

Practical evaluation of a mobile language learning tool in higher education

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Abstract. Following on preliminary research (Kétyi, 2013), in this project we looked for a mobile language learning solution, which combines computers and mobile devices. Our main idea was to explore whether by integrating mobile devices in our language teaching practice, our students at the Budapest Business School would gain valuable additional learning time outside school and whether that would improve their language learning efficiency. The mobile language learning application that was chosen for the project was busuu (<https://www.busuu.com/enc/>). The participants ($N=94$, $M=20.77$ years) were studying four different foreign languages (German, English, Spanish, Italian). The findings of this exploration show that busuu and other similar language learning apps are still new and unknown to the students, only one of them had used busuu before. The use of busuu was easy and simple, the app worked smoothly on the students' devices; during the study, the experimental group increased their performance (+2.2%) according to the language test results while the control group decreased it (-3.1%) and the difference at the post measurement is statistically significant ($p=.013$). An analysis of the results across gender showed that the female students performed at the post measurement significantly better than the male students ($p=.032$), and according to the students' opinions, busuu provides limited help concerning the language skills.

Keywords: mobile assisted language learning, MALL, second language acquisition, mobile app, busuu.

1. Introduction

Language learning nowadays is essential, especially for students at the Budapest Business School who need to take at least two language exams for their degree. In

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the last decade, learning a foreign language has involved technology (Technology-Enhanced Language Learning, TELL), in most cases computers (Computer-Assisted Language Learning, CALL), and in the last couple of years mobile devices (Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, MALL). There are a lot of language learning tools available, but we can find only a small amount of research conducted in this field regarding their effectiveness.

Because of the increasing penetration of mobile devices we conducted a pilot project with the aim to transform CALL into MALL (Kétyi, 2013). In the present project we looked for a mobile language learning solution which combines computers and mobile devices. The mobile language learning application that was chosen for the project, busuu, was positively received by our students. Our main idea was that if we integrated the mobile devices in our language teaching practice, our students would gain valuable additional learning time outside school, something that could improve their language learning efficiency.

2. Method

2.1. Research design

The participants in the study were 94 students of the Budapest Business School who volunteered to participate in the study. They were studying four different foreign languages (German, English, Spanish, Italian) and all of them were native speakers of Hungarian.

The study lasted for eight weeks and was conducted between March 2014 and May 2014. The use of the busuu language learning tool was an addition to their language lessons, which generally took place over 90 minutes twice a week.

The main evaluation tool was a language test for all four languages. In addition to the language tests we also performed a short motivation questionnaire. The language test and the motivation questionnaire were made during a pre-measurement stage in the first week of March 2014 and during a post-measurement at the end of May 2014. In May, the experimental group also had to fill out a short questionnaire about the busuu app.

2.2. Sample description

At the beginning of the study we had 122 students, but at the deadline only 94 filled out the placement test and the motivation questionnaire.

We divided the participants into an experimental group and a control group. We asked the students whether they wanted to use busuu immediately in the spring semester or two months later in the summer. Those who chose the immediate access became the members of the experimental group and the others became the members of the control group. The former was composed of 51 students, while the latter has 43 students. One third of the students was male (32.3%), two thirds (67.7%) female. This ratio is typical for the whole college, so none of the genders were over- or underrepresented. The youngest student was 19 years old and the oldest 25, the average age was 20.8.

3. Discussion

3.1. Effectiveness

At the pre-test (placement test), the experimental group (53.7%) performed better than the control group (47.5%), but the difference was not statistically significant (Table 1).

During the research, according to the language test results, the experimental group increased their performance (+2.2%) while the control group decreased it (-3.1%), and the difference at the post measurement became statistically significant ($p=.013$).

