EXPLORATION MOBILE ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING(MALL) APPLICATION, DUOLINGO AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE LANGUAGE LEARNERS COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE.

by

FOLAKEMI OYEKAN

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

EDSE 900

RESEARCH CAPPING PAPER

DR MARC HIGGINS

APRIL 2021

**Introduction**

Technology is changing every aspect of human life including the scene of Second language or Foreign language teaching and learning (Wang & Winstead,2016). As technology continues to improve and evolve, so do methods of language learning. A popular method today is “Mobile Assisted Language Learning” or “MALL.” In this paper, I am going to explore the significance of MALL and its applications in developing communicative competence or language acquisition of second or additional language learners.

Learning a second or an additional language effectively means using needed learning strategies (Meschyan and Hernandez, 2002). These language-learning strategies are used as a means to earn competence in any second or additional language (L2). The focus of language learning is to develop or improve learner’s linguistic and communicative competences. These two types of competences have significant influence on second language teaching, learning and practice (Thornbury 2006; Young 2011). According to Thornbury (2006) linguistic competence, in its simplest form is the native (L1) speakers’ ability to formulate “well-formed sentences” (p. 37). Communicative competence, on the other hand,  involves not only the knowledge of a language, but also what message to communicate to whom, and how to communicate it appropriately in any particular context, and that it also involves the socio-cultural knowledge that enables speakers to use and understand different speech forms.

The need for learning second or additional languages is growing because the world is fast becoming a global society where international travels and relationships are increasing by the day. It is, therefore, expedient in learning languages not only to focus on the linguistic aspects of languages but also to promote the communicative aspects of language learning to learners.  As the interest in language acquisition is increasing all over the world, a world with over 3.80 billion smartphone users and over 4.88 billion mobile phone users(Turner, 2021), a strategy of promoting the communicative competence of second or additional language learners is the Mobile Assisted Language Learning(MALL).

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), a concept of mobile learning(m-learning) is a learning approach using handheld and portable computing devices such as iPads, laptops, tablets, PDAs and smartphones to improve language learning (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). With the emergence and rapid improvement of many small and portable computing devices, this concept of “mobile learning also referred to as m-learning” is gaining popularity around the world. Sharples et al (2009) attest that mobile learning such as MALL helps to link people in real world and virtual worlds, creating learning communities among people on the move, providing expertise on demand, and supporting a lifetime of learning. With MALL, learners may not have to be confined in a classroom or to a computer to get learning materials as mobile devices are becoming one of the most promising technologies that support language learning (Hoppe et al, 2003.)  One of the mobile tools for second or additional language learning is the MALL applications or apps.

Mobile learning applications(apps) are changing the landscape of language learning as they have the potential to support and enhance the teaching and learning of many languages. Studies into the use of mobile applications (apps) for language learning have found positive results on language improvement and learner engagement (Kacetl & Klímová, 2019; Rosell-Aguilar, 2018) For example, English as Second Language(ESL) learners often use mobile apps to learn language skills such as listening, reading, speaking, writing, vocabulary, and grammar. Rosell-Aguilar (2019) attests that early claims about the potential of apps for language learning includes the possibility to learn, practise, and enhance both language skills and knowledge of the areas where target languages are spoken.

Many classrooms are equipped technologically today  and with the possibility of many students or learners possessing smartphones or any other mobile device for their personal use, would a learning app like Duolingo help improve their communicative competence and would it be enough a strategy for proficient communication in and out of the classroom? These are the questions I would seek to answer in this paper.

**Personal Connection and Positionality**

My interest in MALL Applications for improving communicative competence of second language learning is based on my experience and personal interest.

English Language is taught in Nigeria as an additional language. This is due to the multiethnic and multicultural nature of the country. My introduction to the English language as a communication tool was through television. Though we spoke Yoruba, my ethnic language at home, my parents ensured that I watched many engaging and interesting western programs which helped me to learn many English vocabularies and expressions. That was the beginning of my learning journey.

