

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF VOCABULARY  
LEARNING ACTIVITIES USED IN LANGUAGE  
LEARNING APPLICATIONS BUSUU AND SPEAKLY**

**BA thesis**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years mobile language learning applications have grown in popularity and there are many different options on the market for language learners. This thesis aims to show the different vocabulary learning activities the mobile language learning applications Busuu and Speakly use to help their clients learn English vocabulary.

This thesis consists of an introduction, a literature review, an analysis of Busuu and Speakly, and a conclusion. The literature review focuses on vocabulary learning by looking at relevant articles and studies and also gives an overview of the literature and previous studies done on language learning applications. The second part of the thesis provides a comparative analysis of the activities for vocabulary learning provided in the applications Speakly and Busuu. This is done by viewing all the vocabulary learning activities that are available for A1 and beginner-level learners.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over time, people have started to use mobile devices and different applications for more than just calls and messages. These devices have become a way for people to learn new things and make life more convenient. One of these opportunities is to use different mobile applications to learn new languages. There are many different options available from Duolingo, Babbel, Busuu, Speakly, Memrise, etc. With these applications becoming more and more popular, they have been studied to see how efficient they are for language learners, and to understand the effects of the gamification, or design of the app (Shortt et al 2023; Rachels et al 2018; Huynh et al 2016; Kessler et al 2023).

This paper will focus on comparing the types of vocabulary learning activities provided in the applications Speakly and Busuu by analysing specific activities used in both applications. In this paper, the term “vocabulary” refers to the definition McCarthy (2023:2) proposed in his research as “all the words a person has at their command” as the topic of the paper is about learning new languages and falls on the individual level as opposed to talking about language in general and discussing all the words that can be found in a language. I decided to focus on vocabulary learning activities because this is something that has interested me since starting to learn foreign languages in school. The challenge of learning new words but also the outcome of understanding more when reading or listening thanks to a bigger vocabulary has encouraged me to also try to use different kinds of strategies to learn new words. This research will give me an opportunity to learn more about the possible strategies and activities for learning vocabulary. Pavii Taka (2008:2) refers to language learning strategies as “what learners do in order to make their learning manageable and efficient”. Therefore, while strategies refer to what language learners do to learn vocabulary, activities refer to what the applications use to encourage vocabulary learning.

These two apps, Speakly and Busuu, were chosen since they both offer the opportunity to learn English. This enabled me to analyse the language learning activities in each of the applications and also compare them. Another reason for selecting these applications was due to the fact that there is less research done on these apps than, for example, on more popular applications, such as Duolingo, thus providing a research gap to be explored further.

The language courses in the Busuu application are developed by relying on the system of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) with each course divided into five levels, with the English course covering levels A1 to C1 (Busuu 2024). The levels are divided into different chapters with A1 in English having 20 chapters and C1 having 15 chapters. In the Busuu application, it is possible to learn English with the interface language also being English. Interface language or display language refers to the language that is used for labelling the activities, buttons, explanations, and in which the learner receives the language learning experience. The interface language can be different from the learned language. For example, when a Spanish speaker is learning English, they could select the interface language to be Spanish. In Busuu there was no option to set the interface language to Estonian. Therefore, I chose the next language I am most proficient in, which is English.

Speakly points out on their website that they use three main ways to teach new languages: imitating the way language is learned in childhood, using statistically relevant lists and data, and using memory techniques (2024). The Speakly English course is divided into three levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced, with each level also divided into three parts based on the number of words a learner needs to know for the given level. For example, in the first beginner level, the number of words is 0-300 words and the third beginner level is 601-900 words. In this application, English can be learned with twelve

different interface languages. While analysing the content of the application for this paper, I used Estonian as the interface language since English was not among the options. Moreover, I selected Estonian since it is my mother tongue and I am most proficient in it.

While analysing both of the applications, the paid premium versions were used to see the full range of options Speakly and Busuu have for learning English. I analyzed the language learning activities at the A1 level in Busuu and at the beginner level in Speakly. This ensured that the level was exactly the same in both of the applications since these two apps categorise their language learning levels somewhat differently, with Busuu having A1 to C1 levels and Speakly having a more general categorization of beginner, intermediate, and advanced level, which are categorised based on the number of words learned.

The aim of this thesis is to see what vocabulary learning activities the mobile language learning applications Busuu and Speakly use to help their clients learn English vocabulary. The first chapter will give an overview of vocabulary learning strategies and see which are considered effective and which strategies might not be the most effective for learning a new language. In the second chapter of the thesis, I compare two language learning applications, Speakly and Busuu, and find out what language learning activities are used in these apps. This is done by having a closer look at what these apps offer and how they categorise their content, which activities they use, and what are the overall options for learning new vocabulary by using these applications.

