# *Lingbe*: An App to Practice Languages with (Non)Native Speakers: A Review[1]

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## Abstract

The introduction of new technology has given us many advantages in various fields of learning. Second/foreign language teaching and learning have also benefited from technology; it provides language learners with in and out-of-class opportunities to facilitate the language learning process. Speaking is one of the areas can be benefit from these technological advancements. The purpose of this review is to examine the app *Lingbe*, an application that provides opportunities for learners to practice speaking English outside of the language classroom. *Lingbe* has not had a comprehensive review; hence, the purpose of this article is to inform both language teachers and learners of its effectiveness The authors of this review believe that *Lingbe* is an excellent application for developing and enhancing learners' speaking skills beyond the confines of a traditional language classroom.

## Resumen

La introducción de nuevas tecnologías nos ha aportado muchas ventajas en diversos campos del aprendizaje. La enseñanza y el aprendizaje de segundas lenguas o lenguas extranjeras también se han beneficiado de la tecnología; Proporciona a los estudiantes de idiomas oportunidades dentro y fuera de clase para facilitar el proceso de aprendizaje de idiomas. Hablar es una de las áreas que pueden beneficiarse de estos avances tecnológicos. El propósito de esta revisión es examinar la aplicación *Lingbe,* una aplicación que brinda oportunidades para que los estudiantes practiquen hablar inglés fuera del aula de idiomas. *Lingbe* no ha tenido una revisión exhaustiva; por lo tanto, el propósito de este artículo es informar tanto a los profesores de idiomas como a los estudiantes sobre su efectividad. Los autores de esta revisión creen que *Lingbe* es una aplicación excelente para desarrollar y mejorar las habilidades orales de los estudiantes más allá de los límites de un aula de idiomas tradicional.

## Introduction

Language learning, according to Kukulska-Hulme et al. (2017) "should be an important lifelong pursuit, carried out in a variety of ways according to changing social, educational, and working life imperatives, as well as personal interests and needs" (p. 217). With the introduction and integration of technological innovations, it is no surprise that most disciplines have, are, and will continue to experience changes, and educational settings are not an exception. Learners, instructors, teachers, and researchers should be aware of the ongoing changes that technology has caused and the learning opportunities these can provide.

## Mobile Technology: Past and Present

Mobile technologies (e.g., smartphones, tablets, laptops, MP3 and MP4 players) are more popular than the traditional computer-assisted language learning (Myong-Hee, 2017). Using mobile devices "increases the ubiquity and accessibility of e-learning" and can be used and adapted to the ways that individual learners wish to progress as in self-learning (Ng et al., 2015). Brown (2010) also states that "the distinguishing aspect of mobile learning is the assumption that learners are continuously on the move" (p. 7) and this move encompasses not only the physical aspects, but also the contextual changes that individuals may experience. The multimodal design of mobile technologies is also reflected in the cognitive processes that learners' minds perform (Mayer, 2014). Chanier and Lamy (2017) state that in these multimodal environments "learners orchestrate various resources including language, in its written and spoken forms, as well as images, colors, movements, and sounds" (p. 428). This multimodality can help the learners engage more deeply in learning the content as in real-life situations.

Given the benefits and features of mobile technologies, we are now witnessing an increasing application of such technologies, especially smartphone-mounted apps, in L2 teaching and learning. Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is a flourishing field of research with promising implications for L2 pedagogy (Nushi & Eqbali,, 2018). Kukulska-Hulme and Shield (2008) in the past claimed that MALL research in the areas of speaking and listening "does suggest that collaborative speaking and listening activities could be successfully supported by mobile devices" (p. 281). However, there are currently many mobile language

learning apps available (e.g., *Babbel, Busuu, Duolingo, HelloTalk, Tandem*) that provide a context in which learners can be exposed to language use. According to Genesee (2000), after some time and with enough exposure, "activation and recognition become relatively automatic" (p. 4). However, it is common that in many educational settings, the class time is limited and there is not enough time and opportunities for learners to practice the language and allow automatization of their linguistic knowledge. These themes were very common even before mobile technology reached its current level. As Thornton and Houser (2005) stated the existence of mobile devices and the applications programmed for them could help extend the opportunities for exposure and practice in language learning and/or teaching contexts. Sharples (2006) also argued that learners could associate mobile devices with informal learning and that even then they "often find their informal learning activities more motivating than learning in formal settings such as schools" (p. 16).

