



Mobile Applications in the Russian Language Class: Revisions and Reflections

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Abstract

The use of mobile technologies becomes a common part of the Second Language Curriculum and learning-teaching activities. It can facilitate the teaching process, increase general motivation and attention of students, expand their contact with the language outwards the classroom among other advantages. Based on the authors' teaching experience, interviews with colleagues and students, the paper revises the potential of the popular applications for Russian Language Acquisition, in the non-Russian speaking environment.

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Introduction

Mobile technologies gradually become a part of the formal, non-formal and informal learning and teaching process [1], [2], [3], [4]. The potential of MALL (Mobile-Assisted Language Learning) to encourage and stimulate informal and out-of-classroom learning [5] is especially important for Russian Language Learning and Teaching (RLLT). In the non-Russian speaking environment, such as the Czech Republic and Colombia, which are in the focus of this study, Russian is more difficult to come by outside the classroom. Based on our personal teaching experience, and interviews with students and colleagues, we revise the potential of mobile technologies for RLLT in the non-Russian speaking environment and discuss their strengths and shortcomings. For the purpose of this paper, we understand mobile technology as any technology with "flexible access" ([1], p. 345). The study focuses on mobile applications for Android (free or trial versions) with or without computer assistance, designed or suitable for RLLT. All the discussed applications can be found in Google Play Store. We believe this paper can be interesting for Russian teachers, students or designers of mobile learning applications or other electronic teaching materials.

1. General Revision

While the offer of applications for RLLT is quite limited [6], we believe, it is a matter of time till it gets broader. Many applications are available for a trial version with a further necessity of purchase or have a limited amount of free elements, some free applications are to be used with grammar and exercise books. For example, several publishing houses already provide mobile support for their Russian textbooks (the content or services are to be purchased): the e-book reader FlexiBooks by Fraus Media s.r.o. for the textbooks published by Fraus and mLibro by Learnetic for the interactive materials of the Russian textbooks published by Klett.

Educational and non-educational applications for Russian speakers (games, videos, business, lifestyle, entertainment apps, etc.) can be also used for the purpose of RLLT. For example, the Yandex's virtual assistant 'Alice' can be used as a simulator of short Russian conversations. Sharing materials developed by Russian teachers from all over the world can expand the RLLT offer with the help of applications such as Quizlet, Memrise, Kahoot!, Google Classroom, etc. However, developing the materials that would reflect the complex reality of the Russian language and culture and consider the diverse needs of the learners, changing dynamics of the learning group is time consuming. It also depends on the will and skills of teachers and learners, as well as technical characteristics and accessibility of the available devices.

The applications, discussed in this paper, include the pre-packaged materials, which can be used as complementary teaching-learning materials for in- and out-of-class activities and for the BYOD (bring your own device) class management.

The existing applications are mostly designed for voluntary self-learning that requires a significant level of self-regulation and scaffolding [2]. The majority of popular applications are English based and



carry mistakes [6] in translation, grammar, pronunciation, collocations, etc., which should be kept in mind when included in one's language teaching-learning practice. A possibility for the users' feedback or some form of control over the content of applications are necessary for the further development of such applications. The option for using one's mother tongue (Czech or Spanish in our case) or at least the target language (Russian) as the application's language of instruction is another recommendation.

2. Alphabet trainers

The available Russian alphabet trainers such as Interaktivní ruská písanka (Interactive Russian writing book) by Reinto s.r.o. Russian Alphabet, Russian Letters Writing by Learning & Writing Studio, or Write It! Russian by Jernung, provide a range of services, which can be used by beginners to train Russian letters writing and reading in the classroom or for self-learning.

3. Dictionaries and translators

The most demanded category of applications among students, according to the survey we conducted for this study, is dictionaries and translators. Their offer is quite broad and they can be used instead of paper-based dictionaries. An important requirement, we believe, for a mobile dictionary is its offline accessibility, availability of the Russian-Czech/Spanish vocabulary and an indication of gender and declination patterns. For example, Google and Yandex Translator applications have Russian-Czech/Spanish vocabulary and have both on- and offline availability. Created for Russian users, Yandex has Russian as its source language, and its Russian-Czech/Spanish vocabulary is better developed than that of Google. The advantages of these applications is the regular improvement of the quality of translation and of the services they offer: Google (online only), for example, offers translation of a hand-written word; both Google and Yandex offer voice translation (online), audio pronunciation (available offline), and personal vocabulary building (offline); Yandex has the 'learn these words' option: the words/phrases marked by a user form a block of flashcards can be shared with other students.

