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Mobile Apps in Learning Chinese as a Second Language

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ABSTRACT

Technical innovations and Wi-Fi provide to everyone a chance to learn foreign languages, *provide* instructional **materials** in accessible formats to students, individual consultations and communication with native speakers. Mobile applications and online platforms today are been delivering to users extremely fast, but methodological schemes remain as before. In this article we are going to talk about Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language mobile applications development trends, we will analyze criteria for their selection and features of several applications. We are going to evaluate their effectiveness from the methodological point of view in the context of the goals of Learning Chinese as a Second Language at the beginner's level among Russian speakers. We also are going to propose approach to successful Language Learning applications design. In addition, we will touch upon the topic of transition crisis from the classical scheme of teaching Chinese as a Second Language to innovative models.

Keyword: Chinese Language, Mobile Applications, Second Language Learning, Teaching Methodology

Introduction

Innovations today are related to everything, including Language Learning. Technical innovations and Wi-Fi provides to everyone a chance to enjoy Lifelong Learning, access to learning materials, individual consultations and communication with native speakers. Innovative ideas and new items such as mobile applications and online platforms today are been developing fast, but methodological schemes remain as before.

The main directions of mobile applications development trends face challenges, related to goals of Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language. Currently it is quite difficult to analyze the criteria for mobile applications selection and useful features of applications, but that is even more difficult to evaluate their effectiveness from the methodological point of view.

The most important problem of Language Learning applications design is the lack of balance between user's pragmatism and designer's idealism, and, of course, too strong binding to the traditional methods. Today, the tasks for the methodologists not only in Russia but also worldwide are adaptation of existing applications and elaboration of evaluation criteria.

CALL Development and Main Trends

Historically, there was a strong tradition of training Sinologists in Russia. Time passes, and classical books are now more and more seen as a reference tool for linguists keen, and calligraphers. (Strukova, 2015) The disadvantages of the traditional materials applied nowadays for self-study, as well as learning Chinese for entry level under the guidance of experienced teachers, are: insufficient study of oral communicative exercises in the context,

which is close to real life; the simplicity and uniformity of exercises; lack of the system program and selection of learning content.

New technologies offer us a fascinating and vivid Chinese language self-learning at the beginner's level, here are some examples. Applications and platforms from the Confucius Institute offer movies with slang, oral speech and culture information, a set of interactive exercises entertain student and provide more information about the language through playing and singing. It contains lexical bonuses, as well. In the Confucius Institute Online, you can find suitable materials for topics, such as: Chinese history course, HSK4, On the great wall of China, Meeting or Chinese Spring Festival.

Paid educational online resources are popular among users. However, it should be mentioned, that students report that they are willing to attend classes in a real school, if there would be a chance. Virtual classrooms are opened not only by the Confucius Institute or by educational institutions in addition to the general course, but also by specialized platforms like Laoshi.ru. The designers of the online classes usually fill their courses with cultural features like Confucius quotes or names of traditional dishes, open blogs, 24-hour online support and the opportunity to use the app on your mobile phone.

This type of Chinese Language self-study materials and courses are well designed, colorful and detailed, but the ship invariably bumps into motivation reefs. According to statistics published by Katharine B. Nelson (Nelson, 2011), for special programs, courses and applications for self-study, designed for 20 weeks, of the 50 people on average, only one student came to the finish line. Most of the participants dropped after the third lesson. In her opinion, the application design does not really plays role for participants.

Criteria and Approaches to Mobile Apps Evaluation

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) – is not a new topic to discuss, but touched Chinese Language recently. According to Chinese language features the designers willing to create applications with a large number of images and associations chains. Applications for Chinese language study appear on apps markets with great speed, and for now they are the largest segment of "new" technologies in language learning. The criteria by which to examine and evaluate their uniqueness and innovativeness are vague and are regularly the subject of discussion (Strukova, 2015) among methodologists.