More recently Blake (2017) said that integrating technology in language classes specifically for speaking is not an easy task, and whether and how to use technology to teach speaking is among the primary worries of L2 teachers. In the past even Reeves and Nass (as cited in Blake, 2008) argued that "people's interactions with computers, television, and new media [were] fundamentally social and natural, just like interactions in real life" (p. 3). Therefore, nowadays an app that simulates human interaction can help teachers and learners by improving their speaking ability. The present paper intends to focus on one such mobile language learning application, namely *Lingbe*, to explore the possibilities and opportunities it offers L2 learners to improve their speaking skills.

## Lingbe

*Lingbe* is a language-practicing application that is based on the idea of language exchange. The idea dates to the 1970s and its learning approach is grounded on the premise that any language can be learned through reciprocal language exchange between partners. Ideally, one partner should be a native speaker of the particular language that the other partner wants to learn (Nushi & Khazaie, 2020). This app was initially designed for Spanish and English speakers, but later, the community expanded to the point that it now supports over 360 languages. *Lingbe* is based on the interactions of a global community of L2 learners and allows its users to practice their favorite languages through messages, audio recordings, audio calls, and video calls. This app is compatible with both iOS and Android operating systems, and it can be downloaded from the App Store and Google Play. After installing the application, users must sign up via email or *Facebook* accounts and provide information about their native language and the language they would like to learn. Later, users can adjust or update their primary information, such as selecting up to three languages as their native language or the languages they want to learn (or practice). Furthermore, the app claims that users' native language would be verified. The users also need to verify their accounts to have access to additional features such as referral codes. These are codes that are unique to users, and they can use them to invite



other learners to this app, which earns them rewards.

The very first move in this app is to make a call after registration. To initiate a call, the users should click the Call button in the bottom-middle section of the homepage (Fig. 1). The user has the option of a practice room or a native call. User's account is activated once they make the first call (Fig. 2). They can check their status under the 'Me' tab which includes information about their current level and the amount of XP (experience users get for practicing) they gained, the amount of time they spent assisting other users with their native language(s), the amount of time they spent practicing their selected foreign language(s), and the number of new friends they made in a week.
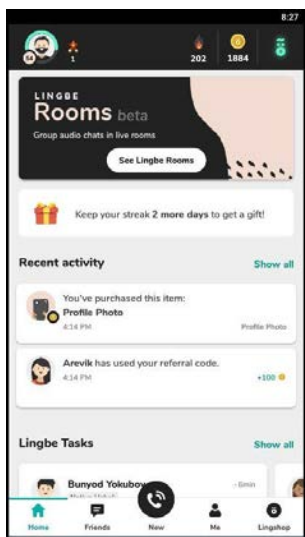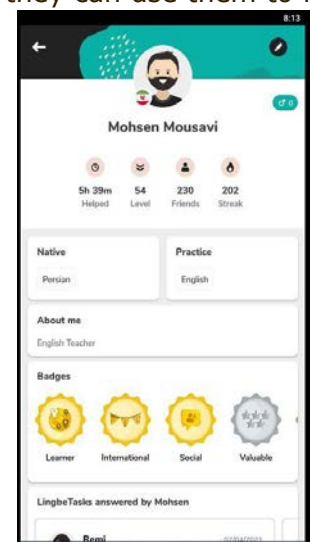


Figure 1: A screenshot of Home

Figure 2: A screenshot of a profile
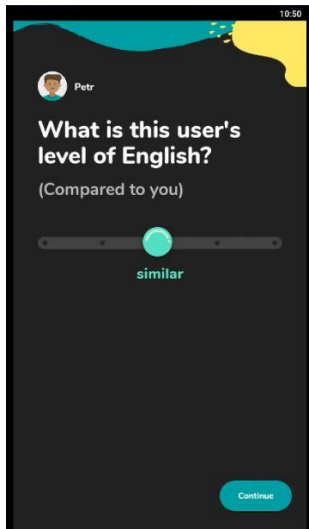
*Lingbe* application has five important features:

### Calls



Figure 3:
A screenshot of the feedback after a call

By pressing the call button, learners can initiate a call with other 'lingbers' in a practice room or native call. Users need at least 10 'Lingos' for a practice call and 50 Lingos for a native call. Lingos are the in-app currency, like coins that learners receive for assisting other users in learning their native language or for watching advertisements. Users first have two types of calls: assisting or practicing. During the call, users can see their partner's favorite activities and use them as topics to have an effective conversation.. Following the call, users can provide their partner with feedback (Fig. 3) on their language proficiency and behavior. The kind of feedback depends on the call type. To give feedback to a partner, one must first engage in a conversation with them for at least two minutes. Otherwise, it is deemed a poor call, and they are unable to provide any feedback on the learner's language proficiency. After a practice call, learners have the opportunity to provide feedback on their conversational partners language proficiency as well as their behavior using a scale of 1 to 5 stars. In a native call, on the other hand, they can provide learners with feedback on their proficiency from beginner to proficient.

### Chats

After each call, users have the option to stay in touch with the partner they talked to previously. They can add them to their contacts, which appear under the 'Friends' tab. The tab contains two panels: 'Chats' and 'Lingcalls'. Users can open the chat box by pressing on any of their contacts' names in the Chat panel (Fig. 4). They can send texts and voice messages and make another call to practice. Additionally, they can unlink or block contacts if they are disturbed by their manners. The Lingcalls panel includes a history of all the learner's calls, allowing them to see every incoming or outgoing call ever made.
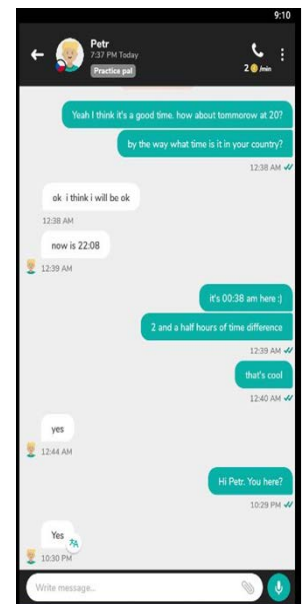
### Tasks

This feature allows users to post questions and anyone in the Lingbe app community can answer those questions (Fig. 5). They can ask questions in six categories: Vocabulary, Grammar, Pronunciation, Translation, Friends, and about different topics. These questions are displayed on the 'Home' tab for the whole community. In addition to the six categories, users may filter Tasks to be displayed based on different factors such as whether they are related to their native or target language(s), and whether they have answered or not. They can click on any question to respond to it. After forty-eight hours of posting the Task, the answer that receives the most votes (likes) is considered the 'Featured Answer'.
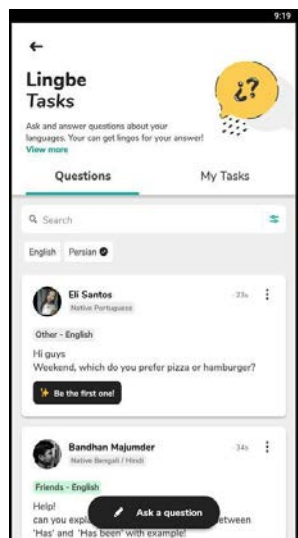


Figure 4:
A screenshot of a chat



Figure 5:
A screenshot of *Lingbe* tasks

### Lingos

These are the in-app credits (currency). *Lingbe* allows many ways to earn Lingos. The most effective way to earn Lingos is to help other members in practicing learners' native language by answering a native call when the notification pops up. In this way, users can receive six Lingos per minute. Likewise, users can purchase these Lingos from the 'Lingshop' tab through the various offers that are provided. Every day, users can view up to five advertisements, each of which gives them ten Lingos. They receive eight Lingos for obtaining a featured response. Users can also invite people to *Lingbe* with their personal code and they are rewarded with a hundred Lingos.

