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Apps for Language Learning

As citizens of the twenty-first century, technology plays a significant role in our daily lives. Current university-aged students, many born in the late 1990s, have grown up with technology integrated into how they function in the world. Due to the portability of smartphones and laptop computers, technology is ever-present. As language instructors, technology can be a vital asset to our students' success, both in and out of the classroom. While we may use videos, music, and other realia in the classroom, on-the-go applications (apps) can be a valuable tool for students outside the classroom to learn vocabulary and practice structures on their own time.

Numerous apps are available for download, but I would like to highlight three, based on my own personal use as a novice language student of Spanish. Duolingo is a free app that students can use anytime to brush up on their skills and learn new vocabulary. Mindsnacks touts the slogan "Games for your brain". Busuu heralds itself as more a social network for language learners, and allows the user to interact with other users through crowdsourcing. While each app supports a unique business model, if used consistently, they are effective tools that can easily be used to positively supplement traditional coursework.

Apple users have long rated Duolingo one of the top language learning applications. Also available on Google Play, its popularity stems from the fact that it is completely free, with no in-app purchases or user fees. A user-friendly design draws in the user, and cartoon graphics offer a simple way for students to identify vocabulary words. Units end with quizzes, or comprehension checks, that identify the user's strengths and weaknesses. Duolingo first launched in 2011 and has since won numerous "best of" awards for its free and fun approach to language learning.

Mindsnacks came onto the market in 2014 and touts the slogan "Games for your brain". Games encourage users to pursue challenges and complete levels in order to win points and prizes. With its brightly colored design, Mindsnacks emphasizes the amusing aspects of language learning. Instructional tools such as pronunciation guides and spelling challenges serve as positive complements to traditional language learning. Mindsnacks distinguishes itself from Duolingo by requiring users to purchase lessons in order to advance.

Busuu heralds itself as a social network for language learners and users. Like Mindsnacks, users must pay for in-app purchases in order to gain access to materials. The most "serious" of the apps named here, Busuu aims to enhance students' vocabulary and grammar. Its crowdsourcing model allows for error correction by native speakers. Less about amusement and more about applied language structure, Busuu is a thoughtful, "human" alternative to language games and allows for cross-cultural communication 24/7.

Using these apps as a complement to classroom learning will enhance students' vocabulary and language skills. By simply picking up their smartphones or computers, students can access the target language wherever they are, even if they only have five minutes to spare. Our work as teachers cannot be replaced by language learning apps or games – face-to-face interaction is crucial to the communicative language classroom approach. Apps work in tandem with the traditional classroom, and I encourage educators to integrate apps by assigning required "playtime" for homework. A simple ten minutes a week reminds students to have fun with their learning, and often they will continue playing in order to reach new levels on their own time.

Apps motivate students to engage with the language and provide positive reinforcement through points and other means of entertainment. Constant reinforcement of vocabulary and grammatical structures allow students to make word associations and sort new information on their own. Building vocabulary in the target language is often viewed as a daunting task. Apps that make learning vocabulary fun help students retain information in order to confidently apply it later, in either the classroom or out in the world.