50LANGUAGES:

A MOBILE LANGUAGE LEARNING APPLICATION

(App Review)

by **Musa Nushi** and **Mohamad Hosein Eqbali**

Shahid Beheshti University

Daneshjo Boulevard, Evin Sq. Tehran, Iran, 1983969411

M_nushi @ sbu.ac.ir / mohamad.h.eghbali @ gmail.com

Application Details:

Publisher: *50languages*

Product Type: Mobile 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 in-app purchases

1. Introduction

In today's world, technology is changing the landscape of education and this includes second language (L2) learning and teaching too (Chapelle, 2007; Otto, 2017, Stanley, 2013; Wang & Winstead, 2016). Technology helps students in a variety of ways: it helps them visualize concepts better, communicate with each other and with the teacher more effectively, makes them more motivated, and learn a lot on their own (Baleghizadeh, 2015). Teachers can also utilize technological innovations to provide learners with multimodal feedback (Elola & Oskoz, 2016), help integrate assessment with instruction (Jamieson & Musumeci, 2017), encourage learner autonomy (Al-Jarf, 2012), and develop higher order thinking and meet the needs of low performing learners with learning handicaps (Roblyer & Doering, 2010).

Among the technological innovations, mobile and hand-held devices such as smart phones, tablet computers, laptops, MP3 and MP4 players, iPads are particularly helpful due to their practicality and popularity. In fact, Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), a subset of M(mobile)-learning, is a rapidly growing field with important implications for

language learning and teaching (Pachler, Cook, & Bachmair, 2010; Thornton & Houser, 2005; see also Burston, 2013 for a review of MALL studies). Commenting on the contributions of MALL to L2 learning, Jalalifarahani and Ghovehnodoushan (2011) write that "among the most noted affordances for MALL is ubiquitous access to learning anytime at any place that the user has reception" (p. 527). The idea of learning a language anytime, anywhere with the use of mobile devices can motivate learners and encourage them to take the responsibility of their own learning process, which in turn can make them feel that they have the authority over the process (Thornton & Houser, 2005).

The current passion towards MALL, however, should not make us forget that many of the mobile applications for language learning and teaching "have been developed by people outside of the field of second language pedagogy and their effectiveness cannot and should not be taken for granted," (Nushi & Jenabzadeh, 2016, p. 30). Cowan (2015) also points out the recent shift towards MALL "lacks a focus on the usefulness of language-learning apps and how to integrate them into lessons," (p. 3). Similarly, Kim and Kwon (2012) add "the widespread use of smartphones has brought numerous mobile applications to second language (L2) learners but discussion about its effectiveness has not been settled yet within the field," (p. 31). The necessity for critical research on the available language learning applications, therefore, is essential to make language learners and teachers alike aware of the advantages and disadvantages of working with such software inside and outside of the classroom. The present article aims to review one mobile language learning application named *50languages* and explore its potential for L2 learning.

2. Description

To use the app, learners must first download it from Google Play/App Store so they could run the app on their Android/IOS devices. *50languages* offers more than 50 languages, and is available in about 3,000 combination of languages. Learners can choose what language they speak and from there, they are presented with a list and can choose what language they want to learn.

Because of the system of storing its database this app has utilized, very rare combination of languages has become available. As seen in Figure 1, a learner speaking Polish can learn Farsi through her native language. In all of the languages, two native speakers, a man and a woman, are recorded saying similar words, phrases, and sentences. Moreover, all 50 languages can be learned through each other since the app simply changes the place of the first language with the target language.
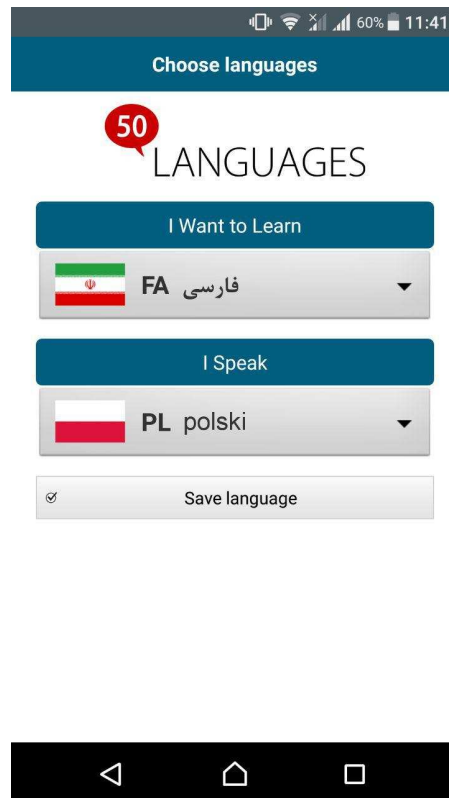
Figure 1. Many combinations of languages offered by *50languages*

