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The use of mobile applications in learning Hungarian as a foreign language

1. Introduction

This paper looks at how mobile applications are used in learning Hungarian as a foreign language and how this field can be researched. A questionnaire was completed by 52 respondents and the results shed light on which applications students find useful and in which areas. The survey also showed some characteristics of those who use these applications. Another project combined a short questionnaire with vocabulary tests involving one group in an intensive language course. However, direct conclusions cannot be drawn due to the low number of participants. Nevertheless, the method of data collection, students' attitude and other practical issues experienced during the latter project as well as the results to a certain extent help us design similar projects in the future.

The new results will be presented after a short review of the term *digital native*, which comes up because the study population consists of young adults, and a brief summary of the mobile applications that can be used for learning Hungarian.

2. Digital natives and the study population

The term *digital native* was first used by Prensky[1] and has become a general term to refer to children and young adults born around the end of the 20th century, who have always lived in a society that uses computers, tablets, smart phones and the internet. As a consequence of this change, Prensky considers it essential to invent new methodologies for teaching which adapt to children's capabilties and needs. Research has confirmed that the new digital environment brought

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[1] Prensky 2001.

about several changes in the way children process information, focus their attention and develop their social skills. Sántha and Polonyi[2] presented some of the characteristics of this generation currently attending primary school and outline some new ways to make their education more effective. A great number of studies aim at investigating the characteristics of digital natives while Kirschner and De Bruyckere[3] questioned the existence of certain skills attributed to them. Based on scientific evidence, they argued that digital natives' ability to multitask is not proven and that they are not information-skilled simply because they grew up in a digital world. Therefore, the authors considered it wrong to design education that assumes the presence of these skills.

Another study carried out in Hungary[4] surveyed more than 1000 pupils in primary schools and came to the conclusion that most of the children that are automatically considered digital natives, because of their age, are actually digital immigrants due to lack of proper computer skills.

Working with university students who are learning Hungarian as a foreign language, it became clear that using mobile devices and applications for language learning is not as common in this age group as it might be expected. Therefore one of the objectives of the present survey is to find out more about the characteristics of those who use language learning applications.

3. Mobile application in learning Hungarian as a foreign language

A great variety of language learning applications are at the students' disposal if wanting to study a commonly taught language e.g. English, Spanish or German. However, there are remarkably less possibilities in the case of less commonly taught languages, like Hungarian. Although it is understandable that profit-oriented IT companies do not invest in a relatively small market like that of the learners of

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[2] Sántha/Polonyi 2017.
[3] Kirschner/De Bruyckere 2017.
[4] Fehér/Hornyák 2011.

Hungarian there are, however, a considerable number of applications for this purpose too. In the following a short overview of the types of language learning applications is provided focusing on the ones which teach Hungarian. There is no space for a detailed introduction of the applications or the categories, only some special features will be highlighted in the descriptions.

The following categories can be distinguished:
a) language teaching applications that offer a complex learning material
b) language teaching applications based on content created by learners or teachers of the target language
c) applications containing vocabulary or phrase banks
d) applications that practice verb conjugation
e) applications containing supplementary materials to specific coursebooks

a) Language teaching applications that offer a complex learning material
The most well-known application of this type is Duolingo, which launched the beta version of its Hungarian course in 2016 and which, according to its official website had more than 344 thousand active learners at the end of 2018. It offers a comprehensive study material for beginners free of charge. Although the technical background, the stucture of the material and the gaming elements are undoubtedly professional and high quality the language content and the teaching methodology leave much to be desired. The study material seems to lack a systematic approach to language structures and the basic concept of teaching by testing is a general shortcoming which is very conspicuous in the case of Hungarian. The application offers several useful exercises for practice though, which can definitely contribute to succesful language learning if the learner has an additional source e.g. textbooks or formal education.

b) Language teaching applications based on content created by learners or teachers of the target language

Memrise and Quizlet are the most well-known applications which offer free and user-friendly possibilities to create learning materials and share them with others. These applications can be used for practising vocabulary with flashcards and some other exercises. Vocabulary lists may be available for specific textbooks or on certain topics if somebody has shared them with all the users but anybody can also create their own collection. It is quite common for language learners in the same group or their teachers to upload the vocabulary learnt together in class and it may be very motivating for students to practise the vocabulary covered in the classroom on their own devices.

c) Applications containing vocabulary or phrase bank

There are several applications which contain Hungarian vocabulary exercises usually grouped according to their topics (Food, Travelling etc.) or situations (Shopping, Asking for information etc.). They offer a variety of exercises with a properly designed learning path and reliable feedback. Such applications are for example Nemo Hungarian or Magyar Fun Easy Learn but one can find similar vocabulary lists in Quizlet or Memrise too, however, the latter are prepared by other users and their quality and content is not guaranteed at all.

d) Applications that practice verb conjugation

The complexity of the Hungarian verb conjugation system is described in several reference books, textbooks and papers and it is also beyond doubt that students would find it useful if they could practice verb conjugation in mobile applications. Such applications are available but there is only a limited number and the material they contain is also very restricted. Verb Blitz offers exercises in more than 20 languages while Hungarian Conjugation was specifically developed for this language. They both take into consideration the special characteristics of the Hungarian verbal system, however, it is quite probable that no teachers of Hungarian were involved in their development. Hopefully these applications will be further developed or

new ones will offer more possibilities for practice because they seem to be really useful.

e) Applications containing supplementary materials to specific coursebooks
Stracke's (2007) study revealed the reasons behind students' decision to leave a course which involved both face-to-face classes and CALL (computer assisted language learning). The author identified three main reasons: students may perceive a lack of connection between the face-to-face classes and the CALL materials; they may lack the usage of print materials in class and, of course, a more general rejection of the computer as a medium of language learning is also possible. It is not very common yet to develop mobile applications as supplementary materials to specific coursebooks but based on the above mentioned literature and on some personal impressions as a language teacher, this may be a great help for students.

