Research Article

CAN DUOLINGO HELP PEOPLE MASTER A FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

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Abstract.
Being bilingual has long been considered an advantage over monolingual speakers. People no longer view being able to communicate in one language as more prestigious, showing that the language is superior and the speakers do not need to master another language. Most people now want to be able to communicate in a second or third language, and they learn other languages, either by taking classes, learning independently or through applications. One of the most popular apps for learning a second, or foreign language, is Duolingo. This paper will discuss the potential of Duolingo to help people (the users) become bilinguals.

Keywords: bilingual, applications, Duolingo

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1. INTRODUCTION

In times when people all over the world are interconnected, either via face-to-face or online communication, the need for a common language arises. Whether people are doing business, conducting research, presenting papers, conducting education, or just doing day-to-day activities, communication with people who speak other languages than their own will most probably occur. With those facts, being bilingual has long been considered an advantage over monolingual speakers. People no longer view that being able to communicate in one language is more prestigious, showing that the language is superior, and the speakers do not need to master another language. People's mobility across countries and across nations will inevitably lead them to the need to interact with speakers of other languages. Being bilingual is now the norm, rather than a special case. But who actually are bilinguals?

Quite a number of definitions have been offered to define who the bilinguals are; Köktürk, Odacıoğlu, and Uysal (2016) delineate three levels of bilinguals: those who 1) can communicate equally well, in both languages, and able to code-switch smoothly, 2)

have the right way to communicate using the target language, and also to decide which language is more suitable in which situation, and finally, 3) have the "lingual-cognitive competence" which refers to the ability to recognize words and meanings.

Another explanation of bilingualism is put forward by Grant and Gottardo (2008), who say that it is very complicated to create one, specific definition of bilingualism, since there are so many things involved. There are the issues of the purposes of learning a second language, and being bilingual, of the age of when the languages are learned, the sequence of the learning, whether simultaneously or sequentially, etc.

When we talk about bilingualism, we should also discuss Second Language Acquisition (SLA henceforth). Discussions and research on SLA have long been an important part of English Language teaching and learning. Just as defining bilingualism, however, defining SLA is not as easy as it is thought. In this paper, I refer to *Second* language as a *foreign* language, which, according to Saville-Troike (2012), is the language which is not widely used in the learner's immediate surroundings. The foreign language might be learned for an array of purposes, including future travel, a compulsory course in school, with no immediate practical applications needed.

Learners of a foreign language have a wide variety of language learning settings, and learners' strategies and conditions (Saville-Troike, 2012). They involve different social backgrounds, learner's needs, or political situations. As for learner's strategies, Cook (2008) points out that learners have their own strategies in learning a language, and using it. Oxford (1990) defines learning strategies as steps taken by the learner to make language learning "more successful, self-directed, and enjoyable".

Regarding the reasons why people learn a second, or third, language, the most common one is to interact with people from different language and cultural backgrounds. Most people now want to be able to communicate in a second, or third, language, and they learn other languages, either by taking classes, or learning independently. In this digital era, furthermore, when most people are too busy to have language classes offline, they prefer to have their classes online, and more specifically through mobile applications. One of the most talked about and used applications is Duolingo, which offers online classes for over 50 languages, including very rare languages like Navajo and Hawaiian.

This paper aims to discuss the Duolingo applications, and its potentials for helping learners communicate in a target language.

2. WHAT IS DUOLINGO?

When discussing a language learning application such as Duolingo, it is inevitable that we also talk about Mobile Assisted Language Learning, or MALL. Loewen et al. (2019) list a number of studies on the needs and existence of MALL, and on the use of Duolingo as a very popular language learning app.

MALL has gained popularity since 2014, with the advent of mobile technology, particularly cell phones and tablets. When we try to find the definitions of MALL, various versions exist; however, several core principles present themselves. They are, to refer to a number of authors: 1) flexibility of time and location of studying, 2) continuity of the structure on various devices, 3) easy accessibility of information, and 4) adaptability to personal study habits (Pegrum, 2014, Duman, Orhon, & Gedik, 2015, to name but a few). So, basically, with MALL, students can study anywhere and anytime, according to their own conditions.

Regarding the Duolingo app, an explanation is called for. The Duolingo Help Centre (2022) states that "Duolingo is the world's most popular way of learning a language". The company's mission is to "develop the best education in the world and make it universally available" (Duolingo Help Centre, 2022). Loewen et al. (2019) explain that Duolingo is a self-described, free, scientific-based language education platform, created by Luis von Ahn and Severin Hacker in 2011. Jiang, Rollinson, Plonsky, and Pajak (2020) describe Duolingo as "a language teaching platform that offers free online courses available on the web and on mobile apps". Furthermore, they state that the app promotes transparency and accountability for the learners.

In presenting the lessons, Duolingo has a certain structure, as follows: the beginning level content of a Duolingo course includes five sections, each of which concludes with a 'checkpoint'. Each unit includes 45 lessons at 5 difficulty levels, where higher difficulty is achieved through exercises requiring progressively more recall and production. Learners are required to complete at least one difficulty level in each row to move on to the next row.

Duolingo uses features such as streaks, crowns, gems, XPs, and leaderboards, and they attract the interest of learners of all ages to return to the lessons again and again. The courses expose learners to words and grammar in sentences in the target language and allow them to gradually infer linguistic regularities from repeated exposure to and engagement with meaningful input. Meanwhile, Duolingo complements implicit learning with explicit feedback and explanations. It is believed that for some concepts, learners

need explicit explanation as a shortcut to more efficient learning. This is especially the case for features of the target language that may be difficult to notice from input alone.

Concerning the use of Duolingo, a number of research has been conducted, both commissioned and independent ones. One commissioned research by the Duolingo researchers (Jiang et al., 2020) compared the learners' proficiency in Reading and Listening, between Duolingo users and ACTFL standards in French and Spanish. In the Listening skills, 225 learners who reached Unit 5, i.e. the end of the Beginner level in Duolingo, had the same level of proficiency as students who had completed 4 semesters of university. For the Reading skills, 340 learners of Duolingo who finished Unit 7, had the same proficiency as students who had completed 5 semesters at the university.

Some independent studies were conducted by researchers in different countries. Ahmed (2016) conducted a case study on Duolingo as a bilingual learning app. The subject was a 12-year old boy in Saudi Arabia (his L1 was Arabic), who learned French and English simultaneously with Duolingo. She found out that the app helps his learning of the two languages, but with some limitations. Ahmed also cites another study, by Munday (2016, cited in Ahmed, 2016) who researched the use of Duolingo in the classroom of Spanish University courses, involving one beginner and one advanced class. The findings revealed that Duolingo is more enjoyable and beneficial for Beginner learners. However, all of the subjects stated that they enjoyed the app, and they achieved more than the required time; they continued learning even after the course ended. Because of the gamification nature, learners enjoy using the app, and they prefer using it than doing homework. All in all, Duolingo motivates learners to learn independently, and encourages them to review what they have learned before.

Bogdan (2016) conducted an independent study, using his own experience as a learner of Spanish using Duolingo. He describes his experiences in learning for over two years, and came up with both the limitations and merits of the app. When he started using Duolingo, he had hoped that the lessons would give him enough fluency to speak with native Spanish speakers; however, even after reaching 50% of fluency level, he still could not conduct a smooth, basic conversation with a native Spanish speaker through Skype. He stated that Duolingo, used by itself, is insufficient to teach a person to communicate in the target language.

However, Bogdan also claimed that Duolingo does have merits, especially for beginners. First, the gamification features makes the app interesting and engages learners to continue learning. Secondly, the fact that it follows the traditional syllabus, entails the ability for the app to be used to "review, reinforce, or support" the lessons. In the end, he concludes that Duolingo, despite its limitations, has very positive points for learners. In

his own words, "For the beginners it constitutes an excellent means for introducing and reinforcing vocabulary and simple sentence structure, and for providing fundamental practice in the four skills. For someone already competent in the language, on the other hand, it can be used as a maintenance tool for keeping up with the language when contact would otherwise be limited".

Finally, Cunningham (2015), and Rachels and Rockinson-Szapkiw (2018) found similar results from their studies, i.e that Duolingo may be seen as a good tool for language learning, due to its affordable and cost-effective option for learning L2, and its DGBL (Digital, Game-Based Learning) features which give it some sort of addictive edge that makes learners want to stay engaged. So, it can be safely said that Duolingo offers a new, interesting tool for learning a second, or foreign language.

3. EXPERIENCE AND DISCUSSION

In this paper, I would like to describe the use of Duolingo in my own family as foreign language learning tool. There are four of us, our L1 is Indonesian, and we learn different languages; my husband and my son are learning Spanish, my daughter is learning English, and I am learning French. Each of us has our own reasons for selecting the language we learn. One of the most dominant hobbies of our family is Latin dancing; and as such, most of the songs have Spanish lyrics. That is the reason my husband and son are learning Spanish. My daughter has to take an English test as the requirement for graduating from the university, and that is why she selects English. As for myself, I have been wanting to learn French ever since I was still in undergraduate studies, but had never had the time (and funds) for taking lessons. Therefore, Duolingo is like a tool to help me realise my dreams.

Despite the different needs and purposes, we all have the same hopes, that Duolingo can help us reach our goals. Our experiences are very much like what the articles and research have stated; that the freedom in deciding our own time and place to study gives us a sense of excitement, and the gamification nature, the DGBL (Digital Game-Based Learning) characteristic of Duolingo makes it "addictive". We want to study it again and again, despite our decision to set up 10-15 minutes of learning per day.

It is true that Duolingo is mainly based on Grammar, there are no authentic language samples, and the kinds of exercises are not varied; yet, we still get the sense of achievement every time we finish one unit or one level. That sense of achievement is what motivates us forward and reaches a higher level every day. The exercises which ask us to do the same questions in which we made mistakes and the tips which explain

grammatical points are very helpful for learning the language. I do believe that practice helps.

At the time when I wrote this paper, I had been learning French with Duolingo for 92 days, and I had finished 5 levels. My husband and son have been learning Spanish for around 2 weeks, and my daughter just started her English lessons for one week. All of us set our learning at 10 minutes a day, but mostly we study longer than that. We are still very persistent and motivated in learning, and we often compare our achievements. On a very small scale, then, I can say that Duolingo actually helps us learn a second or third language, and we are satisfied with it.

As for the answer to the question that I post in the title, I am still unsure, whether it is Yes or No. Yes, Duolingo does help us in learning a foreign language in our own time, and it is a fun learning tool. However, does it help us master the language? The answer to that is yet to be proven, perhaps by taking formal tests in the respective languages. One thing that we can feel is that I can read and understand short texts in French now, and I tried speaking some words in French to a friend from Madagascar, (who speaks French as her second language), and she responded. As for my husband and son, they can roughly say what some words mean in Spanish song lyrics. My daughter has made quite a good progress in her English lessons, and she is constantly moving up in her "league". She hopes to succeed in her English test soon. I know of several other people who use Duolingo to learn foreign languages (Korean and Japanese, for instance), and they all share the same view; that Duolingo is fun, and "addictive". So, I can safely say that, despite its limitations, Duolingo is still a very good language learning app, which can help learners achieve some kind of mastery in the language, albeit not the fluency in speaking, or mastery in writing.

4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, I would like to say that Duolingo is an interesting language learning application, which, according to many, is more interesting than Rosetta Stone or any other MALL apps. Its wide variety of languages, added with the specific features, have succeeded in making Duolingo the most sought-after language learning applications, especially for autonomous and independent learners. The nature of its gamification features, and the ability to be used anytime, and anywhere gives it an additional appeal. However, as I mentioned before, further studies are yet to be conducted to actually see the effectiveness of Duolingo in helping learners master the target language and be bilingual speakers.

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