SPEAKINGPAL: LEARN ENGLISH, SPEAK ENGLISH

(App Review)

by **Musa Nushi** and **Kimia Askarian**

Shahid Beheshti University, Daneshjo Boulevard, Evin Sq. Tehran, Iran, 1983969411

M_nushi @ sbu.ac.ir / askarian.kimia @ gmail.com

Application Details:

Publisher: SpeakingPal Ltd.

Product type: Mobile Application Software

Language(s): English

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

With the introduction and integration of technology within the lives of individuals, it is no surprise that a majority of disciplines have and will continue to experience changes, and by no means educational settings are an exception to such changes. Second language (L2) teaching and learning has been experiencing its own share of technological innovations; mobile-assisted Language Learning (MALL), for instance, is a fast-growing area of research and tends to be favored in certain circumstances when compared to its traditional counterparts such as textbook-based language learning and Computer-Assisted Language Learning. Brown (2010) states that "the distinguishing aspect of mobile learning is the assumption that learners are continuously on the move" (p. 7) and this move encompasses not only the physical aspects but also the contextual changes that individuals may experience.

As a matter of fact, mobile technologies enjoy multimodality in their design and applications, which is also manifested in the cognitive processes that learners' minds go through. Chanier and Lamy (2017) state that in these environments, "learners orchestrate various resources including language, in its written and spoken forms, as well as images,

colors, movements, and sounds" (p. 428). This multimodality can help learners engage more deeply in learning the content than in real-life situations. The least these mobile applications can do is providing a context in which learners can be exposed to language use. According to Genesee (2000), after some time and with enough exposure, "activation and recognition become relatively automatic" (p. 4). Nevertheless, we know that in many educational settings, the class time is limited and insufficient for automaticization to happen. As Thornton and Houser (2005) point out, it is believed that the existence of mobile devices and the applications programmed for them can help extend the opportunities for exposure and practice in language learning and/or teaching contexts.

However, integrating technology into language classes, specifically to enhance speaking, is not an easy task and using technology to teach speaking is among primary worries of L2 teachers (Blake, 2017). Such integration is proved to be beneficial to L2 development since, as argued by Reeves and Nass (1996), "people's interactions with computers, television, and new media are fundamentally social and natural, just like interactions in real life" (p. 5). Therefore, an app that simulates human interaction can help teachers and learners by improving speaking ability.

Given that background, the present article reviews *SpeakingPal,* a mobile application which is designed to improve EFL/ESL learners' speaking ability by enabling them to talk in English with an in-built video character.

2. Description

In order to use the application, learners must first download it from either Google Play or App Store on their respective platforms. The default language of the application is English; therefore, learners are required to have a basic command of the language to work with the application. When users launch the app and press 'start', they are directed to a page where they have a choice to either have the contents translated or continue with no translation. The in-built translation feature provides users with the translations (up to 15 languages) of the sentences used in the dialogs within the employed platform. After creating an account and logging in, users are directed to the main page of the app. There are eight sections in the main page. The content of each section is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Main page topics and contents

Section	**Number of lessons**
Weekly lesson	1 free lesson each week

Everyday – L1	22 (3 free)
Friends – L1	10 (3 free)
At work –L2	20 (3 free)
Travel – L2	31 (3 free)
White House – L3	12 (3 free)
Beginner – L0	51 (3 free)
English Sounds – L0	52 (3 free)

It is important to note that learners are not required to start from a specific section, that is, they do not have to start from Beginner – L0 and then move on to the more advanced levels. Upon creating their own accounts, learners can access all the sections and proceed as they wish. Each section/lesson centers around a particular situation. Except for *Beginner* and *English Sounds*, all other sections consist of a number of short pieces of video scenarios of people having a conversation. Some of these videos are specifically designed for the app and some are real videos which have been taken from other sources and adapted. It should be noted that only three videos of each topic are for free and users can buy the whole lessons or some of them from the *shop* icon. The language used in the conversations is natural, conventional and coherent. Characters behave naturally with clear accents and appropriate body language. Learners can watch the video provided for each lesson and then proceed to the 'dialogs', that is, the text version of the conversation with translation in another chosen language (Figure 1).

