LEARNING ENGLISH LISTENING AND SPEAKING THROUGH BBC VOA PODCASTS: AN APP REVIEW

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Abstract

Knowing another language other than the first language is stereotypically regarded as a prestigious feature, distinguishing an individual from the rest of the community while providing him/her with more job opportunities. Nowadays, language classes are easily available through the expansion of recent technologies such as MALL (Mobile-Assisted Language Learning) and language learning applications (apps). App developers have been competing to design the most efficient apps to facilitate meaningful language learning by focusing on oral production and auditory reception to increase language learners' communicative competence. A characteristic app of the kind is *Learning English Listening & Speaking BBC/ VOA News* which offers learners a massive archive of updated BBC and VOA podcasts both online and offline. The current review intends to present a detailed description of the important features of this app.

Keywords: mobile-assisted language leaning, learn English listening & speaking BBC/ VOA news, listening, speaking

Application Details:

Publisher: Learning English BBC, VOA News

Product type: Smartphone Application Software

Language(s): English

Level: Advanced

Media format: APK

Operating systems: Android

Hardware requirements: Smartphone/Internet Connection

Supplementary software: A Virtual Private Network (VPN) in some regions

Price: Free

1. Introduction

With an exponential and progressive increase in the usage of iPhone and Android operating systems, the range of activities using mobile phones has expanded from downloading music tracks and images to downloading and running hundreds of applications (apps) designed for a variety of purposes, including educational goals (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Therefore, technologically-prompted educators have attempted to improve teaching and learning conditions through developing and utilizing educational apps (Shen, Wag & Pan, 2008). The evidence for the effectiveness of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) apps in consolidating the teaching and learning of a second or foreign language has been suggested in a large number of studies (see Burston, 2013 for a review).

Mastering a second language (L2), especially English, is of great significance to survive today's educational and economic challenges through majoring in the century's top disciplines and finding a well-paid job. Many apps (e.g., Dulingo, Memrise, Magoosh, Mosalingua, etc.) have been developed in the field of English language learning with their focus on oral, receptive, or all the basic language skills. It has been a while that podcasting, with a focus on listening and speaking skills, have gained the interest of many learners and educators (Hasan & Hoon, 2013; Yeh, 2017) since both of these skills have been considered as learners' tools in communication (Brown, 1994). Research has shown that listening is the most important skill and should be prioritized over other skills as it plays a pivotal role in the improvement of other language skills (Masalimova, Porchesku, & Liakhnovitch, 2016; Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 2007). Hence, it is vitally essential for learners to develop their L2 listening competence. However, despite its significance, L2 learners are not well-taught on this skill and its requisite strategies such as contextualizing (LeLoup & Pontiero, 2007; Mendelsohn, 2006). As an instance, the results of a study by Kim (2013) demonstrated that contextualizing MALL advances listening skills.

Owing to the variety of accessible apps, it might probably be difficult to select only one app as a learning tool, especially one that is really efficient for improving English listening skill. Being informed of general and particular advantages and downsides of available language learning apps might help learners choose the suitable app. Therefore, in the present study, the researchers would discuss the efficiency and effectiveness of Learn English Listening and Speaking BBC, VOA news, briefly called Learning English.

2. Detailed description

Learn English listening & speaking BBC, VOA news with the rating of 4.7 at Google Play is freely available to download and install on Android devices which support 10 and more application programming interfaces. It can also be downloaded and run with android emulators like big nox app player, bluestacks and koplayer. The app has been developed by http://hotgame247.com. The developers of this app have claimed that the app is and will be a free one forever. It is worth noting that new lessons and podcasts are automatically and freely updated on this app.

