

PROBLEMS IN LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES THROUGH MOBILE APPLICATIONS

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Abstract, *Smartphones have faded into the background of our lives for the past decade or so but have quietly become one of the most ubiquitous tools that people use to learn a new language. Apps like Duolingo, Babbel, Memrise, HelloTalk and Tandem have drawn hundreds of millions of users who crave the flexibility to learn on their own time, at their own speed and without the commitment of formal classes. That convenience is real, and it matters. But it also conceals a number of problems that anyone who has ever tried to learn a language solely by using an app will eventually encounter. This article considers five of those problems in more detail — the tendency toward a lack of genuine conversation practice, the superficial attention to grammar, how motivation can dry up over time, the difficulty of tailoring lessons to each person's needs and challenges posed by technology and costs that still lock many learners out. The point is not to dismiss these tools but rather to reflect more deeply on what they can do and cannot do, and how they might work better in tandem with other types of learning.*

Keywords: *mobile language learning, MALL, foreign language acquisition, language apps, gamification, communicative competence, digital education*

Introduction

When you walk into a café sit on a commuter train you will probably see someone using their phone to take a language lesson. This is what language learning looks like today. Someone sitting alone quietly scrolling through their phone. The numbers are really interesting. Duolingo has over 500 million people who have signed up. Babbel has than ten million people who use it all the time. Busuu has over 120 million. It is clear that learning a language on your phone is very popular. The reasons for this are easy to understand. These apps make it easier for people to learn a language because they do not have to find a class or pay for a teacher. You can use the app for five minutes on the bus or thirty minutes before you go to bed. The lessons are fun. You get feedback right away. At first it feels like you are learning fast. For people, especially those who do not have access to good language teachers these apps are the first chance they have to learn a foreign language. Most people who use

these apps do not become fluent in the language. They get better at matching words with pictures. They can see patterns but they still have trouble having a conversation with someone they do not know. They have trouble understanding others and being understood. Stephen Krashen spent a time trying to figure out why this happens. He said that people learn a language by hearing and seeing things that make sense to them not by repeating words and phrases. This is what most apps are missing. They do not give people the chance to really communicate with others. What I want to do is look at the problems, with these apps. I do not want to say that they are not useful. They are. But I want to understand what they can and cannot do so we can use them in a way that really helps us learn a language.

A Quick Map of the Major Apps

It helps to start with a sense of what the most widely used applications actually do and where they fall short. The table below summarises six of the most popular platforms currently available. **Table 1. Comparative Overview of Popular Mobile Language Learning Applications**

| Application | Main Focus | Strength | Limitation | Users (approx.) |
|-------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|
| Duolingo | Vocabulary & grammar via games | Very high user engagement | Grammar stays surface-level | 500M+ |
| Babbel | Practical conversation phrases | Well-structured short lessons | Most content behind paywall | 10M+ |
| Memrise | Vocabulary memorization | Effective spaced repetition | Almost no speaking tasks | 60M+ |
| HelloTalk | Exchange with native speakers | Exposure to real language use | Partner consistency varies | 30M+ |
| Busuu | Grammar and vocabulary mix | Peer correction feature | Full access requires payment | 120M+ |
| Tandem | Chat and voice exchange | Authentic conversation practice | Depends heavily on partner | 10M+ |

Source: Compiled by the author based on platform documentation and academic sources.

Looking at the table as a whole, a pattern emerges. Each app does something well, but none of them does everything. Memrise is good at drilling vocabulary but offers almost nothing in terms of speaking. HelloTalk gives you access to real speakers but gives you no structure for how to actually learn from those interactions. Babbel has decent lesson design but keeps most of it locked away unless you pay. These gaps are not accidental — they reflect genuine tensions between what makes an app commercially successful and what makes language learning educationally effective.

The Main Problems

You Never Really Have to Talk to Anyone

This is probably the most fundamental issue. The vast majority of exercises in language apps are recognition tasks: you see a word and tap the right picture, you hear a sentence and choose the matching translation. These activities feel productive because they are easy to measure and reward — you get points, your streak continues, the progress bar fills up. But there is a big difference between recognising a word when it is presented to you in a controlled context and actually using that word when you need it in a real conversation.

Michael McCarthy, whose work on discourse has shaped how communicative language teaching is understood, makes this point plainly: real language competence grows through "interaction and the opportunity to use language in genuine communicative situations."⁴⁰

Apps like HelloTalk and Tandem do try to create those situations by connecting you with native speakers, but anyone who has used them seriously knows how hard it is to sustain. Partners go quiet, conversations stay superficial, and without any framework guiding what to actually do together, most exchanges never go deep enough to push your language forward.

Agnes Kukulska-Hulme, who has studied mobile learning more extensively than almost anyone, points to another dimension of this problem: mobile interactions tend to be short and fragmented by nature, which makes it very difficult to develop the kind of sustained, back-and-forth dialogue that language acquisition actually requires.⁴¹ Five minutes of tapping is not the same as five minutes of conversation, even if both involve a foreign language.

Grammar Gets Treated Like a Footnote

⁴⁰ McCarthy, M. *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. — p. 78.

⁴¹ Kukulska-Hulme, A. *Mobile Learning and Language Education*. London: Routledge, 2012.