### Rooms

Rooms are groups of audio chats in live rooms that allow multiple users to practice the language with each other simultaneously (Fig. 6). When users enter a Room, they can listen to the conversations of other users.

They can also ask the host to start speaking by raising their hand and participating in the discussion. Users must pay two Lingos to join the Rooms, and they will lose two Lingos for every minute they spend in it. Users can create their Room if they have an interesting topic to discuss and wish to be the host for a Room. They need twenty Lingos to begin their Room. The host of the Room will receive one Lingo from each participant in their Room. For instance, if six members enter a Room, the host will receive six Lingos per minute.

## Evaluation

As educational technologies continue to advance,, new approaches to teaching and learning languages also emerge. One particular approach is the use of a wide range of software and mobile applications designed to facilitate this process. *Lingbe* is one such application that has mainly been designed for practicing speaking skills. The application helps language users or learners to improve their language learning experience by having conversations with native and non-native learners. *Lingbe,* like many other language-learning apps, has its share of strengths and weaknesses. The following evaluation is made based on four sources of information: a) the app reviewers' personal experience, b) interviews with five *Lingbe* users who have been using this app for at least one month, and c) a review of the app's over thirty thousand comments in Google Play (the compliments and swears were excluded).



Figure 6:
A screenshot of a
*Lingbe* room

*Strengths*

a) The app's easy-to-navigate and user-friendly features provide a learning environment that is both straightforward and charming.

b) One of the important features of the app is the feedback users can receive and provide after a call. Learners can exchange feedback on four areas including technical issues, language issues, repeated user, and user behavior.

c) The app provides an innovative framework for language practice, more like a mobile game. Users have the opportunity to practice their favorite language by earning Lingos and then spending them on their language practice. As a result, users become more engaged and try to use this opportunity more effectively.

d) When making native calls, if users find out the person answering the call is not a native speaker of that language, they can immediately report them after the call. Then the app asks the user to verify their native language.

e) Rewarding method: There are six distinct 'Badges' in this application: Social, International, Learner, Teacher, Helpful and Valuable. Each Badge is divided into three levels: Bronze, Silver, and Gold. These Badges encourage learners to practice to the point that they can earn them, and then they are rewarded with Lingos.

f) Another prominent characteristic of this app is the 'Streak', which indicates the number of days that a learner has been practicing. Every three days, they are rewarded for maintaining the Streak alive.

g) In the Chat or Task menu, users can press and hold on to a message, and they can translate or listen to the text and correct the errors, if any, in the message of other participants.

h) On the call screen, there is an icon labeled 'Popular hours', which allows users to check the status of online members who are either learners or native speakers of the language(s) they are practicing, thus allowing them to select the optimal time to practice.

i) When users are quiet while they are having a conversation during a call, the application recognizes this silence and suggests some random topics.

j) When having a conversation, learners can see a twisted rightwards arrow icon on the call screen, and by clicking the icon, random topics or questions appear.
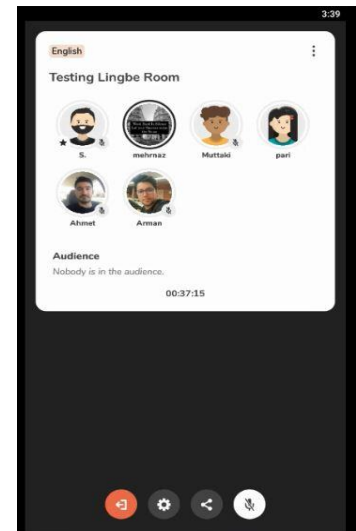
k) The Pro Edition includes video calls, voice messages, gender filtering, a discount on native calls, free conversation in practice rooms, and free Rooms. A subscription fee must be paid to get access to the Pro Edition .

l) Learners can use a chat box during practice calls, practice rooms, and Rooms if they wish to write a note or convey their meaning in written form.

m) In *Lingbe*, there are professional teachers from another app, called 'italki', which can host rooms for users. The italki teachers are competent language users and have appropriate room management skills to encourage user-led discussions.

