Speaky - Language Exchange: An App to Improve Second Language Speaking Skills

(App Review)

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Application Details:

Name: Speaky Language Exchange

Publisher: Speaky Team

Product Type: Smartphone Application Software

Category: Education

Operating System: Android 4.3 and up

Hardware requirements: Smartphone/Internet Connection

Available On: Google Play

Price: free

Abstract: With the emergence of technology and its effect on almost all aspects of our life, it is crystal clear that education cannot remain unaffected from it. Consequently, technology and more specifically Smartphone-Assisted Language Learning can make substantial changes in language teaching and learning. As a result, there are some language learning applications which are designed to facilitate foreign/second language development. One of these helpful applications is *Speaky* which provide the opportunity for learners to make a community in which they can exchange their language knowledge with both native and non-native speakers. This review intends to introduce this application, whose goal is to find the most appropriate language partner,

learn from each other and transfer and share language knowledge simply by exchanging one's language skills, as well as to consider its merits and demerits. Despite the inherent shortcomings, the review recommends Speaky as a free, easy-to-use tool for learning languages to anyone who is interested in learning new languages through having real conversation and chatting with other speakers all around the world.

Key words: Smartphone-Assisted Language Learning, Speaky, community

Introduction

The advent of new technologies such as lap top computers, mobile phones and, more recently, smart phones have changed many aspects of life, including students' learning (Nushi & Khazaei, 2020). Mobile technologies enlarge the opportunities for communication and interaction among learners all over the world, learners both in formal and informal settings can take advantage of online spaces such as Social Networking Sites (SNS) to engage in educational activities motivated by their personal needs (Kukulska-Hulme, 2010). Such new technologies make possible greater individualization, social interaction, and reflection on language. "An important tenet of most SLA theories is the importance of opportunities for input and output, provided through interaction" (Reinders & Hubbard, 2013). One way to promote interaction among language learners is through using new learning modes provided by Smartphone-Assisted Language Learning (SPALL). EFL learners need to communicate in English for better learning outcomes and as mentioned by Stockwell and Hubbard (2013) certainly almost all of these applications provide opportunities for communications either individually or in a group, Loewen and Erlam (2006) also reported that previous researches on CMC are encouraging regarding its effectiveness in promoting interaction among learners, the reason that learners produce more language in online discussions may be that in that contexts the language production is essential for a person to be considered as present, and the interlocutors have to rely on language rather than other nonverbal forms of communication (Payne & Whitney, 2002).

Since new generations are more adept at using online tools, it is literally impossible not to consider the role that these tools have on their language learning and consequently many practitioners adapted new technology-related approaches in teaching foreign and second languages by introducing and have the students using serviced such as SNS in their classrooms. Using web 2.0 to achieve a good learning experience has become very popular nowadays. Pedagogy 2.0 integrates tools such as social software to facilitate interaction, information exchange, and interactional connections, which will have an effect on learners' autonomy, agency, and personalization by promoting communities of learning through associations, interaction, and participation (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008). In the last few years many technological advancements such as online environments and mobile applications for foreign language learning have emerged to assist language learners, some of these are for personal learning, but mostly they have a social component (Kukulska-Holme, 2016).

An application that can be beneficial in promoting interaction between second language (L2) learners all over the world and consequently help improve their speaking skills is Speaky. The application makes it possible for learners of different language proficiency levels to exchange language with people around the world, both native and non-native speakers. Speaky is designed to help people learn a language by having dialogue with others, users are matched with conversation partners based on personal interests and the language they want to learn.

Description

The app does not provide any language instruction; instead of focusing on language, it focuses more on the personalities of users and language learning through conversation. Speaky will not only help you learn a new language and find language partners, but it will also connect you with people all around the world. Upon becoming a member of the Speaky community of language learners, one will be able to create a network of international friends with whom they can build a community of practice.

The app can be downloaded for Android operating system on Google Play. After installing the app, the users must sign up by Facebook or Google Account, then they should fill in information such as age, gender, native language, and the language that they want to practice. Afterwards, there would be a number of multiple choice questions that test the learners' knowledge of the target language. The questions test aspects of the language such as grammar, vocabulary, listening comprehension, and pragmatic knowledge. Based on the results of the test, the learners' levels would be determined and then the members will join the community.

