Mobile Assisted Vocabulary Learning Application of uTalk: An Eye-Opening Appraisal

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Abstract

In a world that is becoming increasingly digitized, the ubiquitous technology has revolutionized every aspect of our lives and education is no exception. Smartphones, in particular, have opened up a new horizon for language learning, transforming conventional instruction into a dynamic, interactive, and genuinely innovative digital experience. This widespread usage of mobile devices has contributed to the development of several mobile apps for English language learning. In this light, uTalk distinguishes itself from other language learning applications as it offers remarkable benefits for expanding learners' vocabulary, and this study will offer a critical review of this app by spotlighting its pluses and minuses for various language learners. The uTalk application incorporates the element of gamification, which makes the learning of vocabulary more interesting and engaging for learners. The review rightly unravels that uTalk's diversity of vocabulary categories, constructed pronunciation technology features, gamification activities, and straightforward teaching methodology render it an outstanding learning resource for both learners and teachers as a valuable supplementary learning and teaching tool. Notwithstanding its flaws (that is, having the same template-based protocol for all languages), with its innovative approach to language learning, uTalk has the potential to revolutionize how we learn and communicate with each other. This review article serves as a guide that can assist educators in leveraging the power of technology to create engaging and interactive learning environments for their students and it can unravel new horizons for teachers and curriculum developers to introduce the app as an additional resource for their students.

Keywords: Learning English; Mobile Application; Review; uTalk

1. Introduction

Nowadays, more than ever, with the constraints on physical assembling and face-to-face instruction brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, instructors and students alike must

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investigate viable digital substitutes for the conventional foreign language class (Loewen et al., 2020). In the spirit of the accelerating rise of mobile technology, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), a sub-category of computer-assisted language learning (CALL), has gained burgeoning appreciation and momentum among language scholars worldwide (Chwo et al., 2018; Godwin-Jones, 2017; Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013; Yang et al., 2022). A large body of research (Burston, 2015; Hsu, 2016; Pérez-Paredes et al., 2018; Zhang & Pérez-Paredes, 2021) testifies to the fact that MALL can offer additional possibilities for learning, modify learning practices, and render a more learning individualized and ubiquitous-oriented learning functionality. Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) affords the chance to integrate software designed for second language (L2) acquisition with the advantageous features of multimodal learning and gamification (Jensen & Cadierno, 2022). Furthermore, numerous mobile apps for L2 learners have been launched in the marketplace as a result of the extensive incorporation of immensely eminent portable gadgets such as smartphones and tablets, expanding the scope of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) to accommodate MALL as a groundbreaking position for L2 learning (Momeni, 2022; Puebla et al., 2022; Tragant et al., 2021). Although MALL is still an emerging domain of study, particularly as the range of professionally accessible L2 learning apps increases, some investigations have proven the promise of L2 applications to facilitate vocabulary learning (e.g., Hanson & Brown, 2020; Loewen et al., 2020; Rachels & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2018). In this regard, uTalk is a language learning application that is extremely beneficial for vocabulary acquisition, and this study will offer a critical review of this app by spotlighting its pluses and minuses for various language learners.

2. Description

The uTalk software, which boasts a ranking grade of 4.2 in the Google Play Store, is a language-learning application that accommodates more than 100 incredibly prominent languages (Figure 1). The app has both free and priced premium versions for its users.

This breadth of language coverage can enable this app to compete with the market's most popular language-learning applications (e.g., Busuu, Babel, Duolingo). In this respect, the app is proliferated with the dialects of different languages (e.g., British English, American English, Canadian English, Scottish English), which is quite expressive. This app's potency is not restricted to English since there are several dialects for other languages (e.g., Moroccan Arabic, Lebanese Arabic, Egyptian Arabic). The app's utilization of audio makes it easier to comprehend the accent of each language. After installing the app from the Play Store, users may gain access to the app's content by registering and logging in using an email, student, Apple, or Facebook account (Figure 2).