However, the journey of English language learning was different when I started school. Learning English as a second language shifted from being fun and engaging to being a mechanical, tasking and a compulsory subject that I became stuck with all through my pre-tertiary education days. English Language was taught in a traditional and old-fashioned way. It was based on the system of grammatical patterns with a trend of formal and textbook language where we just produced sentences and focused on reading and writing.

The desire to learn ESL as a vehicle of interaction and an instrument of communication motivated me to major in English Language in the university. The ESL curriculum seeks to strike a meaningful balance between linguistic competence and communicative competence in schools, however while textbooks possess the features that are necessary to help learners develop their linguistic competence, they did not seem adequate for the development or improvement of learners’ communicative competence.  Years on as an ESL teacher, I see that the journey for many of my students is not so different from mine. Not much has shifted from the ways that ESL was taught.  The use of ESL textbooks, contents and methods is still a source for unachieved ESL curriculum aims, goals and objectives in many schools in Nigeria.

This study is not to undermine the importance of ESL textbooks as they are being used in Nigeria or/and in any other country, however, the extensive use of these textbooks makes language learning mostly abstract, complex and non-interactive. It is what Rowe (2013, p.188) refers to as learning “a language removed from the here and now.”   English or any other language cannot be learned in a vacuum. A great deal of meaning comes from context which may be expressions and gestures, intonations, social setting and culture in terms of which learners come to draw inferences from. This way, learners can understand and use language appropriately to communicate in authentic (rather than simulated) social and school environments. The desire to develop my own communicative competence and as well as that of my students inspired me to engage in this inquiry.

I believe that core or primary goal of ESL as it is with any language is to acquire high communicative competence and as I think of my struggles as a young learner of English then and as a teacher now, I wonder what impacts the content and context of Mobile Assisted Language Learning Applications would have had and may have on current ESL learners’ proficiency. Will the content of Language Learning apps be able to provide authentic opportunities for learning? Will Language apps augment learners’ communicative competence as a supplement or a replacement of grammatical structures in the ESL curriculum?

**Literature Review**

**Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)**

Over the years mobile learning has grown from a minor research interest to a set of significant projects in schools and workplaces around the world. According to Traxler (2005), there is considerable evidence to suggest that mobile learning is growing in visibility and significance. It is a movement or development that enables time shifting and boundary crossing (Kukulska-Hulme, 2009). Kloper et al’s (2002) affirms this by listing five properties of mobile devices as portability, social interactivity, context sensitivity and connectivity. Mobile devices today enable people across culture to reach out to one another and stay connected. Mobile learning devices include smartphones, personal digital assistants (PDAs) and iPods.

Mobile learning ranges from “simple SMS messaging, MMS, live classroom sessions, web and podcasting to audio-to-text or text-to- audio applications” (Gaudry-Perkins and Dawes, 2011 p.12), it provides enriched learning experiences via educational video, logical reasoning and problem solving aptitude games, and even mobile whiteboards for interactive discussions. Mobile learning offers a change from the occasional, supplemental use of computer labs, to frequent and integral use of portable computational technology (Roschelle, 2003). It bridges the gap between formal and informal learning. Similarly, it allows an increased mobility of population and lifelong learning, thereby creating opportunities for constant practice anywhere and anytime.

This access to technology is important especially in the teaching of additional or foreign languages because it enables a constant practice of the language. It also aids the easy recollection of what has been taught which will help learners apply or put into practice in real life situations. In addition, it allows for variety and creativity in teaching and learning, thereby increasing interaction and interactivity between teachers and students which brings about creativity and critical thinking. Furthermore, it allows students to be more responsible for and in their acquisition of information; they are more active in getting their education (Kukulska-Hulme, Shield, & Hassan, 2010). Geddes (2004), Hartnell-Young and Heym (2008), Perkins and Dawes (2011) have examined the benefits of using mobile technologies for pedagogical purposes describing teaching and learning through the mobile technologies as a very good way of making the students active participants in the acquisition and spread of knowledge. Other scholars like Nyíri (2005) examine the close connection between communication and education and submit that it is in the heart of communication not just through words but images that mobile learning is realised. Mellow (2001) views m-learning as a means for enhancing the broader learning experience and a primary method for delivering courses for distance learning, he also views m-learning as a powerful method for engaging learners on their own terms.