The users of the app will be classified as native and non-native based on the language that they have chosen to practice and they can decide to talk with either native or non-native speaker of the target language (see Figure 1). The chats will stay on their pages and users can look at them again whenever they wish and review the language points that they have learned from their partner. The users can add other learners as their friends or unfriend them whenever they wish to; they can also block other users or report them if they find them inappropriate. The chats with the users' friends will be on the section called *messages*, and the chats with those who are not on their friends' list will be on the section called *requests* which can be accepted or denied. If accepted, he/she would be added to the friend list.
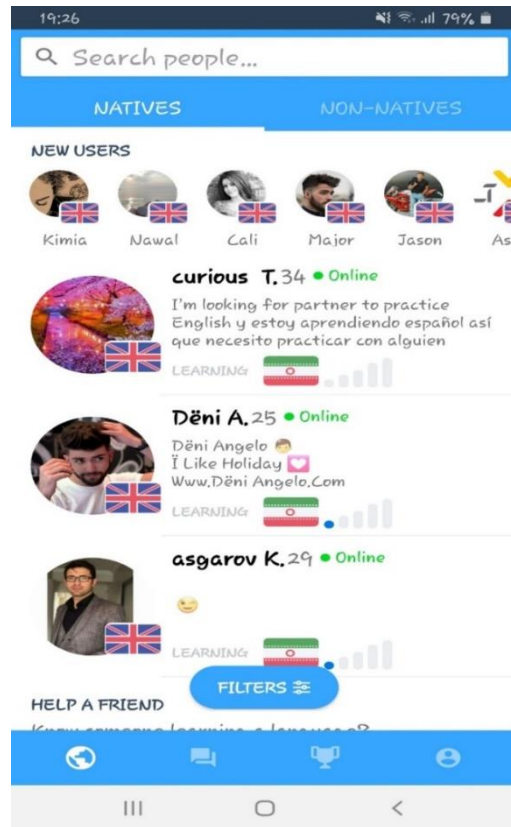
Figure 1. A Screenshot of Speaky's Homepage

Each user can add a picture as his/her profile picture, they can write about 300 words to describe themselves and they can choose the topics that they are more interested in to talk about so that other users can know them better and they can find the best language partners (see Figure 2).
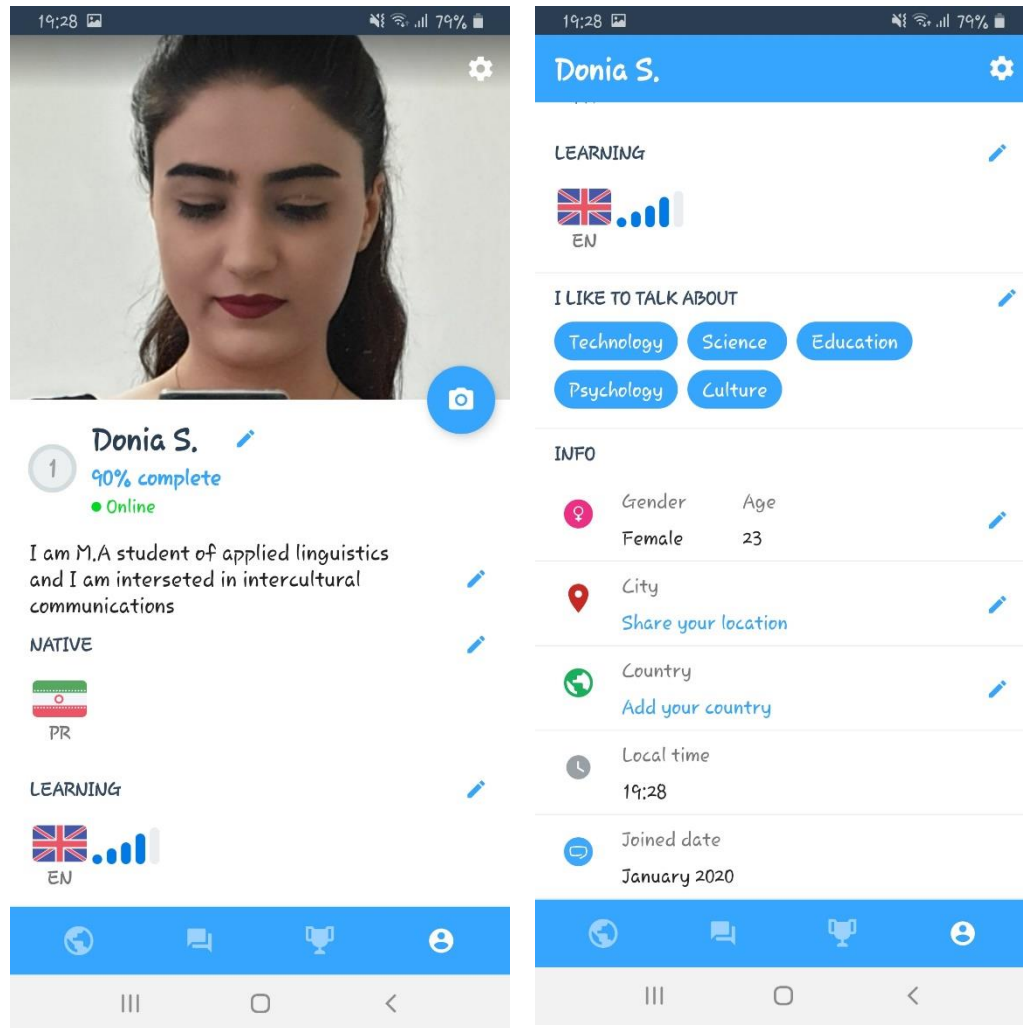
Figure 2. Screenshots of User's Profile