This thesis consists of two main parts. In the first part, I provide a literature review that focuses on vocabulary learning by looking at relevant articles, studies, and publications on vocabulary learning strategies. In the literature review, I also give an overview of the literature and previous studies done on language learning applications. In the second part of the thesis I comparatively analyse the activities for vocabulary learning provided in applications Speakly and Busuu.

## **1. LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review section of this thesis gives an overview of different kinds of vocabulary learning strategies and the activities that can be used for learning vocabulary. This is done by pointing out problems with vocabulary acquisition, how reading and listening help learners acquire vocabulary, and how different strategies such as guessing from context or using flashcards can be useful.

### **1.1 Vocabulary Learning**

When talking about vocabulary, McCarthy (2023:2) points out that we can refer to “all the words in a language” or “all the words a person has at their command”. In this research paper, I refer to vocabulary as the latter since learning vocabulary by using mobile applications happens at an individual level where learners consciously learn new words. Learning vocabulary is not always an easy process for learners and can pose some difficulties. One of those difficulties pointed out by scholars is that vocabulary learning is incremental and various kinds of word knowledge are necessary in order to properly use the word (Chacón-Beltrán et al 2010:28). Having various kinds of word knowledge indicates that it is not enough to simply know the meaning of a word to properly use it. Nation (2001:27) suggests that there are different kinds of ways to know a word which consist of its forms, meaning, and use. In order to have a proper understanding of a word and to know the different forms, meanings, and use of these words, there are different strategies that are used in classrooms or when learning vocabulary on your own or using mobile applications.

Words are often learned incidentally through different kinds of input be it seeing them in various texts or hearing them repeatedly (Webb and Nation 2017:155). The authors Webb and Nation say that this is more likely to help the student learn new words and

understand their aspects than intentional learning. Vocabulary learning strategies, however, imply an intention from the learner to expand their vocabulary (Pavii Taka 2008). Stephen Krashen (1981:1-2) has used the term “acquisition” when discussing incidental learning and “learning” when referring to intentional learning. Therefore, throughout this paper, the term “learning” is also used when referring to intentional learning which occurs when language learners use mobile applications to learn a new language.

In vocabulary learning, Pavii Taka (2008:17) emphasises that it is important for language learners to understand different patterns in language as it helps predict what will be said next. One way to teach vocabulary is by using “chunks of language”, which are described as words in the order a native speaker would naturally use them (Lindstromber and Boers 2008). Lindstromber and Boers point out that by knowing many chunks of language it is easier to have a fluent way of expressing yourself in a foreign language be it speaking or writing. The authors also point out that there are different kinds of chunks that can be classified by their form, function, or categorised by how commonly they are used in everyday speech.

Language learners can encounter and memorise these chunks in different contexts when they have various assignments that are specifically designed to emphasise language chunks. Some examples of these assignments are filling out gaps in a story by using common language chunks or multiple choice questions to determine which are the correct language chunks (Lindstromber and Boers 2008). Pavii Taka (2008:18) points out research that emphasises the importance of reading long texts as a way for language learners to encounter new language chunks and learn them. However, other researchers have emphasised that language input through reading texts alone is not the best for knowing a word (Chacón-Beltrán et al 2010:5). While reading is a very traditional way to learn a new



language, it is best when there are few unknown words and the student already has some knowledge of the foreign language.

When starting to learn a new language and expand vocabulary students often benefit from starting with high-frequency words (Webb and Nation 2017:6). This is because knowing the words that occur more frequently brings more value to the students. Webb and Nation emphasise that students who start by learning with high-frequency words are able to recognize the word and they usually need to use it more often than low-frequency words. These high-frequency words are considered very important by Nation who encourages a lot of time to be spent learning them in both input by listening and reading and output by speaking and writing (2013:24). The importance comes from the fact that by knowing these words it will be easier for students to read and communicate in a new foreign language.

There are many ways that students can use to learn new vocabulary. A way to learn vocabulary is through extensive reading, which is mainly considered to be a good way to learn vocabulary (Chang and Hsueh-chao 2017). Extensive reading consists of reading long texts that introduce many new words to a language learner, with these words being used in a meaningful context. Webb and Nation argues that extensive reading helps to encounter words in a “native-like” manner but emphasises that the value of extensive reading comes when the text is pleasurable to read as it encourages more reading (Webb and Nation 2017:156). However, research also shows that not many words are learned by reading just one text – this is mainly due to the fact that the reading in this context does not usually occur in a normal environment, and a student is given one text to read, after which they need to do assignments based on the text (Chang and Hsueh-chao 2017). This type of reading is called intensive reading, which takes place in a controlled environment and has

shorter text whereas extensive reading has the student working by themselves (Thornbury 2017:26).

