

## Usage and Applications of English Learning Mobile Apps

**R. Subramani, Ph.D., Associate Professor**

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication  
Periyar University, Salem - 636 011, Tamil Nadu, India

[erasubramani@gmail.com](mailto:erasubramani@gmail.com)

Mobile: +91 9444204387

### Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine, understand, and evaluate the features of freely available mobile apps for learning English. The study analyses them from the standpoints of learners in order to assess the chosen apps as to whether they offer tailor-made contents, free from technical glitches and entirely professional. Specifically, we have selected five apps from the Google Play Store to study them from the point of view of the non-native English speakers to learn the language who usually focus on five categories such as pronunciation, dialogue, content, lesson-centric video instruction and vocabulary.

**Keywords:** English, Mobile Apps, Language Learning, Technologies.

### Introduction

The introduction of Information Communication Technologies and subsequently the arrival of smart phones on the horizon have changed the way we communicate; it turns out to be a quantum leap in the area of hi-tech educational tools available to learn the foreign language primarily for the non-native speakers. This technological transformation has facilitated a kind of paradigm shift in the way we previously were teaching and learning different languages. Hence, now learning a new language is just a click of a few tabs on your personal computer or desktop. Basically, rapid technological advancement has conveniently opened doors to various meaningful educational tools beginning from Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in the form of CD-ROMs to new state-of-the-art technology – Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL).

These hi-tech advancement in the field of education has introduced different types of audio-video lessons, drills, and practice exercises in the mobile apps for the users to learn language and master speaking, listening, reading, and writing in an easy manner. Ever-increasing demands persuade firms to invent and introduce novel, easy, and sure-shot learning features to attract learners world-wide. These globally changing socio-economic circumstances have also changed the way the mobile apps' creators envision, understand, and cater to the varying needs of offline and online clientele. They have introduced learning practice sessions, lessons, steps, and level-wise tutorials which suit those who want to learn as and when they get time at their desired locations thus keeping the process of learning intrinsically unhindered and user-friendly. Some learning features like sociable context, native speakers, and teachers' feedbacks, and hobnobbing with people on online forums can

spur and encourage the exchange of knowledge in language learning. Hence, we specifically zeroed in on five mobile language learning apps, parsed and discussed them in this study.

## **ICT Tools in English Language Learning**

Information Communication Technology includes the tools such as computers, internet, websites, emails, mobile phones, and language labs. In this technological modern world, ICT is the pivot of technological world and serves as prerequisite if one wants to work, strive, and thrive. All these tools are essentially crucial in the field of education and primarily when one wants to learn, improve, and enhance linguistic skills – learning English language.

These combination of ICT tools came into being with the need to train American soldiers to survive and efficiently perform in the World War-II (1939-45), consequently, several institutions like Office of Education Training Films and United States Armed Forces Institute had jointly taken the lead in designing and producing entertaining movies and teaching-learning resources that found to be then motivating and encouraging students and soldiers in learning practices. The historical overview has it that in 1969, Leonard Klein Rock could link up two computers; in 1972 email was created; in 1983, Internet Protocol (IP) came into being that allowed computers to get connected with the networks that consist of 12 numerical divided into groups of 3 numbers for instance.

In 1992, Robert Cailliau and Tim Berners-Lee went on to create the World Wide Web (www), it further has facilitated the design and distribution of hypertexts and other resources including animations, images, sounds, texts, and the management of different Internet services like email files, transfer, among others and in 1995, the Internet appears.

All those tools give an opportunity to English language learners to be creative and while learning one can explore, discover and during producing content their performances can also be measured. There are multiple such interactive tools including presentation software, audio & movie makers, camera, podcasting, web publishing exercise creating tools that basically promote and strengthen process of communication between students and teachers and it can be classified into two groups. The first category of software offers for the real-time interaction as telephones, board, voice meeting, conferences, and instant messaging; in the second type of software - email, text messages and discussion boards - you need to have patience as it takes time.

Going through audio-video files and clips one can improve listening skills. Teachers and learners can use Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) to get their work organized and managed electronically. This platform enables parents and learners to have a say on discussion forums and assess their own progress. Internet offers great opportunity to learn English rather providing an English-speaking environment.

Subsequent advances in the deep-learning and its application made Computer Assisted Language Learning more prominent and in today's world computer has become a platform that assists us in the learning process. YouTube enables us to view, and re-view posted videos on different aspects of language learning like reading, writing, listening, speaking and

grammar lessons to master the language. So, above mentioned tools and countless electronic paraphernalia are in place for one who yearns to learn English language at any given time and space.

