

# SMARTPHONE APPS FOR ESL:

## Finding the Wheat Amidst the Chaff<sup>1</sup>

By Julie Zilber

There are between 1.5 and two billion people in the world learning English as a second or foreign language today (Walker, 2009; Graddol, 2006). In many countries, the ability to speak English is the key to economic opportunity and social status. Yet the demand for qualified English language teachers outstrips the supply to such a degree that even government-run English teacher-training programs in many countries commonly produce graduates who cannot speak English themselves. As one of the many Canadian immigrants I've interviewed told me:

We focused on grammar and vocabulary – ‘this is subject, this is verb.’ Teachers didn't speak English.

- JS, Korea

Consider this: with an estimated 1.5 to 2 billion people learning English, if every native English speaker (man, woman and child) were to become an ESL teacher, each English speaker would have five to ten students. How is it possible to meet such a demand?

A substantial percentage of ESL students already have smartphones (mobile phones with onboard computing capabilities), and within a few years smartphone ownership will be the norm (Farago, 2012; Lewis, 2012; Mobithinking, 2012). Already, in many countries and among certain demographics in Canada and the United States (immigrants and youth), the smartphone is often an individual's sole communication and computing platform. And smartphones have attributes that make them well suited to the delivery of certain kinds of English language learning and practice. Smartphones are:

- familiar and easy to use
- personal, private and carried everywhere
- a natural environment for speaking and listening
- equipped with microphone, speakers, and special speech processing hardware and software
- network connected

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a presentation entitled “Smartphones As A Platform For English Language Learning” delivered at TESL Ontario in November, 2012.

- fully-capable computing devices, and
- becoming ubiquitous.

Smartphones won't replace good teachers. But the growing prevalence of smartphones among ESL learners creates opportunities to provide supplementary English language practice anytime, anywhere.

## How to find a *good* smartphone app for ESL

A large number of smartphone apps for English learners have emerged over the past two years. Although smartphones can provide inexpensive and portable access to learning and practice opportunities for ESL students, the challenge is to find tools that are compelling, engaging, effective, complementary to classroom learning.

After hundreds of hours perusing both Apple's App Store and Google Play in search of ESL apps, downloading apps and trying them out, I can testify to how difficult it is to find those apps that are really useful. Teachers are busy people. They don't have time to look at all the apps out there. And unfortunately, the ranking of an app in the online store often has more to do with how clever the marketing people are than with how good the app is. With this in mind, and based on my own experiences, here are some suggestions of what to look for in a smartphone app.

### Designed in small segments

A good ESL app should be designed in small segments that can provide a complete experience in five minutes or less. This respects and takes advantage of the way in which people use their smartphones in between other activities. The best ESL apps allow the user to complete something in a short time, while linking that activity to a longer journey or story arc to encourage repeated use and progress.

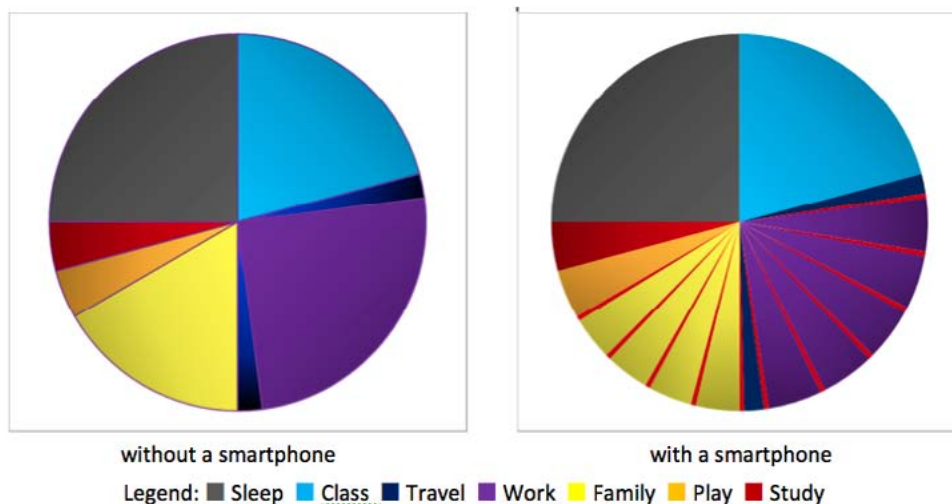


Figure 1. Brief interactions on smartphone increase learning opportunities

Figure 1 shows how study time (shown in red) fits into the day of an ESL learner without a smartphone (left) and with a smartphone (right). In the chart on the left, study outside the classroom is restricted to a single block of time. In the chart on the right, numerous small learning and practice opportunities have appeared throughout the day, cumulatively doubling the study time.

