (De Vere). Among this enormous number of apps is a wide range of software for foreign language learners (or L2). The language areas that the apps are designed to teach can vary from only teaching vocabulary and grammar to well-built language courses. These implementations are different and seem to have in common that they are not based on any known concept of second language learning or pedagogy and are limited to just one or two language areas. Here we try to investigate the Second language learning theories regarding Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and what language learning technologies are accessible for English learners.

## II. BRIEF HISTORY OF CALL

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) started in the 1960s. Language learning on computers in the early years was primarily limited to language laboratories at universities (Davies et al.) and on large mainframe computers the learning took place. Davies referred to the time from the 70s to the 80s as Dumb CALL (Davies et al. 2012) because sound and video were not provided by the computers. Most of the technology of that time could be called functional and gave drill and training exercises because of these technical constraints.

in the 1990s Multimedia technology came into the scene

here ; Computers had soundcards, and the size of the screen increased. The video quality at first was very low, but with the advent of more powerful computers this improved. New software for advanced learners such as LINC (Davies "Introduction to Multimedia CALL") which made use of this new technology was available on CD-ROM. Significant numbers of CALL code, however, were still based on the form of exercise drill and practice. The World Wide Web was also made available to the general public in the 1990s. The internet was sluggish at first and only provided one-way communication from the server to the client, and the websites featured only plain text and still images. During this time, CALL resorted to drill and point and click behavioral techniques for a while or until the internet software caught up with what was available on CD-ROM and DVD (Davies et al. 2012).

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is a CALL sub-discipline using mobile devices such as smartphones and tablet computers (Walker and Davies) for language learning. These devices can be represented as mini-computers that allow the learner from the various online app stores to download applications (mini-software) of their choice. There is a wide range of language learning apps in these stores that can be used offline or need an Internet connection. In this article, we will look in more depth at some of the popular English learning applications (apps) for mobile education.

Bang and Cantos (2004) note that by the mid-1980s, "many people in the CALL community" began to understand how little use was made of foreign language pedagogy by the language learning tools of that period, and by the late 1980s researchers emphasized the importance of

technique over technology. Now the general emphasis in second language learning has been put on communicative skills, which means that the learner should not only know how the language system works in itself, but also know how to use it properly in the many different social contexts in which the learner may find himself.

This definition falls seamlessly to Warschauer's second phase: the Communicative Phase (1980-1990s). This process dismissed the preached systematic approach to cognitive language learning and called for genuine interaction. John Underwood was one of the communicative approach's chief proponents (Warschauer, 1996). A new approach then took advantage of the new 90s interactive (Bangs and Cantos) technologies. But then, as Davies pointed out, a time of backward steps came to behaviorist CALL as Internet technology was catching up with what the CD-ROM and DVD provided, such as quality of sound and video (Davies et al., 2012). Later on the Web, with its many potential study activities such as internet analysis, e-mail correspondence and chat, caused the use of training technology to be nearly abandoned by many organizations. This can be understood in part by the fact that code for education was often regarded as "lacking to a greater or lesser degree pedagogical rigor" (Bangs and Cantos, 2004).

### **III. CALL TECHNOLOGY: THE STATE OF THE ART**

It is interesting to look at what computers are actually capable of performing in the ever-evolving world of computer technology when it comes to language teaching applications. Meskill explains that early CALL software was predominantly based on the instruction input-output model which requires the software to prompt user input and then respond to user input based on a pre-programmed list of rules or possible responses. When selecting multiple-choice responses, the user could be asked to fill in blanks or give an answer to prompts or questions. Feedback was then followed up on the answers (which is right or wrong). The client then followed the pre-programmed course of drill exercises and assessments that typically centered on the form, i.e. grammar and vocabulary (definitions, spelling and recognition). Later versions of this type of software provided tools for monitoring the success of individual students. When computer technology became more advanced software design grew but continued to use the basic structure of the traditional input-output system due to then current technology limitations. Beatty states that "most programs produced today have little more than visually stimulating variations on the same exercises used 40 years ago to fill gaps".

