

## TECHNOLOGY REVIEW

### *FLUENT FOREVER*

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Cite as: Duris, M. (2022). Technology review: Fluent Forever. In J. Levis & A. Guskaroska (eds.), Proceedings of the 12th Pronunciation in Second Language Learning and Teaching Conference, held June 2021 virtually at Brock University, St. Catharines, ON. <https://doi.org/10.31274/psllt.14334>

### INTRODUCTION

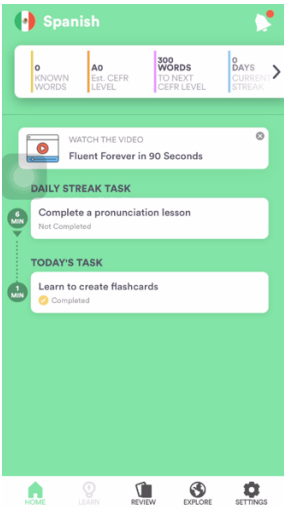
Fluent Forever (Wyner, 2014) is a mobile device app dedicated to language learning through pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, grammar exposure, and speech fluency practice. The application is based on user-created flashcards and repetition schedules to learn quickly and effectively. At the time of this review, only ten options are available as Target Languages (TL): German, Spanish (two dialects), French, Italian, Russian, Korean, Brazilian Portuguese, Japanese, and Mandarin. The basic plan costs \$9.99 per month. The review was completed using Spanish (Latin America) and Russian as the TL with a proficiency level of "new." The choice to complete the review with these two languages is motivated by the reviewer's intent to evaluate the app with a known L2 (Spanish) and an unknown L2 (Russian). In doing so, the reviewer wished to control for bias and review the application for the language content and not aesthetics. This review concentrates on the pronunciation training module of the application. The module guides its users to focus on three aspects of pronunciation for the TL: "basics of spelling," "new sounds," and "ear training." After describing the features of this module, an evaluation is presented considering the principles of pronunciation learning and instruction found in Celce-Murcia et al. (2010).

### DESCRIPTION

The app guides the user in selecting the desired target language and prompts a three-level selection screen (new, intermediate, and advanced). After completing a tutorial, the user is presented with a homescreen with three main sections: a summary of the achievement band, a task pane section, and navigation icons to four other areas of the app (learn, review, explore, and settings) as seen in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

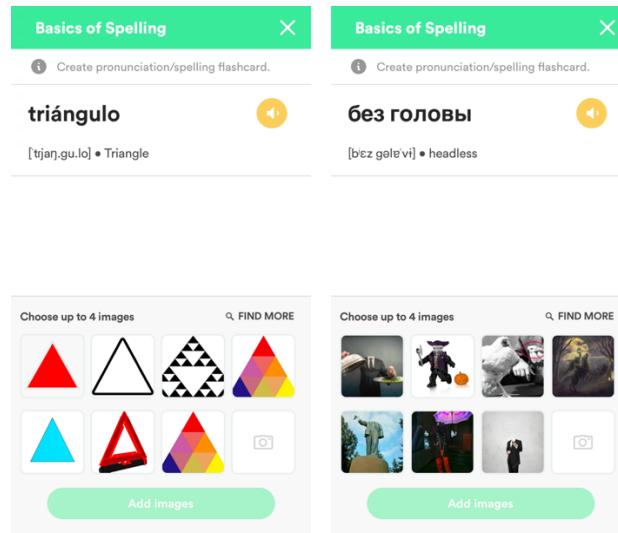
*Spanish dashboard view*



The first area of the application is called *Basics of Spelling*. There, a target word is displayed along with its phonetic equivalent, followed by its English translation. Users can click on the speaker icon to hear the pronunciation of the word. The user is presented with seven images representing the target word with an eighth option to upload a picture (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

Spanish Word-only Flashcard (left) and Russian Word-only Flashcard (right)

