

ProSpeak - Research Report

How might we connect intermediate language learners to native speakers to improve their practical speaking skills?

Executive Summary

Since our product is at a very early stage, our team is interested in exploring the opportunities about how English learners who are non-native can improve their speaking skills with language learning apps.

We interviewed two non-native people and three native English people to have both sides of the user experience and learn on how learning apps are helpful in their learning journey. The research aimed to learn on their behavior, their needs and their pain points as well.

Key Findings

Language learners usually use apps on evenings after their work to connect with people. In the purpose to improve their speaking skills, they really appreciate using these apps through gamification and as a social media or a community.

However, it happens that users sometimes quit the app because these apps turn out to be an occasion to abuse social norms, including but not limited to the desire of flirting or dating. The initial goal which is to learn and improve speaking skills is foiled by how others can use apps. We identified that as an opportunity to build a more secured and controlled product in the only purpose to improve speaking skills.

Research Questions

Our team wanted to know how these adult learners improve their speaking skills through the apps they already tested and what they think about it to create the best user experience for them. The goal was to identify opportunities to create a new app oriented on speaking skills improvement only.

Key Research Questions

- [Needs} What is essential for speaking language learning app in English to keep the user engaged?
- [Behaviors] What are some goals of language learners and how do the existing apps in the marketplace help them accomplish those goals? What is missing that could make that experience better?
- [Feelings] What are the main pain points of learners on that kind of apps?

Methods & Recruiting

We recruited 5 participants from a English group on Facebook and conducted a 45-minutes and semi-structured interview for each of them.

	Study Frequency	Name of apps they use or used	Language(s) they are learning
Participant 1	Everyday	Tandem	English
Participant 2	Everyday	iTalki, Hellotalk and Tandem	French
Participant 3	At least 4 times a week	Duolingo, Hellotalk	French, Turkish, Persian, Arabic
Participant 4	At least once a week	Duolingo	French
Participant 5	5 times a week	Tandem	English

Key finding #1

The initial goal, which is to learn and practice speaking skills, is foiled by the way other users use apps in a community.

Key finding #1

All participant noticed the difficulty to find a serious peer to connect with in their learning journey.

All participants experienced the fact to face someone interested to flirt or a difficulty to find serious people focused on learning a language. Moreover, because of the intentions that certain users can have, serious learners can be extremely solicited for any and every reason, except the aim purpose.

“The minute that women on Tandem started to flirt with me, I immediately stopped using the app. This was not the first time, so after that, I didn’t want to get to know anyone else because of my trust issues.”

Participant 1

Recommendation #1

Enhance that in-app language community experience to encourage the commitment of serious users through clearly communicated guidelines and implemented controls.

Potential Approaches to Solve for This

- Communicate rules and guidelines in interacting within a community to which users have to agree to
- Use key language detection to determine intent of community members
- Screen users through a community review process, or monetize community experience to ensure serious community commitment

Key finding #2

Users really appreciate learning a language through gamification

Key finding #2

All participants acknowledge the fact to gamify the app is very motivating.

All participants agree that going up the levels, winning points while competing with other people motivate them to go to apps often. They also recognize that, as much as gamification is motivating, visual performance play a significant role on their usage frequencies.



Screenshot made by
participant 4

“You have that leaderboard where if you are learning a certain amount of time a day, you'll get a lot of points. An then, you can be recognized as a top 50 learners and it kind of become a competition because I want to go on the app more and learn more”

- Participant 4

Recommendation #2

Gamify the user experience as much as possible to encourage users to make progress by challenging themselves and celebrating small victories at different levels.

Potential Approaches to Solve for This

- Keep up the visual performance by designing a very intuitive and user-friendly learning experience
- Create possible game competition between users
- Give users rewards every time they progress a level to move forward
- Create a giveaway contest if the user is in the top 10 learners monthly

Key finding #3

Learners keep writing over speaking even on a social media platform oriented to improve speaking skills

Key finding #3

All participants noticed the fact that people usually prefer writing over speaking.

Even though some existing learning apps are oriented on speaking skills improvement, people still have the fear the speak to people and be judged by their level. This is why, they keep chatting by text to stay in their comfort zone.

“Most of the people on Tandem prefer chatting through texting which is not helpful enough.”

Participant 5

“There's the problem that in some apps, like Tandem, it's difficult to find someone who is ready to take part in video or audio conversation. So, it takes some time to find someone who can start making conversations with you through audio or video calls.”

Participant 3

Recommendation #3

Encouraging people to improve their speaking skills with confidence and make them ready so they feel comfortable in reaching out to the community as a way to practice.

Potential Approaches to Solve for This

- Create a conversational simulator to allow the users to evaluate their level and upskill their fluency about every type of subject until they feel comfortable. That conversational simulator can, then, evaluate the vocabulary used and the pronunciation before correcting the user.
- Create a community where matches are suggested to the users to practice their speaking skills with other users who have a more advanced level than them.
- Providing users freedom and control to provide another language to learn, or give a custom donation in order to provide incentive to more advanced people who can help them.

Next Steps

- Validate findings with surveys
- Conduct a quantitative study on how apps can help users to build confidence and overcome their fear to speak over writing
- Make a design sprint for brainstorming

Appendix

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