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SOFTWARE REVIEW

Mondly Learning Languages

Nazlinur Gokturk, Iowa State University

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Mondly is a language learning software designed to teach core vocabulary and conversational skills needed to take part in everyday situations in 33 languages, including Spanish, French, German, Turkish, American English, British English, Japanese, Korean, Persian. Driven by the concept of 'gamification' in language learning, *Mondly* aims to provide its users with a chance to learn a foreign language in an enjoyable, practical, and effective way. Selected to be one of the top applications for language learning by Apple in 2015, it targets individual learners, travelers, and business professionals with a busy schedule. The software is available on website (https://www.mondlylanguages.com/), Apple's app store, and Google Play for the Android version. A free version grants access to first unit through membership. It offers its users several packs for a variety of deals such as a premium all languages lifetime access for $19.99, and one-month unlimited access to all languages for $9.99.

Mondly is comprised of twenty-three categories based on daily situations language learners are likely to encounter in real life such as going on a date, travelling, or public transportation. In each category, there are six lessons for teaching core words and phrases, along with the sentence formation exercises, one lesson for vocabulary practice, and one lesson for dialog practice. Below is a screenshot of a category with the lessons on a mobile device.

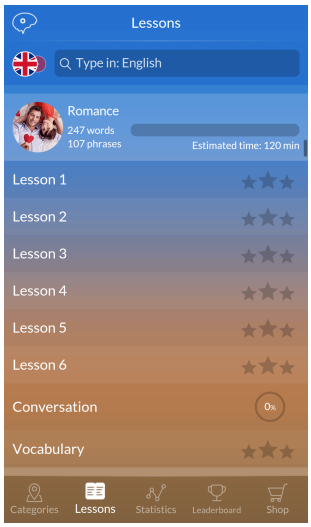

Figure 1. Eight lesson listed in a category

In addition to twenty-three categories, *Mondly* features a Conversational Chatbot (CC), which aims to enhance the learners' oral language skills through simulated dialogs with the computer. The CC includes three everyday situations such as ordering in a restaurant. Furthermore, an intelligent reporting system is incorporated into the software, which schedules the lessons to help learners to retain the skills they need without wasting time on review exercises and assigns

weekly quizzes to the learners to measure their learning.

EVALUATION

Technological Evaluation

For the review, the Android version of Mondly was used. The course English for Turkish speakers was tested on a Samsung S5. The download of the app took approximately 2-3 minutes although it may vary depending on the user's internet connection speed. After signing up on the *Mondly* languages app, an individual premium license was purchased for $19.99 via of a debit card. Immediately after receiving the mail for the payment approval, all the categories became accessible on the app.

With respect to the interface, the intuitive design of the app is easy-to-navigate, which makes it appropriate for anyone with minimal computer knowledge (Figure 2). However, no manual is available on either website or app, although a couple of tutorials are presented for guidance on its YouTube Channel (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEAXQi1NM73KyCNNozI6jEA). There is also a "Feedback" icon at the "Statistics" tab on the app, which includes two tabs: a) report bugs, and b) ask for support. In the ask for support tab, the users are provided with step-by-step solutions for commonly encountered problems, and a comment box for their specific questions.

Figure 2. Home page

One of the most promising features of the software is its built-on automated speech recognition (ASR) technology in Conversational Chatbot. The ASR system in the CC not only recognizes voice input, but also gives replies with human voice in 33 languages. The system has been trained on natural spoken language data collected from multiple native speakers, and it automatically compares the learners' utterances to those of native speakers. However, it does not perform a detailed analysis of the learners' oral production in terms of phonological features, and thus it does not give any specific feedback regarding the learners' pronunciation.

Another feature of the software is its intelligent reporting system, which both keeps track of the learners' progress, and schedules the lessons based on the learners' quiz scores. Additionally, it

helps the users to identify the areas they need to improve through detailed, yet easy-to-understand, graphs.

ACTIVITIES

The software consists of four different types of instructional activities: a) Conversational Chatbot, b) Dialog lessons, c) Flash card-based vocabulary exercises, and d) Translation-based exercises. Additionally, it offers a feature of Leaderboard where learners can compare their own performance in a lesson with learners all over the world. In this section, however, I will primarily describe the activities designed to improve the learners' oral language skills, which are Conversational Chatbot, and Dialog lessons.