4. Research summary

Only a summary of the research will be presented due to the restricted length of this paper and the limited number of participants in the data collection.

Questionnaires about the use of mobile applications
A total of 52 respondents were asked to fill in a questionnaire about the use of mobile applications for learning Hungarian. 14 respondents did not use language teaching applications at all (group A), 31 used at least one application for learning Hungarian (group B) while 7 used applications for learning other languages or used on-line materials which are not mobile applications (news sites, You Tube etc). The average age of the 14 students in group A was 32.3 years, 12 were female, 2 male. Out of the 31 students in group B 18 were female, 11 were male and there was no information about 2. The average age in this group was 26.8 years. It must be noted that there were two respondents in group A whose age were 38 and 60 so if the average age is calculated with their exclusion the two group will be almost identical in this respect.

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Students spoke various languages as their L1 in both group A and B and only one person in each group considered themselves bilingual, while the average number of foreign languages besides Hungarian was 2 and 1,6 in group A and B respectively. The level ranged from beginners to advanced in both groups while there was a significant difference in the average time spent learning Hungarian (95 months in group A and 19.5 months in group B) which was largely determined by two respondents in group A who had learnt Hungarian for 38 and 41 years (only one of them was bilingual). Without these two respondents the average time spent learning Hungarian was 26.2 months in group A.

The applications that the respondents used for learning Hungarian as a foreign language included Duolingo (17 users), Quizlet (12 users), Memrise (5 users), Lépésenként (2 users), Babadum, Nemo, Verb Blitz and Mondly (1 user each), and 14 respondents used more than one application. Apart from language teaching applications dictionary applications and Google Translate were mentioned too. The overall usefulness of language teaching applications (including dictionaries and Google Translate) was evaluated at 3.47 out of 5 while individual scores are shown in the following table.

Quizlet	4	Google Translate	3.5
Nemo	4	Verb Blitz	3
Dictionaries*	4	Lépésenként magyarul	2.5
Memrise	3.8	Babadum	2
Duolingo	3.3	Mondly	2

* Respondents did not specify which dictionary applications they used

The average score for usefulness was 3.47 for all the applications while usefulness in developing vocabulary was 3.97, developing grammar 2.6 and reading skills 2.5 out of 5.

Caution must be taken when drawing conclusions from such a small group but the above figures definitely reveal some interesting information. Students seem to use all types of applications. It is not surprising that the well-known, easily available and free applications are often used, however, students are often not satisfied with Duolingo. Language learning applications are perceived to develop

vocabulary the best while grammar and reading skills seem to receive less attention. This data suggests that the age group of the so-called digital natives is also divided and a considerable proportion of them do not use mobile applications for language learning.

Vocabulary learning backed by Quizlet

The other part of the project was a pilot research to investigate how the usefulness of Quizlet (or other applications) can be studied in the longer term. It was planned that these studies would focus on the general usefulness of the applications and the perceived connection between the teaching material used in the classroom and in the applications.[5]

This part of the research was carried out in a group of 11 students who took part in an intensive language course including 4x45 minutes of language classes taught by one teacher and 2x45 minutes of language practice with another teacher each day for 2 weeks. At the end of each day's language classes all students picked one word to include in the vocabulary list of the day which was uploaded by the teacher to Quizlet the same day. The lists contained 10–11 words every day and in the first week, they were no longer practised in the classes, however, in the second week the same words that were uploaded to Quizlet were also practised in the following class with written exercises or card games. Vocabulary tests were administered after week 1 and week 2. The tests included 24 (Test 1) and 12 (Test 2) vocabulary items as well as 4 (Test 1) and 6 (Test 2) short questions concerning the use of Quizlet.

8 out of the 11 respondents took both tests while 2 took only the second one and one participant failed to give assessable answers. Out of those eight students who took both tests four used Quizlet for learning the uploaded vocabulary and they did 7 % better on Test 1 while their results were 14.7 % lower in Test 2. Due to the low number of respondents it is not clear if these differences are significant and what factors they can be attributed to.

The use of Quizlet was considered almost equally useful after the first and the second test while its connection to the material covered

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[5] See Stracke 2007.

in class grew slightly (the average score was 4.25 out of 5, after the first test and 4.83 after the second test). Respondents clearly evaluated the use of the application much more useful than the summarising doc files sent in e-mail attachments.

This pilot research revealed that the controlled use of teaching materials and applications along with the corresponding vocabulary testing is a very complex and time-consuming method of data collection that requires a considerable investment of effort from the teachers/researchers. Nevertheless, only research involving such a carefully designed combination of factors may guarantee reliable results and therefore similar projects on a larger scale, with more teachers/researchers and respondents are needed.

5. Conclusions

This paper has presented some information on certain aspects of using mobile applications for learning Hungarian as a foreign language as well as possible ways to research this field in greater depth. It is a motivating fact that MALL (mobile applications in language learning) is developing very quickly and language-specific research is necessary to make this new way of learning more effective.

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