

# **TELEGRAM: AN INSTANT MESSAGING APPLICATION TO ASSIST DISTANCE LANGUAGE LEARNING**

## **(App Review)**

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### **Application Description**

**Publisher:** Telegram

**Product type:** Application software for smartphones, PCs and laptops

**Language(s):** Multilingual

**Level:** Any

**Media format:** Web-based, desktop app, and smartphone app

**Operating systems:** Windows Phone, Windows Desktop, Android, Mac, iOS, Linux, OSX

**Hardware requirements:** Minimum smartphone hardware, Internet connection

**Supplementary software:** None

**Price:** Free

## **1. Introduction**

Today, the internet is making second and foreign language learning much easier than before. The emergence of online messaging applications has drastically changed online language learning and has provided a more accessible venue for learning. Similarly, what makes these online environments distinct from each other is the rate of learners' engagement with the applications (Sutikno, Handayani, Stiawan, Riyadi & Subroto, 2016; Takeda, 2014; Wagner, 2007, 2010). The arrival of modern, interactive, and user-friendly technological advances such as blogs, wikis, portfolios, podcasts, and vodcasts has changed the studying habits of learners since they minimize the burdens of traditional classes in which one needs to be physically present (Faramarzi, 2018; Faramarzi & Bagheri, 2015)

Distance language learning is on the path of progress as far as learners' interests are evolving. The use of different technological devices such as Telegram makes e-learning

platforms more distinct. This dynamic setting requires a robust stage to be presented to language learners. For example, the capacity of presenting different file formats such as PowerPoint files, illustrations, audio/video files, Macromedia and animated files simultaneously is something which is the focus of attention of many language educators and curriculum designers. At the same time, the system of evaluation and ongoing assessment can be made much more convenient by using Telegram (Elekaei, 2018; Faramarzi, 2018) due to the interactive nature of this online environment.

The effect of Telegram on developing vocabulary has been previously investigated by several researchers (e.g. Elekaei, 2018; Ghobadi & Taki, 2018; Heidari Tabrizi & Onvani, 2018; Khodarahimi & Heidari-Shahreza, 2018; Movafagh Ardestani, 2017), as well as on grammar (Nabati, 2018), reading comprehension (Azadi and Azad, 2017) or integrated skills (Faramarzi, 2018). Attitudes towards Telegram application have been the subject of many studies (e.g. Karimov & Kim, 2017; Faramarzi, Heidari Tabrizi, and Chalak, forthcoming-2019a; Faramarzi, Heidari Tabrizi, and Chalak, forthcoming-2019b; Khoshshima, Saed, & Arbabi, 2018).

Successful second and foreign language learning should follow some simple steps according to Pufahl, Rhodes, and Christian (2001): early start of the learning program, teacher training improvement, longitudinal study programs, and understanding the use of instructional technology are the major contributing factors for achieving the best results in any pedagogical program. It clearly highlights the significance of implementing new technologies in pedagogy. Besides, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2015) consider technology as an innovative factor. Moreover, since university students spend more time playing video games, watching TVs, working with educational or entertaining applications, and checking their accounts in different online societies such as Facebook and Twitter than reading books (Prensky, 2001), it will be very appealing to combine the intended learning materials into today's most fashionable trends such as Telegram.

The purpose of this review is to demonstrate the pedagogical potential and features of Telegram application and the ways it can be employed in online language learning projects by learners and educators alike. This app is free of charge and advertisement-free and it can be employed by learners from all levels. At the same time, it is a dynamic environment which can be customized in accordance to learners' needs. This application has been analyzed and evaluated as part of two PhD dissertation projects to test different features of the app and the learners' responses to them (Elekaei, 2018; Faramarzi, 2018).

## 2. Description

The Telegram application is compatible with different operating systems and different devices. The appropriate operating system should be selected from the website (see Figure 1). Additionally, it can be used in a web-based domain where installation is not necessary. Other than English, seven other languages are also supported. Signing up to the system is very easy as it only requires the mobile number and the verification code which is later sent to the user via a text message. After logging into the system, the application can be customized in terms of the appearance and security settings. Moreover, the application has the capacity of importing the contacts from the users' phone book.

