

Mobile Assisted English Language Learning: A Selection of Free Applications

- Stephen J. Hall, Malaysia

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Introduction

Learning a language through thousands of differing applications can now be done anywhere, anytime, whether you are on or off line. If you are on line there is much more than Facebook, What's App or getting a taxi. Free or "gratis" applications are of course the most popular. While some learners connect with mobile language learning and go beyond their predominately social use of the phone or tablet, older educators often do not explore effective phone-based language learning, such as this overview describes.

Technology and mobile phone usage have taken us way beyond the frameworks of 'digital natives and immigrants' (Prensky, 2009,) yet educators seem reluctant to look at the motivational support that free applications can provide for learners with online access. In my observations, while working with Indonesian students and educators, there seems to be a widening gap of understanding the power of applications as online access spreads rapidly across the archipelago. With apps (as I shall now use) we can compare our new language with recordings of those who speak it every day and be rated for accuracy (Hall, 2018). We can match pictures to words, which suits many visual learners or socialise with other learners. There are gaming league type set-ups to motivate learning through the competitive streak, which excites some netizens to the point of addiction. Mobile language learning is usually organised in colourful, digestible chunks moving from simple to complex, with tried and tested principles of spaced, significant repetition and visual support along with motivational rewards.

Technology has however been a bit of a double-edged sword for some language learning. On the one hand, as technology advances, learning apps have meant it's never been easier to reach for instant translation on the spot. It is possible to get away without real learning for such pursuits as travelling, thanks to applications like [Google Translate](#) that will do all the hard work for you, although accuracy can be a challenge. However, if you want to really learn and understand a language for travel, study, work or just for the personal satisfaction, there is a wide array of mobile assisted language learning applications.

A small section of popular applications available in both iOS and Android are described here. These are all free and include levels of English language learning, some with paid versions with greater features. There are many more to be found online.

Duolingo

Duolingo is probably the best-known language application and for good reasons. For one thing, it is entirely free - you can pay an extra fee to remove advertisements from the app, but none of the actual content is gated behind a paywall.

It has courses designed for non-English speakers to learn English or other languages, which not every language-learning app does. You can use it on IOS, Android, or in a web browser, and your progress is synced across devices. Modules are broken down by both subject areas and grammatical types, and after completing them you're encouraged to practice older modules.

The whole system is gamified - you gain experience, level up, and earn a virtual currency as you build up your skills, which encouraging you to keep up your daily practice streak. Exercises include reading, listening, writing, and speaking and you can set daily reminders to practice, with custom goals for how much you want to achieve each day.

A limitation is that the app doesn't always teach you why some of the grammar works the way it does, only how to use it. The advertisements can be obtrusive, popping up after every module, but there is Duolingo Plus, which clears away all the adverts and adds offline lessons for a price. The lesson downloads, available in the Plus version will be useful for anyone who hopes to practice offline although you can't download practice sessions, only the initial modules to learn material for the first time. This writer has found this app to be engaging and well designed.

Memrise

Memrise is another popular smartphone app for language learning, with a focus on repetition and memorisation as a way to boost language skills. This is a social platform in that anyone can upload, so you need to check the quality of the links inside this vast collection of many languages, which even include Klingon. There are thousands of English language courses for many levels.

You practice specific words or phrases at a time, loosely connected by topic areas, with a focus on practical words and phrases, and the inclusion of videos helps you improve pronunciation. It is gamified so that you practice words and phrases, you build up a flower for each - one leaf or petal for every correct answer until you have a full flower and have now learnt it. Since the rest of the app has a sci-fi theme that casts you as a galactic explorer, one is at times, not quite sure how the flowers and the spaceships work together.

The base app is free, but there is a rather expensive Pro subscription available, which unlocks features like an offline mode, a chat system to talk to native speakers, and unlimited access. Ultimately, how well you get on with Memrise, depends on how well rote learning works for you when it comes to languages, as compared to learning how to build up sentences on your own.

Tandem

If you do not feel like spending for the chat option in Memrise, you might want consider Tandem. This free chat app connects you with people from around the world that you can talk to by either text or voice chat to help each other learn languages and share your culture. There are several other apps of this type, such as Live Mocha,

In Tandem you set up your own profile with a few photos, and information about the kind of people you'd like to talk to, what you'd like to talk about, and which languages you speak and which you want to learn. The choice of how much you reveal of your 'Digitally Extended Self' (Parkinson et al. 2017) should be carefully crafted.

