

“Break the language Great Wall”(RedClay): The language learning application

In 2010, there were more than 40 million people on Earth trying to learn the Chinese (Confucius Institute Headquarters, 2010). In addition to this, China has recently become the first economic power in the world, overtaking the United States of America. This implies that the demand for a Chinese language education is likely to significantly increase in the coming years as well as the immigration rate to the Middle Kingdom. Indeed, as learning Chinese is a persuasive way to get familiar with both the Mandarin language and culture (Lo Bianco, 2007), learners might want to experience immersion into the country.

On the other hand, the adoption of smartphones in developed countries broadens the horizon for application development. This is also true for learning apps which now offer various teaching features and subjects. Many Chinese language apps are amongst them. The use of multimedia tools can enhance the motivation and the range of education (Chuang & Ku, 2011). It nevertheless remains a research subject to determine which tools are the most efficient for Chinese learning. Flashcards are the most commonly used but they do not enable any social dimension; which nevertheless also influences learning performance.

Some mobile applications such as *Hello Talk* already focus on an interaction and exchange between users. It connects two individuals eager to be taught each other's language. However, the created relationships are not meant to develop outside the virtual world.

The concept of the “language partner” is similar but it involves real contact and intellectual enrichment through everyday life situations and activities. It is an efficient way for knowledge transfer to occur and therefore is often adopted as a learning method. This is especially true for complex languages such as Chinese that consist of distinct aspects: Reading, Writing and Speaking. Linking written and oral Chinese requires practice because it is not phonetically intuitive (Krashen, 1981).

When he moves to China, developing such relationships remains difficult for a foreigner. English is indeed not widely spoken in this country and contact with local people can therefore become very limited. However, many immigrants to China such as students or young workers have skills in English – or any other language – they could share against Mandarin lessons with Chinese partners.

RedClay is an application meant to help those two populations –immigrants to China eager to discover their host language and culture and Chinese citizens willing to improve their level in a foreign tongue – connect and develop both stable and enriching relations.

In the design stage, focus was set on socialization, motivation inspiration and cultural support.

In the era of Web 2.0, Social Networking Site (SNS) becomes an important source of getting information and a main way to interact and connect with other people online. According to Benson

and Avrey (2009), the digital generation of people are more willing to access information and interact with others through the internet. Because of the features of SNS, it is then possible to create a language learning application to provide a new way for language learners to interact and learn from each other in the learning process.

RedClay is a mobile-web language learning application, created out of HTML5 and PHP codes. It mainly provides socialization and learning function. Socialization is encouraged through a chatting platform that lets language learners meet each other. Furthermore, these “language learners” are matched together on the base of the language they want to learn and their personal preferences. Indeed, motivation has a major in learning efficiency (Mondahl, 2014). RedClay therefore aims at raising the level of involvement by giving users the possibility of doing common activities according to what their interests are.

As an example, users can choose interests in topics such as sports, travelling or playing games. The matching is then made between people sharing similar preferences and provided to the user in the form of a recommendation list.

The core of the application then is the management of relationships in between language partners. In order for it to be as successful as possible, the application provides users with activity suggestions to both themselves and their partners based on their common interests. For example, considering to chess-player profiles, “Play chess together in the week-end in a park” could be a suggestion. The chat function then allows the users to communicate and discuss their availabilities, etc.

Eventually, as first contacts might be hindered by the language barrier, RedClay counts 34 vocabulary categories that rely on basic words and expressions. Each language-partner “couple” is provided with a list of relevant vocabulary topics according to their common interests. The purpose is that they will be able to establish contact when willing to talk to each other. The words and expressions are sorted out in three different levels in order to enable a sort of progression.

Culture differences also are a hurdle in intercultural interactions (Spackman, 2009) and that’s why RedClay also gives cultural information about each topic in order to bridge the gaps and broaden the knowledge of its users. Culture indeed is deeply bound to language and for that reason, it shall be associated to language learning. This point is essential for China immigrants who are trying to acquire the feeling of being home in a new country.

As a summary, RedClay is a mobile-web application aiming at motivating learners to master the foreign language they want to learn by permitting social interactions.

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