

# **Analysis of HelloTalk: a language learning app as a medium of communication**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Language learning mobile apps such as HiNative and Tandem have always been available for language learning enthusiasts to acquire foreign languages effectively without the need to attend physical lessons due to the meteoric rise of Web 2.0 technology. Through the usage of portable devices, social interactivity could be facilitated as it is possible for language learners to collaborate and exchange information with native speakers of their target language and other learners (Miangah & Nezerat, 2012).

In this paper, I aim to analyze HelloTalk, which is a prominent language learning app that has stood out among the other apps and has been a competent platform for users to interact with native speakers and other language learning enthusiasts from all around the world. The features of this app will be evaluated using David Crystal's (2006) features of both spoken and written language. Additionally, this paper seeks to provide a brief analysis of HelloTalk's impact on language, communication and society.

## **MOBILE ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING (MALL)**

The contribution of technology towards second language pedagogy can be dated back to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gallego, 1992; Barson et al, 1993). Stanford Learning Lab was in charge of one of the first projects utilizing voice and email with mobile phones in language learning (Brown, 2001). Spanish study programs that enable users to practice vocabulary and translations and gain access to live talking tutors were developed.

Various studies regarding the utilization of mobile devices in second language pedagogy have been conducted. Most of them have proved that mobile devices can lead to positive results for language learning (Shield & Kukulka, 2008; Steel, 2012). Interactivity enables mobile learning to stand out as learners can engage in practical learning activities by communicating and collaborating with others.

## **HELLOTALK AND ITS FUNCTIONS**

HelloTalk, which was founded in 2017, is available on both iOS and Android systems. The development team of this app is based in Hong Kong and Shenzhen, China. The main goal of this app is to enable language enthusiasts to connect with native speakers and their target cultures to facilitate language learning. According to HelloTalk's user report in 2018, it has garnered more than 12 million users and can host more than 150 languages.

Just like every other typical language app, HelloTalk allows its users to chat (both 1-to 1 and chatgroups are available) and make audio or video calls with other native speakers or language learners (Figure 1). What's interesting to note is this app has an in-built correction feature for the chat function, which enables native speakers to correct learners whenever they make any grammar mistakes in their speech.

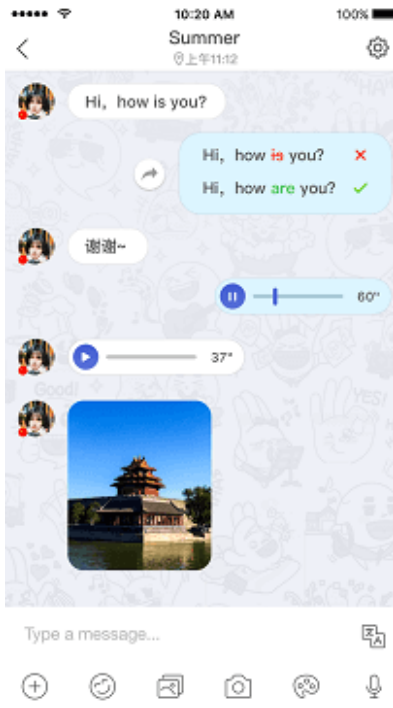


Figure 1: Chat



Figure 2: Moments

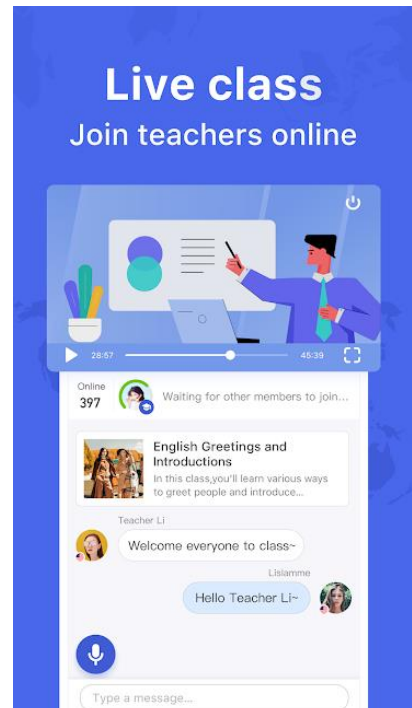


Figure 3: Live class

HelloTalk also provides language learners with a platform to post journal entries known as “Moments”, which resemble “statuses” in Facebook (Figure 2). This unique feature enables HelloTalk to stand out from other language apps as it facilitates interactivity effectively. Native speakers can also utilize the correction feature in Moments to correct the speech of language learners.