As soon as one installs and opens the app, an extensive list of podcasts is displayed. In order to play them, they have to be downloaded of course. The podcasts are among the most popular channels of BBC news including: Words in the News, 6 Minute English, Lingo Hack, The English We Speak, News Report, English at University, and so on. This tool is designed specifically to learn English listening and speaking with daily conversations and the latest news from BBC, VOA, and many other podcast programs comprising a wide array of topics such as education, technology, daily life, world news, etc. (see Figure 1). In this app, a collection of more than 10,000 lessons and a huge number of vocabulary items related to the lessons are provided. That is why this app has been recommended to improve one's vocabulary, listening, speaking, and reading skills. One interesting feature of this app is that it allows learners to learn English listening both in online and offline modes.
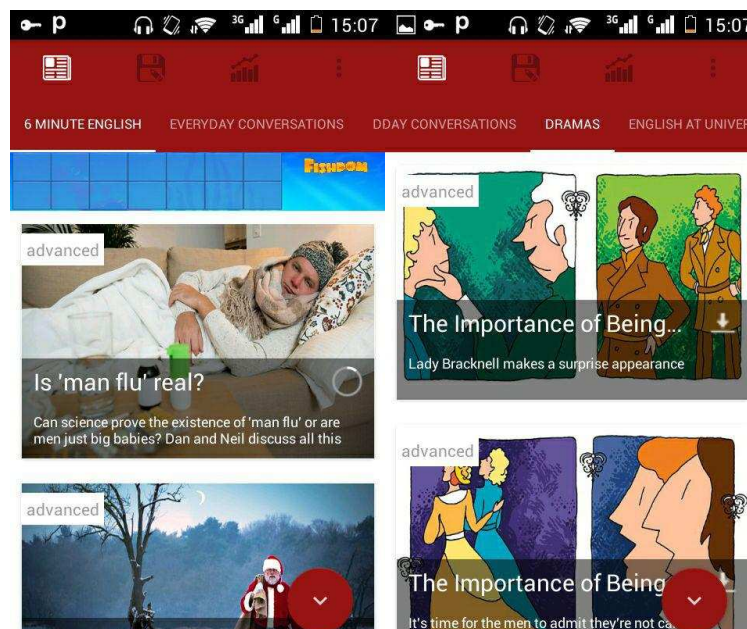

Figure 1. Different podcasts from BBC and VOA channels

As it is shown in Figure 2, each podcast includes an audio file, its transcription and a vocabulary list which makes the task of listening easier and more effective for educational purposes. The expansion of one's vocabulary list may enhance his/ her listening and reading skills. Another prominent feature of this app is that the selected words can be saved into one's own note to help users remember the words along with their sounds. A minor quiz section is also available for a quick review over the taught vocabulary after each lesson.
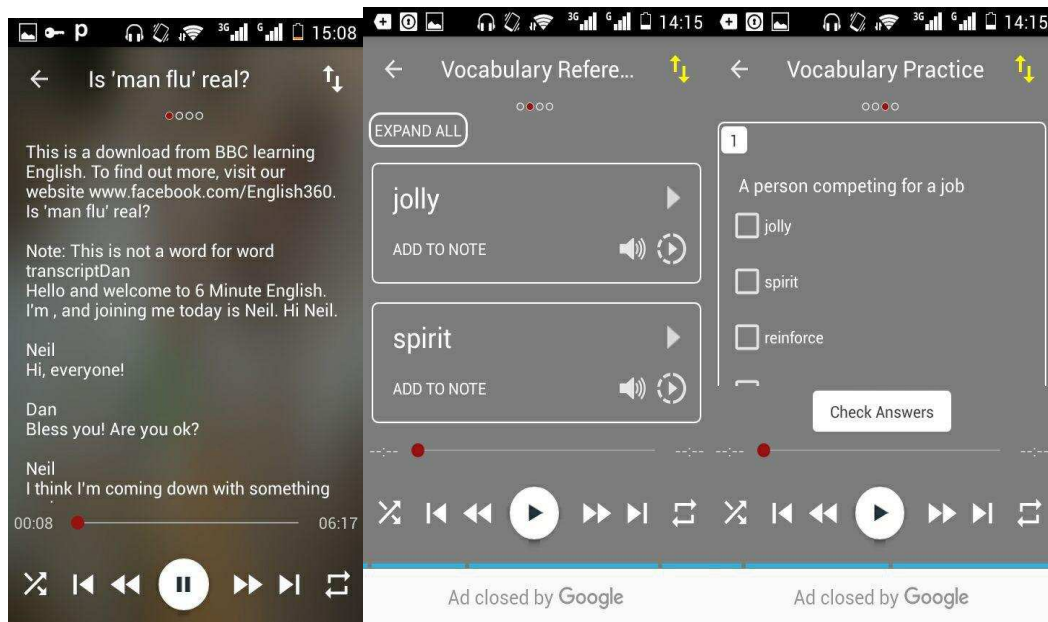