Members of the community can have conversations with each other on their chat pages and while texting each other, they can correct their partners' messages by click on the option 'correct message' and after the correction they can send it back. This correction can be grammatical and lexical or even it can target the pragmatic errors of the speaker, through these corrections participants can exchange and transfer language knowledge (see Figure 3).
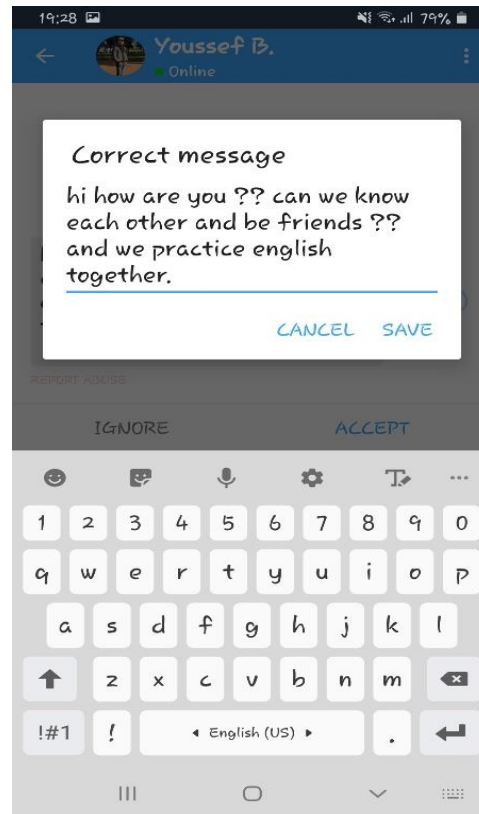
Figure 3. A Screenshot of Correction Option

After finding their language partners and having known each other, the partners can give a sticker to each other on their partner's home page. Each sticker resembles a specific characteristic feature (helpful, cool, talkative, etc.) that would describe the owner of the page so that the other members can see them and know the owner better and decide whether he/she can be a suitable partner to them (see Figure 4).
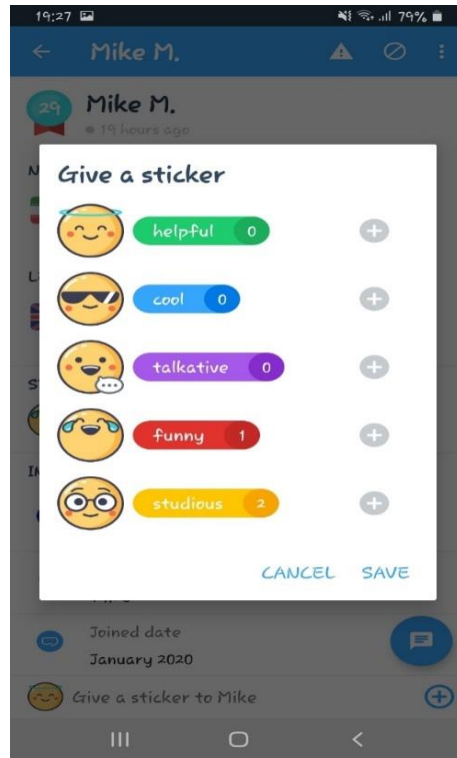
Figure 4. A Screenshot of Stickers Options

