Babbel: A Mobile Language Learning App

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Introduction

Technology is dramatically changing the way we go about teaching and learning a second language (L2) (Chapelle, 2007; Motteram & Sharma, 2009; Otto, 2017). Instructional technology benefits L2 learners in a number of ways: it provides learners with a variety of authentic and educational materials (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), allows for independent, self-paced learning (Pim, 2013), provides learners opportunities for developing intercultural competence via communication with native and other non-native speakers (Whyte, 2011), and makes them more motivated (Baleghizadeh, 2015), just to name a few. Technological innovations also enable language teachers to create a more exciting and interactive classroom environment by incorporating materials from outside world into the classroom (Stanley, 2013), furnish learners with multimodal feedback (Elola & Oskoz, 2016), and help those learners with special learning needs (Roblyer & Doering, 2013). It would not be far from the truth to state that nowadays there is technology to support every aspect of language learning and teaching.

With the increasing development in wireless and mobile technologies, using mobile devices to learn and teach L2 has been attracting a lot of researchers' attention (See Viberg & Grönlund, 2012 for a review). In fact, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), a subset of M(mobile)-learning, is a fast growing field of research with promising implications for second language learning and teaching (Pachler, Bachmair & Cook, 2010). Handheld mobile devices such as smart phones, tablet computers, laptops, MP3 and MP4 players, etc. are appealing to users as they provide them with permanency, accessibility, immediacy, and interactivity among other features (Ogata & Yano, 2005). Thornton & Houser (2005, p. 226) add that "mobile devices can be effective tools for a broad range of educational activities." Moreover, new mobile software (e.g., Duolingo, Busuu, 50languages, HiNative, …) are being developed that promise to facilitate language learning process. Evaluating the affordances that seven mobile English learning apps provide for adult learn-

ers, Chen (2106) concludes that the apps do in fact enhance learning but that "there is no single language-learning app that could provide a one-size-fits-all solution to meet adult learners' language learning needs," (p. 49).

The growing enthusiasm towards MALL and its applications should not be taken at face value. As Nushi and Jenabzadeh (2016, p. 30) have noted, many of the mobile language applications "have been developed by people outside of the field of second language pedagogy and their effectiveness cannot and should not be taken for granted." Viberg and Grönlund (2012) also point out that "there is a lack of empirical studies providing concrete evidence on how the mobile technology use can enhance individual's language learning results," (p. 7). Given those cautionary notes, it behooves us to critically examine the available language learning applications so that language learners and teachers alike aware of their potential advantages and disadvantages and make informed decisions as to whether or not or how to include them in language learning and teaching package. The present paper reviews a language learning app named Babbel and explores its potential effectiveness for L2 language learning and teaching.

Application Details

Publisher: Babbel
Product Type: Smartphone Application Software
Language(s): Multilingual
Level: Any
Media Format: APK/IPA
Operating Systems: Android/iOS
Hardware Requirements: Smartphone/Internet Connection
Supplementary Software: None
Price: Free, offers built-in purchases

Description

After downloading the app for their Android or iOS devices, learners are provided a list from which they can choose their target language. The list of the languages one can learn with Babbel are: Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Indonesian, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese (Brazilian), Russian, Spanish, Swedish, and Turkish. If you are an English speaker, all of these courses and their

materials are provided in English. However, if you want to learn English, you must choose a language from a list of six languages: French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish. Unless you speak one of these languages, the English course would be meaningless to you. It is important to note, early in the review, that all these courses from beginner to advanced are designed by the staff of Babbel, whom they claim are 'language experts'. Unlike Duolingo, which is a community-driven language app, Babbel relies on its own language experts to provide courses. In this review we are taking the French course, one of its most popular ones, to get familiar with Babbel's course content and methodology.

After choosing the course, the learners are provided with a curser to proximately choose their language efficiency. There are only two options: Beginner and Advanced. For the sake of this review, we will put the curser on Beginner [Figure 1].

Figure 1.
We put the 'World of language' on Beginner.

