Organization of Foreign Languages Blended Learning in COVID-19 Conditions by Means of Mobile Applications

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Abstract: The article discusses the theoretical aspects of the organization of blended foreign language learning caused COVID-19 under the conditions of the quarantine. We analyzed different points of view on the process of using mobile applications in the study of foreign languages. We considered the possibilities of four mobile applications Duolingo, Simpler, Hello Talk, EWA with their main advantages and disadvantages. In the context of the research topic, conducted a survey of first and fourth year students (which includes general and special questions aimed at identifying problem points), in which 100 students took part from Karazin and Berdyansk universities. The survey was conducted among students of philological specialties in order to determine the most acceptable conditions for using mobile applications in the process of learning foreign languages. The survey results showed that students, in general, positively perceive the use of mobile applications in the educational process, taking into account the possibility teachers' support. Author's focus on the fact that it is very important in the context of the use of mobile applications in the organization of blended learning is the presence or their compatibility with game methods of learning foreign languages, competitiveness significantly increases the motivation of students, but it is important to note that the teacher must observe the atmosphere of healthy competition through the clarity and comprehensibility of his requirements. The study showed the need to use mobile applications in the process of learning foreign languages in the context of the introduction of quarantine and blended learning as forceful way to organize effective work with students.

Keywords: *education, mobile application, COVID-19, foreign languages, blended learning, students.*

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1. Introduction

It is impossible to imagine our modern life without the use of technology, including digital. Every day we apply a lot of modern technologies that have found their place in every aspect of our life. Movement, preparation, designing, creating – in all, humanity resorts to technology. The educative and learning process did not go without them (Berger & Thomas, 2011; Pacheco et al., 2018). In modern society, every student and teacher work with a variety of devices, which help in the promotion of any process related to education (Zhernovnykova & et al., 2020; Pacheco et al., 2018). Digital technologies have been used in pedagogy for several decades (Weis & et al., 2002; Palaiologou, 2016; Buchanan, 2011), because it is an effective way to increase student involvement in the learning process. It is important to emphasize that in the modern education process, information and digital technologies are especially important as a set of digital means of communication and interaction of participants in the educational process. The relevance of our research lies in the fact that at the moment mobile devices have become an integral part of life, and the use of applications in learning languages has already become a habit of almost every modern student interested in learning languages (Dobrilă, 2020; Douch & Savill-Smith, 2010; Gafni et al., 2017; Nalyvaiko et al., 2020). We will study the large flow of information that the student perceives every day, help to structure it and choose the most interesting applications for learning foreign languages. This will provide an opportunity to learn about new applications and discover new opportunities for old ones.

An equally important circumstance for the use of mobile applications in today's realities is the transition to a blended form of education, where online (Chang, 2020) and classroom training are harmoniously combined in the context of the running of the COVID-19 pandemic. Compliance with quarantine restrictions at universities makes significant changes in the learning process (Dogar et al., 2020) and one of the effective ways to solve this problem can become mobile applications in learning foreign languages.

The theoretical concepts of using mobile devices in the educational process have been studied (Steel, 2012; Nalyvaiko & Chornous, 2017;

Keengwe & Bhargava, 2014). These studies were directed at studying the possibilities of introducing mobile devices into the learning process of educational institutions. The study of the issues of systematization of mobile learning processes is devoted to the article by Park (2011) "A pedagogical framework for mobile learning: Categorizing educational applications of mobile technologies into four types", it examines the evolution of mobile learning and its further adaptation in education. The evolutionary processes of mobile learning were also explored in the works of Traxler (2007). Considering the implementation of mobile applications in the educational process of learning foreign languages, we should note the work of Gafni et al. (2017) "Learning foreign languages using mobile applications", targeted at exploring the possibilities of combining mobile applications and face-to-face learning. The processes of independent study of foreign languages at universities are discussed in the article "Language Learners Perceptions and Experiences on the Use of Mobile Applications for Independent Language Learning in Higher Education" (Niño, 2015).

2. Research methods

The study used methods such as: survey, analysis, synthesis and generalization. The survey was conducted among first to fourth year students of Karazin and Berdyansk universities.

