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# Chapter 6: Selecting and Evaluating Mobile Apps for Language Learning

Jeong-Bae Son

*University of Southern Queensland, Australia*

## Abstract

Mobile-assisted language learning is one of the most important recent developments in the field of computer-assisted language learning. MALL is growing, with an increasing number of studies that examine various mobile devices in formal and informal learning environments. Along with the advancement of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets, a large number of educational apps have been developed and are widely available in the App Store (iOS), Play Store (Android) and other repositories. The number of language learning apps is also rapidly growing and the increasing accessibility of the apps is generating the need for the appropriate selection of the apps. This chapter explores mobile apps for language learning and looks at the evaluation of language learning apps. It introduces a language learning app review form, which guides language teachers to critically evaluate pedagogical and technical aspects of language learning apps. The review form contains 15 evaluation criteria: purpose, accuracy, usefulness, flexibility, authenticity, engagement, feedback, integration, support, price, reliability, presentation, organization, navigation and multimedia. The chapter also presents a list of example apps selected for reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and

culture learning activities with a particular focus on learning English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL).

**Keywords**: Mobile-assisted language learning, mobile apps, language learning apps, app evaluation, English language learning

## Introduction

Mobile learning using mobile devices (e.g., MP3 players, personal digital assistants (PDAs), electronic dictionaries, mobile phones, and tablet computers) is considered as anytime and anywhere learning (Burston, 2014a; Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008; Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013). Mobile learning on smartphones and tablets, in particular, normally involves mobile apps, which are rapidly on the rise (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Mobile apps are available in the App Store (iOS), Play Store (Android) and other repositories. The number of apps is continuously increasing. According to Pocketgamer. biz, the total number of active apps in the App Store (available for download) on 15 February 2015 was 1,515,650 and, on average, 720 new apps were submitted to the App Store every day (App Store Metrics, 2015). In terms of downloads, Statista. com reported that 85 billion apps had been downloaded from the App Store from July 2008 to October 2014 (Apple App Store: Number of downloads 2015, 2015). Categories of mobile apps include games, education, business, lifestyle, entertainment, utilities, travel, books, music, productivity, health and fitness, sports, reference, photo and video, news, finance, food and drink, medical, social networking, navigation and weather. At the time of investigating the total number of active apps reported on Pocketgamer. biz, the most popular category of apps was games (21%), followed by education (10%), business (10%), lifestyle (8%) and entertainment

(7%). The increasing accessibility of apps, particularly educational apps, is generating the need for the appropriate selection and use of apps for educational purposes.

In the field of computer-assisted language learning, the rapid development of mobile technologies has brought up a new trend called mobile-assisted language learning. Mobile devices are widely available for language learners and teachers and a number of studies on the use of mobile devices for language learning and teaching have been reported in CALL publications (e.g., Burston, 2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015; Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008; Stockwell, 2012). As the body of literature on MALL is growing, it is likely to see more studies attempting to use mobile apps on smartphones and tablets in user-friendly learning and teaching environments. This chapter explores mobile apps for language learning and looks at the evaluation of language learning apps. It introduces a language learning app review form, which guides language teachers to critically evaluate pedagogical and technical aspects of language learning apps so that they can make informed decisions in their search for good mobile apps. It also presents a list of example apps selected for reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and culture learning activities with a particular focus on learning English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL).

## Mobile Apps and Language Learning

With the enhancement of hardware and software in recent years, smartphones and tablets have become powerful multi-functional devices featuring touch screen interfaces, voice recognition, motion sensors, high-resolution image and video capture, fast Internet connectivity, Bluetooth and/or Global Positioning System (GPS) technologies. As a result, MP3

players and PDAs have been replaced by smartphones and tablets and MALL is now essentially associated with mobile apps (Burston, 2014a) for smartphones and tablets. Mobile apps are software programs designed to run on mobile platforms such as Android (Google) and iOS (Apple). Some apps come pre-installed while users can download other apps onto mobile devices.

