Exploratory study about communities of language learners: mobility, usability and learning

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Abstract

The study foresees the daily use of the app "Tandem - Language Exchange and Teachers Support" aiming two interrelated goals: (i) to present the functionalities of the app and its user interface investigating, mainly, its usability and (ii) to register and analyze interactions between different couples of users that may be interpreted as learning situations of a new language. We expect the results may contribute to the debate about the feasibility and efficiency of mobile learning in the context of language acquisition considering the app design and the way people use it.

Key words:

Language acquisition, mobile learning, Tandem

Introduction

Learning other language(s) has become a necessity in the contemporary world, either to ingress in the job market or for personal satisfaction. The technological progress in hardware and software has been empowering the development of tools and apps, which promote bigger dynamicity to language acquisition through calls, text messaging, sending audios, pictures and videos, with a low cost and with freedom of time and space; the only requirement is to have a good device with good internet connection.

We focused on the usage of the app Tandem in smartphones with the intention of improving the comprehension of the English language (to speak, listen, read and write) through interactions with users from other countries. During 3 months, the app was used by the scientific research student, author of the research, to interact with 18 interlocutors through an iPhone 5s (iOS 9.3.2) with 3g internet connection. The interactions were registered aiming to identify (i) usability¹ issues which may interfere on the productive usage of the app, as well as (ii) potential learning situations; factors that, we suppose, may contribute to the debate about the feasibility and the efficiency of mobile learning² in the language acquisition.

Results and Discussion

The research is in analysis phase of the data records, but it was already identified some partial results.

I. About Tandem usability

The usage of the app presented some difficulties on its handling, such as:

► **Audio message:** Although the tool works well, either to send or to receive messages, it is not possible to operate the audio file to listen to its intervals, being necessary to play it fully in case just part of it is not listened/understood.

► **Message reception notification:** On the moment of appearing a message notification on the lock screen of the phone, after the unlocking, the screen with the message is showed, but, shortly thereafter, it is closed, appearing the screen with all the other chats and, ultimately, coming back to the screen with the just received message.

► **Statement corrector:** Implicate the opening of a new screen, removing the user of the interlocution context, what may demotivate its use, besides interfering

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with the speed that, generally, characterize this kind of interaction when it happens synchronously.

II. About potential learning situations

We present 3 situations that direct or indirectly may promote a new acquisition to one of the interlocutors who chat with each other.

In the first case (Pic. 1), the interlocutor corrects his partner about the usage of the expression *that sounds cool* using the corrector tool.

Picture 1

In the second case (Pic. 2), the interlocutor sends a message to call attention of his partner about the inappropriate usage of the word *still* instead of *steal*. It is observed that the interlocutor does not use the functionality of the corrector, maybe for the reasons indicated above.

Picture 2

Ultimately, in the third case (Pic. 3), one of the interlocutors asks the other about the meaning of the word *cosy*.

Picture 3

Conclusions

Although it has been found some difficulties on the usage of the app we can say, so far, that it is possible to improve the speaking, reading and writing of the language which is being learned when the interlocutors share the same goals and act reciprocally. The fact of the users being from several countries, with different cultural experiences, contributes to the contextualization of acquisition that happens genuinely and informally, different from the majority of the conventional ways of language teaching.

¹ Nielsen, J. *Usability Engineering*. EUA: Morgan Kaufmann, 1993, 362 p.

² Gholami, J.; Azarmi, G. An Introduction to Mobile Assisted Language Learning. *International Journal of Management, IT and Engineering* – IJMIE, Volume 2, Issue 8, August 2012