Figure 1
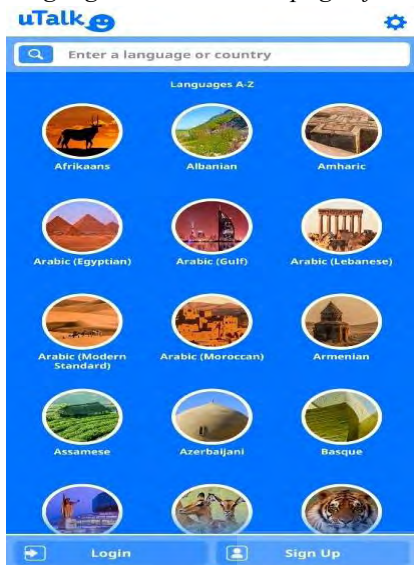*Language Selection Homepage of the App*

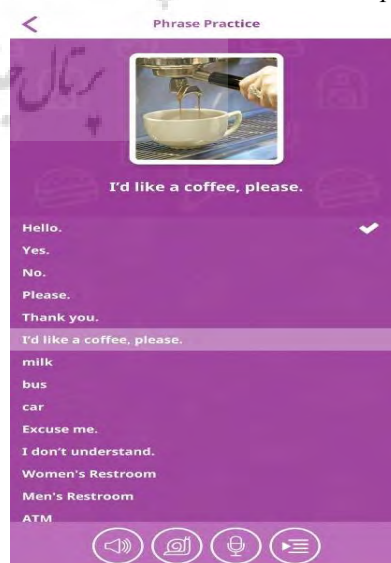Figure 2
Login Homepage of the App

The app seems to be built on the pedagogical principle that a new language may be learned via interaction with gamification and game-based learning of vocabulary and phrases. Noteworthy, is the app's interoperability with a number of games in terms of proficiency, including easy games, hard games, recall games, and memory games (Figure 3). In this way, learners can choose to focus on games that align with their proficiency level or challenge themselves with more difficult games as they progress. This integration of gamification and language learning creates a dynamic and fun environment that encourages learners to continue learning. The app's functionality is in such a way that it gives both female and male pronunciations for a word or phrase with a corresponding picture, and the user may record their voice and check the pronunciation (Figure 4).

Figure 3
Different Games Provided by the App

Figure 4
A Phrase Practice Lesson in the App

Furthermore, the app covers the most commonly used vocabulary in a category-oriented protocol, allowing users to pick among the themes and follow what they may require in a certain circumstance (Figure 5). Under the "restaurant words" category, for instance, the app supplies the vocabulary and phrases necessary for ordering meals or requesting a specific item from the server in a restaurant. This characteristic of the app can be useful for learners looking to improve their language skills in everyday social situations. Overall, the app's category-oriented approach ensures that users have access to the most relevant vocabulary and phrases for their specific needs, making language learning more efficient and practical.

The methodology of the games also involves presenting the user with five or more pictures and having the app pronounce a word that corresponds to one of the displayed pictures. Afterward, the user should choose the picture that correlates to the spoken word (Figure 6). In another specialized game for speaking, the recall game, the user must pronounce the displayed word and then compare it to the pronunciation of a native speaker to determine whether or not the pronunciation was right (Figure 7). By regularly playing this game, users can develop greater confidence in their ability to speak the language accurately and fluently, which can be particularly beneficial for those who need to communicate in a professional or academic setting. Additionally, the recall game can also be a fun and engaging way to practice pronunciation, keeping learners motivated and interested in their language learning experience.

Figure 5	Figure 6	Figure 7
Some Vocabulary Categories of the App	*A Hard Game Sample of the App*	*A Recall Game Sample of the App*

3. Evaluation

Gamification or gamified education has forged its way and garnered growing prominence in EFL education, notably in the domain of vocabulary study, which is believed to play a crucial function in language learning. Since vocabulary mastery holds the groundwork for speaking, listening, writing, and reading (Cameron, 2001), Meara and Jones (1987) showed a favorable correlation between vocabulary competence and language learning capacity. In other terms, vocabulary shortage hampers the acquisition of other linguistic abilities (Al-

Khasawneh, 2019; Gharhbaghi & Hosaini, 2023). Admittedly, most EFL students notice vocabulary learning to be difficult and time-consuming in terms of memorization and long-term retention (Namaziandost et al., 2021; Waluyo & Bucol, 2021), and the use of gamification may be an appropriate alternative to remedy such problems and to transform the perceived monotonous learning experience into a fun and enjoyable one (Kingsley & Grabe-Hagen, 2018). One method that gamification might be utilized is in the language learning applications such as uTalk, which is the focus of this review article. To this end, uTalk incorporates the element of gamification and game-based learning (e.g., easy game, hard game, recall game) which makes the learning of vocabulary more interesting and engaging for learners. A large corpus of studies bears witness to the benefits of vocabulary game-based learning, such as progress in learning effectiveness (Chen et al., 2019), augmentation of motivation (Reynolds & Taylor, 2020), enhancement of interest (Elaish et al., 2019), anxiety reduction (Zou et al., 2019), and promotion of learning independence (Setiawan & Wiedarti, 2020).