Other than reading, it has also been proven that vocabulary can also be incidentally learned through listening (Schmitt and van Zeeland 2013). Schmitt and van Zeeland admit that while listening can be a good way to learn the different forms of a word it is not as effective when learning the meaning of a new word. They also point out that listening by itself needs more repetition and is not as effective as listening and reading. This can especially be the case when studying English since the spelling of words may be different from pronunciation and therefore, language learners may not derive the correct spelling of a word simply by hearing it.

There are various vocabulary learning strategies that language learners can use. Webb and Nation (2017) list the following vocabulary learning strategies that are useful when learning vocabulary autonomously: “learning word parts”, “guessing from context”, “using dictionaries” and “using flashcards”. Oxford and Crookall (1990) name more strategies such as “word lists” and “word grouping”.

Learning different word parts is a strategy where students of a foreign language learn affixes and stems. To completely understand an affix they need to understand its meaning, use, and form (Webb and Nation 2017:162). Nation (2013:409) points out possibilities on how to learn affixes by making words or taking away parts of a word by combining affixes and stems.

When guessing from contexts, learners do not ignore the new word but learn the word by seeing what part of speech it is, analysing the context, and guessing the meaning (Webb and Nation 2017:171). This could be combined with the strategy of using dictionaries. Webb and Nation highlight how this method could be one of the most common but is often not used effectively. Instead of just looking at the meaning of the

word students should also use the other information given such as part of speech, derivations, and collocations.

The strategy of using flashcards, which refer to cards that typically have information on both sides, is a popular way for students to learn new words (Webb and Nation 2017:174). Flashcards, however, can be limiting since similarly to word lists, they usually offer just one meaning of a word (Oxford and Crookall 1990). Oxford and Crookall emphasise that flashcards can be more useful than word lists when grouping them together, for example, according to parts of speech. This is similar to regular word grouping where a longer list of words is divided into groups based on grammatical form, topic, etc.

While these are many different kinds of strategies some of them have similarities. In almost all the different vocabulary learning strategies repetition was one constant pointed out to memorise a new word.

## **1.2 Mobile Language Learning Applications**

It has been pointed out in previous studies that when starting to learn a second language by using a mobile learning application, the effect of the learner selecting a particular application is minimal (Kessler et al 2023). This means that the specific features of a particular application have less effect on the results of a beginner language learner than the fact itself that the learner uses a language learning application.

Research suggests that vocabulary learning can be achieved with shorter activities and materials as opposed to more complex skills, as reading and listening need more time, which most mobile applications do not support (Sung et al 2015). Therefore language learning applications can be a good way to learn vocabulary since they oftentimes support short activities and give short materials for the learner to go through. While researching the difference between using Quizlet or listening to podcasts, researchers did not find any

significant differences in vocabulary learning for students (Bueno-Alastuey et al 2022). This showed that both Quizlet and listening to podcasts can be considered to be good techniques for learning new vocabulary. Other types of vocabulary learning activities were focused on in Yufen Hsieh's (2019) study on vocabulary learning, which indicated that students benefited from video captions, images, and audio. The study showed that by combining audio and video students learned more vocabulary than by combined video and captions.

Li and Bonk (2023) suggest that applications like Duolingo are not enough to learn all the important language areas. This means that in addition to mobile applications learners felt the need to complement their learning with additional materials or with human interactions. One of the difficulties in these studies was the fact that learners could not ask for help with the activities when learning a new language in an application (Zixi Li & Curtis J. Bonk 2023). However, when concentrating on learning vocabulary, mobile applications can be more effective than classic classroom face-to-face instructions. This was noted in the study by Ebadi and Ghuchi (2018), who compared traditional classroom learning to using the mobile application Memrise, and found significant improvement in vocabulary with the group of students who used Memrise.

Many studies rely on users' own opinion of the applications and their preferences. However, this has shown that the users' perception of effectiveness in language learning applications can be influenced by gamification, which means making the application more engaging for example, by using rewards (Kessler et al 2023). Since previous studies rely on user opinion I decided to also use my own experience while analysing the applications as one aspect of the research. However, while looking at the vocabulary learning activities I did not take into account the gamification aspects of the applications and only looked at the activities.