The participants were asked the following questions:

- *What is your faculty?*
- *What is your course?*
- *Do you have an interest in learning languages? Why yes / no?*
- *How often do you meet foreign languages?*
- *In what way do you prefer to learn a foreign language?*
- *If you use mobile apps, which ones?*
- *What are the criteria for choosing a mobile application for learning a foreign language?*
- *Problems with which aspect force you to add an app?*
- *What turns you off when choosing app??*
- *What would you add to an ideal app?*

There were 100 participants that took part in the survey.

The questions included in the study were aimed at identifying the desires and capabilities of students in using mobile applications, as well as their implementation in the educational process.

It is important to note that the survey included both general questions (of the type: “What is your faculty?” or “What is your course?” in which you study in the context of determining whether students are familiar with pedagogical disciplines, for example, the discipline “Pedagogy” is taught starting from the 2nd year) and special ones. This information is important for understanding whether students have knowledge about teaching and its laws in order to have more valid information about their choice of mobile applications. Also included in the survey are more technically specific questions (special ones) aimed at identifying the positive and negative qualities of previously selected applications.

Before this study, we carried out preparatory work aimed at identifying the most acceptable mobile applications for teaching foreign languages in a blended learning environment. The results revealed the 4 most popular mobile applications among them: Duolingo, Simpler, Hello Talk, EWA. To determine the pros and cons of these mobile applications for learning foreign languages. We have benchmarked these digital learning tools to improve our understanding of their application in blended learning environments.

3. Analysis of Mobile Applications

Based on a survey of participants in the educational process that took place in the second semester of 2020 on the basis of Karazin and Berdyansk universities in the context of blended learning caused by COVID-19, we identified several of the most effective applications for learning foreign languages in the context of blended learning. Apps includes: Duolingo, Simpler, Hello Talk, EWA. Let's consider in more detail the functionality of these applications and their pedagogical potential in the study of foreign languages during quarantine and blended learning.

3.1. Duolingo

The app, called Duolingo (<https://en.duolingo.com/>), is a free language learning platform that was created in 2011 and launched in 2012.

The creators of this application are Carnegie University professor M.L. Von Ahn and his graduate student S. Hacker.

Free training is one of Duolingo's core goals. Born in Guatemala, Fon Ahn knew from his own experience and observation how long and expensive to people is learning English. His point of view was that “free education will really change the world”, and he wanted to give people this opportunity. Duolingo is very affordable indeed. And it's not just about the already mentioned free model of work. Duolingo primarily encourages new users to learn English.

Native speakers or those who already speak English have access to study 31 languages (Spanish, French, German, Japanese, Italian, Korean, Chinese, Russian, Portuguese, Turkish, Dutch, Swedish, Greek, High Valyrian, Hindi, Irish, Polish, Hebrew, Norwegian (Bokmål), Vietnamese, Danish, Hawaiian, Romanian, Czech, Arabic, Swahili, Welsh, Indonesian, Ukrainian, Esperanto, Scottish). Another 4 languages are in beta testing (Hungarian, Navajo, Latin, Klingon). The ability to learn other languages is being developed every day. But the opportunity to learn other languages besides English is provided to the speakers of some other languages. For example, those who speak Russian can learn (in addition to English) Spanish, French, German. And Spanish speakers have access to study 10 languages (English, French, Italian, Portuguese, German, Catalan, Russian, Guarani (Döpara), Esperanto, Swedish). So Duolingo is doing quite well with its goal of making language learning available to all people on the planet.

Another thing that makes this program more familiar to ordinary people is that Duolingo uses the structure of the video game in how the application looks and functions, which really fascinates people more than ordinary tasks and theory.

Users receive XP (experience points) as they learn the language, for example, after completing a task, and there is also an in-game currency called “lingots”. For different types of lessons and their completion, they receive a different number of points. You can get “achievements” for completing certain goals or objectives.