One thing that is pertinent to these literatures about m-learning is its ability to help improve additional language acquisition and ‘acquisition' is the product of a subconscious process which requires meaningful interaction in the target language - natural communication - in which speakers are concentrated not in the form of their utterances, but in the communicative act. (Krashen 1998 as cited by Schütz, 2005). If the purpose of m-learning or m-learning apps would help develop or improve learner’s communicative competence of an additional language, it is important to understand communicative competence as it relates to this study.

Communicative competence is the ability to use language or interpreted language correctly in the process of interaction with the social environment such as the use of language in the proper regulation of social practices (Hymes,1972). It involves developing language proficiency through interactions embedded in meaningful contexts, providing authentic opportunities for learning that go beyond repetition and memorization of grammatical patterns in isolation. The nature of communicative competence is not static but dynamic, it is more interpersonal than intrapersonal and relative rather than absolute (Bagarić and Mihaljević Djigunović, 2007).

Different models of communicative competence have been offered by different scholars (Hymes 1972; Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983; Bachman 1990, Celce-Murcia et al 1995; Littlewood 2011) and for the purpose of this study, we will be focusing on the most recent model or framework. Littlewood (2011) takes Canale and Swains’ (1980) and Canale’s (1983) model as the initial model and develops it by adding a fifth component as well as adapting the terminology. The components of communicative competence in Littlewood’s model are as follows:

·       Linguistic competence includes the knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, semantics and phonology that have been the traditional focus of second language learning.

·       Discourse competence enables speakers to engage in continuous discourse, e.g. by linking ideas in longer written texts, maintaining longer spoken turns, participating in interaction, opening conversations and closing them.

·       Pragmatic competence enables second language speakers to use their linguistic resources to convey and interpret meanings in real situations, including those where they encounter problems due to gaps in their knowledge.

·       Sociolinguistic competence consists primarily of knowledge of how to use language appropriately in social situations, e.g. conveying suitable degrees of formality, directness and so on.

·       Sociocultural competence includes awareness of the cultural knowledge and assumptions that affect the exchange of meanings and may lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication. This last component introduces psycholinguistic aspects of second language proficiency that are not included in the Canale and Swain's framework but are fundamental to communicative language use.

In summary, the focus of additional language learning is to develop learners’ communicative competence, that is, their abilities to understand and use language effectively to interact in an authentic social environment.

As there is considerable evidence (Traxler, 2005) to suggest that mobile learning is growing in visibility and significance in language pedagogy, one begins to wonder what role mobile learning applications are playing to develop or improve learners’ additional language acquisition or communicative competence. It is important to review literature on mobile learning apps.

**Mobile Language Learning Applications**

Early language learning applications made use of portable audio devices such as the Sony Walkman or Apple iPod (Godwin-Jones, 2011). Early internet-capable devices such as cell-phones and personal digital assistants (PDAs) made basic use of email and web browsing for language learning (Chinnery, 2006). Pedagogical approaches were fairly limited on these devices, constraining most applications to one-way content delivery with little peer-to-peer communication or interaction (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2007; KukulskaHulme & Shield, 2008). Mobile devices such as smartphones, iPods, iPads, tablets and other portable internet-connected devices have provided learners access to an array of digital learning materials (Beach & O’Brien, 2015). Second or additional language learners often use mobile apps to learn language skills such as listening, reading, speaking, writing, vocabulary, and grammar.

**Listening**

It plays an essential role in language learning because it is the first step when learning a new language (Read & Barcena, 2016). Without listening, it would be difficult to practice speaking (Huang & Sun, 2010). Some apps are specially developed to improve students’ listening skills. Huang and Sun (2010) developed a mobile multimedia English practice system to help users improve their listening abilities. This app contains some multimedia materials website and an English listening practice system to provide users with extensive listening resources in the forms of video, mp3 materials, texts, and online interactions. One of the aims of teaching English listening is to prepare students for understanding actual speech in real communication situations. L2 learners need to improve their listening skills in order to understand natural English speech. (Rost, 2002)

**Vocabulary**

Steel (2012) stated that mobile apps have remarkable benefits for learning English vocabulary (e.g., for understanding meanings and contexts and memorizing words). English vocabulary apps such as vocabulary games and flashcards are among the most common apps that learners use.

