

Chapter 8

Exploring Socio–Cultural Elements in Three Commercial English Language Learning Apps

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ABSTRACT

Second language teaching and learning has experienced a change towards the use of mobile technologies inside and outside the classroom. The goal of this article is twofold: to compare and evaluate three different commercial English language learning apps (Duolingo, Babbel, and Busuu) that cover the four skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading), and to analyze the learning theory supporting their design. These applications include in their homepage the option of interactive learning with friends. However, as this article shows, each app offers a different level of interaction and collaboration. The theoretical framework for this analysis is grounded on Vygotsky's Socio-cultural theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

The constant and rapid evolution of technology has increased the functionality of mobile devices, changing from mere telecommunication devices to important tools for industry, work, and personal use. This shift has had an impact not only on how we communicate with others, but also on the way we learn. Nevertheless, the use of mobile devices in language teaching and learning is not a new trend, if we consider that the interest in the use of portable devices has been present since the emergence of the first generation of portable devices, namely cassette players, MP3 players, PDAs, mobile phones with SMS messaging, cameras, voice recording, and so on (Godwin-Jones, 2011, p. 2). In fact, the first trials of the incorporation of mobile devices in language learning date back to the 90s, involving the use of PDAs in programs to improve English as a first language (L1) in Canada, Australia, and the UK (Burston, 2016, p. 6). However, it cannot be denied that the area of mobile learning has recently received a growing

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amount of attention running parallel with important advances in mobile devices, i.e., innovative tools and accessories, together with an easier access to mobile phones and tablets by the general public. This has brought the incorporation of “bring your own device” (BYOD) methodologies (Pegrum, 2016) offering new resource materials and new alternatives to mobile language learning.

With the emergence of smartphones (with better cameras, bigger screens sensitive to human touch screens, better audio quality, faster connectivity, incorporation of GPS, the anywhere-anytime possibility), the potential of mobile devices in the learning environment has increased considerably (Palalas & Mohammed, 2016). However, as the literature on mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) points out, the main revolution in the mobile education field in general, and more specifically MLL, is not only the hardware improvement, but also the software advances with the introduction of applications (apps) on the market (Palalas & Mohammed, 2016; Ono, 2014). These tools offer new capabilities to educators and students, such as the combination of formal and informal learning, out of class and inside class contexts, and more importantly, they can connect the learning experience with real life (Son, 2016, p. 173).

Son (2016) differentiates two sorts of apps that can be used in language learning: apps that are designed for educational purposes (apps dedicated to language learning, ADDL), and general apps with general purposes (apps adaptable to language learning, AALL) that can also be used in language learning (such as email, messaging, and photo, video). According to Palalas and Hoven (2016, p. 48), MLL requires a high level of autonomy on the part of the student to control individual learning, but it also enhances social interaction, offering a wide variety of contexts for learning similar to what constructivist pedagogies try to foster. Along these lines, the goal of this paper is to analyze and compare three ADDL apps, Duolingo, Babbel and Busuu, from a socio-constructivist point of view, and to answer the following questions: a) What is the most common learning theory supporting the design of the activities in the apps? and b) How do the three apps compare when evaluated according to socio-constructivist principles? In this analysis, the author examines her use of the three language-learning mobile apps and addresses both the concerns and the benefits of using these platforms for second language (L2) learning based on socio-constructivist criteria.

The remainder of this paper is divided into 6 sections: Section 2 discusses a review of recent studies on the use of apps for English language learning. Section 3 includes the theoretical framework in which this study is grounded. Next, section 4 presents the methodology followed by section 5 with a separate analysis of the three apps. Section 6 presents a comparison of the three applications according to socio-cultural paradigms, and finally, section 7 concludes the study and offers future recommendations for the creation and design of language learning apps.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The growing interest for the use of mobile apps in language learning is reflected in the multiple options that result in the search engine Google. When typing “applications for language learning” the system recovers around 159,000,000 results, and pages ranked in the first places offer multiple lists of what are considered the best language apps on the market.

The applications designed for mobile language learning are classified into four types by Bradin Siskin (2009, in Son, 2016, p. 164): a) built-in apps such as email, voice recorders and video recorders; b) instructional apps, such as AccelaStudy, Gengo Flashcard; c) social networking apps such as Facebook and Twitter; and d) repurposed apps such as audioBoom, Current Postcards, and Google Apps for work.

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