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In this column, we explore the issue of teachers and technology—not just as it relates to CALL solutions, but also to Internet, software, and hardware concerns that all teachers face. We invite readers to submit articles on their areas of interest. Please contact the editor before submitting.

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Phrasebot: An Online Mobile Game for Multi-Word Units

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Learning a language's lexicon can at times, appear to learners to be an endless task reliant mainly on unstimulating, rote memorization. Also, it is true that simple rote methods such as repeated exposure to flash cards are an effective way to memorise vocabulary. Sometimes they can be too effective if students rely only on this one method to cram for tests at the expense of understanding nuance or developing productive vocabulary skills. As teachers, we are responsible for training learners in a variety of methods that allow for the necessary repetition and depth of processing to effectively and efficiently learn vocabulary. Common pen and paper teaching methods include word trees, synonym and antonym lists, and personalised sentences that use the target vocabulary. However, while these methods are effective, learners may not find them as engaging as other areas of their language training. One way to make vocabulary study more fun for learners might be to supplement the previously mentioned pen and paper methods with digital vocabulary learning methods. Teachers can do this by taking advantage of the high incidence of smartphone ownership amongst learners. A 2014 survey tells us that 88.6% of all Japanese 15 to19 year-olds own a smartphone (Hakuhodo DY Group, 2014). The high rates of device ownership combined together with the availability of free CALL or mobile-learning applications can now offer more efficient, digital approaches to traditional methods, as well as brand-new approaches that blend game-based learning with traditional methods. This article aims to introduce one such application, Phrasebot. The author used Phrasebot in an action research project that involved training learners in its use, integrating it into a class's assessment scheme, and collecting learner feedback about their experience of using the application. A description of Phrasebot's functions, how it was used in practice, and feedback from learners will be presented below.

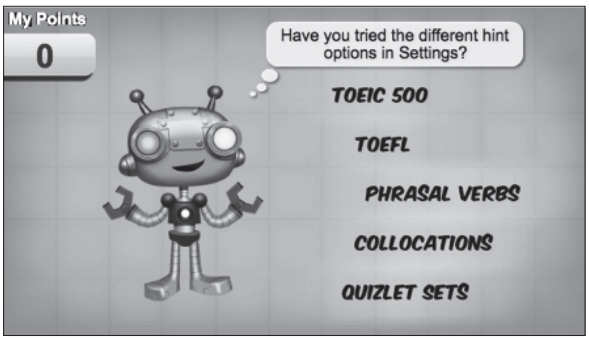

Figure 1. **Phrasebot title screen. This figure shows the start menu, which greets the user after initially starting the application.**

Phrasebot (Figure 1), currently available for free on the Apple App Store and Android Google Play, is a puzzle game that allows learners to actively study any kinds of words, phrases, or sentences. The presentation from graphic design to sound effects is slick, engaging, and attractive. There are a variety of game modes that test learners' productive and receptive vocabulary skills to varying degrees of difficulty. For example, the gameplay can be timed or non-timed, cues can be text, audio, or a picture (an individual cue or all three are possible), and the text clues on answer tiles can be varied from whole words, just first and last letters (Figure 2), or single letters (Figure 3).

The app also allows users to preview word lists (Figure 4) before playing a game as well as review them after a game (Figure 5). On these screens, the user's progress is also tracked by coloured stars, which reflect how many times a particular word has been answered correctly or wrongly. This helps the user to focus more efficiently on the words they need to study. This is a useful feature that draws the learners' attention to vocabulary they repeatedly get wrong or right.

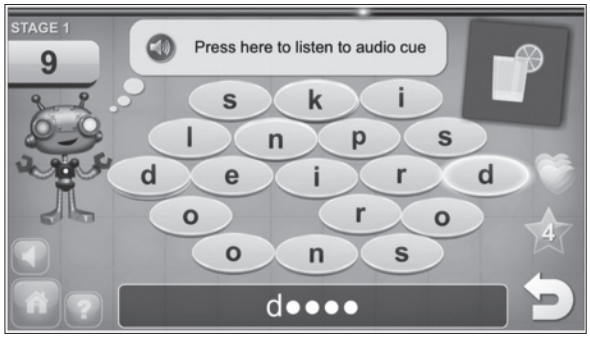

Figure 2. **Gameplay screen. This figure illustrates Phrasebot's ability to give audio and visual cues that need to be answered by writing letters individually.**