HelloTalk allows its users to create virtual classrooms and share lesson materials in the form of PowerPoint files (Figure 3). This serves as a very effective platform for native speakers to teach their own language and culture to other users through chats and audio calls.

Although HelloTalk allows its users to search for language partners, they can only do so for one target language. To gain access to native speakers of multiple target languages, users will have to pay a fee and subscribe to the premium version. By doing so, users are also able to access translation and transliteration features.

### COMPARING HELLOTALK TO SPEECH AND TEXT FEATURES

Through analyzing Netspeak, Crystal (2006) proposed seven features that differentiate speech and text. This section will analyze functions of HelloTalk that exhibit features from both written and spoken language.

Chats and Moments in HelloTalk mainly exhibit features of text-based communication. Firstly, chats and Moments are largely space bound as they are static and permanent. As chat contents cannot be deleted and will remain for an indefinite amount of time, users are able to browse and revisit what they have written in their respective chat spaces anytime. Moments are restricted in word count and each one cannot exceed 2000 words. These functions exist beyond the control of time and is not affected by the time factor.

Both chats and Moments are more spontaneous than contrived, assuming minimal lags between production and reception. Communication in chats and Moments are one-way in nature, which signifies that users are unable to see what other users are writing simultaneously or when someone is replying (Herring, 2007). This causes impediment in turn-taking which will lead to confusion when a lot of users are talking at the same time and may cause interruptions and overlapping.



Figure 4: Chat with emojis

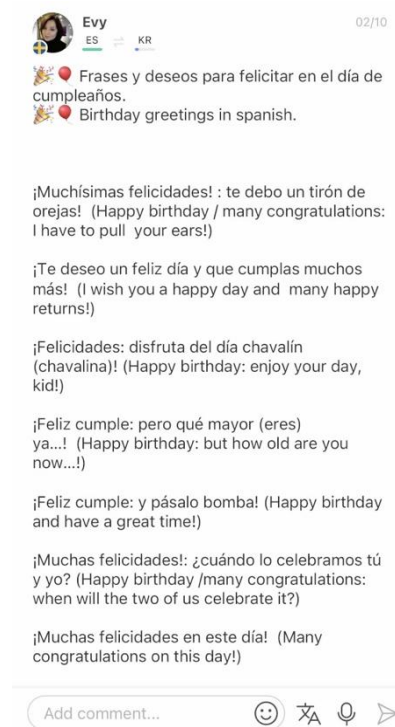


Figure 5: Spanish learning material

As a form of computer-mediated communication, Moments and chats are visually decontextualized. As a result, extralinguistic cues are largely absent. However, HelloTalk allows users to send emojis, GIFs and stickers, which serves as a role to mimic paralinguistic cues and provide contextual information (Figure 4).

Alike to speech, chats are more loosely structured and socially interactive. Given the spontaneous nature of instant messaging alongside with the more informal nature of instant messaging, users are more likely to employ a more informal language style, which involves informal vocabulary and missing punctuation (missing punctuation can be observed in Figure 4).

On contrary, Moments tend to be elaborately structured and factually communicative. Aside from using Moments to share bits of their daily lives, a significant amount of users utilize Moments to share language learning materials with language learning enthusiasts. For

instance, Swedish user Evy (@t\_evy\_63510) who has more than 600 followers, constantly updates her page with phrases and sentences for people who are interested in Spanish (Figure 5).

Both Moments and chats are generally graphically and prosodically rich as pictures, emojis, GIFs and audio recordings can be attached to messages and posts. Emojis and GIFs are able to convey prosodic features like pitch by expressing emotions related to the content. The use of audio recordings can enhance a user's learning experience as it helps learners to pick up prosodic features of their target language and improve their pronunciation and articulation.

Calls and Live Classes in HelloTalk are predominantly speech-based. Calls (audio and video calls) in HelloTalk exhibit all of the features of speech-based communication while Live Classes demonstrate characteristics of both text and speech forms of communication.