In addition to uTalk's gamification, the app offers a variety of learning opportunities for learners. The application provides authentic vocabulary and phrases spoken by native speakers (as commented by the users in the Google Play Store), as well as interactive exercises that aid students in acquiring the Standard English accent and pronunciation and enhancing their speaking abilities. The uTalk app is very creative, and user-friendly, and features an engaging platform that lends itself to a more pleasurable language learning protocol for learners. It appears to be a very face-valid application because the components are logically ordered, and the options are straightforward. For instance, on the language selection homepage of the app, the languages are ordered neatly and the user can select even the dialects of a language very easily. The application is congruent with both tablets and smartphones and is compatible with both the iOS and Android operating systems, indicating that the developer attempted to appeal to a larger audience. Another intriguing element based on the comments of users in the Google Play Store is the utilization of pictures, which may be particularly useful for visual learners. Viewing a visual representation of each phrase and vocabulary can certainly aid in its memorization; learners can just keep that picture in mind to learn the phrase or vocabulary. The application also includes audio, and the audio is extremely clear and easily understandable by learners. This is a crucial feature since it facilitates the memorization of the words and phrases by the students, and the male and female voices make them even more effective. Additionally, the audio feature is especially helpful for learners who struggle with pronouncing words correctly. By listening to the correct pronunciation of the words and phrases, they can improve their speech clarity and increase their confidence in speaking the language.

In spite of the app's plethora of positive virtues, there are a few threads for improvement that may be considered in a future update. The phonetic spelling and pronunciation of the words can be offered for advanced words to cater to the learners' self-discovery learning. The supplementation of the words with some authentic sentences and texts could even contribute to the users. In the various games, a platform or protocol can be supplied for learners to demonstrate whether they have pronounced the word correctly or not, as the app does not specify the correct answers and leaves the decision up to the learners. In the meantime, throughout the games, the frequency of occurrence of the words is not equal, and some words

are given greater emphasis, which app programmers should balance. In the category of words, certain minor terms are repeated in multiple categories, which could be bothersome for the users as they are searching for new words in each category to learn. To this end, the app developers can substitute these repeated words with more specialized ones in each category. Furthermore, the app developers can attach more advanced-tasted words as the majority of them are at the elementary level. A further shortcoming that should be addressed by enhancing the app's operating system is the slow speed at which the app loads its various pages. It should be noted that the app supports more than one hundred languages, which is a positive feature. However, the app developers should bear in mind that each language has its specialized vocabulary and phrases and that using the same template-based protocol for words category may not be effective across languages. In this light, it is strongly recommended to supply more creative, unique, and diversified materials for each language.

4. Conclusion

Smartphones have been progressively integrated into L2 education, converting conventional learning and instruction into an entirely innovative style of digital education (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). This widespread usage of mobile devices has contributed to the development and release of several mobile apps for English language teaching and learning. Downloadable applications for language educators are already abundant on the Internet. The mobility and availability of cellphone gadgets have facilitated the availability of learning resources. Similarly, MALL has been extensively acknowledged as equipping language learners with "portability," "social interactivity," "context sensitivity," "connectivity," and "individuality" (Miangah & Nezarat, 2012, p. 311). To this end, 39% of the leading 100 free applications and 34% of the best 100 premium applications in the education sector on the Chinese App Store on January 21, 2013, were featured around the arena of language learning (Yang et al., 2013).

Being a prominent and well-regarded language learning app assistance, uTalk possesses all the wonderful qualities mentioned earlier. With a high 4.2 rating on Google Play and hundreds of five-star ratings, the application provides learners with user-friendly, interactive, and fun functionality to improve their English proficiency. The uTalk is a smartphone learning app that transforms the smartphones of its users into personal English instructors. This application is one of the English language learning programs that provide a diverse selection of gamification and game-based language learning activities. Users may enhance their English vocabulary and speaking abilities on the go, anytime, and anywhere, despite their hectic schedules. The app's diversity of vocabulary categories, constructed pronunciation technology features, gamification activities, and straightforward teaching methodology render it a wonderful learning resource for both learners and teachers. Notwithstanding its flaws, it appears prudent to propose uTalk as a valuable secondary learning tool, one that may assist its users to learn new English material and improve their vocabulary and speaking abilities.

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Note: The important information about the application
Title: Utalk
Contact Information: hello@utalk.com
Type of Product: Mobile phone application
Hardware Requirements: Smart device (phone or tablet) and access to an Internet connection
Operating System: Android and iOS app
Registration: Required
Language: Multi-Language
Publisher: uTalk
Level: Beginner and Intermediate
Supplementary Software: Google voice recognition on the phone

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