Smartphones drive language learning innovation

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Entrepreneur Chris Lonsdale is pictured in his office in Hong Kong. The boom in "smartphones", led by Apple's iPhone, has inspired language learning tools that would have been inconceivable just months ago -- and a Hong Kong firm, headed by Lonsdale, is leading the charge.

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Tens of thousands of "apps" -- individual programmes that can be downloaded to the phone and do everything from recognising music playing in a bar to guiding tourists around a city -- have been developed for the iPhone since it was launched in early 2007.

The ability to combine audio, video, text and data files with an Internet

connection to a central website has helped create a much-improved language learning device, says entrepreneur Chris Lonsdale.

"The technology allows you to have all the elements in one place and gives you new insights (into how you can learn languages)," said Lonsdale, whose app is a six-month course for Chinese people to learn English.

Lonsdale describes himself as "expert in human performance" rather than a teacher and has given advice to clients ranging from golfers to investment bankers trying to make the best use of their abilities.

In recent years, Lonsdale -- a fluent Mandarin and Cantonese speaker -- has begun tackling how people learn languages, and developed new techniques to counter the grammar-obsessed method that puts so many people off learning.

His work resulted in a course that he says could get you to a reasonable standard of Chinese in just two weeks, and a book, The Third Ear, which combines anecdotes and philosophy with unconventional language-learning techniques.

He also developed a range of CDs that combined language learning with music, based on the idea that words can stick in the brain with little effort if they are associated with a catchy tune.

But it was when Lonsdale and his team of 12, based mainly in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, realised the potential of the new iPhone that he was able to put his methods into a single "learning machine" app, called Third Ear Kungfu English.

Lonsdale hopes it will help people shatter the preconception that language learning is about innate talent.

"Learning languages is not about talent, it is about method," said the 50-year-old.

"If you spend two years investing in learning a language and you are still at a low level there is something wrong with the way you are doing it," added Lonsdale, who learned mandarin in six months.

The new product, which his team have been working on for eight months, will target the estimated 20 million middle-managers in China, in particular those working for multinational companies.

"You have this big group of people aged between 25 and 50 who really would like to have English, who need English, but think it is too difficult," he said.

The firm will sell the iPhone or an iPod Touch (the same product but without a phone) to the firms for 5,800 yuan (850 US dollars) with the app included, which will provide a six-month course of lessons, exercises and memory tricks.

One of the features that would have been impossible on previous systems is a video of a westerner pronouncing various words in English.

Just the speaker's mouth is visible, which allows the learner to copy the way the mouth looks when it is making a particular sound -- a technique that is natural to children as they are copying from their parents, said Lonsdale.

The connected nature of the iPhone also allows managers who have paid for the device to monitor how much it is being used and how much progress the student is making. It also allows for feedback.

And every file has been encrypted so that it can only be accessed through

a password particular to the user, a key factor when dealing with a Chinese market notorious for piracy.

Estimates about how many apps have been created for the iPhone vary from 15,000 to 65,000. Creators usually either give them away for free or charge a small fee to download them.

A search of Apple's online store comes up with around 1,000 options for "language learning" ranging from dictionaries and flash cards to a language suite teaching Klingon, a language used in the sci-fi TV series Star Trek.

Ken Carroll, of Praxis Language whose ChinesePod brand of online and audio learning tools has more than 250,000 followers, said the new technology offered huge possibilities, but added new products had to be carefully tailored.

"You can't just take stuff from a book and cram it into the mobile space," said Carroll, whose products teach mandarin to English speakers.

"Learning content has to be designed for the medium. It also has to be designed for the environment in which it will be consumed."

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