It is known that there are largely three types of apps: native apps, web apps and hybrid apps. Native apps are developed specifically for their targeted platforms and can make use of all device features. Web apps are cross-platform websites that provide users with similar looks and feelings to native apps but run on mobile browsers, and hybrid apps are a mix of native apps and web apps-they can use many device features like native apps while relying on Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML) rendered in browsers like web apps. Each type of these apps has strengths and weaknesses in terms of device features, offline functioning, discoverability, speed, installation, maintenance, platform independence, content restrictions, approval process, fees, development costs, and user interface (Budiu, 2013). Developers create apps using specific programming languages and tools in their own programming environments (e.g., Objective-C and XCode for iOS apps; Java and Android Studio for Android apps; C# and Visual Studio for Windows apps; HTML, JavaScript and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) for web apps and hybrid apps). The question of which type of apps should be developed and used can be answered based on users' needs, preferences, expectations and styles of work.

A wide range of apps are available and can be used for language learning and teaching. Bradin Siskin (2009) proposed four types of apps for language learning: (1) built-in apps such as email, voice recorders and video recorders; (2) instructional apps such as *AccelaStudy*

(http://renkara.com/applications/accelastudy.html), *Gengo Flashcards* (http://www.innovativelanguage.com/products/Gengo) and *WordPower English* (http://www.you2.de/iPhoneSW/progs_wpenglish_e.html); (3) social networking apps such as *Facebook* (https://www.facebook.com/), *Skype* (http://www.skype.com/) and *Twitter* (https://twitter.com/); and (4) repurposed apps such as *audioBoom* (http://audioboom.com/), *Current Postcards* (http://mobilefission.blogspot.com.au/2007/06/about-current-postcards.html) and Google Apps for Work (https://www.google.com/work/apps/business/). Godwin-Jones (2011), on the other hand, recommended practical language learning apps including Chinese language learning programs such as *eStroke* (http://www.eon.com.hk/estroke/), *Pleco* (http://www.pleco.com/), *ChinesePod* (http://chinesepod.com/) and flashcard tools such as *Quizlet* (https://quizlet.com/mobile/). He also mentioned *Rosetta Stone* (http://www.rosettastone.com/mobile-apps/), *Byki* (http://www.byki.com/mobile/), *Babbel.com* (http://www.babbel.com/mobile/) and *Hello-Hello* (http://www.androlib.com/android.developer.hello-hello-iqCj.aspx).

Along with MALL studies looking at specific functions of mobile devices, including short message services (SMSs) (e.g., Kennedy & Levy, 2008), podcasting (e.g., Ducate & Lomicka, 2009) and GPSs (e.g., Sandberg, Maris, & de Geus, 2011), it is likely to see more app-based studies attempting to examine apps in language learning and teaching environments. In Amer's (2014) study, for example, a language-learning app called *Idiomobile*, containing a game, a quiz and a flashcard, was used for learning English idioms and collocations with four groups of learners for a period of one week. The findings of the small-scale study show the usefulness of the app and the learners' positive attitudes toward the use of mobile technology in language learning.

In this chapter, language-learning apps are defined as apps dedicated to the learning of languages. They can be developed as the aforementioned native apps, web apps or hybrid apps and used in and out of the language classroom. They are instructional apps, which are explicitly designed with language learning in mind. Therefore, they are different from other general-purpose apps (e.g., email apps, messaging apps, photo apps, audio apps, video apps) that could be used in language learning but are not originally developed for that purpose. In other words, apps can be categorised into two types: apps dedicated to language learning (ADLL) and apps adaptable to language learning (AALL). The focus of this chapter is given to ADLL.

## Mobile App Evaluation Criteria

The explosion of the number of mobile apps has led to the need for the effective selection of apps and the provision of a variety of review sources. Several practitioners and researchers have responded to the need by suggesting useful criteria for evaluating mobile apps. Walker (2010, as cited in Walker, 2011), for example, presented an evaluation rubric for mobile apps comprising six domains: curriculum connection; authenticity; feedback; differentiation; user friendliness; and student motivation. Schrock (2011) expanded Walker's criteria and provided critical evaluation survey forms for content-based apps and creation-based apps. Her criteria for evaluating content-based apps include: curriculum connection; authenticity; feedback; differentiation; user friendliness; student motivation; reporting; sound; instructions; support page; navigation; and modalities. Referring to Walker's rubric and Schrock's form, Vincent (2012) proposed a rubric emphasising the purpose of using apps. His rubric has the following seven criteria: relevance; customization; feedback; thinking skills; usability; engagement; and sharing. Bell (2014) adapted these resources