After the learners have chosen the language they want to learn and the one they already know, they are presented with a list of many features of the app. They range from learning *Alphabet*, *Numbers* to *Phrase book*. The Phrase book is mainly the place the learners go to learn new materials, and it is the place where all the recorded audios are presented. Every Phrase book in every language offers 100 lessons in bunches of tens (see Figure 2), with each lesson focusing on a specific subject (see Figure 3).
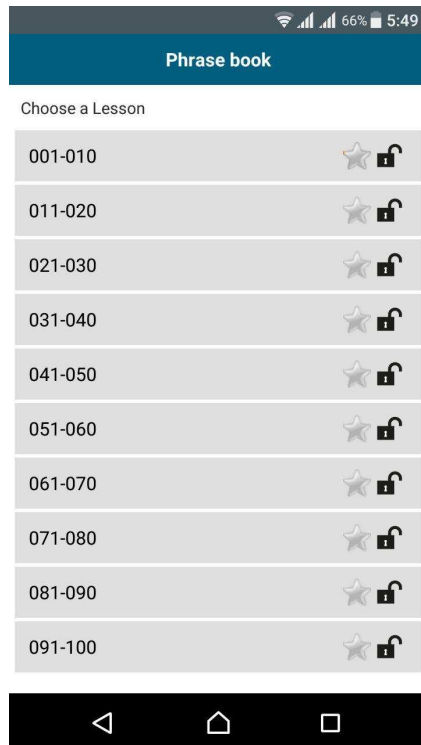
Figure 2. Inside a Phrase book

Figure 3. Inside a lesson

Figure 4 shows that every lesson contains four parts:

1. Word List

2. Flash Card

3. Take Test

4. Did you know? (This one simply provides fun facts about languages. They are all in English.)

Each section has an empty star placed next to it. As the learner explores each one, once he/she is learning the new materials and providing the correct answers whenever questions are asked, the star gradually fills up. Once the star is completely full, the learner knows he/she does not need to go back to that section again, although he/she can if desired. No recommendations are given by the app and the learner can proceed as he/she wants.
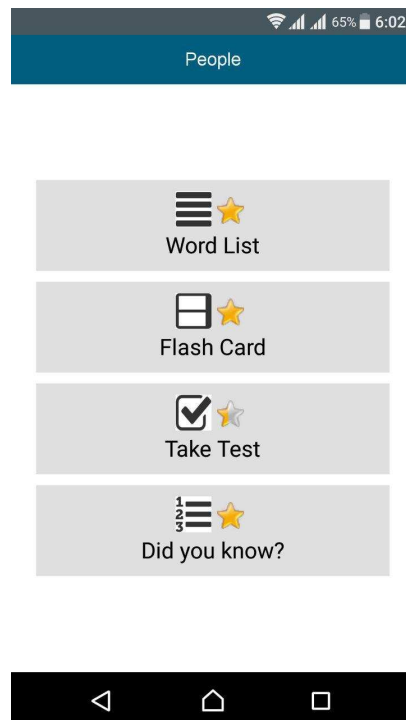
Figure 4. Different sections of a lesson

In the Word List, learners find a list of words, phrases and complete sentences with the translation in their chosen language. The first lesson in every language is under the category of *People*. It starts with the word *One* and ends with the complete sentence *They are all here*, with a number of other words, phrases and sentences in between these two. Learners are exposed to these in both written and spoken form. As mentioned earlier, the spoken form is provided twice, once said by a male and another time by a female. Learners can go about exploring the lesson, tapping on each part to hear the pronunciation, looking at the translation provided, and even recording their own voice and comparing it with that of a native speaker (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Inside Word List

Once the learner is done with the new materials, she can go back one step to explore other sections of the lesson. No hint is given as what to do to next. The second part, *Flash Card*, is placed next. Inside this section, the words, phrases and sentences learnt in the Word List are presented again, but in a flash card manner (see Figure 6). A word, phrase or sentence from the first language appears at the top of screen and the learner is expected to remember its target language counterpart, both in written and spoken form. The written and spoken forms are provided at the bottom of the screen, in case the learner fails to remember them. It is also possible to mark a specific text for future learning sessions.