There is an understandable commercial logic to keeping grammar light. Users do not sign up for apps because they want paradigm tables and exception rules — they want to feel like they are making progress quickly. So grammar gets simplified, compressed into brief explanatory boxes that appear and disappear in seconds. Sometimes it is skipped altogether. David Crystal, who has probably done more than anyone to make linguistics accessible to general readers, describes grammar as "the structural foundation of language, without which communication risks becoming unclear or ambiguous."⁴² That foundation, in most apps, is missing or wobbly.

The consequences show up in a predictable way. Learners reach a point where they have a decent stock of vocabulary and can handle simple exchanges, but the moment they try to say something more complex — express a condition, describe a past regret, qualify a statement — they freeze or produce something grammatically broken. Knowing a word is not the same as knowing how to use it, and that knowledge comes from understanding structure, not from memorising phrases.

The Motivation Problem

Gamification is, in many ways, a genuinely clever solution to one of language learning's oldest problems: it is boring, slow, and the rewards feel distant. Points, streaks, badges, and leaderboards give learners something to work towards in the short term, and research does confirm that these features increase initial engagement. Stockwell's work on mobile vocabulary activities found that learners responded well to gamified prompts — at first.⁴³

The trouble is that extrinsic rewards, however cleverly designed, cannot substitute for intrinsic motivation indefinitely. Once the novelty fades — usually within a few weeks for most users — the app becomes just another thing competing for attention. The streak that once felt meaningful starts to feel like a chore, and when life gets busy, it is quietly abandoned. Language learning is a long-term project; gamification is a short-term tool. When apps confuse the two, learners end up feeling like they failed at something that was set up to produce exactly this outcome.

One Size Rarely Fits Anyone Particularly Well

A learner whose native language is Korean faces completely different challenges when studying English than a learner whose native language is German. The interference patterns are different, the gaps in knowledge are different, the instinctive errors are different. Richards

⁴² Godwin-Jones, R. Emerging technologies: Mobile apps for language learning. *Language Learning & Technology*, 21(2), 2017. — pp. 4–11.

⁴³ Stockwell, G. Using mobile phones for vocabulary activities: Examining the effect of the platform. *Language Learning & Technology*, 14(2), 2010. — pp. 95–110.

and Rodgers, in their authoritative survey of language teaching methods, emphasise that effective instruction requires a genuine match between approach and learner profile.

Most apps offer nothing close to this. Some platforms have made progress here. Duolingo's algorithm adjusts difficulty based on your performance, and Busuu allows other learners to correct your written exercises. These are steps in the right direction. But they remain narrow responses to a wide problem. A good teacher does not just adjust the difficulty of drills — they notice that you consistently confuse two similar sounds, that you hesitate before complex sentences because you are still thinking in your first language, that you are more confident in writing than in speaking and need to be pushed out of that comfort zone. No app currently does anything close to this.

Not Everyone Can Actually Use Them Freely

It is easy to forget, when discussing apps used by hundreds of millions of people globally, that access is not uniform. In many parts of Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa, internet connections are slow, expensive, or unreliable. Apps that depend on cloud processing, streaming audio, or real-time adaptive features simply do not work well under those conditions. Traxler, whose research on mobile learning in diverse contexts is some of the most rigorous available, warns that the promise of universal access through mobile technology often conceals a "digital divide"⁷ in which the learners who most need affordable, accessible education are the least able to benefit from it. The paywall issue compounds this. Babel's full curriculum, Busuu's grammar courses, and most of Duolingo's advanced content are either entirely locked or heavily restricted for free users. The features most valuable for serious learners are often the ones that cost money. This means that, in practice, mobile language apps offer a very different experience depending on how much you can afford — which is a problem for a medium that is frequently celebrated for democratising education.

What Can Actually Be Done

None of these problems are unsolvable, and some of the most useful responses are already being practiced in classrooms and language programs that think carefully about how to use technology. The clearest and most consistently supported solution is blended learning: using apps as one component of a broader curriculum rather than as a complete learning system on their own. Godwin-Jones, who has tracked the evolution of language learning technology for decades, argues that the real potential of mobile tools is unlocked when they are embedded within instruction that includes human feedback, communicative practice, and genuine interaction. An app can do a lot of the repetitive, low-stakes work of building vocabulary and reinforcing patterns. A teacher, a language partner, or a structured conversation task can do what the app cannot: push you to actually use the language, respond to what you say, and help you figure out what went wrong. Structured conversation partnerships — where learners on

HelloTalk or Tandem are given specific tasks to complete together, rather than left to chat freely — can also bridge some of the gap between passive practice and real communicative use. The key is the structure. Without it, most exchanges stay comfortable and undemanding.

Scott Thornbury has spent years arguing for an approach to language teaching that centres on real communication above everything else. His perspective is a useful corrective to the technology-heavy logic of most MALL research. Apps, in his framing, are best understood as preparation for conversation — a way of building the raw materials that conversation requires. The conversation itself has to happen elsewhere.

Coclusion, Mobile language apps are very popular today and should not be ignored. For many people, they provide a new and convenient way to learn languages. Apps like Memrise, Babel, Busuu, HelloTalk, and Tandem can help if people use them regularly and wisely. However, these apps cannot solve every problem. Issues such as having real conversations, learning grammar deeply, and keeping motivation still exist. These problems cannot be fixed with a simple update. The best approach is to use these apps for what they do well and use other methods for what they cannot do. The main goal is not to use an app every day, but to communicate with others and understand each other in the language. Mobile apps are useful, but they should be combined with other learning methods.

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