

Recommended app

Aba English App

Mobile language learning application for iOS and Android
<http://www.abaenglish.com/en>

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1. Structure and description of the app

“ABA English” is a language learning application for mobile devices which has been developed by ABA (American and British Academy: <http://www.abaenglish.com>), an educational company, based in Barcelona, Spain, that has been active in the field of language learning for about 40 years. The app is actually a successful adaptation of a web-based English multimedia course delivered through the institution’s campus website at <http://campus.abaenglish.com> and, therefore, represents a natural step forward in the company’s language learning materials creation process. There are certain aspects, then, which are common to both the website course and the learning app. Nevertheless, the mobile application has been devised taking into account the specific characteristics of MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) environments. The app, as well as the website, incorporates a complete general English interactive resource for adults that may be used as a stand-alone series of 144 modules or didactic units divided into 6 levels or courses, covering the range of levels specified in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR): Beginners (A1), Lower Intermediate (A2), Intermediate (B1), Upper Intermediate (B2), Advanced (B2-C1) and Business (C1). Each level includes 24 units. The support languages of the app, i.e. the language in which help and instructions are expressed, are 8: Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish.

The learning content of the app basically coincides with that of the web-based course, comprising a total of 144 units. The structure of each unit is the same, incorporating 8 didactic sections:

- *ABA Film*: a short video, from 1 to 5 minutes long, showing a situation from daily life and including the language structures and expressions that will be covered in the other sections of the unit. The videos may be watched with subtitles in the support languages or without subtitles.
- *Speak*: this section consists of the vocabulary and expressions of the unit, translated into the support languages. In a quite interactive way, learners can click on the expressions to listen to the right pronunciation first, and then record their own voice. The system plays both recordings so that learners can compare their performance with the model. This is a successful adaptation to a mobile learning environment of the company’s recording technology (“Listen-Record-Compare” or LRC™).
- *Write*: this part is a dictation task where students click on a play button to listen to a short expression from the unit and then must write what they hear on the screen. The app corrects the student’s performance by marking it green (correct answer) or red, in which case the learner must rewrite the incorrect fragment.
- *Act*: this section of the app invites learners to take an active part in a role play that reproduces the video passage of the unit. They should first choose one of the 2 characters in the video and then interact with the app by saying the words of their chosen part. This task is focused on oral fluency. The app does not provide any feedback on learner’s performance this time.
- *Video-class*: a video recording where a teacher provides grammatical explanations to do with the unit’s content. Like in the “ABA Film”, learners can watch the video without subtitles or with subtitles in the support languages.
- *Exercises*: students carry out fill-in-the-gap and/or translation tasks in order to improve their grammar and vocabulary. Feedback on learner’s performance is provided, including the provision of correct answers.

- *Vocabulary*: this part provides a vocabulary list with the key words and expressions from the unit in alphabetical order. Learners may listen to them, practice their pronunciation and compare both versions. Translations into the support languages are also included.
- *Assessment*: here the learners can do a test to check the acquisition of the unit contents; they cannot access this part unless they have completed the other sections of the unit.

The app delivers the learning objects and all related contents in a gradual way, which means that a very clear learning path is recommended, although learners can always follow their own path and jump between different parts of the course or the app. The learning content of this app, on the other hand, is mainly based on oral language, since all tasks, grammar and vocabulary contents of the app are focused on video passages that mirror daily communicative situations. A very important component of the app is the use and practice of oral English through the implementation of speech recognition technology. The prompt of nearly all tasks is oral. In order of importance, the app focuses on the following linguistic skills: listening, speaking, writing and reading. This latter skill has practically no treatment within the app, whereas there is a clear emphasis on productive skills. The multimedia and interactive components of the app, which makes extensive use of situational videos, are also worth mentioning. The application caters for variation since it presents a series of different characters, communicative situations, topics and accents, but the structure of all units is exactly the same, which at times becomes somewhat repetitive. The learning structure is not at all varied.

The app is aimed at adults and young learners who want to learn and produce general English language in an interactive and autonomous way. It matches well the CEFR parameters and, thus, can help learners to gradually advance in their command of English from whatever linguistic level they depart. In this respect, the app may be considered as learner-centred, since it may be adapted to many different learning needs and circumstances. It is easy to use, allowing clear and straightforward navigation, although, unlike the web-based version of the course, it has no links to other useful learning aids, such as dictionaries, grammar books, cultural explanations, and the like. The app does have a 'Contact' feature through which learners can both get technical support and obtain learning help from instructors by sending specific messages.

On top of the screen, the app provides information about the unit that the learners are working on, together with the percentage of the unit that has already been completed and indications about how learners can proceed from any given point in their learning process. Thus, it is easy for learners to monitor their progress throughout the course. In sum, the structure of the learning app is very clear and easy to understand and handle by the students.

2. Pedagogical analysis

The language learning pedagogical approach advocated by the app is the Natural Method, a development of the Direct Method. In accordance with such a methodology, the oral component of the language is prevalent and becomes the focus of instruction, the axis around which tasks and learning objects are developed. The application is based on the extensive provision of linguistic input, particularly in the oral form, which is made comprehensible to students through the use of situational videos. Therefore, visual and oral prompts become paramount in the learning resource, which has a very clear focus on content. The approach known as Audiolingual is also noticeable in this app, since it relies on the use of multimedia (visual and oral aids) to contextualize learning and promotes a deductive attitude on the learner's side.