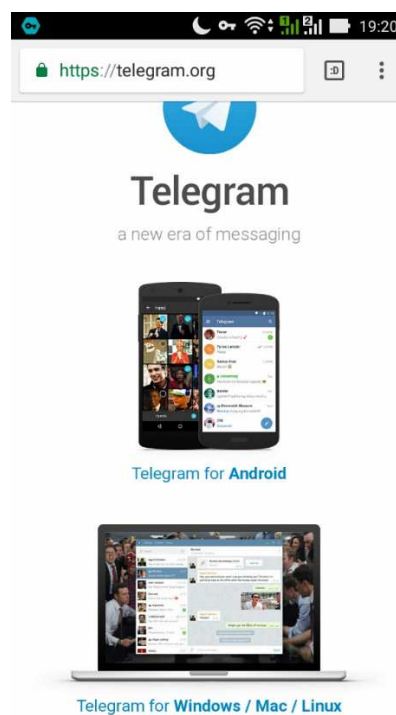


Figure 1. How to access the Telegram application

Telegram emphasizes speed and security as it is very easy to use, fast in uploading and downloading files, and easy to connect with your fellow members. Furthermore, its cloud-based system ensures permanent access to the files which are exchanged across different channels and groups. Moreover, it is capable of synchronizing encrypted data across multitude of independent data centers. Figure 2 shows the flexibility of Telegram in starting conversations with different people and among different channels.

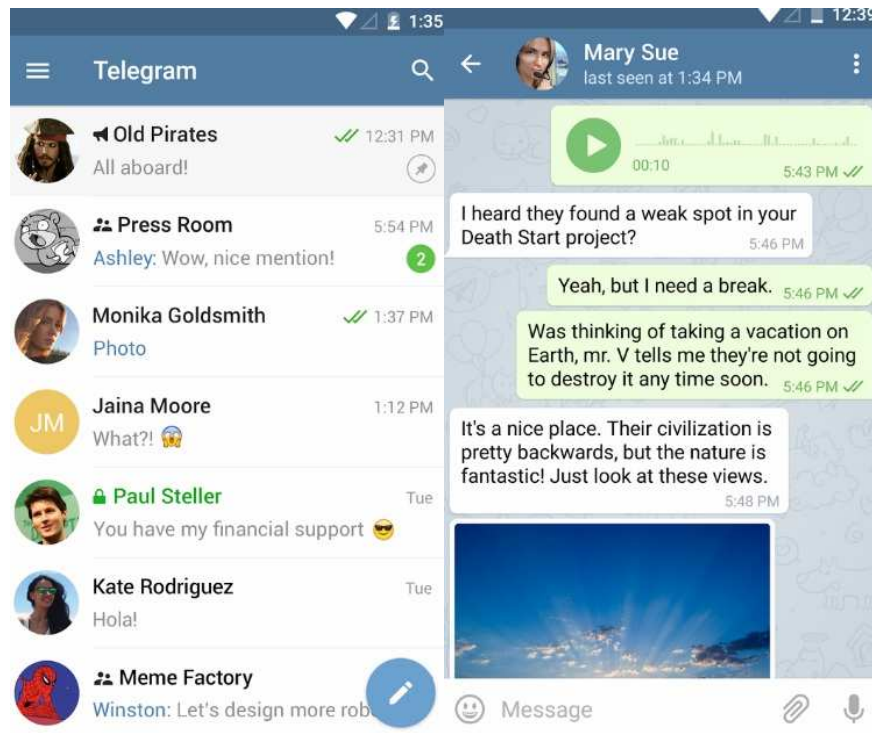


Figure 2. The accessibility of Telegram channel

There are many features worthy of mentioning which make Telegram distinct from other software and establishes it as a leading device for distance language learning.

### 2.1. Safety and security

First, this application ensures the cyber security of users since Telegram messages are encrypted and the app has the capability of self-destruction. As it can be seen in Figure 3, the secret chats can be self-destructed without any interference. This allows learners to be more extrovert and cooperative in doing the tasks because users should no longer be worried about the mistakes they might make since the exchanged messages can be easily rectified. This allows learners to express themselves freely because the messages can be corrected at any time.