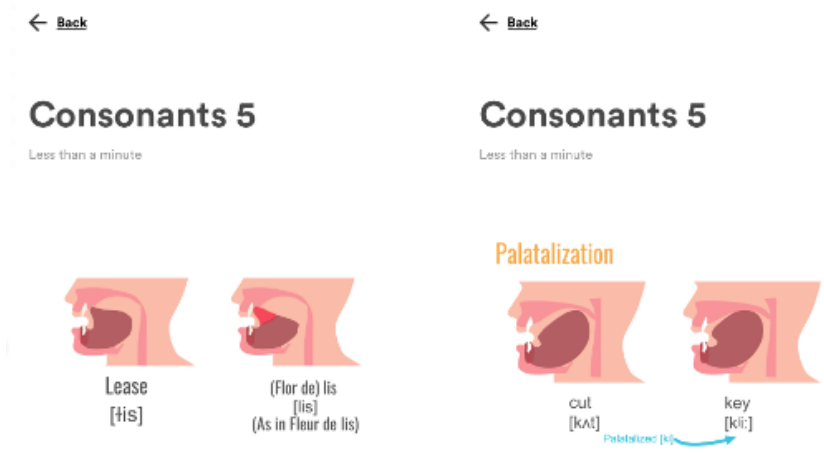


The user selects up to four images that they would want to associate with the target word. After doing so, a new screen appears. The flashcard now contains a question, the image selected by the user, and an answer option. The question prompts the user to sound out the initial letter (/f/) from the target word. For this example, the Spanish word "foca" is used, and the user is expected to pronounce the segment [f] sound aloud. Upon clicking the *see answer* option, a new flashcard is presented. The answer is displayed with the initial sound emphasized and an IPA symbol of the sound below, providing explicit awareness of spelling-sound relationships for these pronunciation lessons. The initial sound is uttered by a native speaker of the TL, while the repetition of the entire word is uttered by a second native speaker of the TL, generally from a different gender. During this activity, no feedback is provided; the user determines if they are satisfied with their answer before moving on to the next area.

The next area, *New Sound Videos*, presents a video that focuses on a specific target phoneme. The English narrator describes the typical phoneme equivalent in the L1 for the target word. Afterward, a native speaker of the TL describes the phoneme and its characteristics. The images shown focus on place and manner of articulation (Figure 3). The user does not interact with the content of these videos explicitly.

**Figure 3**

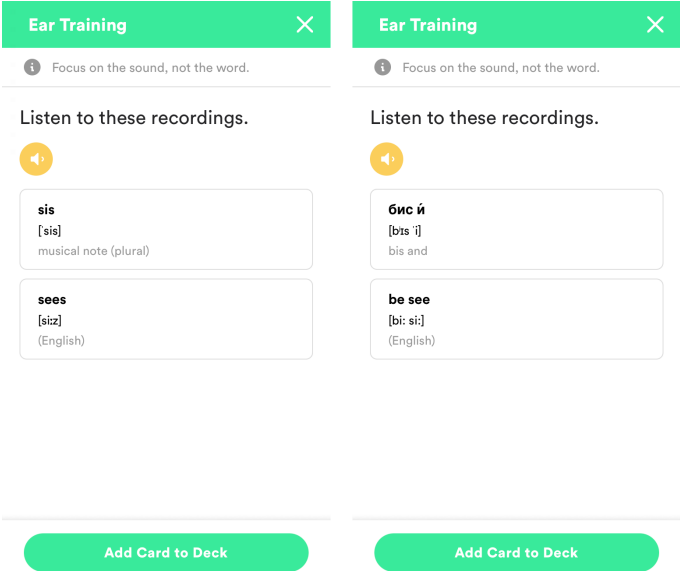
*Spanish Consonant Video (left) and Russian Consonant Video (right)*



*Ear Training* is the last area for the pronunciation focus of this application. The image of a cartoon brain character welcomes the user to the third and last component of the pronunciation lesson. The instructions state that the user will listen to some words that "sound similar" and that they should "hear how they are different." Upon entering this flashcard set, a native speaker of the TL says the two words, one after the other. The first word is in the TL, and the second is in English or the TL. The visual information displayed for that pair of contrasting word is broken down into three main elements, each of which is presented in a separate box. First, the alphabetic written form of the sound is followed by the language in brackets. Second, the modified IPA equivalent is displayed in brackets, and finally, a translation of the target word is offered for the TL box. There are no further instructions, but it is implied that they should play the sound multiple times to notice the differences in sound. On average, about four pairs are presented for each lesson (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Spanish-English Word Pair (left) and Russian-English Word Pair (right)*