*Weaknesses*

a) The most notable shortcoming of *Lingbe* is the 'fairness of Lingos'. Speakers with more popular native languages have a greater chance to earn and then practice their favorite language(s) compared with those who speak less popular ones.

b) Any answer to a question asked by a *Lingbe* community member may be picked as the 'featured answer', merely by obtaining more votes from the users. In cases where two answers to a question receive the same number of votes, the one which receives the latest vote will be the featured one!.

c) After the calls, learners will earn XPs, which will allow them to level up. However, they are not based on a certain criterion. If someone makes a call and says nothing, they will earn ten XPs per minute!

d) The app is only developed for smartphones and users of other platforms, such as Windows, are unable to use it.

e) There are also users in this app who believe it is a dating app and try to find relationships or ask for personal information about other members.

f) *Lingbe* is a language-practicing app, not a language-learning app. Most users have a very low proficiency level when they start using this app, making learning a poor experience for themselves and other users.

g) Introverted users might find it challenging to fit in such a social and outgoing environment.

h) Users may not be so considerate when giving feedback on language proficiency or user behavior after a call.

i) If two users become friends before making a call, they may not provide any constructive feedback to one another.

j) Rooms can get crowded and unorganized when many users join them.

k) Practice rooms are public by default, and other users can join them despite the hosts' wish. Of course users can make practice rooms private by spending twenty Lingos.

l) It would be better if practice with native speakers had its status bar in the profile menu so that the users could see their progress more easily.

m) While gender can be filtered in *LingbePro*, it would be ideal if users could filter their calls by age range, country, or users' proficiency and level in *Lingbe.*

n) Although there are many ways to contact users in *Lingbe*, the option to search for accounts and users will enhance this capability.

o) The ability to remove messages would help users in maintaining a clean and tidy chat room.

p) It would be great if users could initiate various types of calls with their contacts and friends.

# Conclusion

A survey of the users' comments about the app in App Store and Google Play indicates that lack of access to native speakers of a language in countries where the L2 is not widely spoken has always been a problem for learners who wish to practice their speaking. There has been a shift in recent years in the form of various extensive speaking activities. Most of these activities have been monologues (i.e., audio recordings and voice blogs) that only included language production without a partner and not in a real-time context. The importance of a conversational partner is becoming more and more apparent when practicing speaking since

learners must also develop communication skills. Furthermore, the ultimate task for a language learner is to communicate with other speakers of that language. *Lingbe* will come in handy to deal with circumstances like this; as Alberto Cruz Alonso, the CEO of *Lingbe*, stated, "it is like an Uber for language speaking practice" (AIT News Desk, 2019). L2 teachers can encourage learners to use *Lingbe* to practice the language they are learning via extensive speaking activities outside of the classroom. Users can improve linguistic, cultural, and social knowledge of the target language by conversing with (non-)native speakers. Finally, teachers can ask learners to write a report about their experience or create a checkbook to include the grammatical and lexical items they have learned while talking to other target language speakers.

*Lingbe* invites all language learners worldwide to join its ever-growing community, share their knowledge and improve their speaking and communication skills by talking to (non)native speakers of the target language. The application is particularly helpful as a supplementary language practice platform. Many countries have foreign language courses, and *Lingbe* creates a suitable platform for everyone to help others with their native language and practice the language they wish to learn. *Lingbe* can be a valuable tool for teachers to help students develop their speaking and communication skills through extensive speaking activities. Although *Lingbe* provides a suitable platform for practicing languages, it still suffers from several shortcomings. The fairness of Lingos makes it hard to practice with native speakers. The XPs leave much to be desired; they just show users' levels in *Lingbe*. Users' attitude toward *Lingbe*, considering it a language-learning app and not a language-practicing app, also makes it difficult to have a productive conversation. The selection of 'featured answer' could be enhanced by taking the relevance and accuracy of the responses into account.

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## Appendix

## Application Details

Publisher: Lingbe

Product Type: Smartphone Application Software

Language(s): Multilingual

Level: Any

Media Format: APK/IPA

Operating Systems: Android/iOS. Requires Android 4.4 or higher

Hardware Requirements: Smartphone/Internet Connection

Supplementary Software: None

Price: Free, offers in-app purchases

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