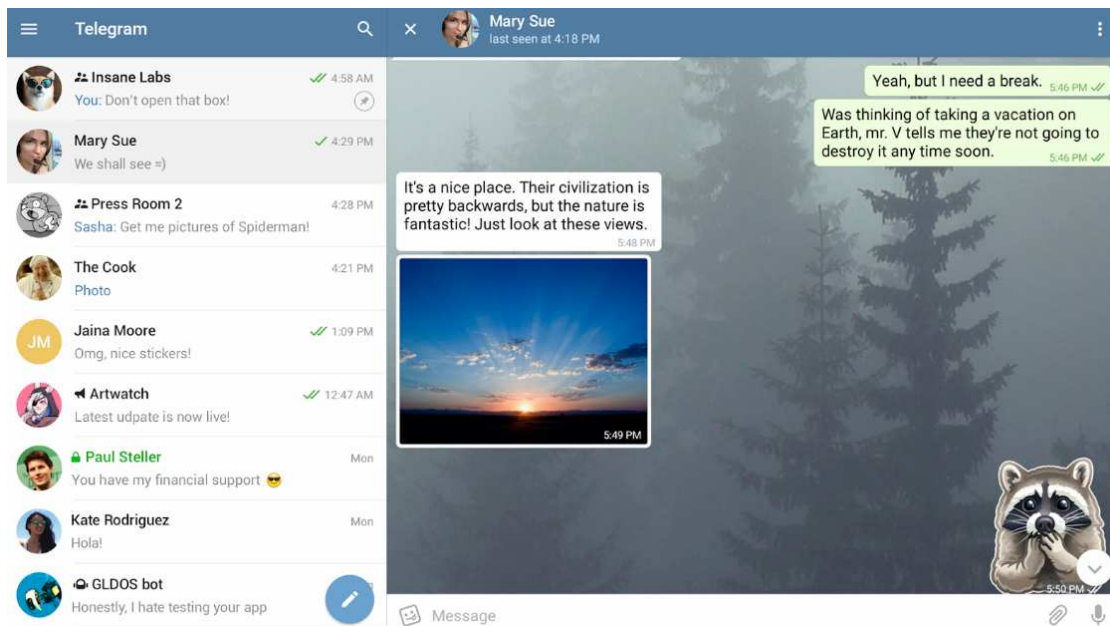


Figure 3. Self-destructed encrypted secret chats

## 2.2. The Seamless Network

It is possible to use Telegram on different devices simultaneously, for example, on both a smartphone and a laptop. This helps the continuation flow of getting the information from different resources without any interruption. In other words, a learner can start getting the information on their laptop and continue doing so on their mobile phone if they want to get out of the house.

## 2.3. Access to channels and groups

Once a Telegram user is signed up, they have access to a wide variety of channels and groups particularly the language learning ones. The channels and groups can either be searched parametrically or accessed by having an invitation link (see Figure 4). Unlike some other virtual societies and websites, access to channels, discussion groups, and online classes can be made much easier with a little search about the topic of interest. Moreover, joining channels and groups is free of any premium charges. Every teacher and/or learner can construct their own channels and groups and invite their students to start interacting in an online environment.

