The Rise of Social Audio Apps: a Tool for Language Learning

Luciana Lousada[1]

Linguaffin/HNEE, Germany[1]

Abstract

Since the first quarter of 2020, the social media sphere has seen the rise of social audio spaces. Apps and platforms that privilege voice over images and texts have been launched by both newcomers and social giants. As social audio spaces become as normal as posts, stories, and short videos, it's worth questioning how the teaching and learning of languages can benefit from them. Filling the gap left by lockdown restrictions, Clubhouse – an audio-only app that allows users to drop into a chatroom and listen to content in real-time – saw an immediate success. This present work shares the experience of using Clubhouse to its fullest – from opening a club up to offering regular practice rooms – in order to teach a foreign language in a non-formal approach from February 2021 on. The first results indicate that the app can be a powerful tool to improve listening skills and promote a cultural interchange. Even if it is still early to say if Clubhouse and other audio social services alike are going to be the future of social platforms, these apps provide us with meaningful information about the role of voice in real-time communication, applied to learning a language.

Keywords: *audio drop-in app, varieties of Portuguese, cultural awareness, listening skills.*

1. Introduction

This work aims to present the experiences carried out with a real-time social audio chat application – Clubhouse – in order to teach a foreign language in a non-formal approach.

Clubhouse was launched in March 2020 as an invite-only app for the iOS platform (since May 2021 available for Android) which hosts rooms on nearly any topic. Although Clubhouse popularized the trend, real-time social audio apps have become fully mainstream and the once most famous social audio app has other competitors, such as Spotify Greenroom, Twitter Spaces, and Facebook Live Audio Rooms.

2. Social audio app

Social audio apps available in the market share similar features: photos and lists of people in each room, an animation to show who's currently speaking, request to speak and the ability to leave the app while still listening in the background. Rooms have moderators and participants that can be either speakers or just listeners.

2.1 Inside Clubhouse app

Clubhouse is based on rooms and groups, known as clubs. After joining the app, any user can start their own room and select whether they want it to be private or open to all users on the app. Rooms in progress appear on the apps home screen called Hallway. Users can choose the conversation they want to take part in. If a user wants to create a club, it is necessary to be qualified first. It means to host a weekly room for three consecutive weeks. When a club is created, it falls into different categories chosen by the creator. Clubs bring together people who share the same interests.

Every chat room is divided in two areas: stage with moderators and speakers; audience with listeners. Rooms have at least one moderator. A moderator can invite other people in the audience to speak on the stage, make anyone a moderator, mute a speaker, disable or activate as well as accept or reject requests to speak, and close a room. The app doesn't have a native feature to record the conversations. Consequently, once the room is closed, the conversation disappears without any record.

2.2 A hybrid format

Clubhouse could be defined as a mix of radio show, podcast, and conference call. It is like tuning into a podcast or radio station, but always live. It is like a conference call, but with just some people talking and most listening in.

Some differences are to be highlighted here. On radio programs, for example, the participation of listeners is only possible through a call with their questions or comments, and they do not always speak live with the presenter and/or guest. There are still programs that get letters from listeners what

is even more distant from real-time communication. On podcasts, interactions take place as written comments that can be answered later. The big difference and also the advantage of Clubhouse in relation to other formats is therefore the possibility of interaction between participants in a synchronous, direct and uncomplicated way.

2.3 Bringing people together

An app without photos, likes, shares, or comments, like Clubhouse seems to be swimming against the tide. Last July, a written message feature, called Backchannel, was launched, allowing users to communicate via text.

The application was launched at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic as a series of measures to restrict social contact were taken. It was an attempt to minimize the distance and break the isolation. According Basu [1], the appeal of Clubhouse and similar social audio apps is the intimacy of the voice. For Radcliffe [2], the voice is able to convey the speaker's emotion and personality in a way that is not possible in written text. He points out other factors that make the app appealing: the ability to perform multiple tasks while listening to a conversation; the casual discovery of themes by the simple touch of the phone screen.

Clubhouse attracted the largest number of new users between December 2020 and February 2021. Zoom burnout [3] [4], a fatigue when somebody feels uncomfortable, anxious or stressed form constantly being on a video-platform screen, in this period was clearly visible. It was not just the countless meetings, webinars and classes: life was mediated through the screen. Opening the camera means sharing part of your home and the dynamics of family life to any person.

Finally, telling and listening to stories is something we have always done. Connecting with others through voice creates a deeper sense of belonging and authenticity than just clicking ‚like' or commenting with emojis.

3. Portuguese Language Cafe: a Clubhouse experience

In February 2021, I joined Clubhouse. Soon I opened the first rooms to help people who wanted to learn and practice Portuguese. The rooms were held twice a day – morning and evening – from Monday to Friday for 60 minutes.

From March on, rooms began to take place within the newly created club: Portuguese Language Cafe. The club attracted native and non-native Portuguese speakers. At first, the rooms did not have a topic. The sessions would range from grammar Q&A to a conversation about lockdown, for example. This model raised questions about the value and usefulness of the Clubhouse as a language teaching tool.