Firstly, Live Classes are time bound, where the class depends on the mutual duration of time between the tutors and learners that coincide for the lesson to be carried out. Live Classes are also spontaneous as native speakers can answer questions asked by learners instantly without long time lags. Spoken errors could be rephrased and revised by speakers in Live Classes, which resembles speech-based communication.

Live Classes also exhibit some text features: contrived, elaborately structured and factually communicative. This is because these online lessons are based on learning materials that are planned out by native speakers. Live Classes are graphically and prosodically rich as both visual aids (Powerpoint files as lesson materials) and prosodic features can be present at the same time. As video conferencing is only available for calls and chatgroups instead of Live Classes, this function is visually decontextualized. As such, extralinguistic cues such as gestures and facial expressions are largely absent.

With a combination of both speech and text features, HelloTalk is able to maximize its potential as an effective and holistic platform for language learners to acquire a new language through interacting with native speakers. Although video calls are available in HelloTalk, it is currently not possible for users to have Live Classes with the help of video conferencing. An addition of this function will definitely upgrade the quality of this app and enhance the learning experiences of users.

### **EFFECTS ON LANGUAGE**

According to Herring's (2007) faceted classification scheme for computer-mediated discourse, meta-linguistic awareness is amplified through the persistence of computer-mediated discourse. As HelloTalk is a language learning application, the phenomenon of users being more conscious in their choice of language use can be observed.

This could lead to linguistic hypercorrection, which happens when a grammatical rule is applied in an inappropriate context as an attempt to be 'correct'. Figure 6 demonstrates an example of this phenomenon.

지호  
 CN ⇄ ES

Yesterday 13:16

El baristo trabaja en la cafeteria



Delicious Snack

♥ 4    💬 1    🌐

Neomar :

El **baristo** trabaja en la **eafeteria**

El **barista** trabaja en la **cafetería**

Figure 6: Moment that exhibits hyperforeignism

In this Moment that was posted by a Spanish learner, a grammatical gender marking mistake was made. In Spanish, the ending ‘-o’ is typically used to mark masculine gender and ‘-a’ is for feminine gender, like *medico/medica* (male/female doctor), *bombero/bombrera* (male/female firefighter) etc. In this case, the word *barista* is invariable in gender, which means it can be used to represent both genders.

As the user intended to describe the barista as male, ‘-o’ was assumed as the correct form to mark the gender of the word. In fact, it is wrong grammatically and the gender *barista* can solely be marked by the definite article *el*. (*la* is used if the barista is female) This act of misidentifying the distribution of a certain grammatical pattern and using it in incorrect contexts has been termed as hyperforeignism, which is a form of hypercorrection (Janda, Joseph, & Jacobs, 1994).

### EFFECTS ON SOCIETY

HelloTalk’s user report in 2018 reflected that East Asian languages such as Korean and Japanese are the most popular languages after English. The massive popularity of Korean among language learners can be attributed to *hallyu*, the Korean wave, which is propelled by the spread of K-pop and Korean dramas (Sotirova, 2014). According to Nomura and Yuan (2018), Japan’s pop culture such as manga and anime has played a very big role in the surge of popularity of Japanese.

Besides, Chinese is also very popular among HelloTalk users, especially in the U.S. According to Xu (2012), Chinese has been deemed as one of the most ‘critical’ foreign languages to increase global competitiveness and heighten national security. However, pedagogical resources to learn Chinese in the U.S. are lacking. That being said, language

apps such as HelloTalk serve as a platform that is competent enough to be an alternative pedagogical resource for language learners in the U.S. who are interested in Chinese.

As a prominent innovation in the field of language educational technology, HelloTalk has contributed a huge part to mobile-assisted language learning technology which is still in its developing stages. When it was first launched in 2017, it received an award as one of the best social apps in Play Store. This proves that integrating the features of social networking systems into language pedagogy helps to increase the motivation of language learners to pick up a new language.

### **CONCLUSION**

By combining both speech and text features, HelloTalk has succeeded in being one of the most prominent and useful language apps. Talking to native speakers and learning about their culture and language has become much more accessible. Future possible updates of this app's features such as integrating video calls together with Live Classes could further enrich the learning experiences of its users.

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