### Highly engaging, entertaining and addictive

However valuable the content or concept of an app may be, if it's boring it won't get used. Passive content, except in tiny bites, just doesn't work on a smartphone. Many ESL apps fail because they don't do anything *for* the user and there's little or nothing for the user to do *with* the app except read or watch. For an app to be valuable, it must be used – and to be used a lot, it has to fulfill one of two criteria:

**Provide small bites of timely information.** An example of this would be reference works such as dictionaries, thesauruses and search engines, which are generally used briefly, to provide just-in-time information. Good reference works for smartphones are easily navigated, take advantage of functionality such as “sounds-like”, “image recognition”, or fuzzy logic in look-up, and exploit the audio and visual capabilities of the platform.

**Engage and entertain.** Games and game-like activities are the most obvious examples of engaging apps. On a smartphone, games are not just for kids. Grammar and vocabulary games and quizzes can be highly addictive for adults, as they try to improve their best scores and earn rewards. An app might look like a kids' game, but remember: on the smartphone, adults like playing games, too. For this reason, even apps that are not really games are starting to incorporate game-like features. Just as games use feedback loops, rewards, and the ability to earn content, the challenge of trying to complete levels or improve scores, will keep students playing—and learning—where paper-based practice would quickly become boring.

**Funny is good, too.** One of the more entertaining ESL grammar apps I've come across is called *English Now! con John Peter Sloan*. Created for Italians by a Brit living in Italy, what could be a fairly standard set of grammar definitions and comprehension quizzes becomes a lot of fun with a colourful informal interface, short (under 3 minutes) entertaining audio introductions, and short quizzes with humorous audio feedback. A big part of the appeal of this app is John Peter Sloan's colourful persona, his self-deprecating willingness to poke fun at himself, the humorous examples he chooses, and the funny responses he provides in the quiz section. (You do have to understand Italian, though, to appreciate this app!)

### Game-like features that make apps more engaging

**Feedback loop:** a term taken from the field of software engineering, in games a feedback loop is any visual, audio or textual feedback to the player that makes the player aware of the effects of his or her actions. Common examples are progress bars and meters of various types, accumulation of points, positive or negative sound effects, written or spoken words such as “You rock!” or “Excellent!” and changes in the size, colour, health or other representation of on screen characters.

**Rewards:** badges, points, titles, rankings, stars, coins, screensavers, new powers or abilities, trophies are all examples of rewards that players can earn in games.

**Earned content:** Many games allow player to earn or unlock new game levels by achieving a certain number of points or by playing the game a certain number of times or some combination thereof. Player may also earn access to new game assets (maps, weapons, cars) or other types of content such as videos.

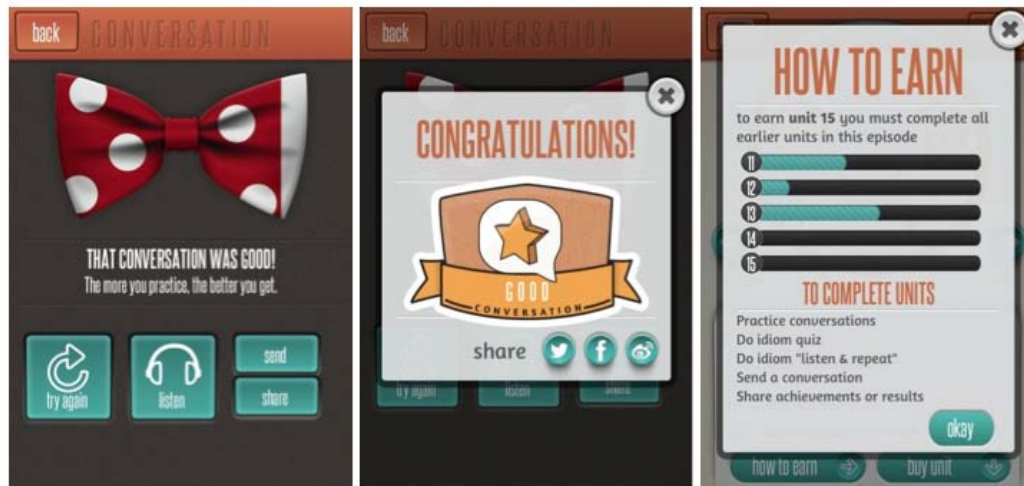


Figure 2. Interactive conversations, feedback, achievement badges and the ability to earn more content keep learners engaged in the Supiki English Conversation Practice app. (Screenshot © Linguacomm Enterprises Inc., Vancouver. Used with permission.)



Figure 3. English Now! con John Peter Sloan uses humour to create an entertaining English grammar app for Italian speakers. (Screenshot © KiwiLabs Digital Guerilla, Milan. Used with permission.)