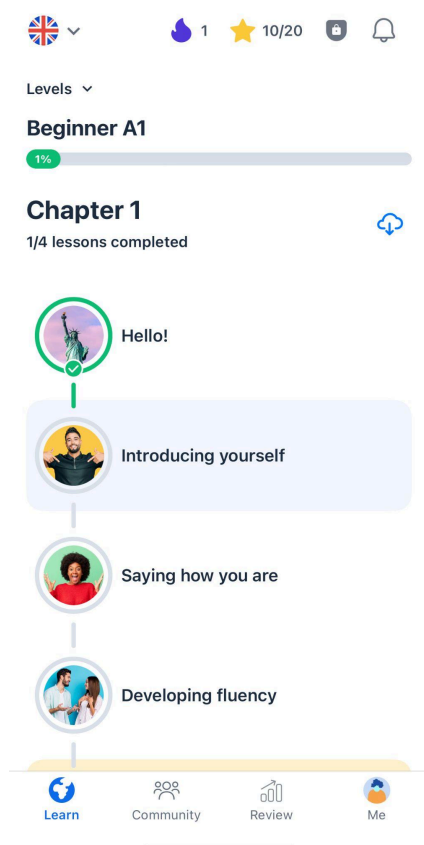
## **2. ANALYSIS OF VOCABULARY LEARNING ACTIVITIES USED IN SPEAKLY AND BUSUU**

The aim of this paper and the study is to see what vocabulary learning activities the mobile language learning applications Busuu and Speakly use to help the people using the applications learn English vocabulary. This analysis is done by looking at mobile learning applications Busuu and Speakly and comparing them to see what vocabulary learning activities they use. While analysing these applications, I used the paid premium versions. This ensured that I got to see the full range of options both applications offer especially since Speakly does not have a free version and only offers a free seven day trial. Meanwhile, Busuu has a free option where some of the content is locked but is not limited to a week-long trial time. For the purpose of analysis, I viewed all the different kinds of language learning activities both of the apps offered when starting to learn English. In Busuu's instance, this meant starting from A1 level and for Speakly this meant starting with beginner I level. In this part of the paper I first give an overview of the material used by going over the structure of both of the applications, explaining how they divide their language learning levels, and naming all the vocabulary learning activities available in each application. The remaining part of the paper proceeds to analyse all the language learning activities in both of the applications followed by a discussion, which is concluded with further implications.

### **2.1 Material**

Busuu's A1 level learning platform has 20 chapters, which have four to eight lessons in each chapter. Figure 1 shows how a learner starting with the beginner level A1 sees the app. After finishing all the lessons in a chapter, there is a checkpoint in the form of a quiz for the learner to retain what they learned in the given chapter and refresh their

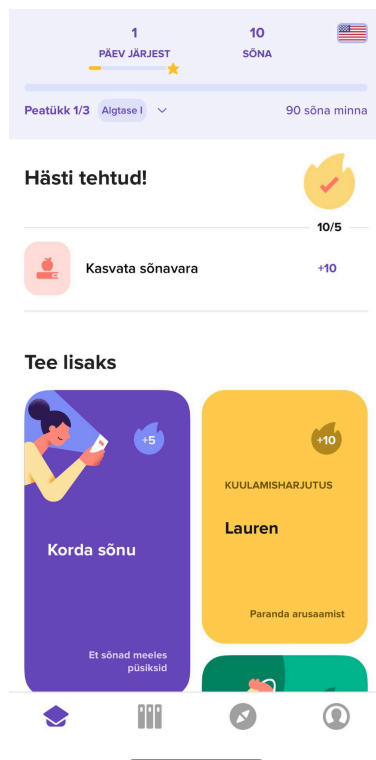
memories. Each of the lessons in the chapter is categorised as either “vocabulary”, “grammar”, “pronunciation”, “reading”, “listening”, “writing”, or “mixed”. After finishing all the lessons in each chapter and passing all the checkpoints the learner can take a test to level up from A1 and get a Busuu Certificate. There is the opportunity to review the grammar and vocabulary acquired. The acquired vocabulary is divided into three different sections: weak, medium, and strong words based on how well the learner knows the word. Busuu also has the community option, where you can connect with friends or talk to different people and practise English with others by asking for advice or correcting others' use of English.



**Figure 1.** The beginner A1 learning example from the Busuu app in 2024.

Speakly's beginner level is divided into three sections: beginner I, beginner II, and beginner III, each having three chapters. The chapters in the beginner I level are divided based on the number of words needed to learn to get to the next chapter. In the first

chapter, the goal is to learn 0-100 words, in the second chapter 101-200 words and in the third chapter 201-300 words. Therefore, the goal of finishing the beginner level I is to learn 300 new words. Figure 2 shows the view the learner sees when starting to learn at the beginner level I. There is a main area for learning and increasing vocabulary with daily goals for the learner. In addition to the main assignment, there are extra assignments so the learner can practice, which have four options: “repeat the words”, “LIVE-SITUATIONS”, “Increase vocabulary”, “listening” and “Listen to a song”. There is also a word bank where the learner can see all the learnt words which are also categorised by how well the learner knows their words.