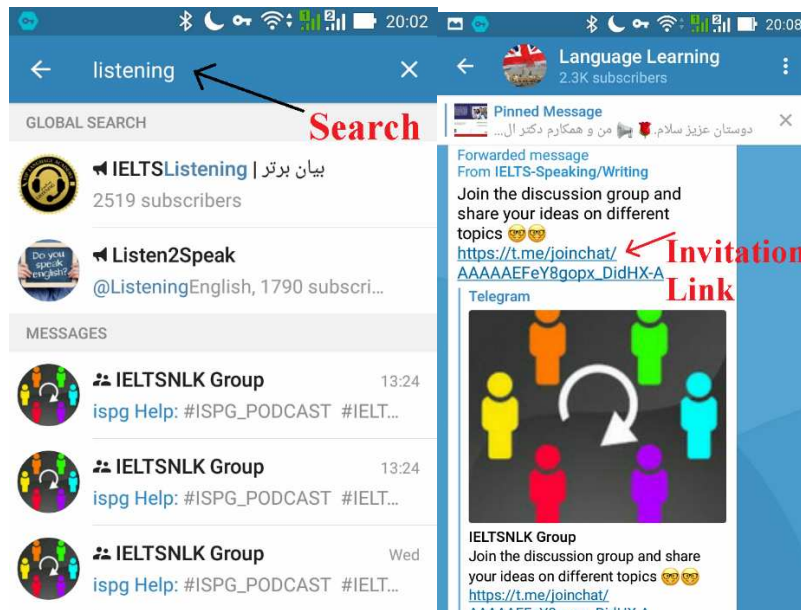


Figure 4. Finding groups and channels in Telegram

#### 2.4. Supporting files with various extensions and sizes

Telegram has the capability of supporting all file formats including, but not limited to, doc, zip, ppt, mp3, mpeg, etc. This is very important for distance language learning since teachers and learners need a robust and dynamic environment to send and receive files with different extensions. Moreover, there is no restriction over the size of files which are exchanged. Files up to 1.5 GB can be exchanged in any discussion forum. Selecting a file from the gallery or saving a file to the hardware requires a single touch or click. Figure 5 shows how to choose files from different sources and extensions which obviates the necessity of installing other applications. For example, the teacher can send a multimedia file with any extension and upload it to a group. All group members can download it for free and share their opinions about it. Learners can also express their own opinions by sharing files. All this maximizes interaction among learners and encourages them to do the tasks collaboratively.

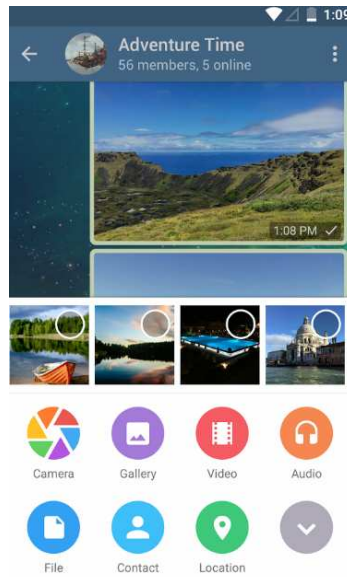


Figure 5. Telegram supports all different file formats

Telegram is a versatile multifunctional online application, with its channels and groups catering for most purposes of their users. Every individual user can create unlimited groups for up to 100,000 members and channels with an unlimited number of members. A group is a combination of email service, text messaging app, multimedia messaging app, online forum discussion, and systematic educational robots. Therefore, it can take care of personal, educational, and business needs all at the same time. Once the members are added to a group, they can be guided by the admin users of the group (usually the online instructors or the researchers and their assistants) to accept the rules of the group (see Figure 6). Depending on the purpose of the group, members are briefed on how to make use of the presented materials within an already determined framework.

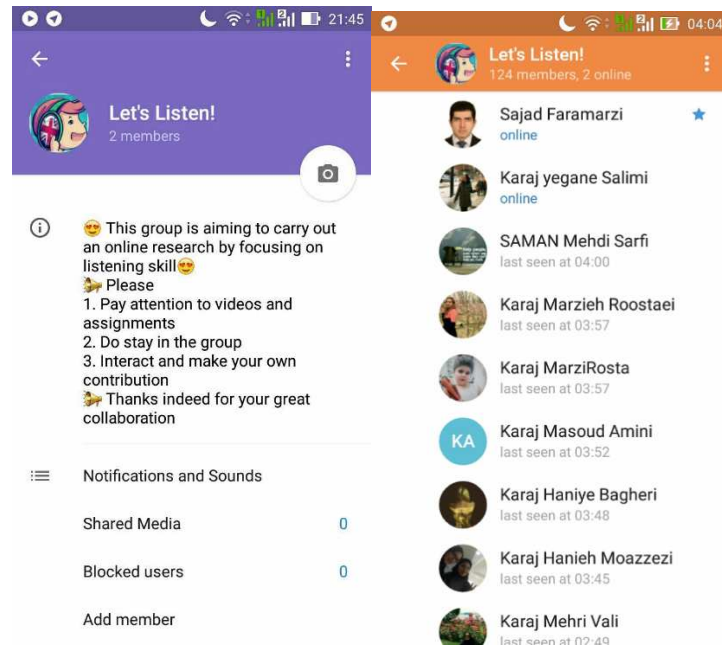


Figure 6. Group construction for an educational group

## 2.5. Assigning tasks to learners

By using a group, a wide range of meaningful and challenging tasks can be presented to learners. This application endorses podcasts from a wide range of domains: video podcasts for teaching grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, reading comprehension, formative writing tasks, speaking, etc. In a longitudinal study, Faramarzi (2018) assigned various integrated listening and speaking tasks in Telegram to measure the effect of video podcasting tasks on the development of listening comprehension of EFL learners. The Telegram users demonstrated increased performance in doing integrated tasks comparing to that of non-users. The participants in the study mentioned Telegram as a powerful device for improving their major skills and sub-skills. Figure 7 shows the video grammar podcasts and how the tasks were presented.