Duolingo offers a large number of written lessons and dictations, although there is less emphasis on speaking skills. The application uses an

approach based on the analysis of a large amount of statistical data. The system remembers the mistakes made by the user and the questions that were difficult at each stage. From this, individual lessons are formed and calculated due to the fact that the system aggregates the received data.

Advantages of the app:

- As previously noted, Duolingo is a free application that is user-friendly and highly engaging;
- Duolingo's design is psychologically very simple and attractive. The minimalism and the chosen color spectrum are soothing for the human eye, inspire confidence and allow you to look at the screen longer than usual, which in turn allows you to spend more time on assignments;
- The game mechanics used in the application are understandable and familiar to many people, which allows new users to learn more quickly and retains human interest through our inherent desire;
- The app sends a reminder for lessons and rewards for daily lessons;
- In Duolingo, the target language is divided into topics (both grammatical and specific vocabulary), so that the user can choose and hone the topic that is more relevant to him. (But at the same time, in order to open a topic, you need to go through each at least once, and going through one set of topics, the user opens access to others, so that he will know the initial basis of each of the topics available in the application);
- Duolingo has a “chat” function where communication in the target language goes with real people, which makes learning more effective;
- The program, based on the data received, compiles individual lessons for users. This approach allows students with different levels of knowledge to receive equal learning efficiency;
- The program makes individual lessons for users based on the obtained data. This approach allows students with different levels of knowledge to receive equal learning efficiency;
- Duolingo has a wide variety of languages available for learning, and one language can be learned by native speakers of different languages. Now native speakers are involved in the preparation of training programs of the languages in whose language the program is written;

- In addition to the main standard languages, Duolingo also offers less common languages to learn, some of them are starting to disappear, so Duolingo is trying to draw attention to them;

- There is also have the possibility of learning already dead languages and fictional languages from books and TV series;

- Duolingo Mascot - A green owl named Duo is a very cute and memorable character;

- The Duolingo team tries to maintain close contact and friendship with their users (For example, the joke that the Duolingo mascot will hurt your family if you don't do your daily lessons. Jokes about this are still supported on the company's official social media accounts. An April Fool's video was even released on this topic where the new Duolingo Push function was allegedly advertised, when the application mascot comes to you and forces you to do tasks if you ignored the reminder that it is time to complete the lesson).

Disadvantages of the app:

- The app pays little attention to conversation practice;
- The level of language skill level that users can acquire is basic;
- Although the topic of grammar is touched upon and practiced, but it has poor explanation;

- The application may be inaccurate in its translations;
- Despite the regular reminders of lessons, a large percentage of people continue to ignore them and not practice every day;

- Due to the free model, there is advertising in the program;
- Duolingo also constantly and annoyingly advertises its paid version, which contains some improvements and differences from the main version;

- The app requires an internet connection;
- It spends a considerable amount of charging device/gadget.

3.2. Simpler

Simpler is another popular English learning app (<https://simpler.link/>). It involves assignments and materials for both beginners and those who already have certain knowledge. The app has several parts, dealing with aspects of grammar, vocabulary and speaking.

At the first launch of the application users get opportunity to choose the level of their knowledge and after that, users get access to a certain

number of lessons. Over time, as users study these lessons, others open up. At the beginning, the lesson includes learning words on a certain topic, then a set of rules and at the end of the lesson a part of the practice. Learning words is offered in the form of a translation quiz: a word in English and two translation options, from which you need to choose the correct one. Unknown words are brought out separately at the end of the lesson, making it possible to repeat and remember them. You can also listen to the words and find out the correct pronunciation.

The rules in the application are presented in a structured manner and without unnecessary “lyrical digressions” on other topics. The main words and main parts of the sentence in the examples are highlighted in color to make them easier to perceive associatively. The practice mainly consists of compilation and translating sentences on a given topic. This part uses the vocabulary and rules learned earlier.

In addition to lessons, the application has a section with synopses and dictionaries. Synopses of topics and lessons are immediately available, while the dictionary needs to be filled out by yourself in accordance with the topics studied, which the application offers to do immediately after each lesson. Also, words can be added to the dictionary from prize “chests” that are offered to the user as a daily reward.