Figure 2. The audio file, transcription, vocabulary list, and word quiz related to a podcast

For each word in the vocabulary list, there are two buttons which read the word with the normal pace and slow pace to teach the correct pronunciation of every single word. As it is demonstrated in Figure 3, there is a speaking button in *my vocabulary* section which allows the users to record their voice and compare it with the standard version played by the app. It points out where your mistakes are, and you will know how to improve yourself.
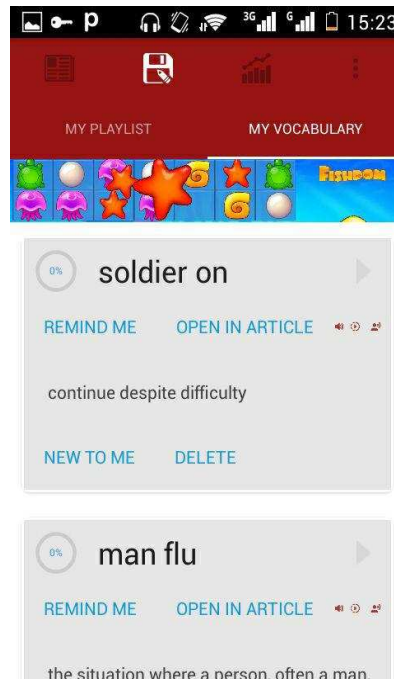
Figure 3. My vocabulary section and its options

The user-friendly interface and advantageous functions, such as chatting online with other members of the community, offered by this app distinguishes it from many other similar apps on the market. This app with its motto, "It is the time to change the way you learn English, let's learn English together" provides a number of potentially useful features for English learners.

3. Evaluation

Chatting with English learners from all over the world is a great opportunity in the language learning process since it facilitates real-life communication with real native and native-like speakers and puts into practice the materials the learners have already covered (see Figure 4).
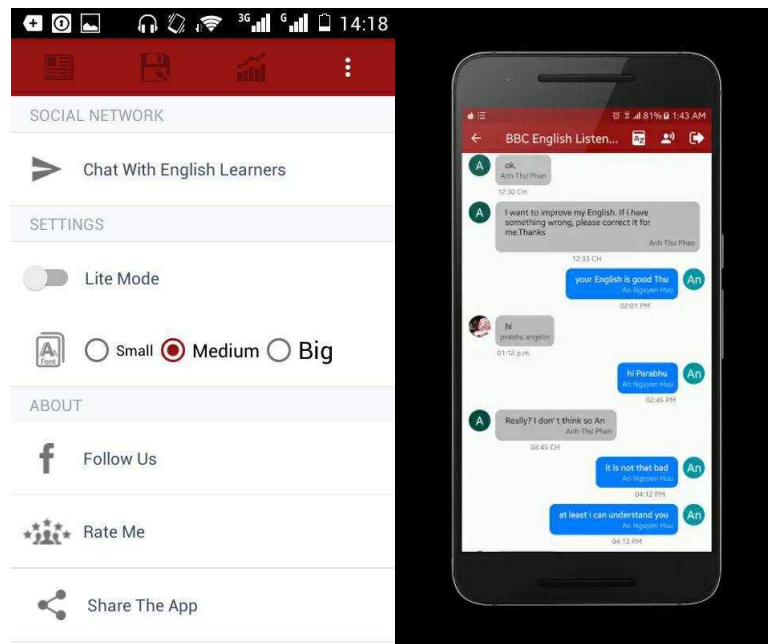
Figure 4. Chat with English learners and some other minor settings of the app