The figure illustrates the integration of digital resources into language learning. On the left, a Telegram chat interface shows a group named "Let's Listen!" with 82 members. Several messages are visible, including a video titled "week1: Grammar show Present simple tense" and a PDF titled "present\_simple\_3.pdf", both forwarded from Sajad Faramarzi. On the right, two screenshots of grammar exercises from "LearnEnglish Teens" by the British Council are shown. The first screenshot, titled "Grammar Snacks", contains two sections: "Check your grammar: true or false" and "Check your grammar: multiple choice". The second screenshot shows a "gap fill" exercise.

Figure 7. Grammar video podcasts and tasks

## 2.6. Using helpful robots

One of the most important characteristics of Telegram which makes it really different from other distance education programs is the existence of robots or so-called 'bots', which can encourage learners to be self-reliant and independent. The idea of getting help from robots can stimulate an initiative sense especially for introverted learners. Additionally, inquisitive learners can challenge their peers by getting some information from robots. In other words, by having access to a great range of robots, learners can become more independent and discover the materials by themselves. Figure 8 shows Andy's chatting robot which makes language discussion practice more lively for learners, particularly beginners who might be interested in finding out reactions of a native speaker to specific questions. In responding to learners, the robot matches its answers to the linguistic level of the questions.

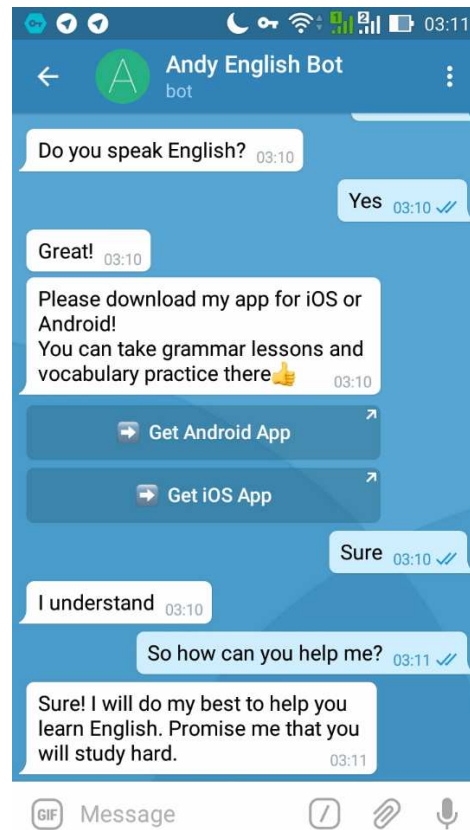


Figure 8. Andy English bot

The following robots are among the few language related robots which can be used by learners from all language levels:

- A. Pronunciation bot helps learners to check the pronunciation of words on the spot and even get the phonetic notation of the words and messages. Therefore, there is no need to use a dictionary while reading a passage (see Figure 9).
- B. Teletwitter robot provides an opportunity to check the twitter account on the go (see Figure 9). The idea behind creating such a robot is to have access to the social network continuously.
- C. Cloudfile robot can save received files in one's drop box account or other cloud-based system (see Figure 9). Even though Telegram has got its own cloud system, some members might be interested in saving the files somewhere else.