and posted another list of app selection criteria covering curriculum support, relevance, usability, engagement, accuracy, quality and costs. For the evaluation of science education apps, on the other hand, Green, Hechter, Tysinger and Chassereau (2014) presented a Mobile App Selection for Science (MASS) rubric, consisting of six items (i.e., accuracy; relevance of content; sharing findings; feedback; scientific inquiry and practices; and navigation) on a four-point response scale. They reported that the rubric was developed based on the analysis of quantitative data and qualitative data collected through four design cycles with the importance of context-specific approaches to technology integration. Their study provides a good example of critical evaluation of mobile apps not only for science education but also for other fields such as language education.

Based on a critical analysis of these suggested criteria, educational benefits of apps and the nature of MALL, a list of mobile app evaluation criteria has been generated and incorporated into a Language Learning App Review Form (see Appendix A). The basic structure of the review form was adapted from Son's (2005) Language Learning Website Review Form and an initial version of the review form was presented at a CALL conference (Son, 2014). The first section of the form asks for general information on the target app such as its title, place to download, price, last updated date, version, size, publisher/developer, target audience and target language activities/skills. The second section of the form has a space for the description of the app. The third section of the form is given for the evaluation of the app and provides 15 criteria that reviewers can use in assessing the app on a five-level scale: "Very Unsatisfactory", "Unsatisfactory", "Neutral/Uncertain", "Satisfactory", or "Very Satisfactory". The criteria include:

1. Purpose: Is the purpose of the app clear? Is the content of the app in

line with its purpose? Is the app appropriate for its target learner?

2. Accuracy: Is the content of the app accurate? Are spelling and grammar accurate? Are the learning materials of the app culturally accurate?
3. Usefulness: Is the app useful for learning the target language? Does the app provide useful information? Are the activities or tasks of the app practical?
4. Flexibility: Does the app allow the user to adjust settings to meet his/her needs? Does the app offer various modes of learning activities? Does the app provide opportunities to collaborate with others?
5. Authenticity: Does the app provide authentic learning experiences? Are the learning materials of the app authentic? Are authentic materials provided in appropriate contexts?
6. Engagement: Is the user motivated to use the app? Does the app provide reinforcement to hold the interest of the user? Does the app offer a meaningful and interactive learning environment?
7. Feedback: Does the app provide specific feedback? Is feedback on learner responses constructive and timely? Is error handling meaningful and helpful? Does the app allow the user to monitor his/her progress? Does the app provide a summary of learner performance?
8. Integration: Can the learning materials of the app be integrated into a curriculum? Does the content of the app fit with curricular goals? Is the content of the app relevant to the course of study undertaken by the user?
9. Support: Is user assistance available? Is online help adequate? Does the app provide necessary updates?

10. Price: Is the app free? Is the app paid? Is the price of the app appropriate and reasonable? Is the app a value for money and time?
11. Reliability: Is the app free of bugs and breaks? Is the app stable without crashes? Does the app load quickly?
12. Presentation: Is the content of the app presented clearly and logically? Is the user interface of the app attractive and friendly? Are screen displays effective and efficient?
13. Organization: Is the app well organised? Is the content of the app well structured? Is the app interesting to look around?
14. Navigation: Is the app easy to navigate? Are the on-screen instructions of the app easy to follow? Is it easy to retrieve information? Does the app use the touch screen effectively to explore?
15. Multimedia: Does the app make effective use of graphics, sound and colour? Is the level of audio quality, the scale of graphics or video display appropriate for language learning?

At the end of the evaluation section of the review form, reviewers are invited to give an overall rating: Very Poor (Not recommended at all), Poor (Not appropriate), Adequate (Acceptable with reservation), Good (Appropriate for use) or Excellent (Highly recommended). Finally, there is a space for reviewers to make additional comments and then sign and date the form. The form guides users to have a quick summary of app evaluation and helps them make a judgement about the quality of the target app and its potential applicability. In practice, empirical validation is needed for the further development of the form in various language learning environments.