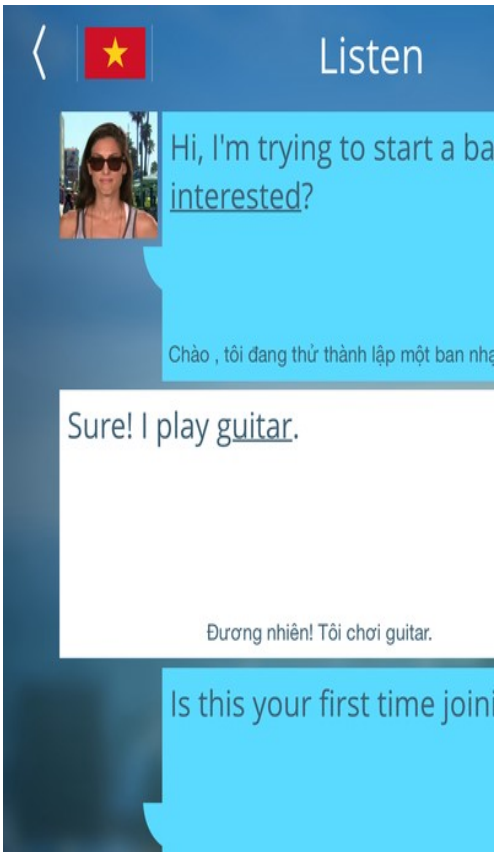

Figure 1. Dialogs

Within the dialogs, learners need to respond to the video character by reading the response that is given by the app out loud. Therefore, users can practice communicating with the other virtual character. The activity aims at getting the user to read (pronounce) the video's script as closely as possible. The vocal responding process, which comes with an evaluation, is associated with a specific sound technology, namely Automated Speech Recognition (ASR), which analyzes and converts audio streams of speech into written text using a speech recognition engine. ASR, however, does not analyze the audio semantically. Unlike Natural Language Processing which makes sense of language data, the ASR output cannot evaluate meaning or coherence, that is, it merely converts spoken language into written language – using sophisticated statistical and language analysis models (Carrier, 2017). By means of ASR, *SpeakingPal* can provide its users with a considerable opportunity to work on their pronunciation and accent, using ASR's Computer-aided Pronunciation Teaching (CAPT) software – it enables apps to listen to a learner's pronunciation and provide formative assessment and feedback on the accuracy of the enunciations. Moreover, the use of ASR allows the app to perform computer-based automated marking of ELT examinations – spoken examinations and quizzes – with an accuracy approaching that of human assessors. After each response, users' speech is rated using a three-

star scale, and when the whole dialog is done, a transcript of the whole dialog is provided. The transcript within the application is color-coded to reflect users' voice performance. The text written in green indicates that the utterance has been pronounced accurately, and those written in red must be improved (Figure 2).

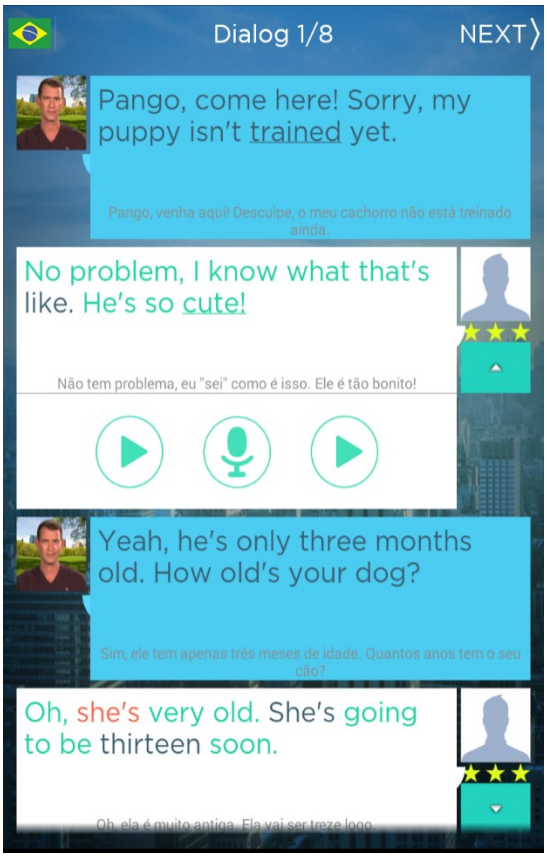

Figure 2. Color-coded feedback and dialog translation

The transcript also provides additional features such as the opportunity for learners to watch the cropped part of the video in which the response was spoken by a video character, play back their own recording, and re-record their response based on the feedback they have received. Some of the words in the transcript are underlined and by tapping on them their definition will appear in a pop-up box. Therefore, the app can help users to gain a variety of words and conversational phrases, which can lead to more proficiency in their speaking skills (Milton et al., 2010).