Another option of this app, as can be observed in Figure 5, is that learners are able to set alarm for their vocabulary list to be reminded of the words which were difficult for them. In other words, English language learners are free to choose the time they want to be randomly reminded of their vocabulary list.
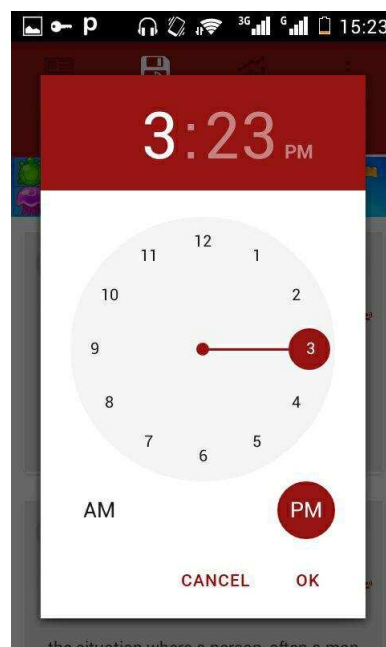

Figure 5. Setting vocab reminder alarm

By tapping on any word in the transcription of each audio file, its meaning appears on the screen. It is of great importance to know that the app supports a multiple language dictionary;

therefore, as it is seen in the following figure, through the dictionary header one is able to change languages.
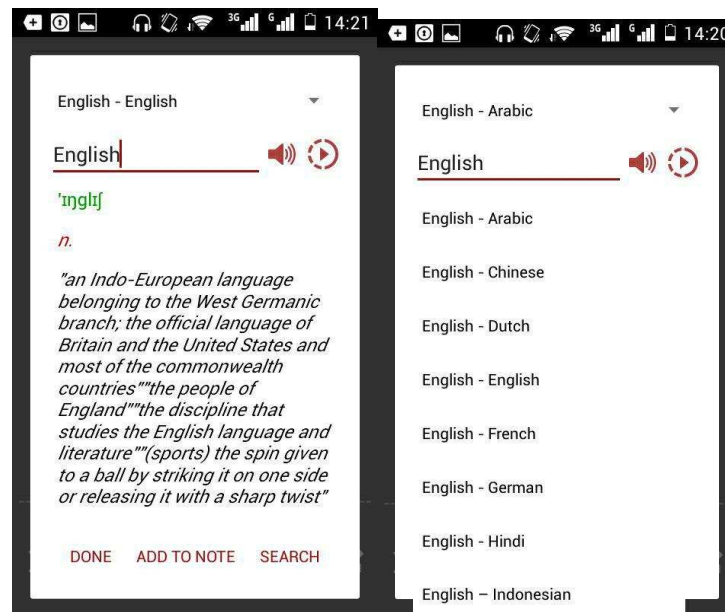

Figure 6. Multiple language dictionary

The auto scroll transcript guides learners throughout the lesson while playing audio. The app also gives learners feedback by displaying a statistics chart which demonstrates one's listening and vocabulary progress.

Leaning English is like every other app, bearing some advantages and at the same time suffering from some disadvantages. One of the shortcomings of this app is the computerized voice used to produce the correct pronunciation of words. Due to the fact that there are some apps such as MosaLingua (see Makiabadi & Abdi, 2018) which offer a real human voice, apps with computerized voice may not be very useful. In addition, in some countries, there is a need to a virtual private network (VPN) program to be able to use the app with all its suggested options. Another negative point which is eye-catching is that there are not any grammatical explanations for the learners to refer to while having structural questions an ambiguities. Although the chat section is a distinguishing feature in this app, due to lack of bright colors or fancy stickers, it might not be as interesting as that of some other language learning apps such as HelloTalk. One more issue which needs the attention of the developers of the app is providing a special version of this tool for iPhone users.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Learn English Listening and Speaking BBC, VOA news is as an effective language learning tool despite its slight disadvantages. It is a professionally-designed app with scientific and creative basis. The variety of podcasts from the most famous, sophisticated, and popular radio channels with their transcriptions and word lists might be really effective. However, this collection of audio files needs to be reformed in some aspects. For example, the lack of grammatical details of English language and its chat section requires certain modifications. The developers of this app had better alleviate the aforementioned problems, or the learners would not consider this product as their prioritized language learning app as much as they should. In addition, due to an increase in the population of iPhone users all over the world, developing an iPhone version of this app could make it more popular and noticeable.

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