Using apps in the learning process reflects Knud Illeris (2003)’s Three Dimensions of Learning, namely the cognitive dimension, the affective dimension, and the socio-cultural dimension. First, language learning apps have a potential influence on the cognitive dimension of learning. For example, apps can lessen learners’ cognitive load by offering unlimited access to the learning activities. Having this information stored on a device and readily available at any given moment does not require them to commit vast amounts of information to memory (Pachler, 2009). Second, a good learning app motivates learners and allows them to engage in meaningful and rewarding learning, which have a positive effect on the development of learners’ affective (e.g., emotional, attitudinal, self-efficacy) dimension of learning (Niño, 2015). Third, second language learning often takes place in the context of interactions with others. The socio-cultural dimension of learning apps makes the learning communication easily accessible (Pachler, 2009). This communicative potential of mobile learning apps provides learners with a chance to actively participate in learning activities with their peers, teachers, parents, and members of their communities and other communities outside the classroom (Pachler, 2009). Context plays an important role in language learning because context provides additional means for learners to enhance their vocabulary (Heil, Wu, Lee, & Schmidt, 2016).

**Some common Language Learning Apps**

The apps are user-friendly and learners can use them at home or even on their move. MyWord Book 2, Learn English Audio and Video, Learn English GREAT Videos, Johnny Grammar’s Word Challenge, Learning Time with Timmy, LearnEnglish Kids: Phonics Stories, LearnEnglishKids: Playtime, LearnEnglish Elementary Podcasts, Premier Skills and so on to name a few. MyWordBook 2 is an interactive flashcard app that helps the learners learn new vocabulary, whereas LearnEnglish Audio and Video app helps the learners improve their listening skills. By watching the videos through LearnEnglish GREAT Videos app, the learners practise their listening skills and learn the history of the English language. Playtime is another app that builds confidence among the learners to practise listening skills by playing challenging games to improve both their spelling as well as their understanding. LearnEnglish Kids: Videos is an app that helps children learn English as the learners watch their favourite stories with audio and text narration, whereas LearnEnglish Elementary Podcasts is an app where the learners improve their vocabulary and listening skills while listening to the podcast hosts. Lingual.ly is one more app that develops learners’ language skills through fun games. Duolingo is another useful app which gives individual practice feedback to the learners and prepares them to get the most out of the class instruction. Another app that helps the learners to expand their vocabulary by learning words in an effective way is Memrise. Sentence Master Pro, is very useful for the learners to build sentences on their own in a game environment. To develop learners’ basic conversational skills, Babbel is an appropriate app. In another app, Speak Well, the pronunciation of American speech practice including voice recognition is emphasized.

FluentU is more useful for the English language teachers not only to teach audiovisual topics but also to teach the content with fun. Fun English is an app with more than ten various English language learning games stored in it. These games help the learners learn more about vocabulary, spelling and pronunciation. MindSnacks is another fun-filled and user-interface app that helps the learners learn new vocabulary with fun. Unlike the other apps, Rosetta Stone is designed with a unique immersive method where the learners can get the meaning of a word English to English, not by translating the word into some other languages. The exercises designed here are to help the learners learn the basic words before they form some phrases, shorter and longer sentences.

There are many more apps that are useful for learners to improve their language skills through English language learning. Learning English through apps is another way to learn English with fun. As each of these apps is designed for a variety of learners, they suit for beginners as well as advanced learners and they can improve their language skills with an ounce of their regular practice. As there are hundreds of apps that develop the learners’ learning skills of English, the main responsibility lies on learners to explore and discover the useful apps that will develop their language skills.