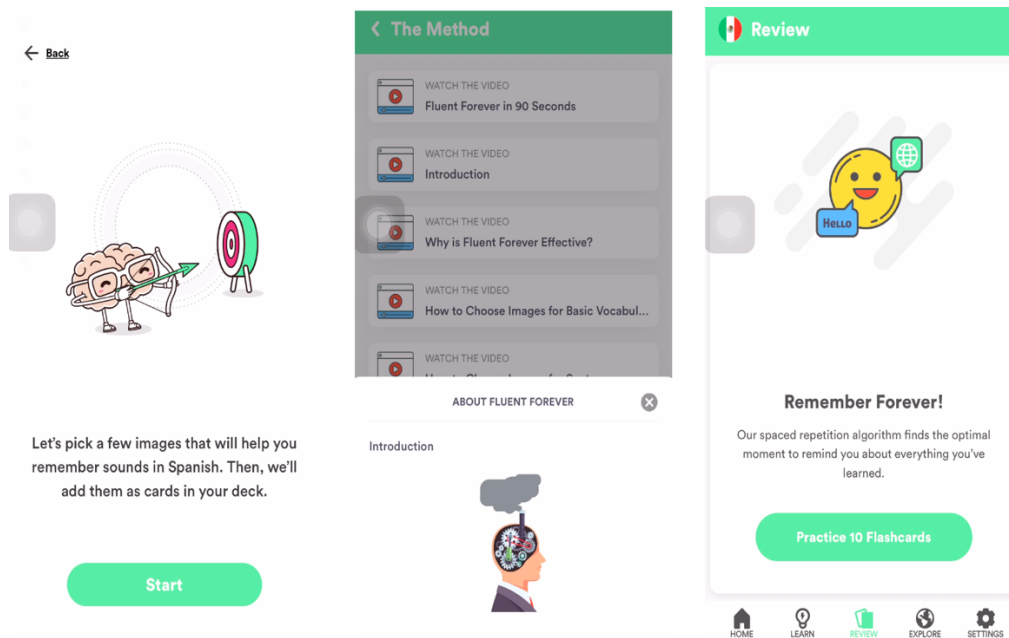


**EVALUATION**

The construct of pronunciation as defined by Derwing and Munro (2015. p. 5) includes "all aspects of the oral production of language including segments, prosody, voice quality, and rate." Forever Fluent focuses only on the segmental features of words as part of their *pronunciation* module and, more generally, uses the term pronunciation as a broad concept for L2 sound discovery. Furthermore, some aspects of the learning focus on implicit cues to language learning. Throughout the app, the user is reminded that the activities presented are all about the brain's capability of remembering language elements (Figure 5).

**Figure 5**

*Neuroscience and Memory Imagery*



The *Basics of Spelling* area introduces many visual and audio cues at once. A modified IPA rendering of the target word is presented before any IPA training along with a TL word that might be in an unknown alphabet (Russian, Japanese, Korean, and Mandarin). For a new learner, the options for hearing the target sound are limited to one utterance. The implicit goal suggests that the user should match the written form to oral production while providing an anchor image chosen by the user. The reasoning explained in the methodology section says that users learn more efficiently if the image makes an "emotional impact" and has a "personal" connection. This activity continues by asking the user to confirm the initial segment from the words learned previously by having the user recall the sound. If the user is satisfied with their production, they can move forward. The lack of production feedback by way of ASR limits the variety of learning. Levis and McCrocklin (2018, p.81) described it as "trying to build furniture with only a hammer and a screwdriver," when learners need a wider variety of tools to help learn pronunciation.

The *New Sound Videos* help users understand the target sounds through some phonetic approach. The narrator uses the English sounds that are easily confused with the target words to demonstrate place and manner of articulation. The explanations are helpful in demonstrating the phoneme difference. This is also in line with the Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) framework that calls for metacognitive knowledge of the pronunciation feature. Feedback is also absent from this stage. The user cannot confirm their production of the target sound in the video. Guided production is a key element in the Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) framework. Another noted barrier is the quality of input, specifically appropriateness to the user's level. Fluent Forever uses vocabulary that is often not common and of low frequency in the TL (Figure 6).