CALL's history spans over more than five decades and

there have been significant improvements in hardware and software over that time. During that time, CALL teaching models have developed from behavioral to constructivist or socio-cognitive teaching models, but theory is generally slow to match the ever-evolving technology. The demand for technology-savvy teachers is growing but the educational programs of the educator are not meeting the demand with enough CALL classes to familiarize the teachers with the variety of CALL resources. Despite the great advances in technology, designers of tutorial applications often face the same limitations that the inability of the machine to comprehend language and binary functions presents. We are now in an age of rapidly evolving mobile technology that offers expanded freedom for the learner who can easily find online cheap tutorial apps without a teacher's intervention. Nevertheless, teachers can easily use such technology in their teaching as they are willing to implement it and have access to information on the variety of English language tutoring applications. This takes us to this essay's main topic, which is a study of a few selected smartphone tutorial applications that are accessible to adult English learners.

### **IV. ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSE APPLICATIONS (APPS)**

#### **Busuu App**

As per busuu.com, the founders were tired of the conventional way of learning languages, which they felt was too costly and boring, so they decided to create their own picture and sound-based learning material and to allow learners to learn directly from native speakers and to offer free sections of the content. If the client chooses to pay for a Premium Membership, they will be able to access additional functions and content ("About busuu.com").

The busuu team created a website that appears to be a mix of a match, language learning and social networking to make language learning less boring. The client could concurrently learn several of Busuu's 12 languages and download apps for each language. The user earns busuu berries if he / she completes portions of the training content, lessons, corrects the activities of other users, etc. and the amount of berries that the user has received within the group is available to his / her friends so that they can act as a motivational tool for users. Before you do, the berries can also be used to challenge a friend to complete a portion of the course and win 50 or loose berries and have 50 removed berries. The berries have many more applications, but they are mainly motivational.

The motivating tool is the language garden where users see their language tree grow as they gradually finish the course. Errors committed by the users in the analysis

exercises appear as bugs in the garden so that the user has to focus on the errors and fix them to get rid of the insects so that they don't consume the language tree of the user. A user can also earn amusing animated bonuses for completing tests and courses for his / her language garden and apples to correct the exercises of another user. ("Help"). In addition, Busuu sends daily research reminders to the user to inspire the user to continue learning. The website can be synchronized with the phone to impact the language garden and busuu berries ("Busuu.com Mobile Apps").

### **Wlingua App**

The language course is created by the Wlingua company, but information about the company itself or the people behind it is not available on the website. This program is only intended for speakers of Spanish. The approach of Wlingua incorporates the methods of incremental language processing, repeated repetition and assimilation of listening to teach the language. The course was structured to slowly introduce the learner to the language. Each new lesson introduces new material but presents it using grammatical rules and vocabulary that have already been learned. Nevertheless, both lessons also introduce new vocabulary. The spaced repetition technique ensures that all the lessons that the learner completes are revisited a few days after completion and then slowly at longer intervals after completion, giving the student time to practice new phrases and vocabulary. As for listening assimilation, the course includes a British English and American English pronunciation for both phrases and vocabulary. In addition, the course includes lessons in phonetics to help the student learn how to pronounce the words ("Información del curso").

The star system contains elements of the course that could inspire the student. When the user performs activities that build up to stars correctly, the user earns points. Each winning star adds to the Premium account extra free hours ("FAQs"). However, the exercises offer no motivational feedback beyond the right and wrong color indication. Other motivational aspects are the possibilities of monitoring the progress visually (only on the website) and receiving diplomas. The student must have achieved a level with a minimum average grade of 6.5 (each lesson is graded) (Curso Wlingua) in order to receive a diploma. The website does include social networking (not the app), but it does not use that aspect of the website in the same motivational way as the Busuu website does. And finally, Wlingua sends daily study reminders to preserve the motivation of the client.

### **Hello-Hello App**

Hello-Hello is a teaching company for online and mobile languages that combines language learning with social networking. The company developed the approach in conjunction with The American Council on Foreign Language Teachers (ACTFL), "the largest and most recognized group of teachers and administrators of all languages at all grades" in the U.S. ("About us," Hello-Hello.com). Hello-Hello uses immersion technique to help the user in day-to-day scenarios acquire usable language knowledge. When training the client to interact in real-life environments, they adopt the notional-functional approach to language learning. In the sense they can occur in real communicative contexts, new vocabulary and phrases are added. And each lesson slowly incorporates more complicated and advanced vocabulary and phrases that expand on and improve what has happened before. In addition, their approach is learner-centered since the platform allows students to practice at their own time and pace ("methodology").