The latter three options are especially useful for language learning. While reading a text, for example, a student makes a personal list of new words/phrases, that he or she finds in the text. Students compare and complement their lists in small groups, and make a shared common list. They can also continue working with new vocabulary by explaining the meaning of some words to their classmates, checking each other's knowledge, finding the contexts of some words in the text; prepare a vocabulary quiz with the help of other appropriate applications (Quizlet, Memrise, Kanoot!), crosswords, and develop a mind map (miMind, SimpleMind). Individual or shared lists can be collected during the course for the future learning activities.

4. Vocabulary trainers

The next most demanded group of applications among the students according to our survey is vocabulary trainers or activators. There is a broad offer of such applications, but only some applications offer Czech or Spanish as the language of instruction: Учите русский (Learn Russian) - Fabulo by Hallberg Ryman AB, Learn Russian Words by Egemen Can Uze, or Учим русские слова со Смарт-Учителем (Learn Russian words with Smart-Teacher) by DEVINCO.ME.

Such applications usually come in the form of electronic flashcards divided into thematic groups (an audio pronunciation accompanies each word or phrase) and imply drilling, repeating and memorising. Some of them also offer games or simple tests. The method of learning is an important criterion for choosing a proper application. The "Learn Russian Words" application (by Egemen Can Uze), for instance, has an option of printing a word/phrase letter by letter in addition to repetition; Duolingo by Duolingo and Fabulo offer learning words in the context of short sentences.

A possible disadvantage of generic mobile vocabulary trainers, besides occasional mistakes including swapping word categories, is that the vocabulary would not always fit the curriculum. The special vocabulary trainers provided by publishing houses can be more useful. For example, Czech publishing house Fraus provides the free application WordTrainer Fraus by Fraus Media, s.r.o. that includes flashcards for single units of its Russian textbooks.

The applications can be used for a warming-up or a closing-up activity or as a more extended class-work: students memorise a group of the words/phrases with the help of the application chosen for the class. They make a list of the words that were the most difficult from their point of view and prepare a vocabulary quiz, a mind map or a crossword, including using other appropriate applications (Quizlet, miMind, etc.). Besides learning the vocabulary, students reflexively participate in the learning-teaching process and choose the learning material according to their own needs.



5. Grammar applications

The offer of Russian grammar training applications is more limited than that of vocabulary trainers. Some of them combine grammar explanation and training: Russian Made Easy by Unique Digital Publishing, Russian Cases by Anastasia Kabalina, Russian Grammar Practice by Russian Language Software, or Learn&Go by Olga Plotnikova. Others provide the samples of tests: TORFL Go by MAPRYAL, Russian Practice by Quizworld, or Симулятор ТРКИ (Russian exam simulator) by Zhdanov&Makarov. Some applications are handbooks of word forms: Склонение существительных (Declension of nouns), Спряжение глаголов (Conjugation of verbs) by Yakov Pchelintsev, Русские глаголы Про (Демо) (Russian Verbs Pro (Demo) by Perraco Labs.

The limited offer of the language of instruction, user services and the fact that they are not designed for the specific context of a particular user are the downsides of the revised applications. For example, TORFL Go is designed to prepare for the state tests in Russian as a foreign language (ТЭУ, ТБУ, ТРКИ I and ТРКИ II), but there is no option to choose and pass only one of the subtests.

The available grammar applications can be used for preparation for tests, students' self-control, the source material for learning activities, etc. The applications that accompany the paper-based textbooks, we believe, are more convenient for the purposes of the grammar m-learning.

6. Conversation trainers

Some vocabulary trainers that include conversation phrases can help in conversation training. Russian Language - Learn Russian by Go Learn French, for example, includes texts of short Russian dialogues with audio recordings and can be used for a recap and role-playing. A broad offer of the language exchange application (Tandem by Tripod Technology GmbH, HelloTalk by HelloTalk Learn Languages App, etc.) can be used for the students' self-learning and conversation training or teachers' communication with students outside the classroom. Students, teachers and parents should remember the basic safety rules for online communication.

Conclusions

It is important to remember that technologies augment the mobility of the learners and "contribute to the process of gaining new knowledge, skills and experience" ([7], p. 235). The role of will, learning predisposition, self-regulation and scaffolding skills are indispensable conditions in the language learning success [1], [2], together with the necessity of combining different media, especially in the case of the Russian language in the non-Russian speaking environment, and with very limited contact with the language. While rapidly developing [5], applications still require more variety in their services and content, especially for languages in less demand. We believe that collaborative, interactive and decentralized designs can improve such shortcomings and make learning more accessible and productive.

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