You can then either set the app to only suggest people who are so called "native" in the language you hope to learn, or to let you match with other people trying to learn the same language. There's a feedback system to flag or recommend people, some built in tools for translation, along with audio messages to help improve pronunciation. The application also makes every user agree to behaviour guidelines which includes agreeing not to treat it as a dating application.

If you want to take it up a level you can pay to book a session with a certified language tutor through the app but if you just want to chat with other users it's totally free. If you're just starting to learn, Tandem is challenging, but if you've made good progress on another app or service and want to get better at actual conversation, Tandem is ideal. This application is built around Artificial Intelligence and machine learning, so it determines your ability level and then serves you flash cards at an optimum learning level.

FlashAcademy

FlashAcademy is one of the many language apps that takes its cues from Duolingo, using gamification to encourage users to adhere to their language learning goals. Older English language professionals will recognise the return of flashcards as they have long been proven to be an effective learning tool.

Exercises are broken down by topic area, and test grammar as well as vocabulary, each introducing a few new words before building up to more complex sentences and conversations. There are also mini-games that give you the chance to apply those new words against the clock. The only real limitation with the app is its insistence on pairing new words with cartoon icons to illustrate them - useful with basic nouns like 'apple', but less helpful for abstract terms.

Probably the most unique feature is outside the main learning experience though. FlashAcademy can use your phone's camera to scan objects in the world and give you an immediate translation, which is a convenient way to learn and reinforce new terms if you are in the target language area.

Léa Knows

Léa Knows takes a single aspect of Google Translate - saving translations for future reference - and expands it into a full-blown app, entirely for free, Flash cards, a proven technique over decades are used here (see Paul Nations work). While Google's software lets you star a few translations to look at again, it will not let you do much with them, simply giving you a chronological list to scroll through.

Léa Knows expands on this by automatically saving every translation you make into a flash card, and then allowing you to categorise them further by starring ones you want to reference frequently, archiving others that you don't need so often, and deleting any you know you're done with.

You can further sort lists by alphabetical, most recent, or most viewed, and can also colour code them for easy reference. There's no gamification either, so it's entirely up to you to put the effort into going through your flashcards every now and then. How useful Léa Knows is will depend a lot on your motivation This app cannot be the core of your language learning, but may supplement your learning by helping you remember those tricky translations, rather than just use them once and forgetting.

Babbel

Babbel is a more traditional language learning app, offering an array of exercises in 14 different languages. Courses are split up into some beginner and intermediate sections, and then others separated by topic area, type of learning (listening, speaking, writing), or language section (grammar, vocab, etc.). It also offers more cultural insight, with a section dedicated to local traditions, even going into regional variations - while still offering language skills.

The user interface is pretty bare unfortunately, and there's not much in the way of gamification either, so if you're worried you might struggle with motivation then Babbel may not be the app for you. It also feels a bit repetitive within each course - probably good for language learning by drilling with spaced significant repetition.

Busuu

Busuu is a language app that could easily rival Duolingo - but only if you're willing to spend for the premium version, whether you're on IOS or Android. The base app gives you a selection of languages to choose from, with exercises across a variety of topics tiered into the internationally recognised CEFR levels.

Busuu offers courses from A1 to B2 (upper intermediate) - acknowledging that if you want to reach the upper tier of language proficiency you'll need to actually talk to people in that language, not just use an app. Courses are split up by topic and type, and there's an attractive interface and some light gamification to keep you interested - though not quite as much as Duolingo's. Unfortunately, the best features are locked behind a premium paywall - like many free applications you get what you pay for. There are many other apps using this approach.

Conclusion

This article describes a very small selection of a multitude of English language learning applications which are available, but like all activities, learners only gain in relation to the time and energy given to learning and playing (Sung et al, 2015). The application developers using recent research, based on brain scanning, know that target setting and achieving targets, biochemically excites the brain providing further motivation. Motivation through reinforcing reward systems, which stress chunking of learning is central to effective game and learning design, as can be seen in the apps described here. A little a day provides fun language progress and just like with fitness, regular and varied is better than an occasional burst. What is clear is that as a certain shoe company says, really it is all a matter of "Just Do It".

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