Another interesting feature of the application is the presence of detective stories that help to train vocabulary in practice and see the visual use of grammar rules in typical situations. This allows you to work out all the studied topics in the form of a game.

Just like many other apps, Simpler keeps track of the progress of each user and allows you to set “Goals for the day” for effective learning. As user progress through different levels of difficulty, he receives certificates.

Advantages of the app:

- The app reminds the user to study and review certain topics/words;
- Availability of accounting progress and awards for achievements that helps to motivate people to study;
- The application focuses on mistakes and allows you to work on them, putting these mistakes into dictionaries and special tasks;
- The application also involves memorizing the material with the help of associative thinking;
- Simpler focuses on all major aspects of the language: grammar, vocabulary and listening;
- Ability to create your own dictionary and mark the learned and unexplored words in it.

Disadvantages of the app:

- Like many other apps, Simpler has paid content that may seem expensive to some users;
- Lessons in the application are downloaded only via the Internet, so it does not have the ability to work offline;
- The application does not allow variability of translation in sentences submitted for translation in practice. Despite the fact that there is grammar, vocabulary and listening in Simpler, most of the attention is paid, nevertheless, to practice, which can be difficult for those who are just starting to learn the language.

3.3. Hello Talk

Hello Talk is an application whose mission is to connect people from all over the world to learn different languages and cultures through the use of the latest technology (<https://www.hellotalk.com/?lang=en>). This network has more than 10 million users from all over the world. The slogan of this company is "Talk to the world" sounds tempting, because only the lazy would not want to talk to the "whole world" using an smartphone.

Now, let's move on to a deeper analysis of the Hello Talk application. This application offers to users: study and communication in 150 available languages; 18 million (according to the company's personal estimates) potential language partners; acquaintance with new cultures; new friends around the world.

When user downloads the application he sees the following requirements:

- The right to access the phone (to ensure the security of your account). It is absolutely obvious that this is a bad move on the part of the developer, since in the era of active use and development of technologies and, in turn, online scams, the requirement for people to "provide their phone number" will cause great doubts and distrust of the application;
- The access to memory storage (access to photos and videos from cache to improve application performance). Here, from personal experience, you can immediately face the first disadvantage of the application - if you are against the spread of personal information and simply reject these two requirements (or one of them), the application does not start, but simply throws you into the main menu.

After registering and logging in, we see an interface with a number of advanced tools that should make language practice simple and fun. There are 5 main sections in the application.

In the advanced search system user can find partners for language collaboration by different parameters: age, gender (here we can highlight the importance of indicating the year of birth and gender when registering), region, city, native or target language. It is also possible to choose the level of knowledge of a potential interlocutor: beginner/student/pro/expert guru. User can find a partner with whom he wants to start communicating, not only anywhere in the world, but also in his hometown. Unfortunately, the application is not responsible for user's safety, as well as for the adequacy of the person with whom you are in dialogue and plan to meet for live communication.

In the process of communication, interlocutors teach each other their native languages. Thus, when communicating with language partners using text, voice messages and video calls, you train several aspects of language learning at once: speaking, grammar, listening comprehension, and also, as a pleasant bonus, thanks to communication with native speakers, you develop correct accent. For better language learning, in this application you can use tools for translation, pronunciation, transliteration and corrections, which makes communication with a native speaker more efficient.

Summing up the foregoing, we can say that the application is pretty good and deserves the attention of linguists and philologists, but just like any others, it has both its advantages and disadvantages.

Advantages of the app:

- Simple registration form;
- Room for choosing both the language and the language partner;
- Practice all aspects of language learning;
- Acquisition of new knowledge;
- New acquaintances around the world;
- Thoughtful and structured interface;
- Convenient search system of a potential language partner;
- Handy tools to facilitate the language learning process.

Disadvantages of the app:

- A requirement access to personal information without the right to choose from the user's side (Example: mobile phone number);
- Presence of annoying advertisements;
- Availability of paid content (VIP subscription);
- User insecurity;
- Application work only with Wi-Fi.