## Review of Literature

The contributions by Chang & Hsu (2011), Egbert, Akasha, Huff, & Lee (2011), Hoven & Palalas (2011) and Stockwell (2010) claim that studies done hitherto show mobile learning apps have the profound possibilities especially for the foreign language learners to learn and practice language skills on their hand-held devices, tablets, and personal computers. While Sweeney & Moore (2012) opined that number of mobile apps developed and utilized for English as foreign language learning are not pedagogically appropriate, for there seems to be knowledge gap between app developers and language teachers. Thirty-four hours of Duolingo, a language application, is equivalent to a semester of a language course. Gamification of language in real-time, acquiring virtual coins simultaneously with grammar and vocabulary has made the app popular.

The app covers methods from beginner to advanced level in 23 languages. For beginners, the focus is on verbs, phrases, sentences, and for advanced learners, the focus is on LSRW skills. Second language learning is through the first language or mother tongue. Learning material and levels are prescribed by the app based on the performance in the Diagnostic test. Ads could be avoided in the premium version. *Quiz - Your English* by Cambridge Assessment is the best for test preparation for IELTS and B2 level on CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). The quiz could be played with peers and friends, especially during the exam, to break the monotony and exam tension.

The British Council focuses on multiple topics for all levels from Questions, tenses, gerunds, and modal verbs. The present era which is standing on the cusp of total digitization has technical means and equivalents for sectors like education, banking, entertainment, commerce, religion, trade, and everything include language learning. And nowadays, we have tremendous possibilities before us to study, learn and acquire knowledge virtually in any language. These technologies have considerably impacted our lives including education and offer multiple benefits when you learn language to enhance academic level through self-learning process.

Rovithis et. al. (2019) and Straková & Cimermanová (2018) are of the opinion that ongoing advancement in the technological world creates possibilities and stimulate the very need for improvement in the field of education thus enhancing the teaching and learning process. On the other hand, Gangaiamaran & Pasupathi (2017) and Kukulska - Hulme & Shield (2008), Tarighat & Khodabakhsh, (2016) seem to have understood that technologies driving mobiles and facilitating development of apps have become part and parcel of learning process; they are more attractive compared to computer-assisted language learning, personal and portable devices.

In this paper, five selected English learning mobile apps – *Duolingo*, *JoshTalks*, *BBC Learning English*, *Grammarly* and *HelloEnglish* are discussed. These apps enable users to

learn to speak, listen, write and improve grammatical aspects of the language including learning and imbibing quintessential vocabulary while one learns the lessons.

## **Analysis of the Usage and Applications of English Learning Apps**

Five English learning mobile apps – *Duolingo*, *Josh Talks*, *BBC Learning English*, *Grammarly* and *Hello English* are discussed and analysed in this article.

*Duolingo* with 100 million downloads, 16.1 million reviews, is the most-downloaded language learning mobile app. It has features to memorize vocabulary, phrases, and sentences; offers option to learn 38 languages for the basic to the advanced learners including test to assess one's level of performance. All courses are available on free version; too much gamification, random vocabulary, lack of native speakers and separate features for speaking exercises are some lacunas and some wants chatting and message sending options to be in place. Having perused its features, it is evident that introducing *Duolingo* into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) training is more likely to have constructive effect on the learning processes of the users. We have noticed remarkable improvement in students' ability in learning English grammar and vocabulary. Despite some inconvenience, it helps you in learning two languages simultaneously.

It is also observed that it cannot be relied on for the higher level due to the direct-translation method. The learners get confused about sentence structure when they are told to translate every word during the process. This app usually provides pictures for the new vocabulary. However, there are certain vocabularies taught through direct translation without a visual image. This confuses the participant as they fail to understand the meaning of many words. Still *Duolingo* stands tall among other apps as it improves the knowledge of the language learners regarding pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

*Grammarly* has 4.4 rating and downloaded by 10 million users. Grammarly's keyboard and auto proof-reader enable us to write clearly, confidently, and mistake-free. Its features like the synonyms tool enhances vocabulary, spell-checks words, and improves writing from emails to social media posts. It is an online grammar and spell checker in English structure and corrects mistakes in writing. It provides genuine word recommendations in the English syntax.

Before using it, we must upload a file for checking, below the pictures of Grammarly after the user has installed it. It lacks some key features, unlike the paid English grammar check (premium) which has full advantages and benefits and many features related to the genre, clarity improvements, and additional advanced corrections.

*BBC Learning English* app offers regular updates on lessons, transcripts, and quizzes. With 4 rating and 19.6 K downloads, its features allow to listen audio programs or download them and use the built-in transcripts and subtitles. It provides multimedia English language teaching materials to meet learners' needs and many materials are delivered as full-length courses wherein the learner can choose the best way to study them. It takes off with lower intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced level learning methods. There is

an option of euphemistic feedback wherein you are taught to use words or expressions that do not cause affront or embarrassment. Without text supports one can watch or listen each show. You can use quizzes to assess command, save scores and can keep trying to achieve desired outcome.