## Mobile Apps for Learning English

There are a number of practitioners and researchers who have presented interesting lists of apps for learning ESL/EFL. Pesce (2014), for example, pointed out the convenience, efficiency and learner engagement aspects of apps and recommended nine ESL apps on a busyteacher. org page (http://busyteacher. org/12155-9-best-mobile-apps-for-esl-students. html). The Educational Technology and Mobile Learning (2014) website also offered a list of ten iPad apps for learning English (http://www. educatorstechnology. com/2014/03/10-great-ipad-apps-for-learning-english. html). In addition, MasterinESL. com (2014) provided a guide to 101 ESL learning apps in four categories: ESL study aids; dictionaries and vocabulary tools; translation and pronunciation; and general language learning apps (http://mastersinesl. com/essential-esl-app-guide/).

More example apps for learning English are shown in Table 6. 1. These applications are divided into the aforementioned two types of apps (i.e., ADLL and AALL) and are listed together with target learning activities (i. e., reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and culture) that the apps can be used for. In the category of ADLL, specifically, *Learn English Grammar* (British Council) helps users improve their grammar skills with practice questions at the elementary, intermediate and advanced levels. *LearnEnglish Podcasts* (British Council) presents three series of English learning podcasts to download and listen to together with audio scripts. *Learn English*, *Speak English* (SpeakingPal Ltd.) offers videos for beginner, intermediate and advanced level learners and allows users to speak with a video character and get feedback on their speech; *Learn Languages with busuu* (Busuu Limited) is an app that helps users learn selected words and phrases, practice what they have learned

with native speakers of English and test their knowledge with quizzes. *Practice English Grammar* (Cleverlize) helps users improve their knowledge of English grammar with grammar exercises such as practice questions and tests; *Sounds: The Pronunciation App Free* (Macmillan Publishers Ltd.) contains a phonemic chart with sounds in British English and American English and samples of practice and quiz modes; and *Real Deal English* (OpenLanguage Inc.) provides users with free podcasts about a range of topics related to American culture.

**Table 6.1 Mobile Apps for Learning English**

| English-English | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Apps Dedicated to Language Learning (ADLL) | | | | | |
| Name | Category | Activity | Price | Download | Note |
| *Learn English Grammar* | Education | Grammar | Free; paid | App Store; Play Store | Grammar activities |
| *Learn English Podcasts* | Education | Listening, culture | Free | App Store; Play Store | Podcasts |
| *Learn English, Speak English by SpeakingPal* | Education | Speaking | Free; paid | App Store; Play Store | Pronunciation feedback |
| *Learn Languages with-busuu* | Education | Listening, speaking, vocabulary, reading, writing | Free; paid | App Store; Play Store | Learning activities and tests |
| *Practice English Grammar* | Education | Grammar | Free; paid | App Store; Play Store | Lessons and tests |
| *Sounds: The Pronunciation App Free* | Education | Pronunciation | Free | App Store; Play Store | Premium version available |
| *Real Deal English* | Language course | Listening, culture | Free | App Store; Play Store | Podcasts |
| Apps Adaptable to Language Learning (AALL) | | | | | |
| Name | Category | Activity | Price | Download | Note |

**continued**

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *English Idioms Illustrated* | Education | Vocabulary, reading | Free; paid | App Store | Meanings behind idioms |
| *iTunes U* | Education | Listening, reading, writing, speaking, etc. | Free | App Store | Free courses |
| *Pirate treasure hunt: Eight challenges* | Education | Listening, reading | Free | App Store | Problem solving |
| *TED* | Education | Listening | Free | App Store; Play Store | Videos and audios |
| *Advanced English Dictionary & Thesaurus* | Reference | Vocabulary | Free; paid | App Store; Play Store | Lexical database |
| *Dictionary. com* | Reference | Vocabulary, pronunciation | Free; paid | App Store; Play Store | Offline access |
| *Toy Story Read-Along* | Book | Reading, listening | Free | App Store | Interactive reading |
| *Dilbert Mobile* | Entertainment | Reading, culture | Free | App Store; Play Store | Comics |
| *Podcasts* | Entertainment | Listening, culture | Free | App Store | Podcasts |

Source: http://www. apacall. org/member/sonjb/projects/apps/ (This site has direct links to each app in the App Store and Play Store.)