Immediately, there is an exercise. Beginner learners must choose the translation of 'Hello' in French. There are two options to choose from at the bottom of the page: 'Merci' and 'Bonjour' [Figure 2].
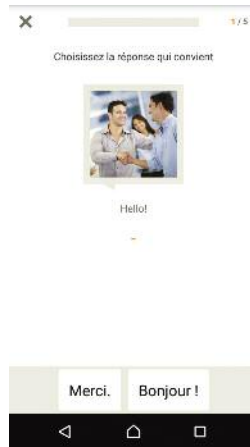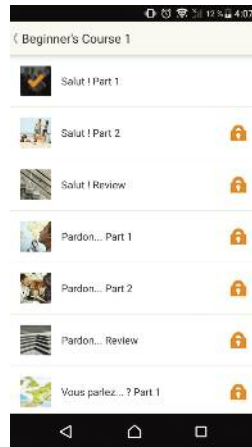
Figure 2.
'Merci et Bonjour'.

The rest of this exercise concerns itself with asking/teaching more and more basic words and phrases in French, including phrases like 'Ca va ? – How are you?' and 'Comment tu t'applelles? – What's your name?'. After clicking on each French phrase, Babbel provides its complete pronunciation said by a native speaker. After finishing this exercise, we go in for the real French course and lessons.

Itis important to note and analyze how these language apps provide their material and give access to their users. For example, Duolingo gives full access of all its materials to the users and claims that its ads running in the app are keeping education free. Rosetta Stone gives 30 days of free access to all its materials, but users cannot download them to use offline. Babbel on the other hand provides users with many courses, several in the beginner level, several in the intermediate, several in the advanced level, and many more in other subjects; such as traveling, family and friends, etc. However, only one lesson of each course in the app is available for free for the users, meaning a beginner learner can only have six lessons – since there are six beginner courses – for free [Figure 3].
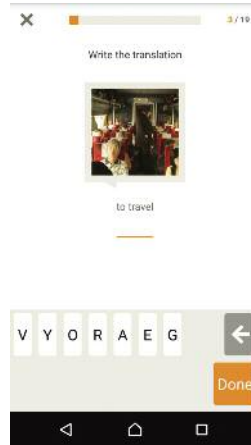
Figure 3.
Beginner's Course 1.

We start with Beginner's Course 4 which is about traveling. The first exercise is a 'listen and repeat' exercise [Figure 4]. The app enjoys a voice recognition system which asks the reader to repeat the phrase or words the course is trying to teach. Babbel also gives direct translation of the target language.

Figure 4.
Inside a lesson.

After teaching three phrases or words in this manner, Babbel now asks the user the same words and phrases; but this time it doesn't show the pictures, only the language. And then it questions the users about the spelling of each word and phrase [Figure 5]. It is worthwhile to mention that the app gives the learners obvious hints as shown in the picture.

Figure 5.
Inside a lesson.

After getting the spellings right, the app continues and teaches three new, and a bit more difficult, phrases and words in the same 'listen and repeat' manner, as shown in figure 4. And immediately again, it tests the users of their knowledge of the freshly taught material by choosing the correct translation. [Figure 6.] And then continues to ask about the spelling in the same previous manner.

Figure 6.
Inside a lesson.

After this exercise, the learners are presented a conversation about the same topic they have been learning in the same lesson [Figure 7]. It is a pleasant surprise for the users to be exposed to a real-life conversation and language, especially because until this exercise they have been only exposed to a robotic type of teaching

and testing. It's important to mention that this exercise is a dynamic one since the learners have to put in some certain words and phrases in certain places of the conversation.
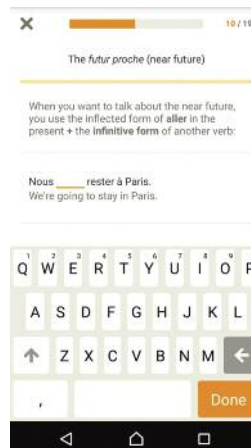
Figure 7.
Inside a lesson.

The conversation is a rather long one and suddenly there is a shift of how much the learners are exposed to language, which is a nice change.

Now comes deductive grammar instruction; the users are merely presented the conjugation of the verb 'aller' which means 'go' in French, accompanied with a native speaker pronouncing the verbs [Figure 8]. What comes after is the testing of the learners in the same robotic and immediate manner of the beginning of the lesson, merely asking the different conjugations of the verb 'aller'.

Figure 8.
Inside a lesson.

