myEnglishAssistant

An app that puts personalized and self-directed language learning in the palm of the learner's hand

Life in a new locale offers many challenges.

When you move to a new country where you're not fluent in the local language, there's so much to learn all at once. Every trip to the grocery store or to meet friends brings new challenges, and new learning opportunities. Learning the local language takes a lot of work, even when you're immersed in it.

My English Assistant (myEA) is a **personal study and organization tool** for people new to Canada or the US, a way to learn English when they're on-the-go. It's a graphical smart phone app designed for adults who have basic language skills, but want to support their learning during their daily routine in a way that's fun and self-directed. Unlike other apps that direct the user's activities with a linear set of lessons, myEA lets the learner set the course. It's a space to enter words as well as a place to look them up.

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It's personalized &
just-in-time learning

Educators recognize the value of "just-in-time" learning, and mobile technologies make the possibilities for this even more rich. In describing the value of "interactive content that responds to student behaviour and attributes," Anderson (2010) pointed out that it is also essential that e-learning tools provide "just-in-time learning assistance provided by job aides and other forms of performance support tools" (Anderson, 2010). And it's not only just-in-time – m-learning offers learning that is "just enough, just in time, and just for me" (Traxler, 2009, p. 114).

Now more than ever "finding information rather than possessing it or knowing it becomes the defining characteristic of learning generally and mobile learning especially, and this may take learning back into the community" (Traxler, 2009, p. 14).

"just enough, just in time, and just for me"
Traxler (2009)

There are a few different features that help people to take charge of their own learning through a system that lets them set reminders and alerts that will prompt them with questions to practice their new vocabulary.
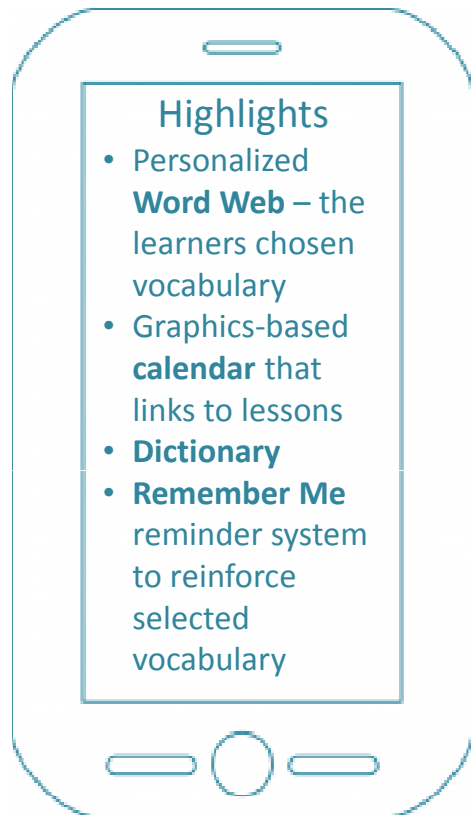
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How it works

When people learn new words, they can enter them in their personal **Word Web**. It's the learner's personal vocabulary list. They can then flag words with **Remember Me** to receive alerts during the following 5 days with a reminder of the word. Initially these reminders will be brief, but with continued development of the app they will expand to in-context examples.

There's a **calendar**, where people can note the things they need to do in the week ahead, and connect that with the vocabulary for that activity. For example, if the task in the calendar is "book a bus ticket to Whistler" the system would suggest vocabulary for travel and buses. This means people have quick access to the vocabulary they need to prepare for and complete new tasks, and have the key vocabulary handy when they need it. Learners can also add their own examples, which could be specific to local usage or slang, to expand the database.

Highlights

- Personalized **Word Web** – the learners chosen vocabulary
- Graphics-based **calendar** that links to lessons
- **Dictionary**
- **Remember Me** reminder system to reinforce selected vocabulary

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Market snapshot: Canada

Learning English is estimated to be a big market – $83 billion market internationally (Gregory, 2009), and in Canada there are hundreds of language schools across the country.

Languages Canada, an organization representing 170 Canadian language programs (public universities and colleges, as well as private and non-profit schools), reported that in 2010 there were approximately 154,000 students enrolled in their programs alone (Languages Canada, 2011). There are also another 90,000 students who come to Canada to study subjects other than English (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008). But learning English isn't just something students need. Each year, tens of thousands of people come to Canada for work temporarily or to immigrate permanently.

When it comes to smartphone usage, one third of Canadians now own smart phones and almost half of Canadians aged 18 to 34 own one (Ipsos Reid, 2011).

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Market snapshot: Apps

Mobile tools mean people can learn new words in the context of everyday life, and learn the words that they identify as particularly useful or interesting. The 2011 Horizon Report "placed mobile computing on the near term horizon" (p. 12).

There are a growing number of language apps, but few involve the learners in entering their own information. Many are static in the sense that they do not respond to the priorities set by the learner, or present information in an as-needed format. Most of the language apps I've seen are quite contained in that they don't push things out to the learner or allow them to store their own info.

Most also do not support students entering and storing their own information – for students to really feel they own the material and can interact with it, they need to be able to use it as a way to store their own notes or key vocabulary.

myEA is also unique in its use of a scheduling tool to connect new language with upcoming events, and to send vocabulary reminders that give them the reinforcement language learning requires.

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The team

The myEnglishAssistent CEO is **Andrea McLagan**. Her interest in this app came from experiences overseas as a language learner and an overseas as a language learner and an ESL teacher. As an e-learning instuctional designer her focus is accessible design and information, and providing learners with the information they need, when they need it. The more learning can be integrated into our everyday lives, and the more opportunities we have to practice language, the more successful learners will be. Her studies in the UBC Master of Educational Technology program have also provided a solid grounding in education theory and trends.

Bringing his web and app development expertise to the table is **Andrew Smith**, who has development and management experience for telecom companies in Canada and Australia, as well as a range of experiences building technology-based businesses.

Most of the development of myEnglishAssistant will be done in-house. There are already a number of open source English and translation dictionary databases available, and these provide a strong foundation for the development of myEA.

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Sales & Marketing

The initial market for myEA is these individuals. The price for language apps ranges from *free* to $20.99 for the extensive translation dictionaries.

FREE   A free version of myEA will allow people to enter up to 5 words in the personal vocabulary list, but people can only set a reminder for one of them at a time. The calendar will also support one event per month.

PAID   The paid version will initially be offered at $2.99, but will climb to $4.99 after 3 months.

The marketing strategy includes:

- Connecting with language schools to provide free app promo codes to students
- Advertising online on popular English language learning sites such as UsingEnglish.com and EnglishClub.com, as well as on Facebook.
- Viral video creation

The future

While it will initially be targeted to launch in North American English, the team is looking ahead to modifying the app for launch in the UK and Australia.

The overseas English market is by far the largest language market, but the app can also be developed for other languages.

Other areas for development include audio. myEnglishAssistant will not include audio initially, but this is a planned addition for future development.

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