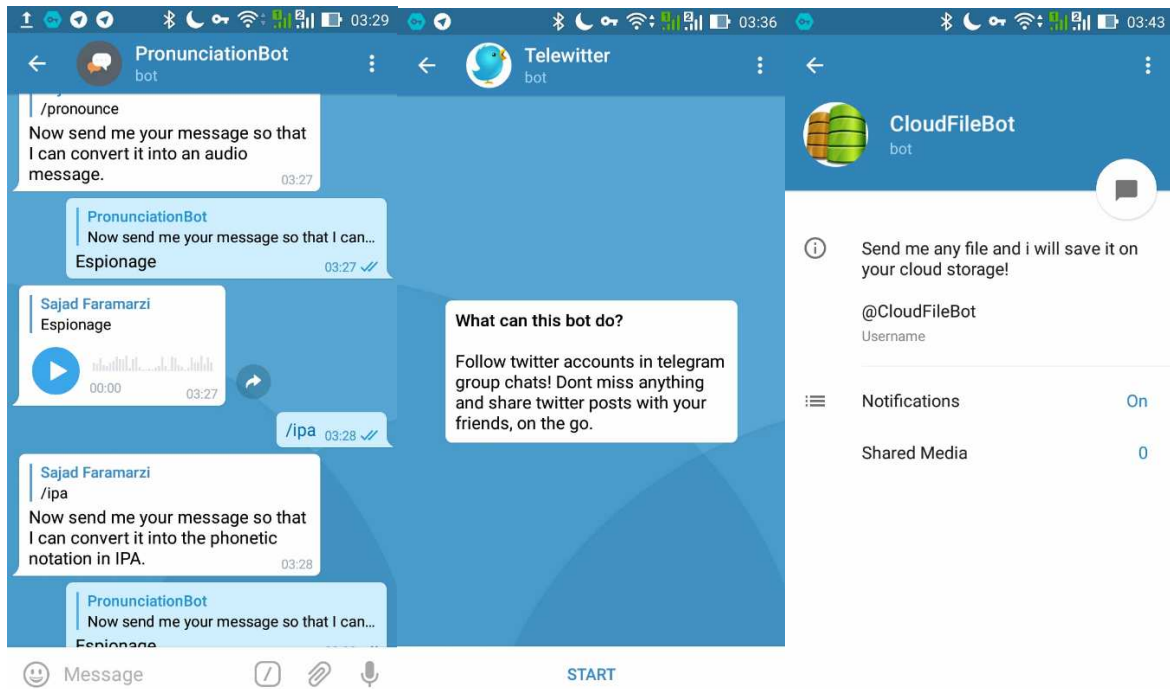


Figure 9. PronunciationBot, Telewitter bot, CloudFileBot

- D. Umad robot provides great animated pictures and learners can use these GIF files in their conversational exchanges to make their conversational exchanges much more exciting (see Figure 10).
- E. Study robot covers a wide range of subjects by teaching different aspects of language, geography, world history and so on. Also it measures different areas of English like IELTS, TOEFL, SAT and IAS mock tests (see Figure 10).
- F. Wiki robot is capable of searching articles in any chat box or forum. It is a great way of sharing information with others without any interruption. The significance of this robot is to have something to say any time one gets involved in a conversation exchange (see Figure 10).
- G. Voicy robot changes the voice messages and converts them to text messages accurately. It can be very helpful for learners to get involved in a conversation whose total understanding might seem to be difficult (see Figure 11). This is also beneficial for learners who like to transcribe the talks from video conferencing or live speeches. This robot puts the learners in a comfort zone that no single material will be lost.
- H. Abadisdic bot gives learners access to dictionaries and encyclopedias in an online environment (see Figure 11).

- I. Vote bot enables instructors to conduct a survey and get feedback from students through Likert scale questionnaire system (see Figure 11). The voting robot can undo a vote if one chooses an alternative by mistake, or one wants to change their mind about a point.