These apps are a good alternative to traditional activities as they help develop language skills. They are developed with a range of functions to support self-study such as the ability for a learner to personalize a list of items by choosing which items to practice, adding their own image or translation (Sweeny & Moore, 2012). Rosell-Aguilar (2009) attests that early claims about the potential of apps for language learning includes the possibility to learn, practise, and enhance both language skills and knowledge of the areas where target languages are spoken. The quality and potential for language learning of apps varies enormously, as with every language learning resource. Some researchers have highlighted drawbacks about language learning apps, questioning the bout between pedagogical and technical qualities and claiming that they can provide very fragmented language practice (Pareja-Lora et al., 2013). Others have claimed that learning activities on mobile apps are basic and mostly replicate what has been done before with other technologies (Burston, 2014), and noted that most apps focus on cognitive processes and receptive language skills and lack the opportunities to engage in socio-cognitive activities or opportunities for collaborative learning (Kim & Kwon, 2012).

**Duolingo App**

Duolingo is an American language-learning website and mobile app. The company uses thefreemium model; the app and the website are accessible without charge. This platform is accessed through a website or an app for smartphones or tablets. Duolingo provides courses in the four language skills. It contains activities for reading, writing, listening and oral practice in 37 languages.

Duolingo has some advantages compared to traditional teaching because it motivates participants to learn autonomously. It uses an appealing interface that engages students’ attention with interesting activities to foster their knowledge in the target language. The way of teaching and learning in Duolingo is not common because the app uses gamed-based features such as translation exercises, multiple choice quizzes, flashcards, word-pairing, and translating unknown words through clicking on them. It inspires learners to review what they have already learnt and remember what they have forgotten (Gilson, Wells, & Tatro, 2012). Duolingo purports to teach nearly 2,000 vocabulary items for each language it offers and that studying via the app, students are able to reach a vocabulary level of B1 on the CEFR if they complete all the activities available (Brick& Cervi-Wilson, 2019.) All these elements make Duolingo a useful learning tool for languages. The app offers several activities to teach and train learners such as translation, matching, pairing, listening and speaking exercises.

Translation exercises: Learners translate words and statements into target language or vice versa. “Translation helps students to profoundly understand abstract meaning of foreign words and complex sentence structures, its systematic grammatical knowledge develops students’ clear grammatical concepts, their understanding of words and translation capacity; extensive reading and recitation of original works cultivate students’ reading and writing abilities” (Kong, 2011 p.76). Translation exercises are focused on accuracy and grammar rules. Research (Chang, 2011) proves that the grammar translation method is really effective to develop language, vocabulary and knowledge.

Matching exercises: This activity mixes pictures and words, the task here is that students have to match the images with the correct words. Visual inputs or images improve learners’ attention and consciousness to acquire knowledge (Schmidt, 1995). The activities in this section help learners to learn vocabulary which in turn makes students remember the word to understand context (Sidman, Cresson, & Willson‐Morris, 1974).

Listening and speaking exercises: Learners have to listen to the word and then type the words correctly. This activity is based on the audiolingual method. This method emphasizes productive and receptive oral skills that help improve learners’ pronunciation (Mart, 2013).

Pairing activity: Learners are given an even number of equivalent words from both languages and are asked to pair them.

Various studies have been conducted to investigate the effectiveness of Duolingo. In Vesselinov & Grego’s (2012) study to investigate the effectiveness of Duolingo, they concluded that the majority of the participants showed positive attitudes towards using Duolingo. They liked the product as it helps to enhance their language. Vesselinov and Grego’s findings showed that the complete beginners would take an average of 26 to 49 hours of study with Duolingo to cover the material for the first college language semester. On the other hand, Krashen (2014) commented that the findings of this study are arguable; especially the fact that the researchers did not take into consideration the number of participants who did not finish the study. However, for Krashen Duolingo does not procure genuine language competence because it is “like most foreign language instruction based on conscious learning” (p.14.)

In another study aiming at exploring the effects of using Duolingo in the English learning process, de Castro, et al. (2016) stated that the use of Duolingo provides huge significance in terms of effectiveness and confidence when communicating in English. The use of this application provided a great deal of freedom related to the language practice schedule. They also found that Duolingo helped a lot in the early stages and proved to be a very effective tool in improving pronunciation as well.

**Analysis**

The first step I took towards the analysis of the content of the Duolingo app was to go through the ESL curriculum for Nigerian schools and extract some of their similarities in the area of themes and learning topics.