In the Conversational Chatbot, the learners are presented with three different everyday situations such as ordering at a restaurant. After they choose the scenario, they are welcomed by an artificial conversation partner in the target language. To record their replies, the users are asked to tap and hold the microphone icon. Throughout the conversation, they are provided with a set of possible responses for each turn in the dialog, along with their pronunciation (see Figure 3). A help button is also available for the learners who want to check the translation of the replies in their native language. Although learners can craft their own responses, the system's ability to capture those statements is very restricted for now.

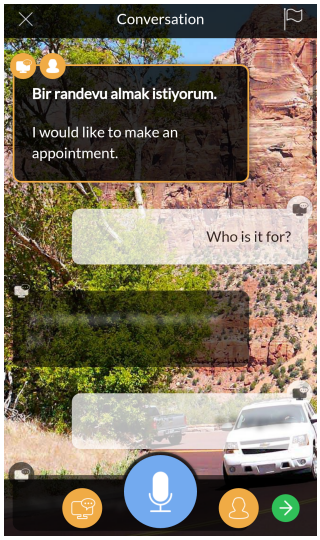

Figure 3. A dialog in Conversational Chatbot

As long as the learners respond to the questions accurately and clearly, they obtain scores for their replies, and the conversation proceeds. When they fail to produce accurate and clear utterances, they are presented with the question again and asked to repeat their response. Such a feature can improve both the learners' ability to produce meaningful utterances to sustain a conversation, and their pronunciation skills as they are supposed to pronounce their utterances accurately to maintain the conversation. At the end of each conversation, they are presented with a one-sentence learning outcome in their native language.

In Dialog lessons the users are presented with dialog scripts on a particular topic or situation such as holiday arrangements in a turn-by-turn fashion. In each turn, the learners are given the

scripts both in their native and target language (Figure 4). In the activity, they first listen to a male and a female native speaker uttering the particular turn, and then they are asked to repeat the statement they have heard. In each conversation bubble, there appears two icons: one for the native speakers' recordings, and one for the learners' recordings (Figure 4). Those icons are also displayed at the bottom of the screen. In each turn, the learners can listen to both their own and native speaker's recordings for several times and compare their recordings to that of native speaker's. As long as they repeat the statements accurately, they are allowed to go further in the conversation, and can see the rest of the turns. At the end of each conversation they can play back both their own recordings and native speaker's recording, which would give them a chance to reflect on their own performance. As in Conversational Chatbot, the learners obtain scores for their performance and are provided with one-sentence learning outcome in the end of each dialog.

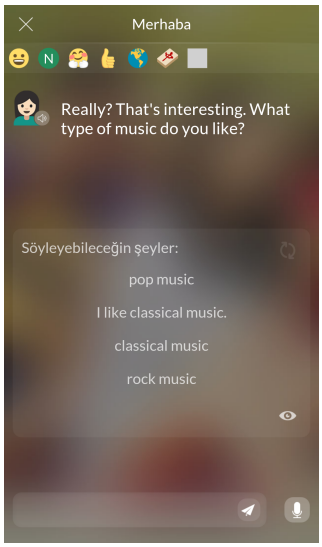

Figure 4. A dialog lesson in a course

TEACHER FIT (APPROACH)

Mondly has adopted Competency Based Language Teaching (CBLT) which focuses on "the design of work-related and survival-oriented language teaching programs for adults" (Richards, 2006, p. 40). It encompasses the teaching of the pre-determined language forms that would prepare the learners to communicate in real-life situations in the target language (L2). In line with CBLT, the focus of the software is on the achievement of learning outcomes, rather than the learning process (Richards, 2013).

Intended to provide the learners with opportunities to foster their speaking skills, Conversational Chatbot exemplifies the type of interaction realized between a person and a computer (Chapelle, 2003). Revisiting Ellis' (1999) work on interaction, Chapelle (2003) identifies three benefits of such an interaction type: a) enhanced input), b) attention to form, and c) negotiation of meaning. In this regard, CC appears to give opportunities for enhanced input through L1 translations, and for attention to form by requiring the learners to produce accurate and clear responses. Yet, what

is missing in the CC is the opportunity for negotiating meaning. While learners can produce "comprehensible output" in CC (Swain, 1995), the nature of the output is restricted to a set of pre-fabricated responses. More creative opportunities would enable the learners to produce their own responses that would fit the context. As noted by Lin (2015) and Coniam (2008), exploring the ways of integrating a certain degree of negotiation into chatbots is certainly an area that merits further research.