3.4. EWA

EWA – the application provides an opportunity to test your knowledge, take a test before moving on to learning a language (<https://appewa.com/>). EWA, was developed for people who are already familiar with a foreign language, for an audience who is practicing their skills and wants to increase their word count. EWA allows user to keep his knowledge in good shape, if he stops developing his vocabulary, then sooner or later user will start to forget the words. The developers have spent a lot of time making the learning categories as interesting as possible.

The application is really interesting – there are a lot of TV shows and films that everyone is watching now. The program contains content that is currently in trend. There are also texts from classical literature that user might have heard at school or simply seen on the net, there are texts from popular American TV series, etc. Thanks to this diversity, language learning becomes multifaceted, because you see a lot of words and can study a variety of spheres of life. There is a lot of interesting content where user highlights unfamiliar words and gets a workout to learn those words and add them to the vocabulary.

Advantages of the app:

- Increases vocabulary;
- It is absolutely not necessary to immediately buy a subscription for a year or a month. User can try the application, and then only spend money if he likes it;
- There is always a choice - to study the words from the series or read the classics;
- The opportunity to study Spanish and English.

Disadvantages of the app:

- The application is not free – the cost is \$ 35/6 months;
- The application replenishes exclusively the vocabulary, not giving knowledge about grammar and the correct construction of sentences.

4. Results of the student survey

In the context of the analysis of mobile applications, we will consider the results of the survey among students.

To the question **“Do you have an interest in learning languages?”** 96% of respondents answered “Yes” and only 4% noted “No”, respectively, we can say that our survey is relevant (Fig. 1).

Fig.1. Do you have an interest in learning languages?

In the next question **“Why yes/no?”** opinions were divided, but the most popular were the following answers:

- *A foreign language is needed to obtain the profession of a translator / teacher;*
- *A foreign language is needed to study / live in another country;*
- *Knowledge of a foreign language is a necessity in the modern world;*
- *Knowledge of a foreign language is necessary for work;*
- *Ability to speak fluently and understand native speakers.*

To the question **“How often do you meet with a foreign language?”** 73% of respondents answered “Often”, 16% answered “Sometimes” and 11% answered “Rarely”.

In the question **“In what way do you prefer to learn a foreign language?”** the clear leader was the answer “With a lecturer” - 64% of the respondents chose this method. The second option was “Independently” - 53% and the last was the answer “Using apps/platforms” - 53%. Some students noted several or all three ways of learning at once (Fig. 2).

Fig.2. In what way do you prefer to learn a foreign language?

The next question **“If you use mobile apps, which ones?”** the TOP-3 includes the following applications (Fig. 3):

- Quizlet - 46%
- Duolingo - 37%
- LinguaLeo - 23%

HelloTalk and Simpler applications became less popular – they scored 16% and 10%, respectively. In the “Other” option, the applications Memrise, AnkiDroid, BrightBusuu, ABBYY, ReWord were also popular.

Fig.3. If you use mobile apps, which ones?

In the question **“What are the criteria for choosing a mobile application for learning a foreign language?”** respondents preferred to choose an application according to the following criteria (Fig. 4):

- Free to use - 56%
- User-friendly interface - 50%
- Has an emphasis on one of the aspects of interest (grammar, speaking, listening) - 49%

Almost all of the students chose several options.

Fig.4. What are the criteria for choosing a mobile application for learning a foreign language?

In the next question, **“Problems with which aspect force you to add an app?”** also the leader was the answer Grammar - 66.7% Speaking - 45.8% and Listening - 19.8% (Fig. 5).

Fig.5. Problems with which aspect force you to add an app?

In the next question **“What turns you off when choosing app?”** – The leaders among the answers were (Fig. 6):

- High price - 55%
- Lack of some aspects of language learning - 48%
- Lack of vocabulary - 33%
- No progress tracking - 32%
- No choice of accent (American, Scottish, New Zealand, etc.) - 23%

Fig.6. What turns you off when choosing app?