Figure 6. Inside a flash card

Once all the materials in this section have been covered, the learner can press 'Back' and continue to the next section which tests the knowledge of the learner (see Figure 7). The app does not suggest any recommended time as to when it is better to test your knowledge of the materials, but it seems these sections should be covered one after another. *50languages* provides a variety of tests. They include writing, listening, reading tests, but no speaking tests. The tests, except for *Word Order*, directly or indirectly test the learners' vocabulary (see Figures 8, 9 & 10).
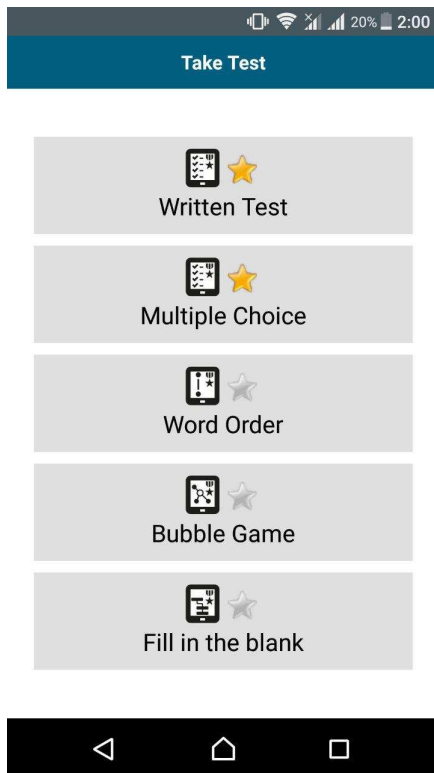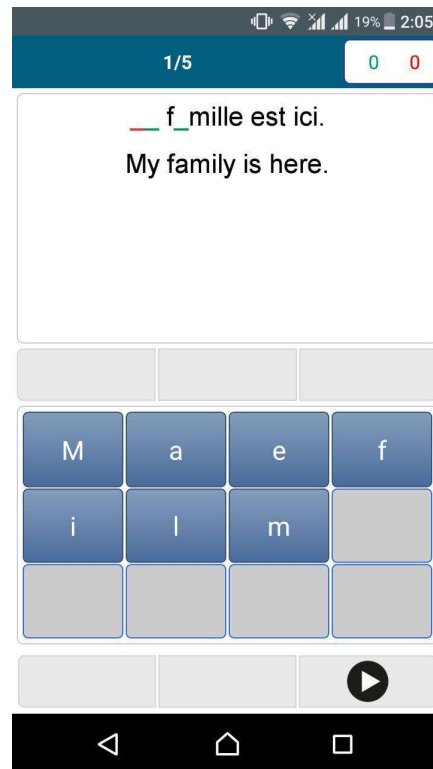
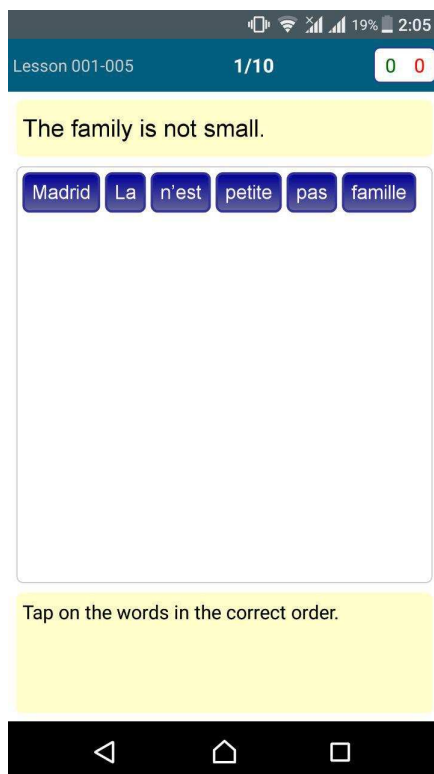Figure 7. Types of tests