Since most of the applications are paid, through analysis of popular applications, we can only rely on the views of users and consumers. Their opinion could be considered as "the invisible hand of the market". Moreover, since there is no universal applications effectiveness test or a control system, when using self-study app, students judge process according to their own experience. In addition, applications are often used for other purposes (translation, travelling, games, etc.), without proper control of the material understanding, so the users "votes" and "likes" which make lists and ratings, can be considered as representative only in part.

Due to the lack of evidence-based information, users can make their own (Zhou, 2015) lists of "criteria for good applications". They include important features of the modern applications, such as: the use of active learning technology, customized product and learning from your mistakes.

Fortunately there are scientifically designed approaches to evaluation for applications for the self-study of the English language, which we consider as universal to some extent. According to Philip Hubbard (2006), there are three major approaches to software evaluation: evaluation driven by checklists or forms, evaluation guided by methodological frameworks for language teaching, and evaluation linked to second language acquisition (SLA) theory and research-based criteria.

Checklists

Series of questions or categories for judgment have been presented from the earliest stages of CALL. The evaluator is expected to make a response based on the information gathered through the reviewing process. There are number of examples of software checklists available online. As for the Chinese, these Checklists are used only by specialists, and the analysis results are not published. In view of the lack of an adapted scheme for the Chinese language is only used when absolutely necessary on a small scale.

Methodological Framework

Methodological frameworks differ from checklists in two ways. First, they attempt to be largely descriptive rather than judgmental. Second, they attempt fundamentally to link with the language teaching and learning considerations that take place outside of technology. If we talk about the application of the Methodological frameworks for advanced applications for learning Chinese speaking users, then they work only under the control of teachers from the outside, and in the creation of applications do not appear at all. There are studies on the application of Methodological frameworks, but there are no studies on the functional efficiency.

SLA-based Approaches

Given that teaching languages with software is a form of language teaching, a reasonable procedure for software evaluation is to build it on recommendation from theory or research in instructed SLA. However, results in some cases differ from expectations and SLA-based Approach should be taken in context.

In general, the methods of analysis of the effectiveness of the application for language learning and Chinese in particular, based on the principle of rationality and compliance goals. Despite the recommendations of methodologists and scientifically based expectations, Philip Hubbard (2006) found out that in the selection and evaluation of software, 78% of respondents rely on the opinion of friends and colleagues.

Popular Apps and Their Features

For this part of our discussion we took a list of applications proposed by App Store (for iOS platform based devices) and Google Play (for Android platform based devices), compiled by popularity rating among users. Due to the limited number of applications for "Chinese/Russian" language pair, Russian-language users have to turn to the English-language courses. It should be mentioned, that in Russia the English Language is taught in schools, but the course is not mandatory and for now many people still have difficulties with understanding native speakers without using a dictionary. This complicates the process of studying the Chinese language through English taught course, and has a negative effect on the students' motivation.

Speaking about preferences among Russian-speakers, "Pleco" is popular for many years, although it is just a well-designed dictionary. As well as "Line Dictionary" (former "Nciku"). CNTV (Chinese Internet Television) appeared among recommended applications for Chinese Language self-study. Students commented that is very useful for them to watch free TV releases on the gadget. For this type of applications can be noted rapidly gaining popularity "TingMedia: Broadcasting Stories". The program allows learners to listen to a variety of stories, fairytales and even poems. An interesting is the position of extraordinary "Rosetta Stone" course, it consistently gets high marks from experts, while not falling into the list of the popular applications among users. As we can see, these listed applications are associated with listening and visual perception of information, which is so severely lacking classical benefits.

Code-switching method (sandwich stories method) is used to develop a short story in the student's native language, with the gradual addition of foreign words. Thus, at the output you are telling a story entirely in a foreign language. This interesting technique is based on psycholinguistics ideas and well illustrated in the application "Learn Chinese: Toy Story 3". This extraordinary application is poorly adapted to the Russian-speaking users and it is suitable mainly for younger children. The technology is used in a language pair "Chinese/Russian" extremely rare due to different grammatical structures and complexity of adaptation of authentic texts.