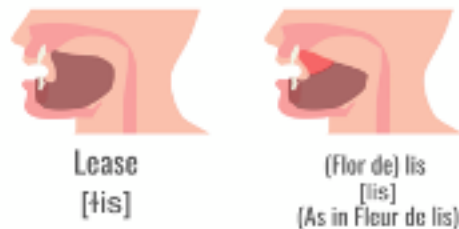
**Figure 6**

*Place and Manner of Articulation Contrast using TL Low-Frequency Words*

← **Back**

## Consonants 5

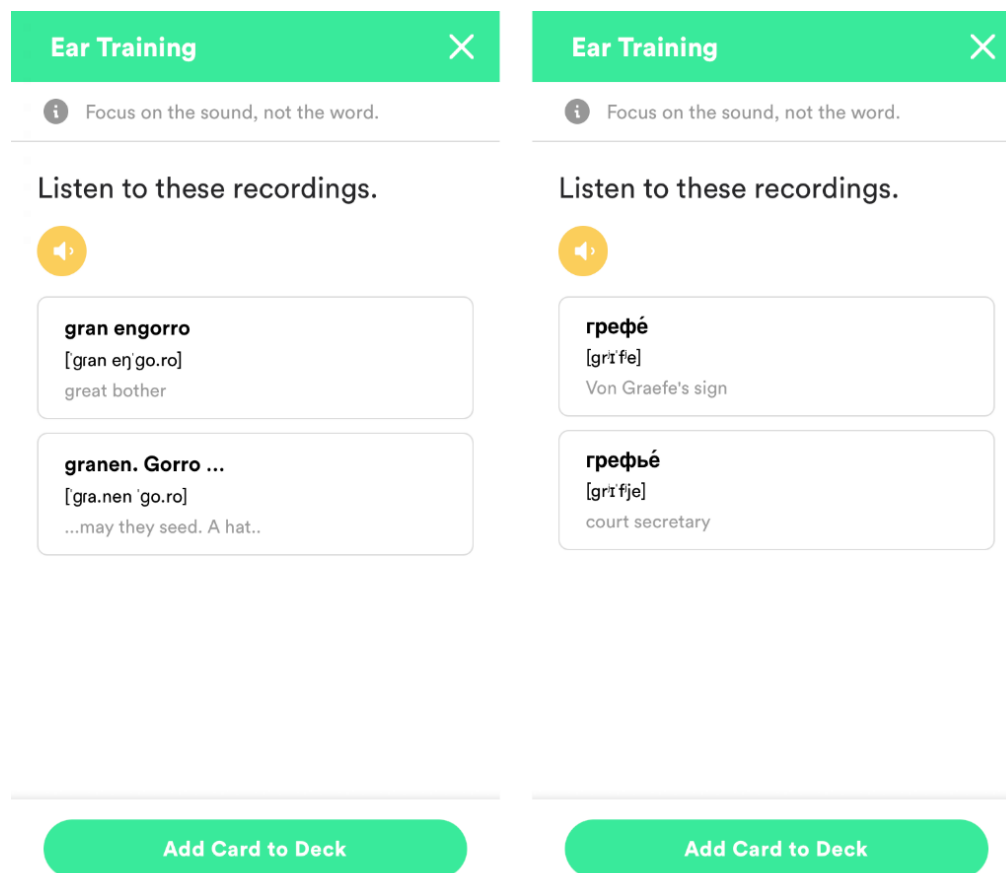
Less than a minute



The last pronunciation focus of the app is called *Ear Training*. In line with Celce-Murcia et al. (2010) framework, perceiving new sounds is recommended when learning pronunciation. The app does this by presenting L1 to L2 sound pair contrasts. Both sounds are uttered by native speakers and are illustrated by a written form, modified IPA form, and translation. Although the quality of the input is very good, the sound focus, target word selection, and lack of consistency could be off-putting for the user. Moreover, the two new sounds in the TL are often presented in low frequency vocabulary or as pieces of larger sentences (Figure 7).

**Figure 7**

*Contrast Pairs with Low Frequency Words in Spanish (left) and Russian (right)*



## CONCLUSION

Launched only four years ago, Fluent Forever has certainly taken the language learning app industry by surprise with a record crowdfunded development. This review focused on the pronunciation module of the application and showed that, overall, some elements for effective pronunciation learning are present. However, a clear lack of available technologies (i.e., ASR) severely limits the benefits of user feedback. The app is a highly revamped version of the 2014 Anki flashcards<sup>1</sup> that accompanied the book. The framework draws on the "listen-repeat" principles which have their limitations when trying to learn the pronunciation of a new second language. Specifically, other applications focus more on developing learners' communicative competence using ASR.

<sup>1</sup> <https://blog.fluent-forever.com/gallery/>



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mahdi Duris is a Ph.D. student in Applied Linguistics at Iowa State University. He has worked in the TESL field since 2013, with experience in teaching, teacher training, and program administration. His research interests focus includes pronunciation, acoustic phonetics and technology assisted L2 learning.

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