Another video exercise scheme called the 'Double Answer' allows users to participate in how the conversation progresses by providing them with the option of choosing between two sentences to reply to the corresponding questions. This feature of *SpeakingPal* is powered by 'English Tutor', a technology which presents users with short, authentic dialogs, enabling users

to direct the conversation flow, much like in a real-life communication. English Tutor also makes it possible for the app to provide immediate feedback on the users' speaking performance.

SpeakingPal can help promote learners' listening skill as well. Listening to the native speakers of English can help students improve not only their listening skills but also their pronunciation. After all the dialogs are practiced in each lesson, learners can take a quiz. All the questions are time-bound, multiple-choice, and based on the conversations of the lesson. However, when the learners answer the questions incorrectly, there is no feedback as to why their answer is wrong. At the end, it scores the performance as a percentage along with a three-star rating scale (Figure 3).

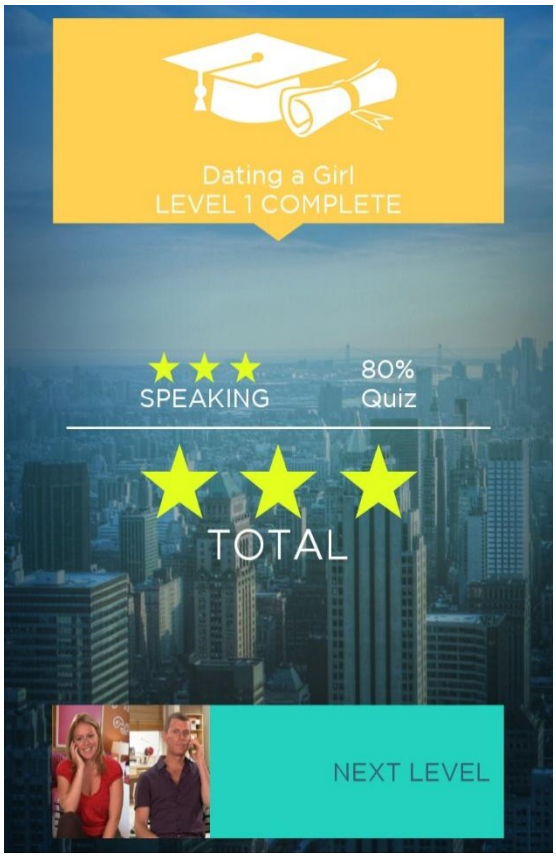

Figure 3. Scoring the performance

It should be noted that the *Beginner* lessons introduce some vocabulary items using pictures and videos in the same manner that the other lessons mentioned above provide conversation practice for learners. The section labeled *English Sounds* contains videos about how to say all English sounds demonstrating how to articulate them in addition to providing interesting pronunciation tips. It is also worth mentioning that the content of the app is not constant in all the parts; for example, sometimes learners need to just repeat what was said in the video

instead of replying to it and therefore, there is no interaction pattern. Also, even when the translation option is activated, there is no translation available for some of the videos.

3. Evaluation

Learning English in traditional ways, like attending classrooms, does not allow learners to practice their speaking skills adequately and on a regular basis. Meanwhile, with English learning apps for communication, learners can listen to any dialog and improve their speaking skills at any time and as long as they want. Most of the English-speaking apps provide original dialogs spoken by native speakers and interactive activities, which help learners grasp the Standard English accent and pronunciation in a natural way and improve their speaking skills. *SpeakingPal* is quite innovative, user-friendly and has an appealing interface that employs colorful layouts which make language learning more interesting and enjoyable to users. The sections are clearly arranged, well-organized and the menus are easy to work with, therefore, it seems a very face-valid app. The app is compatible with both smartphones and tablets and is supported by both Android and iOS operating systems, showing that the publisher has tried to reach out to a wider range of users. *SpeakingPal* is powered by ASR which enables the app to enjoy computer-based automated marking of ELT examinations. This feature can provide the benefit of speed and instant analysis and evaluation of learners' performance – the spoken production of a learner does not need to be recorded and sent to a human examiner, but can be assessed immediately.