3.1 Survey

Between the end of March and mid-April 2021, a survey was carried out among the participants of the club. Non-native Portuguese participants, regardless of their level of proficiency in Portuguese (Fig.1), were sent a questionnaire on the perception of Clubhouse as a language learning tool.
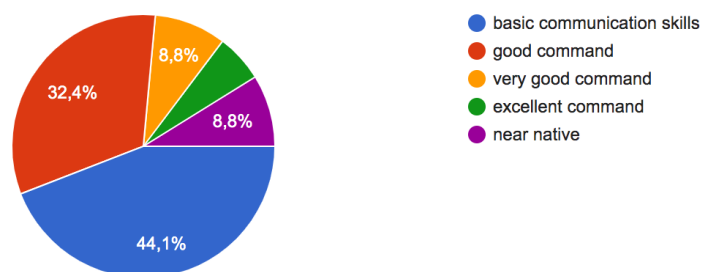

Figure 1: self-assessment of Portuguese proficiency level

The most used means to learn and practice Portuguese is speaking with native speakers online and offline(79.4%), followed by movies and songs (58.8%) and YouTube channels in Portuguese (44.1%). Podcasts in Portuguese and for Portuguese learners obtained 20.6% and 23.5%, respectively.
Considering the rooms and clubs visited in the Clubhouse with the objective of learning and practicing Portuguese, 61.8% of the respondents believe that the app helps to understand what native speakers say. For 35.3% of respondents, the app is a tool to raise the confidence in communicating in Portuguese. Clubhouse is perceived as a good tool for learning and practicing a language (47.1%).

The main factors for participating in the rooms created within the club were: the friendly (79.2%) and respectful (58.3%) environment, the participation of native and non-native speakers (50%) and the variety of cultures (50%).

Factors influencing a more active participation are rooms: at different times (41.2%), with different objectives (38.2%), with clearly defined topics (29.4%) and shorter speaking time for native speakers (20.6%).

3.2 Rethinking the club

The first change to be implemented was to set a topic for the rooms and also the indication of the level. These changes have been attracting more learners to the club. With a clear objective the learners' time of speaking has increased.

Among the regular participants, it was possible to observe a rapid development of listening comprehension, pronunciation and oral production. The natural flow of the conversation combined with the friendly atmosphere of the rooms helps people to feel comfortable to request to speak on stage.

Some important points about the club should be mentioned here: participants are encouraged to use the entire repertoire of languages they have in order to keep the conversation going; the freedom to use any language, as long as somebody in the room can understand it, when communication in Portuguese is not possible. It has helped to build a strong community spirit among the participants. The support participants get in the rooms are perceived by everyone as one of the most important factor when using the club to learn and practice Portuguese.

4. A tool for language learning

The lack of images can initially cause discomfort, as we are used to an excess of visual stimuli: videos, photos, animated gifs, among others. An audio-only app is an invitation to learn how to listen attentively. Participants can possibly concentrate better to what is being said without the distractions of visuals.

Using Clubhouse to learn a language can be a rich experience as different cultures and variants of a language meet in the same room. Talking and listening to a real variety of people offers learners a deeper and more personal learning of the language.

As new versions have been released, new functions may be relevant to language teaching on the platform. Backchannel, the written message feature, has also been used for activities, such as dictation and instant feedback on participants.

Although the app was not created for educational purposes, it has been proving to be a good tool for developing oral comprehension and production, as well as being a varied source of authentic audio. One expected feature is the ability to automatically generate subtitles while people are talking. It will certainly have an impact on the teaching and practice of languages on Clubhouse. A notepad native to the application would make it possible to leave a summary of the points covered during a conversation that could be used as reference for later. Clubhouse is still a new app. The use of the application after each update will affect the way it has been used in the field of education.

It is possible to notice a decrease in the number of users. The post-pandemic situation will define the future not only of Clubhouse, but with any real-time audio app. The availability of Wi-Fi networks, the use of mobile data, the appropriate place to speak and the synchronous participation in the rooms can be constraints as we move back to presencial activities. Social audio apps don't seem to be just a fad. Many audio apps have been developed and launched lately. For educators, it opens up other possibilities to focus on listening skills.

References

[1] Basu, T. „The future of social networks might be audio", MIT Technology Review. (January 25,2021). Retrieved 20 May 2021 from https://www.technologyreview.com/2021/01/25/1016723/the-future-of-social-networks-might-be-audio-clubhouse-twitter-spaces/

[2] Radcliffe, D. „Audio Chatrooms like Clubhouse Have Become the Hot New Media by Tapping into the Age-Old Appeal of the Human Voice", (February 25, 2021) The Conversation 2021. Retrieved 10 May 2021 from SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3796686

[3] Solaris, J. „The Rise of Audio in Virtual Events to Combat Zoom Burnout", Event Manager Blog. (September 29, 2020). Retrieved 15 May 2021 from https://www.eventmanagerblog.com/rise-of-audio-events.

[4] Strielkowski, W., „Clubhouse: Yet Another Social Network?", (March 08, 2021). Retrieved 10 May 2021 from SSRN: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3832599.