In addition to the lack of opportunities for negotiating meaning, the native speaker speech in CC is slower than natural speech regardless of the language learning level (i.e., beginner, intermediate, and advanced). Although this may help low proficiency learners to comprehend the input (Krashen, 1985), the lack of authenticity in speech may lead to communication problems in real-life use (Cook, 1991; Ellis, 2008). A true adjustment of the speech pace based on the learner's proficiency would achieve this purpose. Another drawback of the CC is associated with the way it handles ungrammatical learner speech. As highlighted by Coniam (2008, 2014), chatbots targeted for second language learners need to be able to handle grammatical errors in learners' production to a certain extent. In this regard, CC appears to rely on phrases or expressions to sustain the conversation, and it ignores the grammatical accuracy of the learners' production. One way to mitigate this may be to incorporate a feature that would serve the purpose of recasts to CC. For example, upon receiving a statement like "I does like football" from the learner, the system may give a response like "Do you mean "I like football?". This would not only raise learners' awareness about language forms (Chapelle, 2003), but also give them a chance to produce accurate forms in their own speeches.

A useful feature of Dialog lessons is that it enables the learners to compare their own speech to that of native speaker's, and thus, to notice the gap between their own speeches and native speakers' speech. Schmidt (2001) suggests that 'SLA is largely driven by what learners pay attention to and notice in target language input and what they understand the significance of noticed input to be" (p. 4). One shortcoming of the Dialog lessons is that the software provides no explicit feedback on learners' pronunciation, except for asking for repetition. When the learner's response is not understood, the system asks for repetition until it is understood. As Levis (2007) points outs, feedback is an area where most computer assisted pronunciation teaching systems fall short as they are unable to perform an accurate analysis of learners' speech. Yet, given the importance of feedback in the enhancement of language learning (Chapelle & Jamieson, 2008; Gass, Behney, & Plonsky, 2013) the integration of a relatively more detailed explicit feedback feature to the system could improve the teaching of pronunciation in the software. Another drawback is associated with the lack of meaning focus. As highlighted by Chapelle (2001), a good language learning task should "direct the learners' attention to the meaning of the language" (p.56). This is certainly not taking place in such repetition-based dialog tasks. One solution would be to provide the learners with a set of responses, and to ask them to choose and repeat an appropriate response.

LEARNER FIT (APPROACH)

Considering the limited range of expressions and situations in Conversational Chatbot and Dialog lessons, *Mondly* may be appropriate for L2 learners at the initial stages of language learning. For those learners, the software can provide a safe environment to take part in meaningful conversations, and to practice their speaking skills in L2. However, for L2 learners with intermediate or higher levels of proficiency, the software would fall short of the

expectations for two reasons. First, it offers only one dialogue practice on each situation in each course, and the Conversational Chatbot includes only three everyday situations. Additionally, according to company's website, *Mondly* adjusts the difficulty of the content based on the learners' language level. While it is true that a certain degree of adjustment is undertaken in the translation-based or flash-card activities, such an adjustment is not observable in the activities designed to improve the learners' speaking skills. For example, even in the advanced stage, the speech pace in both Chatbot and Dialog lessons is slow, and the dialog contents revolve around basic daily conversations such as making a hotel reservation. One way to address the intermediate or advanced L2 learners' needs would be to increase the variety of situations in Chatbot and Dialog lessons and to perform a true adjustment of the content depending on the proficiency level of the learner.

SUMMARY

Mondly language learning software would be best utilized by novice L2 learners, who would like to have a general introductory course in the target language possibly prior to a study-abroad, or business trip. The software features a Conversational Chatbot, and offers dialog lessons on everyday situations, which would be quite useful for L2 learners with limited command of target language. One way to enhance the effectiveness of the software for those learners would be to integrate a system of explicit feedback. On the other hand, for higher level L2 learners the affordances of the software for improving speaking skills would be probably insufficient in terms of both quantity, and quality. One alternative to address this shortcoming would be to extend the range of responses that the Conversational Chatbot can handle, and to increase both the quantity and variety of the conversations in dialog lessons so that the learners might have a chance to practice various conversations on a particular theme or situation. The software offers a premium license for US$19.99, which gives its users a life-time access to the courses in all 33 languages, and it is a good value for money for L2 learners who seek to have a general understanding in more than one language.

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