Despite the benefits, the app suffers from some weaknesses. As in many CAPT applications, the interaction is essentially self-study, taking place between learner and device, with no learner-to-learner or teacher-to-learner interaction. *SpeakingPal* may help learners with their pronunciation and speaking skills, but since they interact with a virtual video tutor appearing in short video clips, without using the phrases or the sentences in a real interaction with real people, users must be aware of the fact that these computerized listening and speaking exercises provided in the app might not be enough for what they actually need in real-life communications and situations.

Another drawback concerns the feedback; the one provided by the app consists of a review screen which provides all utterances that were articulated, along with the color-coding feature for each word of each utterance, so that users can pinpoint where to improve, by realizing which words they pronounced well (in green) and which ones they need to work on (in red). There does not seem to be any explanation as to what in particular the problem is with the learner's pronunciation and they may have to only repeat the red word or utterance a couple

of times to pass the dialog, so the users are not any wiser as to how to improve. Therefore, they might get stuck in saying some word or utterance which could lead to a communication breakdown. Here again, the absence of an actual person with whom the users could adopt a strategy to improve their communication and interaction skills is felt and is quite a profound pitfall. *SpeakingPal* tends to underpin criticisms of ASR-based educational procedures, namely that such activities lead to learners talking to a device by themselves in isolation. Lack of synchronous speaking and listening activities with no promotion of collaborative learning are among the main problems of many language learning apps (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). To compensate for this problem, some language learning applications like *Duolingo* have created a community of their users in order to create real interaction among them and get users to assist one another with their learning process (Nushi & Eqbali, 2017).

As explained earlier, after watching the video, users are supposed to play roles of one or two characters. The validity of using role-plays as a pedagogical strategy has been backed by numerous studies. Role-play is defined as "a simulation activity in which students are expected to take on a personal attitude, opinion, or role of someone else in a set context" (Senf, 2012, p. 3). Burke and Guest (2010, p. 34) describe role-plays as an excellent means to engage learners, which emphasize "interactive, inquiry-based scholarship rather than passive learning." For the activities to be successful, a few key points need to be attended to including modelling, providing students with language support, establishing realistic objectives, making use of practical scenarios, and using objects and material from everyday life (Parrish, 2004).

The app also provides learners with almost every utterance translated into the selected language to make the content more comprehensible. The use of translation in L2 teaching and learning has and will continue to be a controversial issue. Some teachers and researchers have negative attitudes toward translation whereas others hold a more positive attitude toward its use, believing that it facilitates the teaching and learning process (Samardali & Ismael, 2017). Researchers (e.g., Ur, 2012) argue that it is wrong to assume that translation always cause negative interference by the native language; on the contrary, it can increase students' awareness of similarities and differences between the two languages, and it also promotes their acquisition of difficult structures and elements in the target language. However, some researchers do not prefer the use of translation in language teaching and learning due to the fact that it has allegedly many drawbacks. Harbord (1992), for instance, warns that the use of translation may lead to the development of an excessive dependency on the students' mother tongue. Considering this controversy, many L2 scholars (e.g., Cook, 2010; Liao, 2006) believe that it is not the very translation but the way it is used for pedagogical purposes that counts and

it seems that *SpeakingPal* developers are convinced that the way translation is used in the app benefits the learners.

The interactive exercises included in the app require the learners to select a response from prefabricated options rather than to create their own answers, which raises a concern regarding the development of creativity in the learners' production. Furthermore, a speaker can choose to rephrase what they are trying to say using a variety of structures or vocabulary, referred to as adaptive strategies, whereas, through the in-app interactions, users are locked into a very narrowly-defined response scenario with no chance to employ and practice such strategies which are highly required in a real authentic conversation.