In the next exercise the learners are presented, again, with a deductive and more complicated grammatical point explained not in French, but in English. There's the grammar rule and then immediately there are exercises following up on the same rules [Figures 9 and 10].
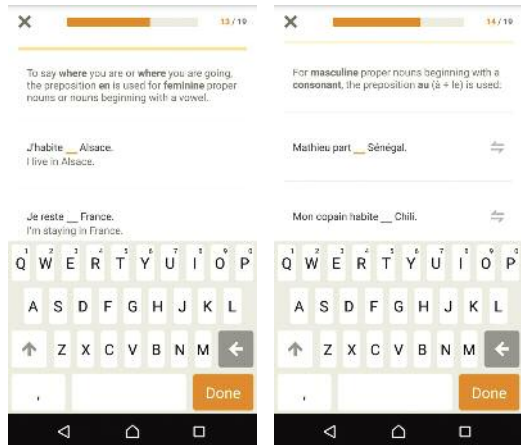

Figure 9.
Inside a lesson.

In the following exercises the learners get the same type of exercises that they have been exposed to during this lesson, and Babbel never forgets to test them as soon as it can with as much as exposure to the new material. For example, now that it has taught 'near future' and some vocabulary about travelling, Babbel mixes these two and tests the learners with questions containing both of these materials.

In the final parts of the lesson, Babbel again focuses on grammatical points, but this time a rather minor one – preposition for places – in the same deductive manner [Figure 10 And 11].

Figure 10 and 11.
Inside a lesson.

The lesson finishes up with some exercises covering all the materials taught in the lesson combined. Babbel, as mentioned before, pronounces each and every sentence, phrase, and word throughout the lesson.

Evaluation

Babbel can perform as a stand-alone to learn a new language but within certain conditions. One, which is very obvious, is that one cannot truly learn a new language by only using the free version of the app, although it can be used to get to know a language better and more importantly to have a quick preview of how the app works and how the lessons will unfold in the future so the learners can decide whether the app's teaching methodology works for them or not. Second, Babbel's two most prominent features are deductive grammar teaching and heavy reliance on the source language, meaning if one wants to study through this app, they must know what advantages and more importantly what disadvantages these two approaches might have for language learning.

As mentioned earlier, Babbel teaches grammar rules and vocabulary explicitly. After introducing a new sentence, Babbel takes the time to explain and immediately gives examples of that certain grammar rule and then tests the learner on the

material. This is very convenient for the students, since they do not have to think very much on how the target language's structure and grammar is built. This explanatory approach is applied to new words and phrases too. As shown earlier, Babbel teaches vocabulary, including words, phrases and even full sentences, in a direct way. The learners are presented the word in the target language, then they hear the pronunciation, and at the same time they are shown a picture of the vocabulary item and are given different translation of that in their source language. Again, this makes it convenient for students to learn vocabulary and it does not require a lot of critical thinking and context reading.

One of the downsides of this app is its heavy reliance on the source language. Nearly everything, except for the exact materials being taught, are given in the students' source language which makes the learning atmosphere too familiar. The learning atmosphere should not be neither too unknown nor too familiar for the learners. Nonetheless, there are many positive things about Babbel as well. It is inexpensive – it runs from $7.45 to $12.95 a month, depending on the package the learners choose – its surface is modern and clean and its courses are well-structured, highly-organized, and user-friendly.

Conclusion

Babbel is not a free app, yet it is inexpensive and popular. Compared to other language learning apps, Babbel comes somewhat in the middle; it is not as popular as Duolingo, for example, but on the other hand, it is not as expensive as Rosetta Stone. We cannot exactly say how many downloads and purchases Babbel has, but the website says that it is "#1 selling language learning app in the world1". We cannot say for sure, because we do not have the exact number, but since Duolingo is not a "selling" app and compared to rather expensive Rosetta Stone, Babbel is much more affordable. The app developers have gamified its content which makes the materials more interesting. The app has been designed to be used in the learners' spare time, but it definitely can be used as a serious course for a serious-minded learner; it carefully nurtures the needs of both types of learners.

In general, Babbel is a rather good choice for language learning; for some students it might work as an excellent language learning tool which helps them every step of the way, carefully building up the intricately designed courses, but for others the pedagogy may seem unimaginative. Students who want an easy-to-use tool

and a deductive teacher will love this app. Babbel gives the material straight to the students and immediately afterwards tests them on the recently learned material. However, many might think it is ineffective to be presented the direct translation of every new word and phrase and feel like they are being spoon-fed. Others may feel that they do not have enough natural exposure to, or communicative task types in, the target language, when half or even more of the app's texts and language are presented in their own native language rather than the one they are trying to learn. One must simply try out the free version of the app and some of its courses in their level (beginner, intermediate, advanced, etc.) to learn whether they can work with the same methodology for an extended time or not.

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