Themes  Learning topics

Reading:  Comprehension(stories), Vocabulary Acquisitions

Listening: Greetings, Identification of persons, Colours, Animals, Expression of Gratitude and Farewell, Asking and Answering questions

Grammar:         Nouns, Pronouns, Verbs, Adverbs, Articles and Tenses

Themes and topics in Duolingo

Themes:           Learning topics covered in skills are

Reading:         Comprehension (Duolingo stories)

Listening: Greetings, People, Travel, Restaurant, Weather. Technology, Money, Sports, Feelings and Food

Speaking:    Greetings, People, Travel, Restaurant, Weather. Technology, Money, Sports, Feelings and Food

Grammar :   Tenses (present, past, future), Agreement, Articles, Reflexives, Commands, Objects, Pronouns, Adjectives, Verbs and Adverbs.

Duolingo covers many of the topics drawn from the ESL curriculum listed above. This first confirms that Duolingo is an appropriate tool for second or additional languages as these topics cut across different language curriculum.

**Breakdown of lessons and activities in Duolingo**

There are over 150 English learning units in Duolingo with over 500 lessons. Each lesson intends to teach different vocabulary. The title of each unit indicates that over 100 units are designed for vocabulary learning, 33 units are for grammar, and 17 units teach basic English words and expressions.  No rules indicate how the order of the units is listed in the app. The app describes each unit as a “skill,” and each unit contains from one to eight lessons. Each lesson has one summary page with a list of key words and ten learning pages on average. The user has to learn each lesson in sequence so as to progress and unlock the next lesson. Once a lesson has been unlocked, learners are able to practice the lesson as many times as they want. When the user answers a question incorrectly, the same question or similar questions show up again at the end of the lesson.

The Duolingo Stories.

The Duolingo Stories are short humorous stories that help learners practice their language comprehension skills. There are over 270 short stories on Duolingo that learners can listen to their narration as provided with the textual form of the story. These stories are entertaining and somewhat interactive. The narration of the story pauses at critical points and waits for the learner’s input. The platform generates closed-ended questions that test readers’ understanding of words and content of the story. Comprehension questions during the narration check in present time whether the learners are following and understanding the narration, allowing them time to reread the parts they did not understand and then proceed with the story.

Podcasts

The efficiency of podcasts (Hana et al 2013) has been proven that the incorporation of podcasts in language learning is beneficial both to learners’ language performance and engagement. The Duolingo Podcasts are true stories narrated in audio format. Though podcasts are currently in Spanish and French for English speaking learners and in English for Spanish speakers. I believe they are valuable tools to enhance learner’s language improvement. These podcasts aim to familiarize the learners with the target language in different meaningful contexts. Duolingo Podcasts seem promising from an educational perspective and can provide learners with authentic L2 material. The podcast stories are transcribed so learners can listen and read along. That way, they are able to make a connection between what they hear with its written form.

The Duolingo podcast and Duolingo stories are new additions on the app. They provide a very important tool for communicative competence improvement because in developing or improving language acquisition, stories offer a valuable way of contextualizing and introducing new language, making it meaningful and memorable (Wasik & Bond, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Wright, 2000). Stories are associated with feelings and memories, as they are a distinctive manifestation of cultural values and perceptions. Besides, they present linguistic forms, grammar, phrases, vocabulary, and formulaic speech within a meaningful and structured context that supports comprehension of the narrative world (Glazer & Burke, 1994; Jennings, 1991; Koisawalia, 2005; Mallan, 1991). Also, the Duolingo stories and podcast are activities that would help beginners, independent and proficient learners. Listening to these stories will not just help improve learners’ vocabulary, it will also help them understand day to day expressions that can be used to express their thoughts. It will also help them with correct pronunciations. The Duolingo stories and podcasts will be great activities to supplement all reading and comprehension activities through all classes because students will be inspired to read for pleasure and information, a skill that is lacking in many students though very important in developing their aspects of their communicative skills.