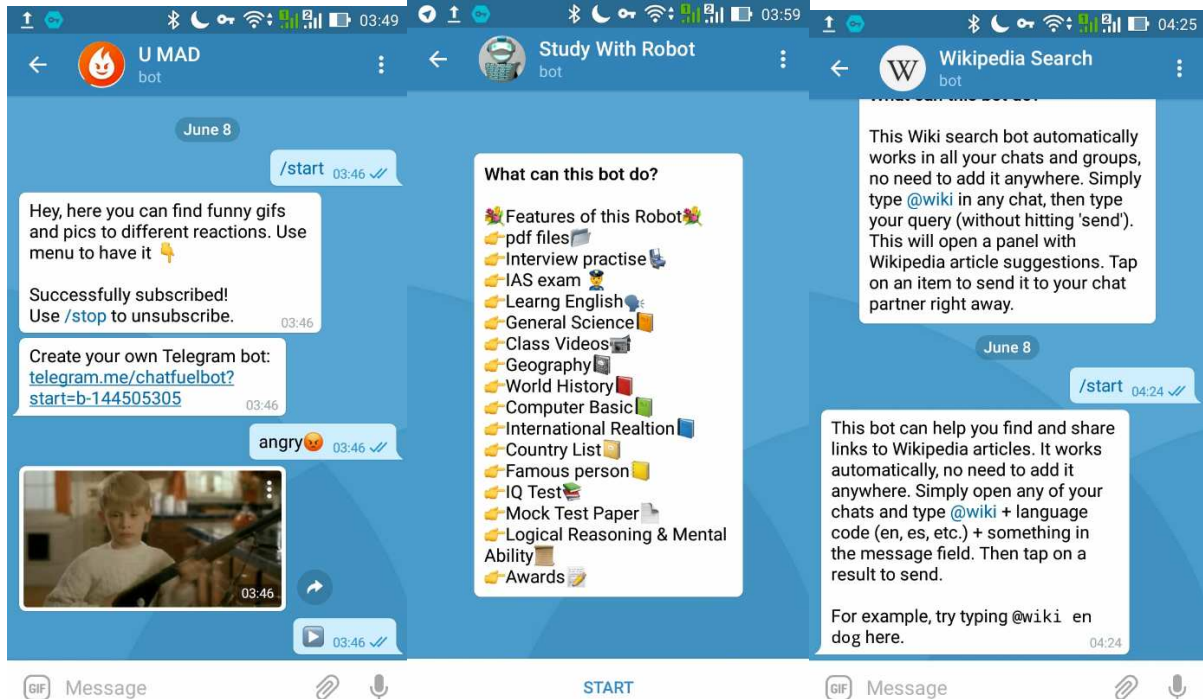


Figure 10. Umad robot, Study bot, WikiBot

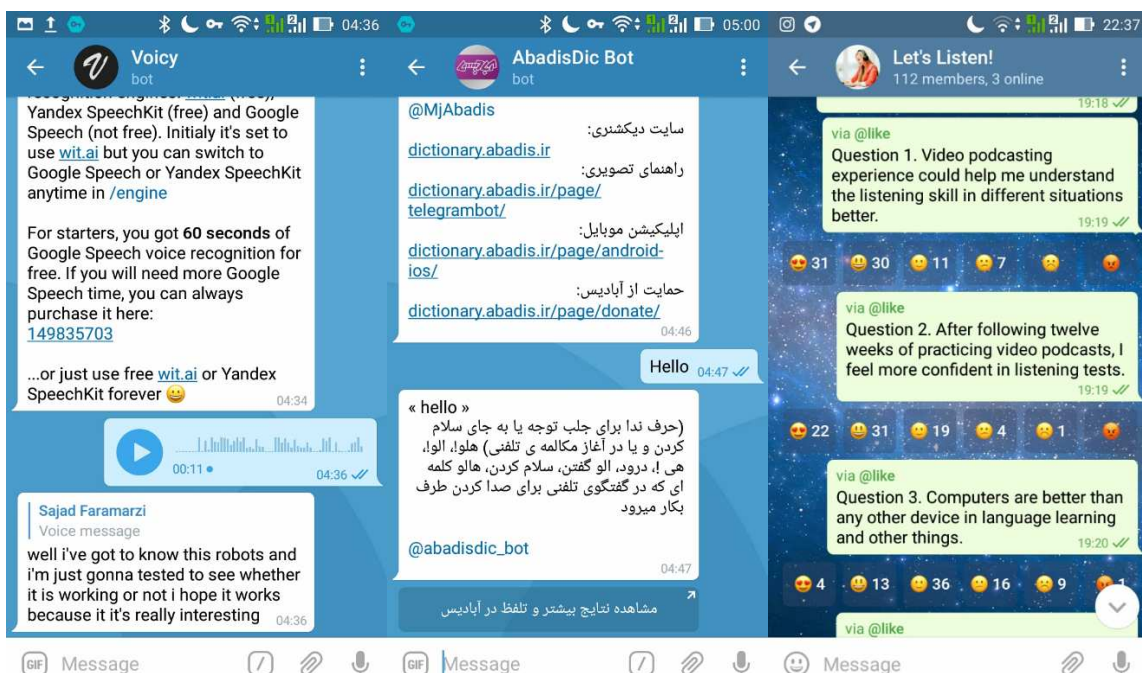


Figure 11. Voicy robot, abadisdic bot, Vote Bot.