**Figure 2.** The beginner learning example from the Speakly app in 2024.

Both applications have varied options for learning English based on the level of the learner with the emphasis on vocabulary learning based on the assignments given to learners and also by the option of looking at all the acquired vocabulary. The set-ups are different where in the Busuu app the learner can see all the chapters and even skip

chapters. However, Speakly does not allow to skip ahead and the learner needs to learn the required number of words to progress to the next chapter, which is otherwise locked.

## **2.2 Analysis**

In the Busuu app, the learner has vocabulary-focused lessons in each chapter. These lessons consist of short videos, where different people speak out a new sentence that the learner has not encountered before. In addition to that, there are also videos, under which the learner has to recognize what the person in the video is saying or choose if the sentence is true or false based on the video. With these assignments, the learner has to partially guess from context the word needed to complete the sentences in addition to the video where the learner can also use the audio to help them select the correct word for the phrase. These kinds of vocabulary learning activities are beneficial to language learners as also pointed out by Yufen Hsieh (2019) since having video and audio is beneficial when learning vocabulary. While the main emphasis is on the videos and short sentences, there are also assignments where the learner has to make a phrase by matching the beginning and end of it. Instead of emphasising individual words, the app uses phrases and so-called chunks of language to teach new words. As pointed out by Lindstromer and Boers (2008), these chunks of language help the learner encounter the words in a natural manner like a native speaker would as opposed to only providing one word and meaning. While using the Busuu app and learning English with the interface language also being English the learner has to guess the meaning from context. This is made easier by giving the learner visual and audio cues. While this does not replace translation, it is a good way to make the learning experience more varied and gives the learner a better chance to guess the meaning of the word.



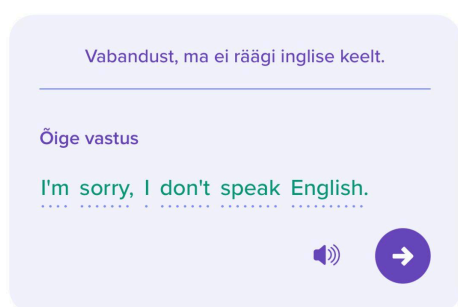
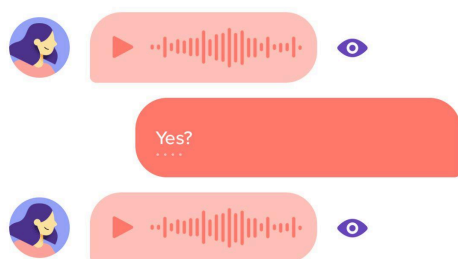
Speakly's vocabulary exercises have different sentences where they highlight phrases or words that are being learned. These highlighted phrases have translations under them. After going over new vocabulary Speakly puts the learner to the test and gives exercises either to translate from Estonian to English where the learner has to pick the correct option out of four options. These vocabulary exercises also have speaking assignments where the learner has to translate a phrase from Estonian to English by having to type in the required words while having the first letter of each word in the phrase as a clue. Similarly to Busuu, Speakly provides sentences and chunks of language to the learner instead of single words to be learned, helping the learner get a sense of the natural sentence structure and not only relying on learning the meaning of a word.

Busuu has a “learn more” button with each new word or exercise that shows the grammar or tips which can help learners put the new word into context and understand it better. Similarly, Speakly has a feature where the learner can see the grammar about the new word and in addition to that also see the translation, which is a feature that Busuu does not have. The grammar or “learn more” part in both of these applications focuses on either morphology, syntax, or inflections depending on the particular lesson the learner is going through. This extra function can be beneficial to learners so they have more context for what they are learning and also can help them with the activities they are meant to fulfil in the applications.

While Busuu focuses more on videos and does not have the translation possibility, Speakly does the opposite and has no videos in the standard vocabulary exercises and focuses more on using translations. Both of these apps use repetition to help the learner memorise new words and phrases. This can be seen by the initial introduction of the new word and then after putting it into an assignment where the learner either has to translate it as is in the case when using Speakly or fill in the blank in a sentence when using Busuu.

Encountering the word in multiple different scenarios can help the learner to know the new word since they see the different word forms, meanings, and possibilities on how the word can be used.

In the Speakly app in addition to the regular vocabulary learning option is also the LIVE-SITUATIONS. Before these exercises, there are descriptions of imaginary situations, for example, being on a trip and having to answer a person on the street. There learners can act out situations by listening to questions and then speaking out the answers. These exercises not only allow the learner to act out a situation similarly to real life but also allow them to combine the learned phrases and words by saying them out loud. Figure 3 shows an example of the LIVE-SITUATIONS with a translation of the correct answer.



**Figure 3.** LIVE-SITUATION exercise from the Speakly app in 2024.

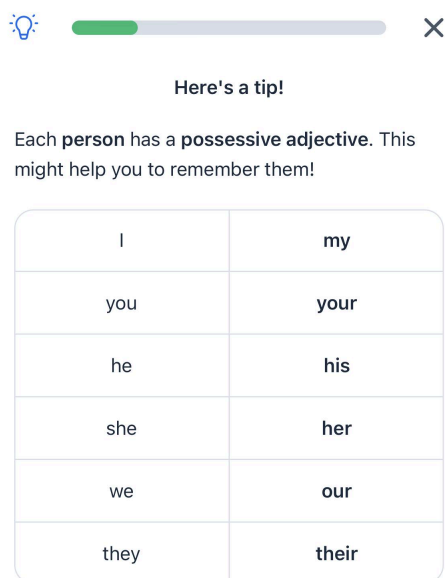
“Repeat the word” exercises allow the learner the opportunity to use either flashcards or listening exercises to practise the already learned words. Flashcards have

phrases with gaps where the learner has to fill in the phrase by translating the Estonian part of the phrase. On the reverse side of the flashcard is the correct phrase and the full translation of the English phrase. These flashcards in the app are not used to the full extent that they could be, they are more similar to word lists and have little other purpose since there are no additional exercises with these flashcards. One platform that offers more options for flashcards is Quizlet where the learner can add pictures and make the cards more interactive and offers many different modes for learners (2024). Speakly could benefit from a similar solution where flashcards were used with more diversity than just flipping them back and forth. The listening exercises help the learner to hear the learned phrases by either just listening or listening and repeating. These repeating exercises do not have the learner write or record themselves, giving the learner only the phrases and no checks if the learner got it correct.

Busuu has separate reading exercises for the learner but these are quite short paragraphs for beginners to read. This is in accordance with the A1 level where it is not expected for the learner to understand or read long texts and instead focus on shorter phrases and sentences often accompanied by visual cues, therefore making it a good activity for beginner language learners (Council of Europe 202:54). Before the paragraph, the app first gives short exercises to make sure the learner has knowledge of the necessary words, and only then gives short texts to read. After reading the short texts the learner has to complete exercises based on these texts, for example putting together a correct sentence with the given words, matching sentences, completing sentences, or answering questions based on the text. While completing the exercises the learner has the opportunity to go back to the text and re-read it if necessary.

Busuu also has separate sections concentrating on grammar exercises where the learner focuses on verbs or asking questions, quantifiers, prepositions of time, etc.

Grammar is relevant when talking about vocabulary learning since knowing a word includes knowing the different forms of the words and also how to properly use words in context. These grammar lessons have exercises that include listening, true or false questions, listening and repeating, and tips for learning these new grammar rules. At the beginning of the exercise Busuu app gives an overview of the grammar rules that are related to the exercise seen in Figure 4. While Speakly does not have equivalent separate grammar teaching exercises, there are grammar rules, for example showing the comparative forms of a word, given under each new word that is learned. In addition to that, Speakly has a “grammar rules” section in one place in the app where the learner can go back and have an overview of the rules they would like to concentrate on. There the learner can find information on pronunciation, verb tenses, numbers, etc. This can be especially beneficial to a beginner language learner so they do not have to do additional research on, for example, verb tenses and they can refer back to the section of the app that talks about these rules.



Here's a tip!

Each **person** has a **possessive adjective**. This might help you to remember them!

I	my
you	your
he	his
she	her
we	our
they	their

**Figure 4.** The grammar exercise from the Busuu app in 2024.

Speakly's listening lessons are additional to the vocabulary learning exercises that the learner is meant to do. In these listening lessons, the learner has a text that is for example four minutes long and which is read to them. The text in the listening exercise is written out so the learner can also try to read at the same time. There is the opportunity to see the translation of the whole text. By choosing this translation option the translated text is divided into sections so it is easier for the learner to follow the text and the translation. In case the learner only wants to listen, they can hide the text. In addition to the listening lessons, Speakly also offers the learner a music listening option. There are chosen songs that the learner can listen to and the number of songs that unlock is based on the number of words learned in the app. This music listening and listening exercise option does not have any additional exercises. This means that after listening to a song or text the learner does not have to do any gapfill exercises or answer questions based on the listening. Listening to music could be more beneficial to the learner if the application offered some extra activities to go along with the music. This could be done many different ways by either gapfill exercise on what the lyrics were talking about, true or false exercises based on the song, etc. This would make the learner listen more intensely to the lyrics and possibly gain more from the activity by having a chance to test their vocabulary knowledge.

Busuu's listening exercises are different from Speakly's. Busuu has shorter videos where the learner can watch and listen to them and complete exercises based on these videos. The exercises are filling in the gaps, putting the words in the correct order, spelling, matching the pairs, and true or false activities. While doing the exercises the learner can return to the video and rewatch it to refresh their memory.

Busuu's writing lessons are similar to the other lessons in the application such as vocabulary and even listening. They all follow the same format with videos and exercises where the learner has to complete sentences, fill in the gaps, arrange the words in the

correct order, etc. The only different exercise is the complete conversation exercise, where the learner will afterward get feedback from the Busuu community. This is a good way to increase some “real-life” interaction in the application and get suggestions from other learners. However, this could also possibly pose some issues since the suggestions can be made by anyone in the community and not only more advanced language speakers.

### **2.3 Discussion**

Both of these applications have a varied selection of exercises for learners. While Busuu uses more guessing from context and video exercises, Speakly puts more emphasis on translation and less on guessing from the context with no video possibilities. This is possibly due to the fact that Busuu has English as the interface language and therefore no possibility of translating to another language but Speakly has Estonian as the interface language. Busuu has seemingly resolved the issue of not having translation by providing the learner with audio and visual cues in a majority of their language learning activities.

Each application emphasises the importance of learning vocabulary, which can be seen from the vocabulary bank option where learners can see all the learned words. Both applications also use short speaking and listening exercises. These short exercises have been shown to be a good way for students to learn new vocabulary (Sung et al 2015). Speakly and Busuu have seemingly taken this into account with their A1 and beginner levels and utilised the short activities as opposed to longer reading or listening exercises that would not be suitable for beginner language learners. Busuu has separate pronunciation and listening exercises in addition to the vocabulary exercises where the learner already hears the pronunciation. Speakly, however, incorporates pronunciation and listening more into the vocabulary-based exercises but also has the option to do additional listening exercises.

Busuu's application has reading exercises and they utilise intensive reading where a short text is given and the learner has to do exercises based on this reading. This is a good option for beginner language learners since not only does extensive reading require more vocabulary knowledge but also the learner's interest, which might be difficult to attain if the application has long texts chosen that might not be interesting to the reader. In addition to reading, both applications also support listening exercises with Speakly having more intense and longer listening exercises than Busuu. The listening exercises can help with learning different forms of one word and also see how they are used (Schmitt and van Zeeland 2013).

While the layout and the division of the exercises in the applications are different, they both have similar options with the true and false, match pairs, gapfill, write what you hear, and speaking exercises. The Busuu app tried to categorise the lessons in each of its chapters based on a certain skill but many of them had very similar exercises where the learner would not necessarily know if it was the listening, writing, or vocabulary exercise they were currently doing. The exception to this was the grammar exercises where there was a clearer focus and a distinction could be made when compared to, for example, vocabulary exercises. From the learner's perspective, it does not necessarily seem required to know which exact exercise type they are doing since all these exercises offer variation and help with learning vocabulary. However, with the grammar exercises, the more structured approach can help if the learner wants to go back and check some grammar rules they have already learned, therefore making it a good feature to incorporate into the application.

Busuu's application has one distinct option that Speakly does not have and that is the community section. This allows the learner to connect with their friends but also interact with other users of the application. The community section gives the opportunity to

give feedback to others on their exercises or pronunciation. Li and Bonk's (2023) study points out how many applications do not have the opportunity to ask questions and interact with one another in the app. Therefore, Busuu's option to interact with one another and ask for feedback on activities could be really beneficial to language learners. However, there can be possible issues with this community possibility since everyone can give feedback regardless of their language level. This feature would perhaps be more useful if only native or proficient language speakers could correct others since the benefit of A1 learners correcting one another does not seem the most beneficial.

Both of the applications have various vocabulary learning activities for beginner language learners. While comparing the two applications there is no significant difference in the vocabulary learning activities since Speakly and Busuu have similar activities in somewhat different formats. Therefore, both applications could be good to use by beginner language learners while learning English vocabulary.

The findings of this thesis could be useful for potential Speakly and Busuu users to get a better idea of the vocabulary learning activities in either of the applications. This could make the process of choosing which application to use easier. However, there are limitations to this study since I only looked at the activities at beginner levels and used my own experience while navigating the applications. This topic of vocabulary learning activities could be further researched by comparing the more advanced language levels in Speakly and Busuu with the intention of seeing how the activities might differ. It would also be interesting to add more applications to the comparison to see what vocabulary learning activities other language learning applications have. To further study this topic, there could be the possibility of doing a case study with students. This way it would be possible to see which vocabulary learning activities work best and which of the two applications shows better results.



## CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to see how mobile language learning applications Busuu and Speakly use vocabulary learning strategies. The literature review gave an overview of how learning vocabulary can occur incidentally from reading or listening and also intentionally by using vocabulary learning strategies. While extensive reading can be a great source for vocabulary learning, it has its limitations as it is not recommended for beginner language learners. It often also does not enable the student to understand all the aspects of the new word. This is where language learning strategies can be a way to understand the use, form, and meaning of a new word. Vocabulary learning strategies include using dictionaries, flashcards, word lists, learning word parts, and guessing from context.

The second part of the thesis had an analysis of vocabulary learning activity types in applications Speakly and Busuu. Both applications were analysed from the A1 or beginner's level to have an equal level on both Speakly and Busuu since they categorise their language levels differently. These two applications put an emphasis on vocabulary learning by using phrases and not individual words. However, both applications have the option for the learner to see how many words they know and how well they know these words. Vocabulary and the number of words learned is also the basis of Speakly's language level system where the learner needs to acquire a certain number of words in order to level up. While in the Busuu app vocabulary was also given attention, it was less prominent when compared to Speakly. While vocabulary is at the forefront, grammar is also important in these applications with both offering tips on words and grammar exercises. In this case, as well, Speakly put more emphasis on grammar by giving more in-depth explanations and also a separate section of the application with all the necessary English grammar rules. Both applications encouraged the learner to use various language learning

techniques, which included learning word clusters and doing exercises such as filling in the gaps, true or false, completing the sentence, and picking the correct answer.

Speakly and Busuu both offer the learner a varied vocabulary learning experience by having various vocabulary learning activities. Out of the two applications, there was no significant difference as they both offered similar activities in slightly different formats. The differences could be seen with Busuu offering the learner many more visual cues than Speakly. Meanwhile, Speakly relied more on translation for the learner to know the meaning of a word. Other than these smaller differences one application did not seem inherently better for a beginning language learner and either of these applications seems like a good way for a beginner English learner to start with.

This research paper showed the different language learning activities in both Speakly and Busuu. The topic could be further researched by comparing the more advanced language levels in both of these applications to see if there is a bigger difference in activities. It would also be possible to add more applications to see the difference across the mobile application market with possibly more varied results. Another possibility to further this research would be by doing a case study with students to see how well the vocabulary learning activities work and which application shows better results.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Laura Elisabeth Karu**

**A Comparative Analysis of Vocabulary Learning Activities Used in Language Learning Applications Busuu and Speakly. Keeleõppe rakenduste Speakly ja Busuu sõnavara õpetamise harjutuste võrdlev analüüs.**

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Annotatsioon:

Käesoleva bakalaureusetöö eesmärgiks on võrrelda ja analüüsida, milliseid sõnavara õppimise harjutusi mobiilsed keeleõppe rakendused Speakly ja Busuu pakuvad, et aidata õppijatel inglise keele sõnavara laiendada. Analüüsi käigus vaadeldakse kahte erinevat mobiilset keeleõppe rakendust, et näha milliseid sõnavara õppe tegevusi nad kasutavad.

Bakalaureusetöö koosneb kahest peamisest peatükist. Esimeses osas antakse kirjanduse ülevaade, mis keskendub sõnavara õppimisele, andes teoreetilise tausta varasemalt tehtud uuringute ja artiklite põhjal. Samuti tehakse esimeses osas ka ülevaade mobiilsete keeleõppe rakenduste varasemate uuringute kohta. Töö teises osas keskendutakse Speakly ja Busuu keeleõppe rakendustele, kus analüüsitakse, milliseid sõnavara õppe tegevusi kummaski rakenduses kasutatakse.

Analüüsi käigus saadi teada, et mõlemad mobiilsed keeleõppe rakendused kasutavad sarnaseid, kuid mitmekesiseid sõnavara õppimise harjutusi. Seega võib kokkuvõtteks öelda, et Speakly ja Busuu sõnavara õppimise harjutuste vahel pole märkimisväärsed erinevusi ning algajale inglise keele õppijale võivad mõlemad rakendused kasulikud olla sõnavara laiendamiseks.

Märksõnad:

Inglise keel, sõnavara, keeleõpe, mobiilsed keeleõppe rakendused, Speakly, Busuu

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