



Apps, short for applications, are actually the first thing that many people think about or turn to when talking about MLearning. After all, the mobile devices are only hardware, it's the software programmes that run on them that can make things much more interesting.

What kind of software is being developed for mobile devices these days? In this post I take a closer look at some of the apps that are out there and for our field.

60 second word challenge

This free app is from the British Council, who were among the first to develop apps for ELT that went beyond the simple phrase book kind of thing. 60 second word challenge is a quiz game. You choose a category, e.g. Food and restaurants, Film and technology, at work, shopping, and a level (easy, medium or hard). You then get 60 seconds to answer as many multiple choice questions as you can, all relating to vocabulary.



The interface is okay, it feels kind of like a spaceship. Personally, I found some of the “easy” questions really quite hard! In the food category, for instance, I got questions like the following:

A pie made with meat and potatoes is called a _____ pie. (shepherd's, shearer's, sheep's, sleeper's)

I thought this was a bit hard and culturally specific, especially as it was in the easy section! At the end of the challenge you can see the answers and a bit of feedback (for the question above, the answer was *sheperd's* and the feedback was *The pie has mashed potatoes on top of it*). It allows you to upload your score to facebook too, now a regular feature of these kinds of games.

www.britishcouncil.org



Big City Small World

Another app from the British Council, this one has been around for a bit longer. Big City Small World is a series of podcasts for an audio soap opera. The app gives you all the episodes (although you have to download each one in turn). The soap opera and story are okay, although I was looking for some kind of exploitation of these at the end and could not find.

There were also cartoons of the characters introducing themselves which was a nice touch. The thing I liked best were the individual cartoon stories with a nifty way of doing a bit of language awareness. You read the cartoon, then scroll down to reveal a language awareness note.



Macmillan Dictionary App

The first things to come from the major publishers in app format were the dictionaries. This makes a lot of sense. Dictionaries are heavy, and not the most portable of things. Plus if you had the dictionary with a CDROM in class but no computer then you could not make use of the extra features that CDROM had. So having all of this combined into something that goes on your phone or tablet is a great step forward I think.

The Macmillan Dictionary app has a lot of extra worthwhile features. Apart from looking up words, you can also hear the pronunciation (in British or American English), see the relative frequency of a word or phrase, create your own wordlists and do some of the vocabulary tests.

The dictionary apps are the most expensive, clocking in at 7.99 or 15.99 depending if you want audio or not. This is in line with other English learner's dictionaries from the major publishers, but perhaps a bit expensive considering that when I enter “dictionary” into the search box of the app store, I got almost a whole page worth of free dictionary apps. Maybe the price will begin to come down on these.

Still, it's a useful thing to have on you at all times. <http://www.macmillandictionary.com/apps/>

Sounds

Sounds is the latest app from Macmillan, and it uses the phonetic chart developed by Adrian Underhill in his book Sound Foundations. The app allows you to choose between American or British pronunciation.

The centrepiece of the app is the chart itself. You press on a sound and hear the sound, if you press for longer you hear a sample word. Just this in itself provided for quite a bit of fun

and I can see its use for my trainee teachers who are learning the phonetic chart. In fact, I found that if you swooped your finger across the sounds you could almost make the app say words.

There's a lot more though. The wordlist has over five hundred words which you can listen to, and record your own pronunciation of. The practice and quiz sections are also very useful. You can select a phoneme or a group of phonemes to practice. Then there are three different possibilities:

Read – you read a word in phonetics and have to type what it is.

Write – you read a word and have to type what it is in phonetics (the phonetics typewriter is cool)

Listen – you hear a word and have to type what it is in phonetics (again with the phonetics typewriter)

In the free version you get the chart and a sample of the tests and practice activities. In the premium version there are more activities, tests and a tips section for teachers and students. Of all the apps here, this is the one I like the best and I am recommending it to all my students and student teachers.

www.soundspronapp.com



Voxy

Voxy was another company that provided free apps for language learning. The one I got was for Spanish speaking learners of English. When I opened it I was immediately asked to register with them, a bit of a turn off, but fortunately there was a skip this step button. Which I pressed!

The app I got used bits of international news to teach English. I could choose from the authentic news clipping or a simplified one. I then chose the news story I wanted to read.

At the beginning of the news story Voxy told me it would be asking me a question at the end. It gave me the question first, which was good because I then had an extra purpose to read the article. I then had a choice of answers at the end.

Key words in the text were highlighted, and when I pressed on these I got a translation of the word into Spanish and was able to hear the word in English. Very nice. There were also features for vocabulary self-testing, which included allowing me to take photos of words to make my own flash cards (I think! I was using an old ipod touch for this, so no camera).

There were several very recent news stories, all international ones. For the premium version I could get other kinds of news.

I don't know if Voxy comes in other languages, there was a lot of Spanish in the interface for this one so it wouldn't be useful to other language groups. But I can see myself recommending it to students. Pity it's always pushing you to buy it (a buy button in the corner of almost every screen, which I was nervous about pressing).



<http://voxy.com/>



All of these apps are available at the Apple iTunes App store and most are also available on Android at the Market. At the time of writing all these apps were free or had a free version.