To compare the *SpeakingPal* app with other similar applications (e.g., *Replika*, *Tandem*), one can notice that those applications try to prioritize real communication with people and incorporate updated instructional methodologies in the teaching and learning process. *Replika*, for instance, allows users to personalize their virtual friends by talking to them every day about their daily routines and share their life experiences. Another similar app that focuses on speaking skills is *Tandem*. In this application the developers prioritized real communication with people over incorporating updated teaching methodologies in the learning process. Unlike *SpeakingPal* this app does not have an in-app dictionary or a built-in translation (see Nushi & Khazaei, 2020 for a review). *Speaky* is another app that assists students with their speaking. One of its most important features is that it provides students with a forum where native and non-native speakers with all levels of language proficiency learn from each other. However, unlike *SpeakingPal* it does not provide learners with voice recognition to practice speaking skills.

It is quite obvious that a learner cannot become proficient in English by using only the free features of the app, although it can be used to learn and practice some new points, and more importantly, to have a quick preview and get familiar to how the app works and how the topics and conversations will unfold in the future, so the learners can decide whether the app's teaching procedure suits their needs or not. Nevertheless, *SpeakingPal* contains many favorable features. It is not too expensive – its complete version runs from $7.5 to $21 per year, depending on the lessons the users want to purchase – its appearance is modern and clear and its subjects are well-structured, highly-organized, and as mentioned earlier, user-friendly. Thus, it seems a great idea to recommend even the free version of the *SpeakingPal* application as a beneficial supplement for learning or improving English – but not as a substitute.

4. Conclusion

Mobile devices have been steadily incorporated into L2 education, thus transforming the traditional teaching and learning into a whole brand new mode of virtual education (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). This vast use of mobile devices has brought about the production and launch of loads of smartphone applications in English language teaching and learning. A great many apps are available presently for language learners to download from the Internet. The portability and accessibility of mobile devices has made learning materials easily accessible. Accordingly, MALL has been widely recognized as providing "portability", "social interactivity", "context sensitivity", "connectivity" and "individuality" for language learners (Miangah & Nezarat, 2012, p. 311). That is why the popularity of language learning apps has grown immensely. As a result, as the App Store chart of the Education category on the Chinese market on Jan. 21, 2013 demonstrates, 39% of the top 100 free apps and 34% of the top 100 paid apps were for language learning (Yang, et al., 2013).

As a relatively well-known language learning app assistant, *SpeakingPal* enjoys all these great features. With a high 4.2 score on Google Play and thousands of five-star reviews, the app offers a fun, interactive way to its users to excel in English. Even popular Russian English-learning project *LinguaLeo*, which has more than 9 million users worldwide, is allegedly interested in connecting with *SpeakingPal* (The Russia Times, 2014). *SpeakingPal* is a mobile-learning product that turns its users' cellphones into a personal English tutor. This app is one of the subscription-based English language learning systems that offers a unique range of interactive exercises, role plays and other language activities. Users can improve their English-speaking skills at some point during their busy schedules, on-the-go, anytime and anywhere (TOEIC, n.d.).

The variety of topics, built-in pronunciation technology facilities, exercises, and 'to-the-point' teaching process makes the app a valuable learning tool for both learners and teachers. Users are simply and directly presented with different topics and new related vocabularies, which are in a specific order, can skip around the built-in syllabus (Ellis, 2005) and go through any level of any course topic anytime they want. However, *SpeakingPal* is not an app which one should be solely dependent on; its over-reliance on the learners' native language, and lack of human interaction and over-use of prefabricated dialogs in presenting the materials do not make the app a good companion for more determined learners of the English language and for those who want to achieve a higher level of proficiency.

Despite the shortcomings, it seems a good idea to recommend *SpeakingPal* as a useful secondary learning aid, one that can definitely help its users learn new things in English and

boost their speaking skills. After all, for many learners, self-study activities are a preferable way to gain enough time with and exposure to the target language to enhance their proficiency, either because they cannot attend real classes or their class hours are limited. Furthermore, for many learners this alone would be a welcome support to their learning, building more confidence in speaking when they see their correct pronunciation is recognized and rated by the ASR engine (Carrier, 2017). We should also take into account that for human-to-human synchronous interaction, there are some barriers such as scheduling, sound quality, operation, and cost (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008) and apps like *SpeakingPal* attempt to remove such barriers.

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