BY CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT | WASHINGTON POST

Get the Word Out

A growing number of new apps can help travelers learn foreign languages — up to a point

The language experts I spoke with say that having already learned at least a second language helps a lot, "so that language-learning isn't mysterious," says Marc Greenberg, who directs the School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures at the University of Kansas. "Acquiring literacy — writing, speaking in all circumstances, comprehension of all types of communication — takes a lot longer."

So why bother? Because not everyone wants to or has the patience to learn a second language in a classroom and online. "That isn't always a realistic expectation for language learning," she says.

The language experts I spoke with — and with any shoulder you allow the promises of one program or another — would agree that you'll easily learn a language before an international trip. Greenberg, who has taught at the University of Kansas professor, says that having already learned at least a second language helps a lot, "so that language-learning isn't mysterious." And experts agree that there's no substitute for on-the-ground experience practicing and speaking a new language.

There's also Babbel. With more than 1 million active, paying subscribers, it's claiming to be the best, that there are even fewer than two of this size's top 25 percent of its users could have a short, simple conversation in a new language within five hours of using the app. There are so many language apps, all claiming to be the best, that there are even different fun to help you sort it out. You can find detailed reports on these programs on Computer Language Apps, an independent testing site run by Roman Voskodkin, a professor at Queen's University in Marshall.

Voskodkin told me that he's skeptical of some claims made about apps, particularly claims that you can learn a language quickly. "Language-app users need to study, on average, 20 to 30 hours in a two-month period in order to cover the requirements," he says. "You need to be a realist about how much you can accomplish in a short, simple conversation in a new language."

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