There is a section which is designed for motivating the users and under this section there is a list of the goals that learners should achieve to start on Speaky and give scores, it includes goals like starting a conversation, sending 20 messages, etc. After achieving each goal, the users will move to the new level, so in order to achieve this goals the learners will use the application more and more, converse with other learners more and more, and learn the language more and more (see Figure 5).
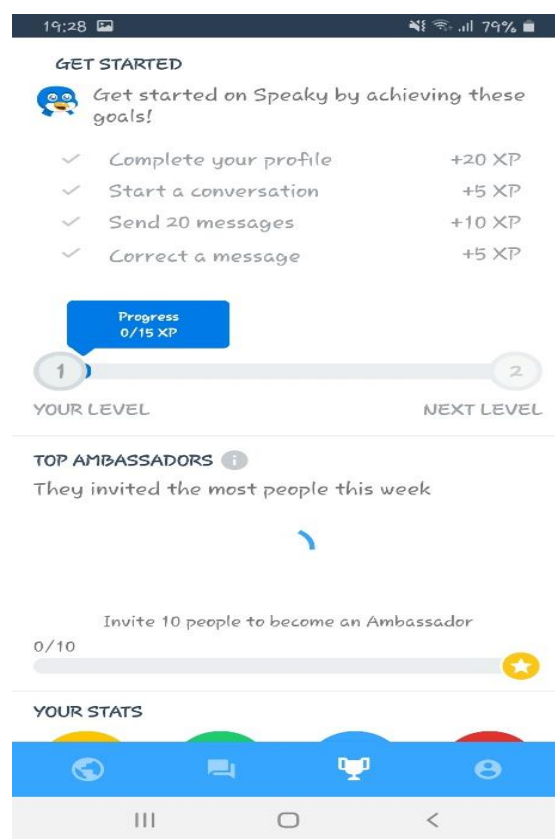
Figure 5. A Screenshot of the Goals Sets by the App

Evaluation

As a language learning tool, Speaky has many strengths. One prominent feature of Speaky is that it is a free mobile app which can be downloaded for Android operating system on Google Play. It is really user-friendly which motivates users to install and use the application in their free time. As mentioned earlier, real conversation and human interaction take place via the app. In addition, this app provides a forum for native and non-native speakers with all levels of language proficiency, from beginners to advanced learners, to find the appropriate language partner, learn from each other and transfer and share knowledge simply by exchanging one's language skills. Since having dialogue with others is one of the main features of Speaky, this makes it convenient for learners to learn easily from each other, specially learning colloquial forms of language. Users will find their ideal conversation partners based on personal interests and the

language they want to learn which means that language partners are not chosen randomly and it depends on learners themselves that which member of the community is will be their desirable language partner. Another major advantage of Speaky is how it motivates learners to gain scores owing to a list of the goals that learners should achieve to start on Speaky.

Despite these positive features, the application has several inherent weaknesses. For instance, this app is heavily- reliant on the users' personalities instead of focusing on any language items or any instructions on language. It is obvious that one cannot learn a language only through chatting, even if s/he can learn via chatting, it is not possible to become professional enough in that language. Another major downside to Speaky is that the app does not provide learners with voice recognition to practice speaking because it mainly relies on users' chats which are in written modality.

Conclusion

Speaky is a great free learning tool. It is user-friendly and can be used by learners of different ages and cultures. Speaky is mainly designed to help language learning, but is also used for other purposes like finding new friends as well as communicating with them all around the world. This is what sets Speaky apart from other language learning applications. This app is highly recommended because it can help learners with all levels of language proficiency to make a community and learn new things in the target language from each other. It also provides them with the opportunity to communicate with native speakers, who can easily exchange their language knowledge with the non-native users through chatting and having conversation with them as well as receiving some corrective feedback. Since the main feature of Speaky is chatting and having dialogue with other language users, colloquial forms of the language can be learned easily from native users. Furthermore, since its framework is really friendly, learners can choose topics which are appealing to them and motivate them to talk about them.

Despite the merits, the app does not provide any language instruction for learners and mainly focuses on chatting and commenting, which may make it weak in some people's ideas. We recommend that learners try the app out as tit is free and see for themselves whether it is useful for them or not.

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