In the last question **“What would you add to an ideal app?”**, opinions were also divided, but it was possible to identify the most basic wishes of students:

- *Adding a dictionary*
- *Small price\free application*
- *Determination of the user's language level*
- *Adding idioms, phrasal verbs and vocabulary according to the user's language level*
- *Ability to save and track progress*
- *Adding the function of communication with the native speaker*
- *Emphasis on all three main aspects of learning language*
- *Auto-check for mistakes in texts and translations.*

5. Conclusions and Discussions

We would like to note that the pandemic has made significant changes in the organization of the educational process at universities and the search for the most effective ways of teaching is a priority task for any teacher. The organization of blended learning in the study of foreign languages is no exception.

In our opinion, a very perceptive approach in teaching is where the teacher explains in an accessible form the positive and negative aspects of using mobile applications, in general, plus student can focus on specific functions of submitted applications (Nalyvaiko et al., 2020). The modern student has constant access to information and the task of a qualified teacher is to clearly guide the student to let self-knowledge through interaction with digital learning tools (Gafni et al., 2017). In a blended learning environment, where the process of personal interaction decreases, it is necessary to take a more responsible approach to recommendations aimed at effective interaction within the educational team, that is, on the basis of a scientific approach and the didactic principle of accessibility to show students those mobile applications are not only a way of independent learning of a foreign language, but and an effective means of organizing classroom learning.

It is important to note that our own long-term experience in organizing blended and distance learning based on the use of digital teaching tools (Zhernovnykova & et al., 2020), such as mobile applications, significantly activates the cognitive activity of students and allows to use the maximum amount of their creative potential, plus this shows lecturers' pedagogical skill in the era of digital technologies. Often, the authority of a teacher among students is based on the use of modern teaching tools and technologies. We do not deny the importance of using traditional methods, forms and technologies of teaching, but we insist that a modern teacher must be ready for modern challenges and possess the qualities that allow

him to organize educational process in any conditions, even such as unexpected changes in the educational process, which can be attributed to and quarantine restrictions caused by natural disasters, epidemics and other phenomena.

Very promising in the context of the use of mobile applications in the organization of blended learning is the presence or their compatibility with game methods of learning foreign languages, competitiveness significantly increases the motivation of students, but it is important to note that the teacher must observe the atmosphere of healthy competition through the clarity and comprehensibility of his requirements.

An unsolved problem in the context of the research remains the problem of motivating students to systematically use mobile applications in their further education. Surveys conducted after graduation from the bachelor's program showed that graduates without the support of their teachers are much less active in mastering new applications and learning tools in the digital space.

Our task was to research the use of modern technologies, namely mobile applications, in language learning. We have determined the relevance of our topic. Since the development of society has reached the stage when our life is strongly connected with mobile devices, we can extract all the most useful from this, facilitate the student's learning process and make this process more entertaining and accessible at any time. The world is moving into a "network era", where applications are gaining in importance and "take over" the entire network.

We analyzed the most popular language learning apps. We took into account both paid and free, with the presence of paid content at will. We tried to make it as objective as possible, because when you read reviews, for example, in the same Play Market, they confuse, because they can be completely opposite. We have indicated the advantages of the app and its disadvantages of each application to make it easier to form a more or less objective picture before downloading. Most apps focus on vocabulary learning, as this is usually the most problematic aspect for those who are interested in learning languages. Many applications also have rewards for completing assignments or internal "currency" that can serve as motivation. The application itself can "reminder" so the student does not forget about his classes and assignments. Some free apps include paid content that you can purchase after you are finally interested in it and realize that the paid content will be more effective.

An analysis of the responses to the survey showed that most of students have interest in learning languages answered it positively. We

learned that students learn languages almost equally with apps, with a teacher, and on their own. The biggest “attracting factor” for students is free access to all the advantages of the application, and in turn, the biggest disadvantage is the high price. Working in mobile applications in the process of learning foreign languages in a blended form of education opens up new opportunities for acquiring knowledge and helps to delve into the process of learning a new language or consolidate existing knowledge. It is also important to note that working in mobile applications allows to develop digital skills and personal qualities of the student, such as communication in digital network and self-discipline. The study showed that the combination of mobile applications and communication with a lecturer can give the most effective result in quarantine and blended learning environment.

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