There is nothing special that stands out when it comes to motivating the user. The social networking offered by the website and receiving feedback on written and spoken exercises from other users may be considered motivating, but this factor is not available on the app. In addition, there is no feedback on the other exercises unless they are correct or incorrect. Furthermore, the availability of resources that can all be uploaded to the computer and done anywhere without an Internet connection increases the freedom and probably the motivation of the user.

### **Learn English App**

The business behind Learn English is called Anspear and was formed when two companies joined forces: FoneFonics, a company with expertise in "operating and implementing digital technologies," and Pearson Publishing, which has long experience in "developing and using software successfully in education" ("About us," Anspear.com). Anspear has designed software specializing in creating language learning applications for mobiles and tablets. This software was used by the company to create its own language learning applications as well as in cooperation with others ("Overview").

There is nothing especially encouraging in the app, no chart to track the improvement, no bonus / star system, and the feedback is limited to right or incorrect color and sound indicators, and a note after each lesson asking the user whether he was doing well or should try again. The only thing that could be encouraging is that after the lessons have been downloaded, the software does not need internet connection and can be used anywhere.

### eTeacher App

Nahlik Soft, a Polish software and publishing company established in 1990, develops eTeacher. The concept was developed in the 1980s of this program and was not based on any theory or technique. The aim of this program was not to replace the instructor or the conventional language course, but to create additional content. The content is structured into exercises (drills) and assessments to make vocabulary, grammar and language use training more successful and enjoyable. Krzysztof Nahlik, the developer, uses his intuition and experience as an English teacher when creating the projects and exercises that he tests on his students, and "[ s]ome native English teachers always participate in pronunciation recordings and final exercise checks" (Nahlik).

The funny comments (negative and positive) should be motivating as well as the optional sound effects (e.g. cheers and boos) when it comes to motivation. Such results are intended to make the exercises and tests (Nahlik) full fun and are the only feedback provided to correct or incorrect answers.

### V. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Developers of English language curriculum apps use different approaches and methodologies to ensure a fun and simple learning process with similarly different study content and focus on different aspects of language learning. While some developers use advanced technology, the basic structure of all apps is bound by the same technological limitations of pre-programmed code which places them all on the behavioral side of the spectrum of pedagogy between action and constructivism.

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is a new study field inside CALL and the increasing growth of the app is an area that provides many research possibilities. This essay concentrated on adult English courses available at the Google Play store. It can be challenging and time-consuming to search the store while searching for a particular type of product, and the accessibility and success that the user selects can greatly influence the app.

Many developers portrayed their apps as an easy and fun way to learn languages, offering different approaches and methods, although not much focus was put on SLA theory. The language courses also offered very varied study material such as topics of everyday life, real news, fictional story, and a conversation course focused on situations of everyday life. Almost all courses included motivational elements, but typically feedback was very minimal. Both apps used the same pre-programmed exercise software due to the inability of computers to understand unpredictable input or react with unprepared output. Generally speaking

and writing the apps provided a very small learning. Websites that include social networking are able to include messaging, but are not accessible on the phones. Thanks to the technological limitations, the language courses are primarily cognitive, as this teaching model works well with the binary role of the machine.

Typically, the downloadable apps provided several languages of translation, restricted lessons and lower skill levels, while the web-based apps were intended for only one language community and offered only in English and offered a much larger number of lessons and higher skill levels. Popularity of apps seemed more linked to Google Play's network and popularity than the study material.

This study provides a look into the world of mobile applications learning English language and sheds light on where engineering and pedagogy are the language course features. The number of apps on Google Play for English language learning is enormous and rising. Online language learning websites understand the value of mobile learning by creating apps that connect to their platforms, language tutorial software developers make their software available to the mobile platform, and even people create language tutoring apps. The technology is moving rapidly and every day, smartphones are becoming more efficient. Mobile Assisted Language Learning area is an important one to explore as we are moving towards a mobile future.

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