


Chapter 7


An Analysis of the Efficiency of a Selection of Mobile Language Learning Apps

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to pinpoint the features characterizing a mobile app that make it effective to learn a foreign language. To reach this aim, the authors used two types of instruments: publicly available efficacy reports on four popular language learning apps and a framework for evaluating language learning apps. A correlation study was conducted between the two instruments by depicting several parameters from the efficacy reports: the number of hours needed to cover the requirements of one semester, the number of participants who did and did not improve their language skills using the app, the efficacy or improvement per hour, and app user perception. Subsequently, the apps were analyzed according to the evaluation framework. The study concludes that learner improvement is closely related to the underlying

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pedagogy implemented within the app, that there is a strong correlation between language uptake and overall user satisfaction, and that the more interaction, interactivity, and better technological traits an app has, the higher quantity of study hours the user spends on the app.

INTRODUCTION

According to Iqbal (2024), the iOS App Store was launched in 2008, with an initial 500 applications available. Currently, in 2024, the same store has 1.88 million apps available for download¹. Android users have a wider range of apps from which to choose since, as of March 2024, there are 2.33 million apps available on Google Play Store². Iqbal (2024, n.p.) believes that “the market for these apps is about as big as they come. It is estimated that there are over six billion smartphone users worldwide, and about five billion of those have access to the internet”, which means that there is a considerable market for app consumers globally. Ceci (2021), on the other hand, states that “Apps are designed with the limitations and features of mobile devices in mind. For example, a game could make use of a smartphone’s accelerometer, or a drawing pad app could make use of a tablet’s stylus. As compared to integrated software systems on computers, each mobile app typically offers a specific functionality” (n.p.). This fact illustrates an overall picture of the situation, which relates each app to a different type of user, a specific objective, with different software design principles, and different types of usability.

If we narrow the scope of the search to language learning apps, we will find dozens of web pages where sundry apps are presented as being the most useful, successful, and motivating on the market. Nevertheless, all of these pages, with their presentation of different apps, raise an important question for language practitioners: are mobile language learning apps effective tools for language learning? In other words, have they all been tested to see if they are helpful for language teaching/learning?

According to Hubbard (2019), “[...] evaluation in the digital age is a specialized skill that differs from evaluating textbooks and other static materials” (p. 390). In other words, apps should be evaluated in a different way compared to books or web pages. It is necessary to find a checklist or a taxonomy that includes all the possible elements that can be analyzed in an app so that the user can choose among those that are suitable for his or her own purposes.

In a paper published in 2017, Rosell-Aguilar conducts a thorough review of the literature of language learning apps from the potential they offer to their possible drawbacks, analyzing previously existing studies, and the different taxonomies that were available at the time of publication (2017, p. 244). But the objective of his paper was to present a new taxonomy of apps specifically meant for language

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