Figure 3. **Gameplay screen. This figure illustrates a text cue that needs to be answered by choosing the words with only the first and last letters shown.**

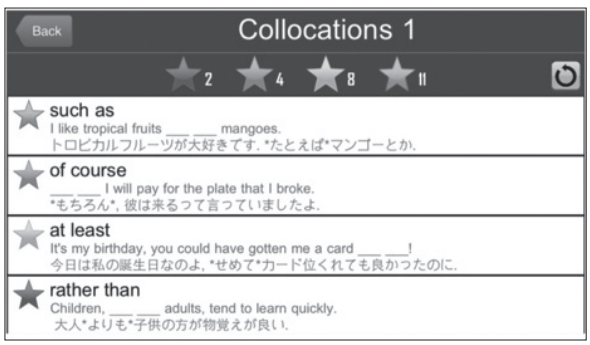

Figure 4. **Preview screen. This figure shows how users can preview a word list before they play a game and also see how many times they have correctly or wrongly answered questions.**

Figure 5. **Review screen. This figure shows how users can review a word list after they play a game, and they also see their updated scores before progressing to the next game stage.**

Word Lists

Phrasebot comes with several word lists preloaded (more can be downloaded for a small fee), but the best feature of the app is its ability to import word lists from Quizlet for free. Quizlet is another useful vocabulary learning platform (quizlet.com) that has been written about in this column before (Foster, 2009), as well as being featured in JALT conference presentations (Ashcroft & Imrie, 2013). Quizlet has millions of word lists available as well as the ability to create word lists with pictures and audio embedded. Now that the main features of Phrasebot have been presented, learner training and classroom integration will be considered.

Classroom Training and Protocols

In the author's classes, Phrasebot was presented to learners as a self-study tool to supplement traditional vocabulary learning methods. The classes focused on reading and vocabulary acquisition, making Phrasebot an appropriate tool that learners could clearly see the value of. Learners were trained in the various game modes, and how to import the classes' weekly vocabulary lists from Quizlet, by having them do this on their own devices while watching a live demonstration screencast from the author's device. To integrate Phrasebot meaningfully into class assessment, playing Phrasebot with the course's word lists for 45 minutes in a week was set as one of five self-study assignments that focused on vocabulary acquisition techniques (the other four assignments focused on traditional methods). The five assignments as a whole were worth 20% of the overall course credit. Learners were required to take a screenshot of their score after a week (the score had to be above 1,500 points, which is roughly equivalent to 45 minutes of time spent using the application) and attach it to an

email sent to the author. Students were required to write their name, class name, class period, and the number of points in the subject line of the email. This allowed the author to easily sort emails and view the weekly scores of each student. The protocol had 100% compliance and some learners even sent scores 10 to 20 times higher than the requested 1,500 points. It is also interesting to point out that some students sent their high-scores to the author at the end of the course without being requested to do so.

Comments from Learners

At the end of the course, the author administered a questionnaire to the classes that used Phrasebot. This questionnaire comprised of Likert scale type questions as well as space for learners to write general comments about the application. The response from learners was overwhelmingly positive. Many comments mentioned the convenience of being able to study on the train, or when learners had a few moments to spare between appointments. Other comments mentioned the importance and value of having the option of audio cues. However, some learners did express a preference for traditional pen and paper methods of vocabulary learning. For example, one learner commented that while the application was beneficial to learning, it lacked the flexibility that pen and paper methods offer, such as the ability to enter synonyms and antonyms of target vocabulary. Another comment remarked that the application was ill-suited for learning the spelling of words. However, since Phrasebot has a specific mode where users need to enter words letter by letter, this may be evidence of inadequate training.

Conclusion

Phrasebot is a fun and engaging vocabulary learning application that allows learners to study on the move. The majority of the learners in the author's classes found it to be very beneficial and a useful addition to their independent learning toolkits. However, some learners expressed a preference for traditional pen and paper methods. Teachers would be wise not to assume that all learners of university age are digital natives. Clear demonstrations and adequate training are necessary. Therefore, it is up to teachers to perform a cost-benefit analysis for their individual group of learners that takes into account the possible pedagogical benefits as well as the cost in time for training.

References

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Teachers who wish to experiment with Phrasebot can download it from either the Apple App Store or Google Play for free, and a page of useful resources made by the creator of Phrasebot can be found at: <http://www.phrasebotapp.com/for-teachers.html>.