## Conclusion

MALL still has many challenges (Burston, 2014a). One of the challenges is the development, evaluation and selection of apps that maximise language learning and provides both an improved learning process and outcome. In evaluating language-learning apps, the language learning app review form presented in this chapter can be adopted or adapted to examine pedagogical and technical aspects of the apps critically and effectively. Through the suggested 15 criteria, the review form addresses

important issues such as curriculum integration, learner engagement, collaboration, learner monitoring, interactivity, response feedback and personalised learning. Language teachers are invited to use the review form when they need to evaluate and choose certain language learning apps in their specific learning situations and contexts.

The popularity of apps on smartphones and tablets and the number of language learning apps are likely to increase further. In MALL, learners are encouraged to combine formal and informal learning, learning within the classroom and outside the class. Apps provide learners with a great way to achieve the goal of connecting learning with real life experiences. It is recommended that more app-based research should be conducted to explore different aspects of apps from diverse perspectives in a variety of contexts. It is also recommended that more MALL training opportunities be offered to teachers so the evaluation of context-specific apps can be done by teachers well versed in mobile pedagogies and technologies.

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# Appendix A

**Language Learning App Review Form**

| App Information | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Title | | | |
| Place to Download | | | |
| Price | | | |
| Last updated date | | | |
| Version | | | |
| Size | | | |
| Publisher/Developer | | | |
| Target Audience | | | |
| Language Activities/Skills | ☐ Reading | ☐ Writing | ☐ Listening |
| | ☐Speaking | ☐ Vocabulary | ☐ Grammar |
| | ☐ Pronunciation | ☐ Culture | |
| | ☐Other-Please specify: | | |

| App Description |
|---|
| |

| App Evaluation |
|---|
| 1. Purpose: Is the purpose of the app clear? Is the content of the app in line with its purpose? Is the app appropriate for its target learner? |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

| |
|---|
| 2. Accuracy: Is the content of the app accurate? Are spelling and grammar accurate? Are the learning materials of the app culturally accurate? |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

3. Usefulness: Is the app useful for learning the target language? Does the app provide useful information? Are the activities or tasks of the app practical?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

4. Flexibility: Does the app allow the user to adjust settings to meet his/her needs? Does the app offer various modes of learning activities? Does the app provide opportunities to collaborate with others?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

5. Authenticity: Does the app provide authentic learning experiences? Are the learning materials of the app authentic? Are authentic materials provided in appropriate contexts?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

6. Engagement: Is the user motivated to use the app? Does the app provide reinforcement to hold the interest of the user? Does the app offer a meaningful and interactive learning environment?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

7. Feedback: Does the app provide specific feedback? Is feedback on learner responses constructive and timely? Is error handling meaningful and helpful? Does the app allow the user to monitor his/her progress? Does the app provide a summary of learner performance?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

8. Integration: Can the learning materials of the app be integrated into a curriculum? Does the content of the app fit with curricular goals? Is the content of the app relevant to the course of study undertaken by the user?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

9. Support: Is user assistance available? Is online help adequate? Does the app provide necessary updates?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

10. Price: Is the app free? Is the app paid? Is the price of the app appropriate and reasonable? Is the app a value for money and time?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

11. Reliability: Is the app free of bugs and breaks? Is the app stable without crashes? Does the app load quickly?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

12. Presentation: Is the content of the app presented clearly and logically? Is the user interface of the app attractive and friendly? Are screen displays effective and efficient?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

13. Organization: Is the app well organised? Is the content of the app well structured? Is the app interesting to look around?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

14. Navigation: Is the app easy to navigate? Are the on-screen instructions of the app easy to follow? Is it easy to retrieve information? Does the app use the touch screen effectively to explore?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

15. Multimedia: Does the app make effective use of graphics, sound and colour? Is the level of audio quality, the scale of graphics or video display appropriate for language learning?

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | |
| Very Unsatisfactory | Unsatisfactory | Neutral/Uncertain | Satisfactory | Very Satisfactory |

Overall Rating

_____ 1 Very Poor (Not recommended at all)

_____ 2 Poor (Not appropriate)

_____ 3 Adequate (Acceptable with reservation)

_____ 4 Good (Appropriate for use)

_____ 5 Excellent (Highly recommended)

| Additional Comments |
| --- |
| |

| Reviewer | | Date reviewed | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |