ISSN 2185-3762

Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal

<http://sisaljournal.org>

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Publication date: December, 2020.

To cite this article

Buendgens-Kosten, J. (2020). Review of 'The secret agent's language challenges' app. *Studies in Self-Access Learning Journal*, 11(4), 370–373.
<https://doi.org/10.37237/110405>

To link to this article

<http://sisaljournal.org/archives/dec20/buendgens-kosten>

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Courage, cunning, perseverance – these are three character traits that help you to become a secret agent, or to develop your foreign language skills. The Secret Agent’s Language Challenges App (*Language Challenges* hereafter) combines (tongue-in-cheek) agent training and language learning in one mobile application.

Language Challenges is a free app, available for Android (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=at.ecml.edl.challenges&pcampaignid=pcampaignidMKT-Other-global-all-co-prtnr-py-PartBadge-Mar2515-1>) and iOS (<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/id1527271604>). It was designed to celebrate the European Day of Languages 2020 on September 26th, but is available beyond this date.

Description

The app provides a gamified (Kapp, 2012) context for language learning and practice. The app is built around a “secret agent” scenario, where learners are “international agent[s]” who “are going to visit new places and foreign lands”. The app prepares these “agents” for taking risks and identifying opportunities for language use outside the classroom.

It is based on the Linguistic Risk-Taking Initiative (<https://ccerbal.uottawa.ca/linguistic-risk>), which originally used a “Passport” (printed, or downloaded as a PDF) to encourage learners to take and document linguistic risks either in English or in French, with *linguistic risk* understood as “authentic communicative acts in learners’ second official language (French/English) which may be ‘risky’ due to factors such as making mistakes, being misunderstood, misunderstanding others, being judged, taking on a different identity, and changing previously established language-choice patterns” (Slavkov & Séror, 2019, p. 254). The Language Challenges app adapted this idea for foreign language learning settings, without specifying any specific language to be learned.

The app supports autonomous language learning outside the language classroom. After users have filled out a very basic profile (name, age and location are required), they gain access to a range of challenges. Learners can decide to display all challenges, only challenges related to specific skills or difficulty levels or select a random challenge. Learners self-determine if and when a challenge has been completed.

Learners choose the challenges they want to complete, as well as the languages they want to complete them in. For example, for the challenge “Solve a mystery,” the learners are to read a target language comic book or in “Voice detector,” they need to make a phone or Skype call in a target language of their choice. These tasks are unspecific enough to allow learners to engage with them at a range of levels (e.g., a simplified comic book for language learners as opposed to a celebrated graphic novel) and to tailor the challenge to their own interests (Skype with a teacher, a customer or a friend). Many challenges focus on the skills signing, listening, speaking, reading and writing, combining skill development with other interests, such as pleasure reading, listening to music, or exercising.

In addition to such skills-based challenges, the app also includes a range of challenges with a language awareness focus, i.e. challenges that look at language as an object rather than as a means of communication. For example, in the challenge “Alphabets,” agents write a word in languages which use different alphabets, giving them an opportunity to compare these writing systems. Or, in “Double agents,” learners need to identify five words in their own language that are the same as or borrowed from other languages (i.e., internationalisms, loan words, cognates).

With each mission a learner completes, they earn stars and climb in agent rank (e.g., from “Trainee agent” to “Agent in training” and so on). In total, 51 challenges are offered to learners, with the final 51st one designed as the “Ultimate mission” (creation of a video demonstrating what a person dares to do in their target language(s)). Some challenges require minimal language skill, such as signing two words, or writing one word in different alphabets. Others need intermediate to advanced skills in at least one target language. Learners who complete at least 10 challenges can receive a certificate.

Benefits for Learners

The challenges themselves will have minimal effect on the proficiency of learners, but the experience of working through these challenges might inspire learners to take more linguistic risks and to use more opportunities for language practice that naturally occur in daily life. Also, these challenges support learners in finding ways to purposefully integrate language practice into their daily life. Many challenges can easily be combined with existing chores or hobbies, e.g., “Investigation list” (write a shopping list in your target language) or “Get fit” (play a sport, talking only in your target language). Some of the challenges may also create follow-up learning opportunities. “Inform headquarters,” for example, requires users to post on social media in the target language, potentially inviting comments in that language, or

encouraging learners to follow speakers of that language on social media. Over time, such a change in behavior might improve language skills of learners.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the App

The design of the app is very basic, but the usability is good. It is illustrated with comic-style characters representing a range of ages, skin colors and genders. As no internet access is needed for app use (after installation), and as learners can choose between 20 interface languages (including English, Spanish, French, Russian), this app is suitable for many different settings. For learners who do not want to use an app or do not have access to a smartphone or tablet, a PDF “handbook” version (<https://edl.ecml.at/Portals/33/documents/language-challenge/EDL-language-challenge-handbook-EN.pdf?ver=2019-05-14-111112-403>) is available as well.

The fact that the app does not require specific languages is its greatest strength. As such, it can be used for any target language, including less frequently taught languages. Students might, though, require more support, for example in accessing comic books or audio books in those languages. A teacher or other facilitator might be helpful here in pointing learners to resources available.

It is extremely rare that apps support acquisition of both spoken and signed languages, and the developers’ decision to include signing as a skill—reflecting its importance in the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2018)—should be applauded. Signing, though, is at the moment represented by only one signing-specific challenge (“Sign 2 words”), plus the overarching “The ultimate mission” challenge. More sign language-based challenges should be added to increase the balance between the different skills and modalities.

Unfortunately, the app consistently uses the term “foreign language.” This limits its usefulness in language learning contexts that are not connected to the foreign language classroom. Heritage language learners or learners of minority languages may find it off-putting to have their language referred to as “foreign,” though they too could certainly profit from the challenges put forward in this app.

One disadvantage of this app is that it does not come with an online community, and so the opportunities to exchange experiences or discuss new goals is limited. If used in educational settings, a teacher or other facilitator might encourage such practices in the classroom. As learners of different target languages can practice language skills using this app, learners can meaningfully interact even if they are studying different target languages.

Users have the opportunity to suggest new challenges to the developers using an built-in feedback form. This could be used as opportunity for learners to reflect on which kind of challenges they face in their daily language practice and use, or which kinds of challenges might support them in achieving their language goals. It may also help to improve the representation of sign languages in this app over time.

Notes on the Contributor

Judith Buendgens-Kosten is a postdoctoral researcher at Goethe University Frankfurt. They hold an MA in Online and Distance Education from the Open University, UK, and a doctorate degree in English Linguistics from RWTH Aachen University, Germany. Their research interests encompass multilingual computer-assisted language learning and inclusive education in the EFL classroom.

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