



by BENNY LEWIS ([HTTPS://WWW.FLUENTIN3MONTHS.COM/AUTHOR/BENNY/](https://www.fluentin3months.com/author/benny/))



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HelloTalk (<https://www.fluentin3months.com/hellotalk>) is a cool new language learning app that serves one purpose: it connects you directly with native speakers, and provides an interface to text and speak with them, all from your smartphone.

There are websites out there (<https://www.fluentin3months.com/italki>) that let you search for people to talk with, but with these websites the actual conversation happens on Skype, Google plus (<https://plus.google.com/+BennyLewis>), or by telephone. HelloTalk acts as the direct interface through which you find a conversation partner **and** chat, send voice messages or call the people you want to practice with. No need for any third-party software.

And this is available for **FREE**.



HelloTalk also offers translation options from within the app. These features are the paid aspect of the app. This supports the developers to keep the rest of the app free, but I can give you a quick tip to get these tools at no cost...

Sign up to the app, and one of your friends will automatically be *HelloTalk Team*. **Simply message them "F13M" and you'll get 3 months free membership.** This includes unlimited access to HelloTalk's premium features. These are Translation, Voice Recognition, and Transliteration.

Now, more about the app and its pros and cons...

HelloTalk Features

I've been aware of the HelloTalk app for some time, but now is definitely the time to try it out because the community around it has exploded. *This week* it passed **1 million users** covering about **100 languages**. In the time that the app has grown, the developers have had the chance to vastly improve the interface. That said, there's still some room for improvement.

Key features of the app include:

- Voice chat
- Text chat

- Camera share
- Doodle share (draw in the app to visually represent what you want to talk about)
- Smileys and other features you'd expect from a good chat program, like notifications of new messages, GPS location sharing, text size settings.
- Language learning specific features: Translation, Transliteration, and voice recognition to help you write/speak your target language.
- Mark exchanges (text, voice, images) for studying later, or save the entire chat to refer to later.

You can use the photo feature to share cultural differences with your language partner from your surroundings – when combined with the doodle option, the possibilities are endless for how you could use this to your benefit in language learning. You can draw a picture of a dog if you don't know how to say that word (and as you can see, I can share my incredibly beautiful artistic talent), you can take a picture of your house and try to describe it, or try to describe your language exchange partner's environment as language practice, and you can share cultural differences between your country and theirs.



Another helpful feature is the option to chat in several languages at the same time. On the app's home screen you can see all your latest chats. There's no need to go into the app settings to change your target language. This is an issue I've had in other language tools when I've been learning or practising more than one language.

In many ways, the experience of using HelloTalk is like *Whatsapp*, but with a public database of "friends" for the sole purpose of language practice. It's pretty cool that you can scroll past many people and see at a glance where they are from based on the flag shown in the corner of their avatar.

One more thing. HelloTalk works on *both* Android (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.hellotalk>) and iOS (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/hellotalk-learn-english-chinese/id557130558?mt=8&uo=4&at=11MtH>), so whether you've got an iPhone, iPad, or an Android smartphone or tablet, you're good to go.

Practice Speaking Without Feeling Embarrassed

If you're using HelloTalk's voice recognition system, then you can simply speak what you want to say. The system will attempt to understand you automatically, and convert that to text to send to your language partner. I tried this out with a few Mandarin phrases, and it worked well.

This feature lets you practice speaking without having to worry about the embarrassment of someone actually hearing you. What's more, the conversation can continue in a slower pace than it would if you were speaking on Skype. Your conversation partner can choose

whether they reply using text or voice. If they opt for text, you can use the text-to-voice feature to have a voice synthesizer replicate what they may be saying, as if you were having a voice chat.

Mileage in this feature will vary widely depending on the language, how closely you can emulate a native speaker, and of course limitations of the voice recognition system itself.

Find a Language Partner in Your City

In the past, I've recommended using social searches (<https://www.fluentin3months.com/social-search/>) to find language partners who live near you. Meeting with people who speak your target language from your local area is great when you want a break from online lessons.

HelloTalk has this covered. Its local specific search option helps you find a language partner who lives near you that you can invite out for coffee. As there are over a million HelloTalk users, there's a good chance of finding somebody in your area.

I tested this feature out in Sydney, Australia (where I am at the time of writing) and found 24 people within a few kilometres of me looking for a Chinese-English exchange. I also discovered several people ready to offer exchanges for other languages like **German** (<https://www.fluentin3months.com/german-learning-resources/>), Japanese, Italian, and Spanish. As with Whatsapp, you can share your GPS location to make it easier to find language partners nearby.

However, unlike many social language sites, HelloTalk doesn't come with a review system for its users. There's the option for users to fill out an introduction for information about themselves, although many people don't do this. This makes it a little riskier when you are meeting up with strangers, as you don't necessarily know much about them. For this reason, I'd recommend using the meetup feature with caution.

To find people in your area, just use the search feature to find people who speak the language you are learning, and who want to learn a language that you speak. Then, change the search order to "by location". Generally, I'd stick to using just the live chat feature via the app, rather than arranging a meet-up if you'd prefer to be cautious.

Another thing you can do – which I think is a much safer – is use this app while travelling to connect with people in your destination. Then you can pick up local tips on getting around and places to eat, all while getting language practice.

HelloTalk's Special Language Learning Features

As I've mentioned, HelloTalk is like a normal chat app, but with lots of features to help language learners – especially if you sign up to the premium version of the app.

If you use it for Chinese, for instance, you can use the *transliteration* option when a native speaker writes to you, to instantly see the pinyin (romanized pronunciation).

HelloTalk also includes an automatic translation feature. This is really helpful if you are OK with just getting the general gist of things. It can also help keep conversations flowing, *since you don't have to open another app/window to get the*

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When you're chatting using HelloTalk, you can see your conversation partner's language/location as a flag. Additionally, while you talk to them, their local time is shown at the top of the chat window. This is handy if you need to know whether to say *good morning* or *good evening* to start your conversation!

This combination of features is what puts it ahead of the competition. Whenever I chat to someone on Skype, I almost always have several tabs for dictionaries or Google Translate open in my web browser. Switching between these is hard work, and it doesn't help if you are feeling overwhelmed as it is!

Another cool feature is the option to highlight your conversation partner's reply and select it for correction to help them improve their sentences. They can do the same for you. This is different to simply replying with the right way of saying something, because it keeps the dialogue focused on the actual conversation.

Finally, the app has a mode that counts the amount of characters or time spent (e.g. 500 characters or 5 minutes) in one language. When it reaches the limit, it suggests that you switch languages. This avoids the awkwardness of trying to bring it up yourself in the conversation.

You can check out some of these features demonstrated in this video:

Ben: How to use HelloTalk to learn Chinese



My Main Criticisms of HelloTalk

I don't like to be overly critical, especially with a free app. But it's really hard to ignore the fact that HelloTalk is still buggy. Luckily, I imagine these problems will disappear very soon, but be warned that you'll see things like:

- Bad English used in the interface (this is likely the case in the other non-Chinese translations of their interface). Things like "Advance" instead of "Advanced", "Portuguese" spelt as "Portugues" (in the English column), and the guide to the app saying "This help your partners practice listening" among other things. These slonny



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Key features of the app include:

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saying this help your partners practice listening, among other things. These sloppy mistakes should be fixed for a more professional feel, but they can be ignored of course.

- Huge ****stability issues****. It crashes at inopportune times. HelloTalk are aware of this, so I imagine it should be fixed soon. For now though, you will need to be patient as you keep restarting the app.
- Slow responsiveness over 3G/4G when you leave a wifi connection. Wifi shouldn't be necessary for text exchanges.
- Huge battery drain (on my Android). I found that I had to manually kill the app whenever I left it, since letting it run in the background just destroyed my phone's lifespan for the day. This is a pity because when you have HelloTalk running in the background, you get notified when people are interested in speaking with you.

However, these are mostly technical issues. I'd struggle to think of *any* ways HelloTalk could improve the interface, features and look of the app. For people looking for casual free conversation exchanges, it is definitely something worth testing out.

To try HelloTalk for yourself, go to the Android (<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.hellotalk>) or iOS (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/hellotalk-learn-english-chinese/id557130558?mt=8&uo=4&at=11MtH>) store to install it.

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Fun-loving Irish guy, full-time globe trotter and international bestselling author. Benny believes the best approach to language learning is to speak from day one (<https://www.fluentin3months.com/tedx/>).

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