The type of syllabus that helps organize the learning materials is situational, and the topics that contextualize the units are closely related to recognizable daily situations, which arguably may foster motivation, since it also relates to the development of communicative competence, rather than simply the linguistic command of the language.

The oral skills come before the written ones, and the productive competences are also regarded as more important than the receptive ones, since the latter are practiced so as to acquire the former. As regards the linguistic components, the app mainly focuses on pronunciation and vocabulary. Language is taught through situations in a learning environment which encourages learners to use those daily contexts to make their own assumptions about the language and its rules, an approach which has a lot to do with immersion scenarios, where students are put in direct contact with relevant input in the target language. Nevertheless, the app also, and very emphatically, focuses on grammar and the form of the language in two major ways. First, a whole section of each unit, that is the "Video class", is devoted to formal instruction on grammar. Second, most of the tasks in the "Exercises" section are grammar- and vocabulary-based drills, constructed around mimicry and memorization. Thus, the course delivered through this app has a remarkable structural component. Accordingly, it would seem at first sight that the application is more concerned with accuracy. Nevertheless, after a more thorough analysis, the ultimate aim of the app is the consolidation of oral fluency. Pedagogically speaking, therefore, in our view the course successfully combines an intuitive and indirect approach with a tutor-led, more direct, treatment of grammar and linguistic forms.

Regarding the crucial aspect of feedback on students' performance, a difference can be observed between written and oral production. On the one hand, when learners carry out oral pronunciation tasks, the app does not provide direct feedback, since it is the learners themselves who must compare their performance with the given recorded model. On the other hand, when doing written tasks, learners may receive two types of feedback. In the first type, the app marks the learners' mistakes in red and their correct answers in green, so they can make several attempts until they produce the correct answer. In the second type, the correct answer may be directly available for the learners if they click on a question mark icon on the screen. These types of feedback are not very metalinguistic or informative, but are consistent with the app's general objectives and can, to a certain extent, promote the learner's grammatical awareness. In terms of interactivity, i.e. the way the learner interacts with the learning resource, this application is quite rich, since there are multiple ways in which this is accomplished in a multimedia environment. But as regards interaction, i.e. humans communicating through the mobile technology, the app is more limited, because there is only the possibility of contacting the teacher through the app features. Therefore, the app is not very communicative, although this limitation is compensated for by means of a highly contextualized grammar and vocabulary instruction, a major feature of the communicative approach to language learning. The selected situations also encourage the learners to engage in communicative language production.

The ABA English App takes into account the specific characteristics and requirements of mobile language learning (MALL), three of which are worth emphasizing here. First, the learning objects should not be too long, since learners who opt for this type of learning normally use the materials during short periods of time and on the go. Second, mobile language learning must provide learners with a rich and varied exposure to comprehensible linguistic input in the target language to be processed usually as self-study, without time and place limitations. Last, but not least, mobile language learning apps may be valuable tools to complement specific aspects of language learning, such

as oral language in the case of the app under examination. These three fundamental issues of mobile language learning resources are well solved by the ABA English App.

3. Technical analysis

In terms of usability, the ABA English app is very user-friendly, which is clearly reflected in two of its technical strengths. On the one hand, the control features of the multimedia learning objects, mostly videos, as well as the interactive menus, are well designed and easy to operate, and, as a consequence, learners may access and manipulate learning materials in a simple and effective manner and at their own pace, which contributes to a learner-centred approach to language learning. On the other hand, user-friendliness is achieved through straightforward, intuitive and efficient navigation throughout all the menus of the app. Learners always know exactly where they are, which is partly due to informative menus and consistent design of the app's structure from a graphic design point of view.

The app runs very smoothly without technical problems or delays and is provided with a solid interface that makes interaction easy and stable. The degree of technical reliability of the app is very high, since it works well on smart mobile devices, both in the online and offline modes. The quality of the multimedia components of the app is very high, including audio, video and graphic design, which guarantees an enhanced learning experience. The LRC™ (Listen-Record-Compare) technology, which was implemented in the web-based course has also been successfully applied to the corresponding app with excellent results. And, to round off the app's remarkable instructional design, the feedback on student's performance is flawless from a technical point of view, which is a fundamental issue for self-study. The app, then, is a good adaptation of a sound web-based language learning resource to the requirements of mobile technologies.

4. Summary of the analysis

The ABA English App is an example of good practice in the delivery of language learning courseware in a MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) environment. The learning materials it contains perfectly meet the requirements of the self-study of English on the go at the different levels of the CEFRL. If we compare this app with other similar applications on the market, the ABA English App is a comprehensive resource without the limitations of other apps in terms of efficient language learning content. It is strong both pedagogically and from a technical standpoint. It provides extensive practice of oral skills, grammar and vocabulary in a contextualized way, through the use of videos that illustrate common daily situations. On the debit side of the app, there is the repetitive format of many of its exercises and drills, which lack communicative practice. The app can, nevertheless, become a motivating resource to practice the most mechanical aspects of language learning, such as the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar rules, which are also necessary to cover. On the other hand, two fundamental strengths of the app are the focus on oral fluency and accuracy, and also the pedagogically sound organization of the content in a comprehensive and stand-alone format that allows learners to gradually advance and improve their command of the English language in an autonomous way from several starting levels.