There are many advantages in using robots in online classes. Above all, the biggest advantage for the instructor or the learner is they can create their own tailor-made robot for free, customize its application, and introduce it to the target audience. BotFather is a robot which makes it possible for everyone to establish a new robot by following simple steps (see Figure 12).



Figure 12: BotFather robot constructor

### 3. Comparison with other similar applications

Unlike some other e-learning applications such as WiziQ, Telegram is free. Creating an account is simple and only requires following a few steps. It is safe and it can be operationalized seamlessly by using different devices. The customized adjunct robots are not available in any other application. In spite of having a massive cloud-based system, it works very fast. Communication has been made easy as far as recording the voice and videos is very simple.

Something which is almost nonexistent in other distance language learning programs is the ability to find and join different channels and groups based on the topic of interest. Moreover, the application is free from any disturbing advertisement. The two-step verification made the security setting confidential. Maximum collaborative learning, peer correction, and discovery learning are among the best features.

#### **4. Evaluation**

Telegram is a free application can be used for online language learning programs that possesses major advantages to facilitate the process of learning. It is one of the most downloaded messaging apps that is constantly updated and new features are being added to every day. Some studies (e.g. Elekaei, 2018; Famarzi, 2018) revealed the educational potential of Telegram as a tool to pursue online language learning programs by showing statistically significant results in listening progress of L2 learners, vocabulary gain, vocabulary retention, autonomy, and learning strategy training.

In using the app, various languages are supported at the moment, which makes it easy for beginner learners. The app and the robots are very user-friendly. However, learners need to be trained in how to get the most of the features like groups, channels, robots, etc. The application has its own format of recorded voices which takes some volume. The fast built-in video recorder allows the users to be in contact with each other.

The main objective of this app is to encourage collaborative learning and pursue the negotiation of meaning. Therefore, learners can help each other without any inhibitory feeling. Moreover, they can be engaged in different features of the app for many hours and it is a wonderful tool to develop learner-centered pedagogy. The dictionary robots, testing robots, pronunciation-checking robots, and chatting robots are some of the interesting functionalities that can help accomplish these aims.

The Telegram application possesses a great aptitude of troubleshooting the learners' problems. There are three ways of solving the problems in Telegram: discovery learning by using robots, peer correction by exchanging information with peers, and by getting help from the instructor. This encourages learners to be more inquisitive while learning.

In addition, this application provides an opportunity for instructors to continuously monitor the learners' progress. As a result, it is much simpler to recognize learner's needs and accommodate the pace of instruction with their learning outcomes.

However, the application needs to be revised and moderated by web-developers and robot designers in several aspects as far language learning is concerned. The necessity of video chats and live video conferencing options which of course is promised by the Telegram owners to be included in later updates is one of its drawbacks. Additionally, language educators and curriculum developers should be fully trained and briefed about the potential of the app. As far as the role of instructors is concerned, they need to be trained about the app's features. The major commitment is to acquaint students about the functionalities of Telegram and its interactive resources. Overall, a learner can practice taking a leading role of a self-starter and

act as a team player, which can improve their interpersonal intelligence. However, not all learner are actually ready to take up such a learning role.

## 5. Conclusions

The Telegram application, a free online app, has everything in itself: a massive cloud-based storage system to keep the files, a venue for organizing collaborative online classes, dozens of robot assistants, and the capability of making one's own customized robot for any particular purpose. Therefore it is a compact device that obviates the need of using other applications. Its versatility and user-friendliness made it specifically popular among teachers and learners from all levels.

One feature of Telegram is its capacity to change its function based on the needs of the learners. Working on different skills and sub skills in Telegram is very easy but it depends on considering some educational provisions. As many distance language learning programs require online contact between the instructors and the students, the educational policy must facilitate the possibility of coordinating a communicative link to get the job done. To put it more simply, the macro policy necessitates the instructional programs to acknowledge Telegram as an acceptable virtual society. Also, the broadband internet connections should be made accessible.

However, there are many untapped potentials worthy of being considered in further studies. Testing the students' abilities in different skills such as speaking, reading and writing together with the computerized form of examinations in Telegram can be the target of future investigations. In terms of writing, the dynamic process of writing and the amount of learner's engagement with the texts along with the statistical analysis of the results of the tests could also be investigated in future studies.

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