In summary, in terms of curriculum, the Duolingo articulates learning objectives that are achievable through its content. It provides rich, appropriate learning content through different learning activities (e.g., level challenges, and games, etc.), it has accurate learning content and provides various content activities (e.g., translation, quiz, etc.) that can improve learners’ learning. Various learning topics are included in the curriculum content of the app to enrich learners' language learning experience. While in terms of pedagogy, Duolingo gives feedback to learners, articulates the levels of difficulty of the learning content, integrates social context, provides personalized options that can satisfy learner’s individualized needs and more importantly, facilitates autonomous learning. Duolingo as a language learning app indeed offers content in terms of vocabulary, grammar and stories that would help learners improve their additional language acquisition. The question remains to what extent will it impact second language learning.

Though I was not able to complete all the levels of activities on the app due to time constraint, I would agree that learners who are able to complete the first three levels on Duolingo will meet the A2 goal in the Common European Framework of Reference(CEFR) global scale. On the other hand, Brick & Cervi-Wilson (2019) purport that students are able to reach a vocabulary level of B1 on the CEFR if they complete all the activities available.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| CEFR GOAL FOR A2 and B2 LEARNERS | |
| B1  Independent  learner | Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. |
| A2  Basic  Learners | Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need. |

                                                                        Extract from Council of Europe updated 2001

Similarly, Vesselinov & Grego, (2012) highlight the difference of knowledge gained from Duolingo between beginners and advanced learners. They claim that beginners showed their gain to be the greatest, while advanced learners were the opposite. It may be hypothesized that beginners might be more motivated to learn than the learners who have been learning for a while, since it is generally accepted that motivation is usually highest at the beginning and decreases over time.

With my observations and that of existing literature (Brick & Cervi-Wilson, 2019), it is no doubt the value and impact of MALL apps in the classroom or to individual learners. Its gamification approach against the traditional method of textbook usage will definitely motivate and engage learners in and out of the classroom. I enjoyed every moment I spent learning on Duolingo, I worked toward earning points and badges. I looked forward to unlocking units and activities. I definitely learnt many words and expressions using the app.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper is to look into the content of the Duolingo app as a Mobile Assisted Language Learning tool, examine its effectiveness in improving or developing learners’ communicative competence and explore its possibilities as a sole or supplementary resource for language learning in a traditional classroom.

Duolingo is an effective tool for the development of learners’ communicative competence because as identified above, its curriculum aligns with the ESL curriculum and also with the CEFR goal Level A1 and B1. Its content, in terms of themes and topics embodies Littlewood’s (2011) model of communicative competence. Duolingo topics caters to develop learners’ linguistic(grammar), discourse(vocabulary), pragmatic(images), socio-linguistic and socio-cultural (greetings, people) competences.

Also, available on the app is a rich range of vocabulary activities. Vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of  how well learners speak, listen, read, and write.(Richards, 2002).Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new words, learning a second or an additional language may be challenging if learners do not have adequate vocabulary. Duolingo provides a whole range of vocabulary to help improve learners’ communicative competence. Vocabulary covers a whole range of registers or topics that learners need for their day to day interactions. Examples of topics that learners can explore vocabulary from are sports, weather, restaurants, persons, and so on. This also qualifies Duolingo as a tool that develops or improves communicative competence in a traditional classroom environment.

With an understanding that Duolingo is an effective language learning tool, it may not take the place of textbooks in the traditional classrooms, particularly in Nigeria. The app may not be recommended for high school classrooms because the curriculum at this level is mainly tailored towards obtaining the Secondary School Leaving Certificate and these textbooks are designed and published for this purpose. In the higher elementary level and middle school, I believe that  Duolingo may be more effective when it is used as a supplement to the textbooks that are being used as students are expected to take qualifying examinations at the end of higher elementary school and at the end of middle school. There are textbooks that have also been developed and published for these purposes. The outcome of many researches( Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013; Munday, 2016; Rosdiana & Sulistyawati, 2019) support that Duolingo may be used most effectively as a supplementary language learning tool to consolidate and deepen knowledge acquired in a classroom setting rather than as a sole source.

However, it may be highly recommended in lower elementary classrooms (Kg -Grade 3) as a main resource because the communicative competence of students at this early stage and years of learning need to be well grounded. Students at this early age will find the Duolingo app very interesting, motivating and engaging. The gamification method will make learning ESL or any other language fun for them. In retrospect, had I had access to Duolingo as a young ESL learner in Nigeria, I believe that I would have gained a vast vocabulary capacity and developed my communication skills at a very early age through fun and engaging activities. I would have been well grounded in my communicative competence and learning through textbooks in school may not have been so daunting.