Table 1. Language test results of the control and research group

	Group	N	Mean (%)	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-Test Result	Control	43	47.5395	16.41598	2.50341
	Research	51	53.7688	21.12746	2.95844
Post-Test Result	Control	35	44.4400	17.07716	2.88657
	Research	45	55.9111 ($p=.013$)	21.91307	3.26661

3.2. Factors of effectiveness (gender, study time, motivation)

Analysing the *gender results* we found significant difference ($p=.032$) in the progress of the experimental group where the female members performed better (54.5%) than the male members (44.2%). The male members of the research group

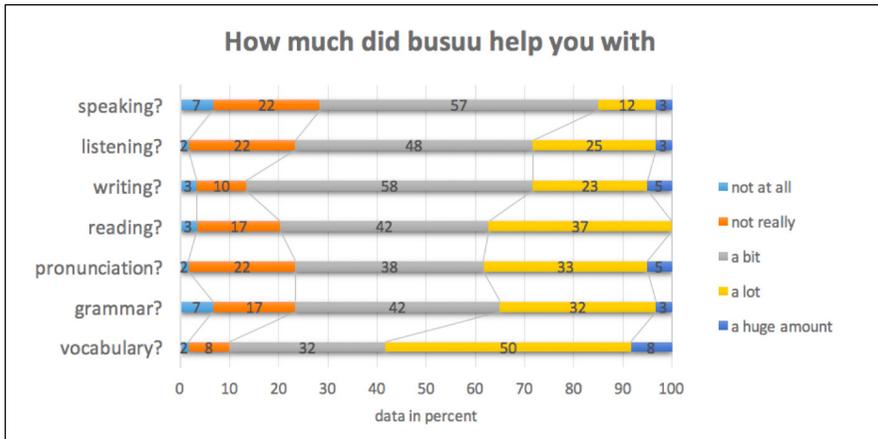
decreased their performance (-4%), whereas the female members increased it (+2.2%).

According to the answers to the post-busuu survey by the research group, the *average study frequency* was once per week and the average study length was between 10 and 15 minutes. It means for the whole research only 120 minutes, 2 hours on average, which is a very low value. This low value cannot explain the significant difference between the two groups.

Despite the statistically significant higher values of the experimental group for the *motivation scores* we did not find any correlation between the test results and motivation.

3.3. User satisfaction

Figure 1. Contribution of busuu



According to our post survey data (see [Figure 1](#)), we found that:

- Language learning apps like busuu are still unknown among the majority of students.
- Android is the most popular platform for our students followed by iOS and Blackberry, and Samsung is the most popular smartphone.
- Busuu is a useful learning application especially at vocabulary and writing.

- The overwhelming majority of the students (73.3%) think that busuu can help, but is not the ultimate tool for language learning.
- Busuu could not achieve a regular use. The regular users (3-6 times a week) are below 10%. Half of the students used the app less than a week and 40% only once or twice.
- Slightly more than half of the students spent 10 to 20 minutes on busuu. Every fifth student used the app less than 5 minutes and only every tenth student was a heavy user.

4. Conclusions

Despite the ongoing penetration of smart phones, busuu and similar language learning apps are still new and unknown for the students, only one of them had used busuu before and six of them another similar program.

According to students' experience, the use of busuu is easy and simple, the app worked smoothly on the students' devices. The post-busuu questionnaire also gave by and large positive feedback on the app, its strengths dominating clearly over its weaknesses, but unfortunately using the busuu app did not become a regular habit, as the students spent very little time using it.

Despite the sporadic and short use of the app, busuu could contribute remarkably to the learning progression of the students. While the experimental group increased their performance (+2.2%) during the research, the control group decreased it (-3.1%) and the difference at the post measurement was statistically significant ($p=.013$).

We also found that overall, the experimental group was more motivated, the difference of the motivational values was significantly higher in 3 out of 5 sub-categories, but we did not find any correlation between the test results and motivation values.

Analysing the gender results we found that female students performed significantly better at the post measurement than male students ($p=.032$).

Despite the good test results, the students thought that busuu provides limited help with the language skills and the vast majority wouldn't pay for the app after the trial period.

5. Acknowledgements

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Reference

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