## Content created by competent English speakers

In her fascinating book *Factory Girls* (Chang, 2009), Chang devotes an entire chapter to the insatiable desire to learn English among the young internal migrants who flood into Chinese factory towns from rural China. Chang accompanies a young woman to the school of one Mr. Wu:

The guiding principle of Mr. Wu's school was that treating people like machines was the key to mastering English. After learning the alphabet and the phonetic sounds of the language, a student sat at a machine while columns of English words rotated past. The student read aloud each word and wrote it down without knowing what it meant, week after week, until he attained the highest speed. He then proceeded to another machine that showed Chinese definitions of words; next he advanced to short sentences. At each stage, he wrote the word or sentence in English and said it aloud without comprehending its meaning. When

a student achieved the top speed – able to write six hundred English sentences in one hour – he graduated to basic grammar. Only then did he learn the meaning of the words, phrases, and sentences he had been repeating for months. (p. 250)

Sadly, there are many ESL smartphone apps created by people whose ability to communicate in English and understanding of ESL teaching methods is poor. Would you recommend an ESL app from a producer who says of its app, “You can learn more natural conversations that like Japanese conversations you usually have! [sic];” “You can learn english very easy and funny [sic];” or “Improve your TOIEC score for a short time! [sic]” (Examples taken from actual Google Play and App Store descriptions of ESL apps, January 2013)?

Good ESL apps are created by teams that combine expertise in app development, user experience, and ESL. You can often identify the apps that are missing the last element simply by reading the descriptions posted on the App Store or on Google Play. Identifying who is actually responsible for creating the app can be as easy as reading the descriptions carefully and visiting the app web sites.

### Highly focused apps that complement and reinforce classroom learning

The best apps don’t try to do everything. They do one thing well. App developers who come from the desktop computing or Internet world often try to cram too much into an app. Unlike desktop application users, smartphone users don’t want one app that does everything: they want lots of little apps, each of which does one thing well.

Be specific about what you’re looking for. Do you want your students to learn the English alphabet? There are apps for that. Do you want your students to practice reading authentic materials and testing their comprehension? There are apps for that. Do you want your students to practice pronunciation, increase their vocabulary, improve their listening comprehension, prepare for a TOEIC test, or get extra conversation practice between classes? There are apps for each of those things as well.



Figure 4. The SLP Speech Tutor provides cross-section animations showing how the tongue lips and jaw move when different phonemes are produced. (Screenshots © Pocket SLP, New Mexico. Used with permission.)

And don’t restrict your search to the ESL category. Not every app that might be useful for your students was designed for ESL students. I found an app designed for speech pathologists that uses animations to show how the tongue and lips move in producing

the English phonemes. This app could be a great resource for teachers to use with certain students.

## Designed for Smartphones

The best apps are designed specifically for the smartphone platform. They are easy to use and interactive. Some well-known and reputable publishers of ESL books and videos have “repurposed” their legacy content by digitizing it and selling it, sometimes with minimal adaptation, as a mobile app. This reflects a serious lack of understanding of the ways in which people use content on a smartphone. Very few people are going to read a textbook or watch a one-hour instructional video on a smartphone.

When searching for apps, read the descriptions carefully and look at the screenshots. Do you see screenshots with lots of text or pictures of “talking heads”? Are there a lot of indices, or a list of videos and/or transcripts? Odds are, this is not content that has been specifically designed for the smartphone platform.

Do you see screens that indicate high levels of interactivity? Does the description suggest that the app takes advantage of features such as fingertip interactions, record and playback functionality, speech recognition, connectivity, graphics, animations, and other rich media content? The likelihood is that this app was specifically designed for the smartphone platform, making a richer environment for students and encouraging them to practice more.

## Summary

Smartphones offer a great opportunity to get your students practicing and learning between classes. There are thousands of smartphone apps for ESL out there, and the number is increasing rapidly. The best smartphone apps for ESL are:

- designed in small segments
- engaging, entertaining and addictive
- created by native English speakers
- highly focused and complementary to other learning
- specifically designed for smartphones.

Separating the wheat from the chaff is a challenge, but with the growing ubiquity of smartphones this will become an important tool in the ESL teacher’s arsenal. Do your own research and also talk to your students. They can be a great source of information on apps that they find useful. Investing a few hours each month to keep abreast of this rapidly evolving field will definitely pay off in increased student engagement and achievement.

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### Author Bio



A new media expert with over 20 years of experience developing interactive applications for education and culture, Julie Zilber is also a certified ESL teacher. She is currently Imagineer-in-Chief at Linguacomm, leading the development of Supiki® - the world's first mobile app that allows people to practice English by engaging them in realistic conversations. Prior to co-founding Linguacomm, Julie was Co-Director of 7th Floor Media at SFU. She has been a Research Leader on the Mobile Muse Research Network and a Principal Investigator for the TeleLearning National Centre of

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