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Mobile Apps:
Apple of Every Youngster's Eyes!
Why not English through Them?

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Abstract

This paper takes as starting point Laurillard's (2012) assertion that classroom practitioners need to become designers of effective learning experiences (TIRF, 2017). Learning a language is one of the most rewarding things that can be done at a time and remains forever. There are a lot of ways to learn or improve skills in a particular language, from attending classes through traditional methods such as reading and practice. But recently smartphones really do a lot for learning languages. With the smartphones a new market of mini-software called apps (short for applications) is growing at an incredible speed. The app stores *iTunes app store* and the *Android Market* (now *Google Play*) opened in 2008 and now only a few years later *Google Play* offers over 2.6 million. Amongst this incredible number of apps, there is a great variety of apps intended for students of foreign languages (or L2). The areas of language, the apps are designed to teach can range from teaching only vocabulary or pronunciation up to being well constructed language courses (DocPlayer, n.d.). Whether starting from scratch or just wanting to improve your English, the apps features of smartphones take advantage of the interactivity in order to provide gamified learning environments that will definitely be more interesting than what one can find in language classes. Thus, ubiquitous access to mobile phones makes language learning to straddle beyond the classroom, in virtual spaces and out in the world. This paper further throws light on how learner-technology interaction supports language development, particularly how apps can be viewed as

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opportunities for learners to extend or practice their communication. Lastly, I identify the apps I consider to offer the best language learning courses in terms of "best practice". I conclude that the courses for language learning as applications try to make language learning easy, easily accessible and fun. They offer various approaches and methodologies to language learning with study material that emphasize different aspects of language learning either linguistic or for communicative purposes (DocPlayer, n.d.).

Key Words: language learning, smartphones, applications, language study material, apps store, Mobile Assisted Language Learning

Introduction

We live in a fast moving world where technological advances happen at high speed. In only a few years the mobile market has changed drastically with the advent of smartphones and the number of people who own these kinds of devices is growing at a fast rate especially among young people (DocPlayer, n.d.). In response to the global information era, countries all over the world are encouraging educators to use computer-assisted devices for educational purposes. As an English teacher, the appropriate digital resources can be adapted into language teaching. Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is a sub-discipline of CALL which makes use of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablet computers for language learning (Walker and Davies). These devices can be described as mini-computers that allow the learner to install applications (mini-software) of their choice from the various online app stores. Initially, the designs of mobile apps were not for educational purposes. However, with the appropriate design, the apps can be teacher's teaching aid, and students' learning can be multiple. We know that learning becomes more real and permanent when tied to learners' lives outside the academic environment. Mobile devices are a great way to achieve that goal. Hence, using apps in language learning is in line with the current educational trend. Because the apps are portable and students can use them on their smartphones, it is easy to use without environmental limitation. In this article, we will be looking at some of the English learning software (apps) available for mobile learning in more detail.

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Why Apps?

This particular topic is to explore students' attitude of the use of app in English learning, and to realize its potential value of self-study. To begin with, mobile devices in learning is a hit among young fussy learners because it is portable with high mobility. In addition, when mobile devices are combined with the internet, teaching can be extended to outside the classroom, and learning can be done ubiquitously. Moreover, students are able to learn in a real context instead of receiving knowledge from textbooks. This student-centered approach is very important in learning. In addition, using apps for learning has become a constructivist classroom, the focus shifts from the teacher to the students, that is, students learn willingly, not on compulsion and it is not time-bound. Hence, we can understand that the classroom is no longer the only learning environment. Instead, the mobility makes students be part of the context and interact with their peers. As for teachers, they need to apply mobile devices and design teaching strategies to help the students.

The Search Method

Today, new iPhone or Android phone users face the quandary of which of the hundreds of thousands of apps (applications) they should choose (boukhtouta, 2017). It seems that everyone from federal government agencies to your local bakery has an app available. This phenomenon, not surprisingly has led to tremendous interest among educators (Learning & Language, 2011). Mobile learning (often "m-learning") is in itself not new, but new devices with enhanced capabilities have dramatically increased the interest level, including among language educators. The goal of this section is to investigate the availability of apps that teach English as a second or foreign language. Further the aim is to review and compare some of the apps to find out what they teach, how they teach and what technology they use in order to see on which aspects they are different and on which they are alike, where they are lacking and what they do well.

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The search was focused on finding mobile apps that teach English. The study began with a search on *Google Play store* which turned up astonishing number of apps that claim to teach English. At first I searched for all English teaching applications within the education category on *Google Play* and started to browse the suggested apps which turn up next to each app's description. Then I looked at the app descriptions, screenshots from the apps, rating and comments from users. I found far more apps than I could test and write about in this paper so I decided to focus on the apps that taught complete language courses. In all I downloaded and tried 10 apps which I then cut down to 7 apps that I fully investigated and wrote about. I reviewed each of the seven apps according to a list of criteria: app's background and pedagogy, skills and types of exercises the app uses to teach those skills, and finally the platform used and popularity.