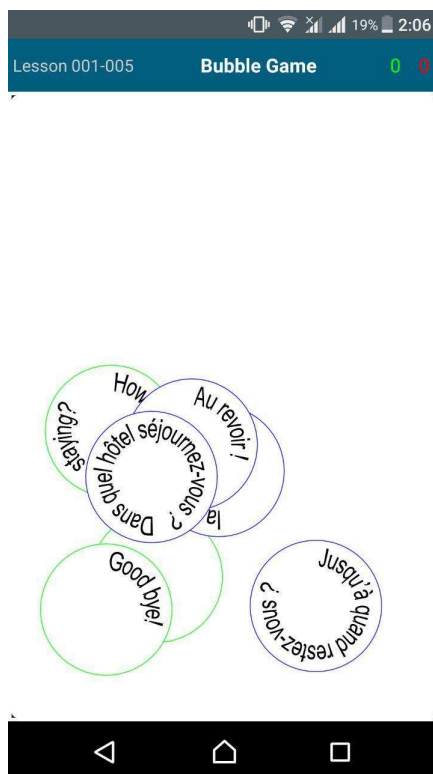Figure 8. Written Test

Figure 9. Word Order

Figure 10. Bubble Game

Other interesting sections of the app include the teaching of the alphabet, the numbers of the target language. There are also some vocabulary games, crossword puzzles, cloze tests,

and even radio stations. *50languages* offers a wide range of games and fun, most of which are in the app and some are on its website.

It must be noted that this app only works through translation and does not provide any grammatical instruction in any stage. It only works with vocabulary and grammar, which are to be learned inductively by the learner. When mistakes are made, *50languages* does not provide any explanations as to why the mistake is a mistake; it only lets the learner know that a mistake has been made. It does not have a community of learners, teachers or any human interaction of any kind either – the app itself is the learner's only companion.

3. Evaluation

50languages is a free mobile and web-based app, offering a lot of content for its users. The lessons are divided into different subjects, teaching the basic vocabulary for each language. The learners are not expected to be able to talk fluently or be experts in the target language, rather *50languages* tries to get to the 'point' of every subject as soon as possible and equips the learner with the basics needed for communicating within that particular subject in that language. If we consider this as the app's main objective and not learning the new language fully and completely, the app has been more or less successful. If not, there are many aspects in which the app fails to deliver, at the least, helpful assistance.

First, the contents do not seem to be backed by any particular scientific method or approach, at least none is claimed by the developer on its website. In the initial stage of learning a language, some very random and disjointed words appear for the learner to learn; for example, the equivalent of "child", "my family" and "My family is not small" is given to the learner. Although they are all categorized based on themes, there is not any meaningful context to these new materials, except for the title of the theme. This can prove to be very confusing sometimes. Imagine that the learner does not know the Chinese alphabet and suddenly the first lesson presents a sentence in Chinese. The only resort for the learner is to memorize the shapes of the letters, pronunciation, and the meaning of the sentence but no real meaningful communication is happening.

Second, *50languages* relies heavily on the learner's native language and if you take that away from the app, it practically loses its ability to teach and present new materials. The app developers' lack of attention to teaching materials in appropriate context makes it very dependent on its Translation Tool – Google Translate - which takes the learner out of the app and into the chaos of the Internet. This, particularly, could be a problem for beginners. But again, if we consider the app as only a means to learning the basics of the language, its

translation tool actually comes in very handy. For long-term learning, however, the goal should be to depend less on the speaker's native language and more on the target language.

Third, the lack of human interaction in *50languages* is something to be cautious about when using this app. In fact, the failure to support synchronous speaking and listening activities and promote collaborative learning are among the main problems of many language learning apps (Kukulska-Hulme & Lesley, 2008). To address this issue, some language apps (e.g., *Busuu*, *Duolingo*) have tried to bring about a community of learners to together to they could help each other out, using forums or even commenting on the materials presented by the app. *50languages* does not provide any feedback on learners' use of the language; the only time they are provided with any feedback is when they take different tests at the end of each lesson.

On the positive note, the app's Pronunciation Tool can be very useful and effective; *50languages* has a built-in voice recorder with which the learners can check and double-check their pronunciations with that of a native speaker without having to exit the app or even move from page to page. In the case of a language like English, the app opts to use the American accent for all its English content. Another great merit of the app is the range of languages it covers. As mentioned earlier, this app claims to cover the basics of more than 50 languages and provides more than 2,500 combination of languages that can be learned by each other, a feature which is simply amazing. For instance, *Duolingo*, the most popular app on the market does not even come close. *50languages* is a great language learning app for polyglots and anybody who wants to learn the basics of a language quickly. We recommend the app as a useful supplement when learning a second language – but not a substitute.

4. Conclusion

As a free language learning app assistant, *50languages* enjoys many great features. The variety of languages, built-in Pronunciation Tool, and 'to-the-point' teaching process makes the app a value learning tool for many learners. However, as mentioned earlier, *50languages* is not a tool on which one should not be solely dependent; its over-reliance on the learners' native language, lack of contextualization of the new materials and coverage of only the basics of the languages do not make the app a good companion for more determined learners of a language and for those who want to achieve fluency. Nonetheless, *50languages* will surely be of great assistance to polyglots and to people who want to learn the basics of a specific language. This might have been the developers' original aim. Polyglots can easily

switch between languages as they wish, learn new materials in the language of their choice and move on to the next language once done with the previous one.

References

Al-Jarf, R. (2012). Mobile technology and student autonomy in oral skill acquisition. In J. Díaz-Vera (Ed.), *Left to My Own Devices: Learner Autonomy and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning Innovation and Leadership in English Language Teaching* (pp. 105–130). Bingley, UK: Emerald Group.

Baleghizadeh, S. (2015). *Teaching Practice for English Language Teachers*. Tehran: SAMT.

Burston, J. (2013). Mobile-assisted language learning: A selected annotated bibliography of implementation studies 1994-2012. *Language Learning & Technology, 17*(3), 157-224.

Chapelle, C. A. (2007). Technology and second language acquisition. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 27*, 98-114. doi:10.1017/ S0267190508070050.

Cowan, M. R. (2015). *The Projected Use of Mobile Applications for Adult English Language Learners' in Class Instruction* (Master's thesis). Retrieved on December 8, 2017 from https://knowledge.library.iup.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2181&context=etd

Elola, I. & Oskoz, A. (2016). Supporting second language writing using multimodal feedback. *Foreign Language Annals, 49*(1), 58-74.

Jalalifarahani, M., & Ghovehnodoushan, M. (2011). MALL and vocabulary learning in elementary students. In: *2011 International Conference on Languages, Literature and Linguistics IPEDR*, Singapore, 2011, IACSIT Press. Retrieved January 13, 2018 from www.ipedr.com/vol26/105-ICLLL%202011-L10184.pdf.

Jamieson, J., & Musumeci, M. (2017). Integrating assessment with instruction through technology. In C. Chapelle & S. Sauro (Eds.), *The Handbook of Technology in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (pp. 293-316). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.

Kim, Heyoung & Kwon, Yeonhee. (2012). Exploring smartphone applications for effective mobile-assisted language learning. *Multimedia-Assisted Language Learning, 15*(1), 31-57.

Kukulska-Hulme, A., & Lesley, S. (2008). An overview of mobile assisted language learning: From content delivery to supported collaboration and interaction. *ReCALL, 20*(3), 271-289.

Nushi, M., & Jenabzadeh, H. (2016). Busuu: The Mobile App. *The TESL Reporter, 49*(2)*,* 30–38.

Otto, B. W. (2017). From past to present: A hundred years of technology for L2 learning. In C. Chapelle, & S. Sauro (eds.), *The Handbook of Technology in Second Language Teaching and Learning* (pp. 10-25). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Pachler, N., Cook, J. & Bachmair, B. (2010). Appropriation of mobile cultural resources for learning. *International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning*, *2*(1), 1-21.

Roblyer, M. D., & Doering, A. H. (2010). *Integrating Technology into Teaching* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Stanley, G. (2013). *Language Learning with Technology: Ideas for Integrating Technology in the Classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thornton, P., & Houser, C. (2005). Using mobile phones in English education in Japan. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, *21*(3), 217-228.

Wang, C., & Winstead, L. (2016). Introduction: Foreign language education in the digital age. In: C. Wang & L. Winstead (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Foreign Language Education in the Digital Age* (pp. xxvii-xxxii). Hershey. PA: IGI Global.