*Josh Talks*: It is an Indian educational mobile app, has 4.3 rating, 5 million downloads and allows real-time conversation practices with Firebase. It has 90% accuracy rate in speech-to-text conversion, reduces 30% of operational costs for more investment in product development and helps create new interactive learning features tailored for the local users. Some of the users want its lay-out to be modified along with facilitation of unblocking options. It offers interesting and glitch-free online learning experiences. This platform shares inspiring role model stories in vernacular languages, offers free career guidance and inclusive online courses for the past 7 years. It helps one to learn speaking, communicate well, gets the hang of grammar, vocabulary, but there is no tutor or teacher in person to rectify and guide users in their progress, sudden flooding of videos cause confusion to users. It does not have provision of multi-device connectivity on the platform.

*Hello English* app is a global brand in the field of English learning mobile apps with presence in 23 vernacular languages tailored for various business needs. Its 4.4 rating, 50 million downloads and 922 K reviews are the testament to the facts about its relevance in the eyes of learners. Being personalized this app gives an interactive vernacular/English-to-English learning experience, tracks daily progress, follows constant feedbacks, extensive reporting, performance tracking for managers, and continuous assessments. AI-driven app has over 50 million users and is preferred by over 7000 top-notch firms. It is fully automated that gives instant report card, has robust voice recognition engine to evaluate spoken English skills with facial and voice recognition it is completely fully proctored as it works across devices and different platforms.

This free and ad-assisted app eases learning experience in speaking, reading, writing, listening, and acquiring grammatical nuances and vocabulary. It has a premium version as well to remove ads and unlock special courses. Released by Culture Alley in September 2014, it was named as India's Best Mobile App in 2017 by IAMAI and Google's Best App for 2016. Android 4.0 is required to play this application. It's over 475 interactive lessons assist users in learning grammar and vocabulary. It provides various features for junior high school students in improving their vocabulary mastery via fun and attractive ways. Most of the students have favourable opinions in utilizing it as a medium for learning vocabulary. It has lacunas as its free variant cannot allow us to open some courses because that comes under premium package. At the outset, this app wants one to know Basic English structure and alphabet thus cannot help you learn English from the scratch. As soon we launch the app, we must select native language as it works in one's native language and continue; make sure you choose the right one. Afterwards, it gives a 20-questions test to assess current English level and accordingly recommend lessons. It uses interactive games to teach different English lessons and gives coins to unlock difficult lessons. It offers new audio books, latest news, and books to enhance one's English language.

## Highlights and Challenges in the English Learning Apps

In order to make their mobile English learning apps efficient, convenient, and user-friendly, almost all developers try and strive to make their platforms cost-effective, introduce wide range of features, park divers learning materials and bring uniqueness in the way lessons and drills are offered, and make interface engaging. In the process most of them successfully guide users in acquiring good vocabulary, grammar sense and other English skills as they come across readable content and other features which motivate them. But the disadvantage is most of the apps often do not provide an opportunity to user to get connected with others to share and communicate in English. Above selected apps certainly have features which empower them to learn, speak, read, write, listen, and build vocabulary but their frequent streaming of request to opt for the premium package for high quality learning materials torpedo their flow that needs to be addressed.

These selected English learning mobile apps are not complete; they do have technical flaws, operational glitches, a few shortcomings, and some lacunas. Still when we have comprehensively investigated their available packages, technical features, and assessed overall feedbacks of tens of thousands of users, we can say that they are still the best in the present environment where people from all walks of life are yearning to learn English language to upgrade their existing levels and to master its nuances which is not their mother tongue.

### Conclusion

Our study broadly examined selected five English learning mobile apps *Hello English*, *Grammarly*, *BBC Learning English*, *Duolingo* and *JoshTalks* which have greater influence on the students who want to learn English. Free Hello English is found to be liked by those students who want to learn in an easy way online. This app is used as a teaching aid particularly in teaching and learning English vocabulary. While Grammarly has two free and premium variants meant for freelance & informal and academic and professional writings. *Duolingo* yields an amazing result when it is employed in the process of learning English as a foreign language in both teaching and learning methods. It has depth to assist learners to master grammar and learn vocabulary, as well as their listening, speaking, reading, writing skills, and it keeps on motivating them. The use of *BBC Learning English* does motivate and create interest in the students in learning English. Therefore, *BBC Learning English* is said to be an effective medium in learning English. Similarly, *JoshTalks* is quite dear to many Indians as it has various features which benefit basic to professional seekers; hence, it is one of the best apps in the market for many passionate individuals who want to learn English language.

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