1. Enguru

The *enguru* app is based on games which give *employability-related educational experience*. It follows the story of a shop assistant working his way up the corporate ladder, featuring realistic interactive workplace conversation scenarios and informative training exercises. As a character in the game, a user goes through realistic conversations with customers, colleagues, and managers (with language training sessions included between the conversations) to help them improve their language skills. With this interactive learning game, you build your career in a retail scenario by learning and improving your English.

"The focus of enguru is to help people practice conversational English in a workplace setting. It caters to students and young adults who require English in order to excel at their jobs, or even just require using English socially. There are other apps that focus on teaching English from the basics, but none of them focus on conversational English practice in the manner that we do", says Arshan Vakil, Co-founder, King's Learning.

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Arshan adds that enguru has been developed completely in-house. The app content comes from the combined learnings of its teachers and program directors who are teaching the target audience on a daily basis, and hence, able to relate to and create the most appropriate content.

The startup claims that enguru has approached the language app space from a completely different angle from any of the other players in the market. In this learning app, the entire delivery is in a game format, which keeps the users engaged. Besides, it is addressing the issue of poor spoken English and communication skills in young adults by focusing on conversational scenarios (Limited, 2015).

2. Duolingo

Incredibly well-designed and user-friendly, Duolingo teaches users languages through drills, requiring a mix of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. An "immersion" section allows you to read real-world articles, while helping to translate them. Beyond that, Duolingo makes studying fun by awarding you points for lessons completed and bonuses on doing well; a social aspect allows the user's friends to see his progress and vice versa. If they wish, Duolingo will send daily reminders to study, which is easy to do, even while they're on the go. Currently, the site offers instruction in Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese (Brazilian), Dutch, Irish, Danish, and Swedish. If users feel ambitious, they can study multiple languages simultaneously at no extra charge ("7 outstanding language-learning Apps and Websites", 2014).

One of the biggest draws of Duolingo is its gamified learning system: instead of the usual progression through lessons, Duolingo structures lessons as a skill tree, with "skill points" being awarded for completing lessons, achievements for tracking progress as well as a lives system that encourages users to answer each question correctly (Khaliq, 2007). The app has become a staple example of mobile language learning.

3. Lingua.ly

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Lingua.ly is a language learning and vocabulary tool that tries to turn web content into language-learning opportunities. Lingua.ly uses a proprietary language-processing method that makes it able to recommend real texts to users, based on vocabulary tests and interests. This means that learners are not limited to texts written specifically for them and can read the real texts in whichever language they're learning, therefore users can never complain for the lack of variety.

At first the app will assess learner level, by testing the knowledge of specific words and in turn will estimate user level. While learning a text, by clicking on a word user can see its translation, hear it pronounced aloud and have it added to his database of words. The idea of Lingua.ly is to help users study in context and it aims to serve with 90% of vocabulary. The words can be reviewed in 5, 10 or 15 minute study sessions. Installing the Lingua.ly Chrome add on will remind the users about the need to come back to saved vocabulary while browsing. With Lingua.ly the learners have a lot of control over what material they learn and how much they review.

4. Fun Easy Learn English

Fun Easy Learn English is again a vocabulary app with more than 6,000 words in its database. Learners can improve their vocabulary through illustrations, recorded pronunciations and native translations, and the app also includes seven different games that should further help their efforts to learn English. The app also has a Spin Categories function that chooses a random topic, subtopic and game, to keep the user on his toes. The good news is that this app doesn't require an Internet connection (Khaliq, 2007).

5. Busuu

With an international community of more than 40 million registered native speakers, Busuu relies heavily on its customers' efforts to help teach each other. The lessons are based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), so the quality of Busuu's reading, writing and speaking practice and lessons are guaranteed. Beginners' lessons use flash cards for learning new words and phrases, but

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advanced lessons involve writing and answering questions that will be reviewed by native speakers on the site. Lessons range from beginner to advanced, and Busuu offers more than 150 topics with more than 3,000 words and phrases. The free version, however, only offers 20 units. Dialogues, writing exercises, and audio recordings are also part of the mix, but grammar-focused lessons, video units, and printable PDF files are only available via paid memberships. However, the free lessons are available on-the-go via Busuu's apps. The site offers instruction in Spanish, German, French, Italian, Portuguese (Brazilian), Russian, Polish, Turkish, Arabic, Japanese, and Chinese ("7 outstanding language-learning Apps and Websites," 2014).

