



PHOTO BY MIKE PALUMBO

# Language Apps for Learning Vietnamese

Wannabe Vietnamese speakers, rejoice

**T**he good news for reluctant language learners like me is there is now a litany of language apps out there to choose from, and there are no excuses not to at least try them out as most of them are free to use. I tested four out, with each app offering different functions and features for the wannabe Vietnamese speaker.

## Duolingo

Duolingo is the market leader and undisputable daddy of the language app. The ever-so-slightly annoying sound of a correct answer has become a ubiquitous noise in airports and waiting rooms over the last couple of years, though perhaps the irritation that you feel is the feeling of guilt that you aren't practicing enough.

Chances are, if you've dipped your toe into the world of language apps, Duolingo was the first one you tried, and Vietnamese was a new addition to their impressive arsenal of languages last year. The full course of Duolingo is shaped a bit like a tree. You start at the bottom, slowly working your way up as you logically build from the basics, all the way up to more complex grammar and sentences.

Where Duolingo shines is its accessibility — its mini-lessons are a mixture of picture matching, translation and typing what you hear, and completing them genuinely feels like fun. You set yourself a daily target of points that you would like to achieve, which when completed, builds up as a streak that can become dangerously addictive. There were times when some of the sample sentences are infuriatingly wacky (The man is a fish, anyone?), but Duolingo is globally popular for a reason, and their Vietnamese course is well designed and incredibly easy to pick up. One thing to bear in mind, however, is that the app is designed using the Hanoi dialect.

## Dict Box

English-to-Vietnamese dictionary apps are some of the handiest things you can keep on your phone as you navigate your way through life in Vietnam. On Android, Dict Box leads the way. As the saying almost goes — there's no such thing as a free app, and this one is absolutely riddled with ads, meaning the main takeaway you might get from it is the latest Grab bike or Samsung smart phone offers before you delete the app in frustration — but mercifully you can make them go away with a small fee.

One of Dict Box's best tools is its live translation, so when you are browsing a website in English and you copy a word, a pop-up will appear on your phone displaying a comprehensive Vietnamese definition of the word. Another handy tool is that all the words you have searched for are saved in your history, which in my case was pretty much exclusively food items. It is after all, just a dictionary, so don't download it expecting to be holding court with your neighbours after a few months of use.

## Memrise

Like Duolingo, Memrise is a big fish in the language app world. What makes Memrise unique, is its courses for Vietnamese are submitted by the vast community of Memrise users.

You essentially learn through a series of flashcards, which sit alongside 'mems'. These are the reminders that users have submitted to help you create connections between a word and its meaning, helping your brain memorise a word. Some are pretty suspect; the word *chieu* meaning 'afternoon' results in a mem that uses 'I chewed in afternoon,' as a way of remembering the word.

In this example there was a glaring

spelling mistake in English, which doesn't instil confidence that the Vietnamese will be watertight. It's a decent app but really is only as good as its user created content, which can be hit or miss for a language like Vietnamese. It just doesn't have the manpower behind it like the French or German versions will have.

## Hello Talk

If apps like Duolingo or Memrise become too repetitive, with their examples of everyday sentences maddening, there are other options out there that don't rely on suspect AI or dodgy user-created content. Language exchange apps have risen in popularity with Hello Talk being a popular one for English-Vietnamese exchange.

They work like a social network for language learners. You set up a profile with a picture and a few interests, set which language is native to you and which you'd like to learn, and the app connects you with people looking to learn the opposite to you. I was bombarded with messages after my initial post, and things initially looked promising.

The app has a built-in dictionary and one great feature is that it allows you to make corrections or improvements to your partner's text. One of the unique things about Hello Talk is you can record messages and send them, and be corrected on tone and pronunciation.

Unfortunately my rudimentary Vietnamese isn't enough to make this app worthwhile, and all too often I fall back on speaking English before conversation fizzles out completely. It's an app that has lots of potential, but you need to be at a semi-conversational level first before diving in. — **Thomas Barrett**

All the apps reviewed here are available on Google Play Store and iTunes 