Thanks to new technologies, today the Chinese for children is full of colors, life and the learning process is a fascinating journey to the land of Confucius and Chinese characters. Teachers are using iPads and different online and multimedia courses in class. Methodologists are implementing psychology and psycholinguistics achievements for the development of applications interface. One of the most well-known applications for kids – "Monki Chinese Class", is developed on the basis of book with original illustrations "Chineasy" by Xue Shaolan. As Albert Krisskoy concluded in his critique review (2014), this method can be used for entertainment and for increasing the motivation, but can not be taken as a single way to learn Chinese characters. Insanely popular analogue of Tamagotchi - the app "Feed Me (Mandarin)", where learner has to feed the dragon with words it likes. In these applications, the basic are implemented quickly memorize and physical respond techniques.

Russian-speaking users gave high estimation to applications such as "Train Chinese", "Memrise", "Amanda", "Polyglot" and "Anki". These applications are a combination of colorful flash cards and spaced repetition method, they ate not fully involve the gadgets functions.

Successful Design

As we see, with the development of new technologies the consumer is offered a large number of innovative and interactive programs for learning Chinese, some of which - the repetition of well-forgotten old information. Some users have focused only on the new learning tool, which can not become a basis for high-quality language learning. Without proper motivation and perseverance, all of the above - is more fun, game and add-on. The skillful organization of process, the conscious choice of learning goals and new language learning technology is a good chance to reach the intended target and raise the Chinese language proficiency to the desired level.

However, many new applications, as before, are designed on the principle of spaced repetition. While experimenting with this method since 1932, Professor Mace came to the conclusion that it is simple, but effective technique to memorize new language patterns. In the 60-70s school of cognitive linguistics has confirmed the validity of the method of repetition, offering a new memory circuit material - flash cards. These are the same cards, which everyone who is connected with the study of foreign languages knows and uses. Experts say (Cull, 2000) up to 90% of today's applications are based on the repetition filed under this or any other circumstances.

The current situation with teaching Chinese with mobile applications or even online courses in Russia is satisfactory, but not perfect at all. Still there are few methodologists (Kochergin, 2012) who want to increase the level of teaching Chinese in the schools and universities. They recommend us to take into account different modern ideas and principles which can be used for mobile apps design. They are:

1. The principle "one difficulty" lesson.
2. Clear learning purpose of study process.
3. A variety of testimonies, exercises and control.

4. Work with the improvement factor.
5. Work according to the target age.
6. Add video materials, color pictures and other multimedia resources.
7. To engage abstract connection while learning new language material.

In fact, for Russians, Chinese is one of the most difficult languages in the world to learn, than for some other countries, and we have a nice opportunity to use comments above to adjust existing methodology and make in more useful, effective and profitable.

Chinese language teaching for Russian-speaking students system crisis is not only the work of teachers and the production of new textbooks (printed type). It also affects the latest goals of communication with native speakers. The functions of gadgets allow designers to realize and implement the most daring ideas, and to develop a self-study multi-functional application or the whole platform.

The most important problem of designing applications for the Chinese language learning is the lack of balance and too strong binding to the traditional methods. Nowadays the market surplus of the same type of applications, students are selecting tools for self-study basing on personal preferences or recommendations of incompetent none-methodologists. In terms of methodological analysis, some applications have no difference from books, TV or audio player. Guidelines are often not put into practice. Of course, it is undeniable focus on the customer and market, but also the reduction in the scientifically formed criteria level will be a shortcoming.

Conclusion

As we mentioned above, the tasks for the methodologists not only in Russia but also worldwide are adaptation of existing applications and elaboration of evaluation criteria. In this article we have talked about the main development directions and trends in mobile applications for Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language, analyzed the criteria for their selection and briefly discussed the features of several popular applications. We tried to evaluate their effectiveness from the methodological point of view in the context of the goals of Learning Chinese as a Second Language at the beginner's level in Russia. We also proposed few methods of more successful Language Learning applications design. In the end, we touched upon the topic of transition crisis from the classical scheme of teaching Chinese as a Second Language to innovative models. Balance between traditional methods and market inquiry should be found and gadgets functions should be used in full potential.

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