6.Memrise

Visual learners should head to Memrise, a site that features countless categories of so-called "memes," user-generated mnemonic flash cards that rely on graphics, humor, and imagination to implant new vocabulary in your memory. The fun of Memrise lies in two things: memes and gamification. The app follows a learning method that relies on creating funny or bizarre associations with the studied words. The site hosts thousands of free courses in many languages; you can also upload your own memes for other users to view. As the content is entirely user-generated, the quality may vary, but when memes work, they really work. Earning, revising and creating memes is a source of points that help learners advance in the Memrise hierarchy of users (from Membryo to Overlord).

The power of Memrise also lies in two things: spaced repetition and mnemonics. The spaced repetition algorithm calculates when and how often learners should review each word and the app will send them reminders when it's time to review (Krzemińska, 2016). The addition of memes is really helpful in memorizing the vocabulary; it would take some time for a new user to adjust to, over a period of time they come up with their own creative combinations.

Taking-on the Challenge

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Among all modern communication devices, mobile phones are the most powerful communication medium even richer than email or chat or their apps as they can act as a learning device. With such a learning device, the learner controls the learning process and progress in his/her own space based on his/her cognitive state. Learning through the computer or e-learning enables the learners to learn in a non-classroom environment when they are at home in front of their personal computers online or offline. Even better that that, learning through the mobile phone or m-learning provides the learners with the opportunity to learn when they are in the bus, outside or at work doing their part-time jobs. In fact, they can learn every time and everywhere they are (Nezarat, 2017). Two main characteristics of mobile devices are portability and connectivity, having internet functions accessible even in the poorest areas. It is always possible to transfer information to and from mobile phones between instructors and learners without any difficulty.

Nevertheless, learning service through mobile devices has multiple advantages, it is not with constraints as small screen, reading difficulty on such a screen, data storage and multimedia limitations, and the like. Many of the mobile phones are not designed for educational purposes. If they have the availability, those devices which are appropriate for specific learning tasks are too expensive for most of the learners to buy. In case of possession also, students' ability of self-control could be another obstruction for mobile learning. For most students, mobile devices are mainly used for entertainment and communication. That is, it is difficult for the learners to use them for the task given by the teachers to be carried out.

Even though app developers use advanced technology, the basic structure of all the apps is bound by some technological limitations that may hamper learner's interest. Some language skills such as speaking and listening skills need some further improvements due to the hardware weaknesses. That's where, although identified as tremendously potential, developing new teaching and learning methods could still be a barrier for educators to put this into practice (Kim et al, 2013). In an experiment,

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Stockwell demonstrated that the learners found the activities take too long to complete on the mobile devices, and consequently, some of them preferred to use their PCs to do their assigned tasks. In that experiment many learners indicated from the outset that they did not intend to use the mobile phones for doing their tasks because of the cost of Internet access, the screen size, and the keypad (Nezarat, 2017). Designing exclusively for smartphone usage will necessarily exclude many users as those said above. Hence, it is clearly understood smartphone penetration will likely gain worldwide fame in coming years, but not at the same pace everywhere.

Summary

The field of Mobile Assisted Language Learning is an important one to follow because we are heading for a mobile future. In order to teach these digital narratives, teachers need to understand how to inspire their learning motivation instead of forbidding those using tablets or smartphones. This study offers a glimpse into the world of English language learning mobile applications and throws a light on where the language course apps stand in terms of technology and pedagogy. The number of English language learning apps on *Google Play* is incredible and is still growing. The developers of such apps use various approaches and methodologies which are all supposed to guarantee a fun and easy learning process. They also offer versatile study materials such as every-day-life topics, real news, fictional story and a conversation-based module built on real life situations. Learners can earn and share badges as they progress through various levels, and they can even compete with other users on a global leaderboard. Self-motivation is an added advantage of almost all language learning apps with greater number of lessons and higher proficiency levels.

Mobile-based learning or m-learning faces many challenges, but it has grown exponentially in spite of all its problems to provide a better environment for language learning. That is, no matter where the students are, if they have mobile devices, they can study ubiquitously. In addition, podcast lectures and digitized audio comments have made the online interaction between teachers and learners possible in a more convenient

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way without any time and space limitations (Oxford, 2009). Although going through language activities on mobile phones may take a longer time compared to computers, the learners feel a greater sense of freedom of time and place, so that they can take the advantage of spare time to learn a second language when and where they are. Mobile technology gets learning away from the classroom environment with little or no access to the teacher, though the learning process can hardly be accomplished without a teacher's direction or guidance. In other words, mobile applications can be considered an ideal solution to language learning barriers in terms of time and place. Hence, this article supports the app which is expected to help students master their English learning and enhance their communication ability.

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