**References**

Brick & Cervi-Wilson (2019). Enhancing learners’ professional competence via Duolingo classroom. In Goria, Cecilia; Guetta, Lea; Hughes, Neil; Reisenleutner, Sandra; Speicher, Oranna (Eds), Professional competencies in language learning and teaching (pp. 19-29).

Burston, Jack (2014) MALL: the pedagogical challenges, Computer Assisted Language Learning, 27:4, 344-357, DOI: 10.1080/09588221.2014.914539

Chimombo, M and Mandalasi, I. (2000). Malawi Junior Secondary Integrated English Teacher's Book. Malawi: Macmillian.

Fasold, R.W. and Connor, J. (2006). An Introduction to Language and Linguistics. Cambridge University Press.

Hasan, M.M., Hoon, T.B(2013) Podcast applications in language learning: a review of recent studies. Engl. Lang. Teach.

Hong Thi, Nguyan, Wandy Warren and Heather Felfing. (2014). Factors Affecting English Language Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Canadian Center for Science and Education. 7(8), 94.

Kim, T-G. (2004, September 17). Mobile learning attracts high school students. The Korea Times. Retrieved June 25, 2005.

Kukulska-Hulme, A. (2005, May 12). The mobile language learner—now and in the future. Fran Vision till Praktik. Language Learning Symposium conducted at Umea University in Sweden. Retrieved July 28, 2005.

Kukulska-Hulme, A., & Shield, L. (2007). An overview of mobile assisted language learning: Can mobile devices support collaborative practice in speaking and listening. EuroCALL 2007.

Kukulska-Hulme, A., & Traxler, J. (2007). Designing for mobile and wireless learning. In H. Beetham & R. Sharpe (Eds.) Rethinking pedagogy for a digital age: Designing and delivering e-learning (pp. 180-192). London, UK: Routledge.

Larsen-Freeman Diane, (2000). Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Munday, P. (2016). The case for using DUOLINGO as part of the language classroom experience. RIED. Revista Iberoamericana de Educación a Distancia, 19 (1), 83-101.

Pareja-Lora, A. et al. (2013). Toward Mobile Assisted Language Learning Apps for Professionals that Integrate Learning into the Daily Routine. In L. Bradley & S. Thouësny (Eds.), 20 Years of EUROCALL: Learning from the Past, Looking to the Future. Proceedings of the 2013 EUROCALL Conference, Évora, Portugal (pp. 206-210).

Rosell-Aguilar, F. (2007). Top of the pods—In search of a podcasting “pedagogy” for language learning. Computer Assisted Language Learning, 20(5), 471-492.

Rosell-Aguilar, F. (2018) Autonomous language learning through a mobile application: A user evaluation of the busuu app. Computer Assisted Language Learning, 31(8): 854–881.

Rosdiana & Sulistyawati(2019) Mobile Assisted Language Learning: Practices and Readiness in EFL Speaking Class.

Rowe ML. Decontextualized language input and preschoolers' vocabulary development. Semin Speech Lang. 2013 Nov;34(4):260-6.

Stockwell, G., & Hubbard, P. (2013). Some emerging principles for mobile-assisted language learning. Monterey, CA: The International Research Foundation for English Language Education.

Sweeney, P., & Moore, C. (2012) Mobile apps for learning vocabulary: categories, evaluation and design criteria for teachers and developers. International Journal of Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Teaching, 2(4), 1-16.

Thornbury, S. (2006). An A-Z of ELT. Oxford: Macmillan Education

Thornton, P., & Houser, C. (2005). Using mobile phones in English Education in Japan. Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 21, 217-228.

Turner(2021) <https://www.bankmycell.com/blog/how-many-phones-are-in-the-world>

Young, R. F. (2011). ‘Interactional competence in language learning, teaching, and testing’, in E. Hinkel (Ed.), Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning. London & New York: Routledge, 426-443

<https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda>