Modern Language Mobile Learning Apps

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Abstract:

Soloway and Norris (2011) argue that within five years, all students will have mobile learning devices, smartphone-type devices, as their main learning tools in schools. Marklein (2011) reports that some colleges have already created learning apps for students. Tuttle (2011) urges schools to eliminate textbooks and replace them with apps.

Mobile learning devices have many advantages over current learning devices. In public schools well over half of all middle school and high school students already have smartphones. The number increases daily. Students always carry their phones with them; therefore, they would have access to learning 24/7 in any setting (at home, in a park, or at a boring party). Students feel comfortable using phones; not only do they text and send messages but they also access information. Students think of their smartphones as interactive devices. Mobile learning devices allow teachers to be the guide on the side as the students take over the learning stage (Soloway & Norris, 2011).

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According to Tuttle's SpanishAndroidApps Wiki (2011), at present, free apps for modern languages comprise these categories: vocabulary, grammar, translation, and online newspapers and radio stations. Many language apps focus on vocabulary. Usually the apps organize the words or phrases by categories such as basic greetings, food words, or travel words. Often the apps show an English word or phrase, "speak" the individual word or phrase in the target language, and show the word or phrase written in the target language. Sometimes, an app uses a picture to illustrate the word or phrase. Flashcard apps show both English and the target language, sometimes with both English and the target language on the same "card" and sometimes with the English on one side of the "card" and the target language on the other. Sometimes these flashcards "speak" the target language.

Language apps include comprehensive dictionaries. Students can go from English to the target language or from the target language to English. The students type in the English and the target language words appears. Students can also scroll down a list to find an appropriate word.

These vocabulary apps have both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, students can use these vocabulary apps as review or reference. They hear the target language and they see the spelling in the target language. However, usually the students cannot search these apps for a specific word or phrase. Often the app creator has excluded some common words and included some less frequently used words. For example, one app under the category of "house" did not include the word for "bed" but did include the word for "pills." Students do not read or hear these words being used in the context of a conversation. Often the apps have a limited number of topics or a limited number of words in each topic.

Grammar apps often list many verbs in the target language with the English translation; the students click on a specific verb and see all of its conjugations. In another type of grammar

app, the students read a question or statement and then select the appropriate verb form from multiple choices.

These grammar apps also have positive and negative aspects. They provide a quick reference to the conjugations of verbs; they enable students to see the "difficult" verb forms. On the other hand, many of these verb lists contain very uncommon verbs, such as the Spanish *cuajar* for "to coagulate." Public school and even college students do not need 1,000 verbs; they just need the most common ones. The apps practice grammar in non-contextual ways. They simply provide verb after verb.

Smartphone technology permits a third category of apps: simultaneous translation. Many apps allow the students to speak in English and, instantly, hear and see the target language. Usually, these apps can switch to translating from the target language to English. A student simply clicks on a microphone and then speaks.

Simultaneous translation apps perform well in some areas and not as well in others. Almost as quickly as the students finish speaking, they hear the translation. The students can click on the speaker button to hear the translation again. The app performs remarkably well for translation for common topics in the present tense. In addition, the students can read the translation. Conversely, these apps rely on how clearly students speak the English words. If students do not pronounce a word clearly, then the app does not translate well. For example, when students say, "I used to live in the city," the app needs to hear clearly the word "used" to translate it correctly. Likewise, when students pause too long in saying a sentence, the app stops and translates the previously said part. Sometimes the app translates incorrectly. For example, when students ask for the Spanish translation of "Who is cooking supper?" the "Who" became translated as "que" instead of "quien." Sometimes these apps have trouble identifying the appropriate past tense.

A final category of modern language apps incorporates advanced reading and listening skills. Some apps provide the text of major newspapers in the target language, so students can read the current news. Likewise, certain apps allow the students to listen to radio stations from the target area or in the target language.

The newspaper and radio apps have authentic up-to-the-moment culture; students read about what is happening today in the language area. The students read or hear "real" Spanish. On the downside, students need a high level of language skills to read the papers or understand the radio. The apps do not have the usual guides that teachers create to help students better understand certain radio shows.

At present a huge gap in free modern language apps exists between the basic drill-type vocabulary and grammar app and the authentic reading of newspapers and listening to radio stations apps. Educators need more apps that introduce basic listening comprehension, such as short listening passages followed by questions. Also, they need apps that help students to answer basic communication questions, such as "Would you like to go to a movie?" They need some grammar apps that build on a context such as verbs associated with common classroom actions instead of random questions.

Modern language learners can improve many skills through the current mobile learning apps. How much more comprehensive will the next generation of language apps be? And how soon will students' modern language curriculum be a series of apps?

Works Cited

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A Brief Sampling of Free Spanish Android Apps available from Android Market or AppBrain:
    Vocabulary Apps – Hola, Spanish Audio Flashcards, and Learn Spanish
    Grammar Apps – 1001 Spanish Verbs Pro, Spanish Verbs Pro Edition
    Translation Apps – Talk to Me
    Newspapers and Radio – AG Periódicos Free and Tune-in Radio