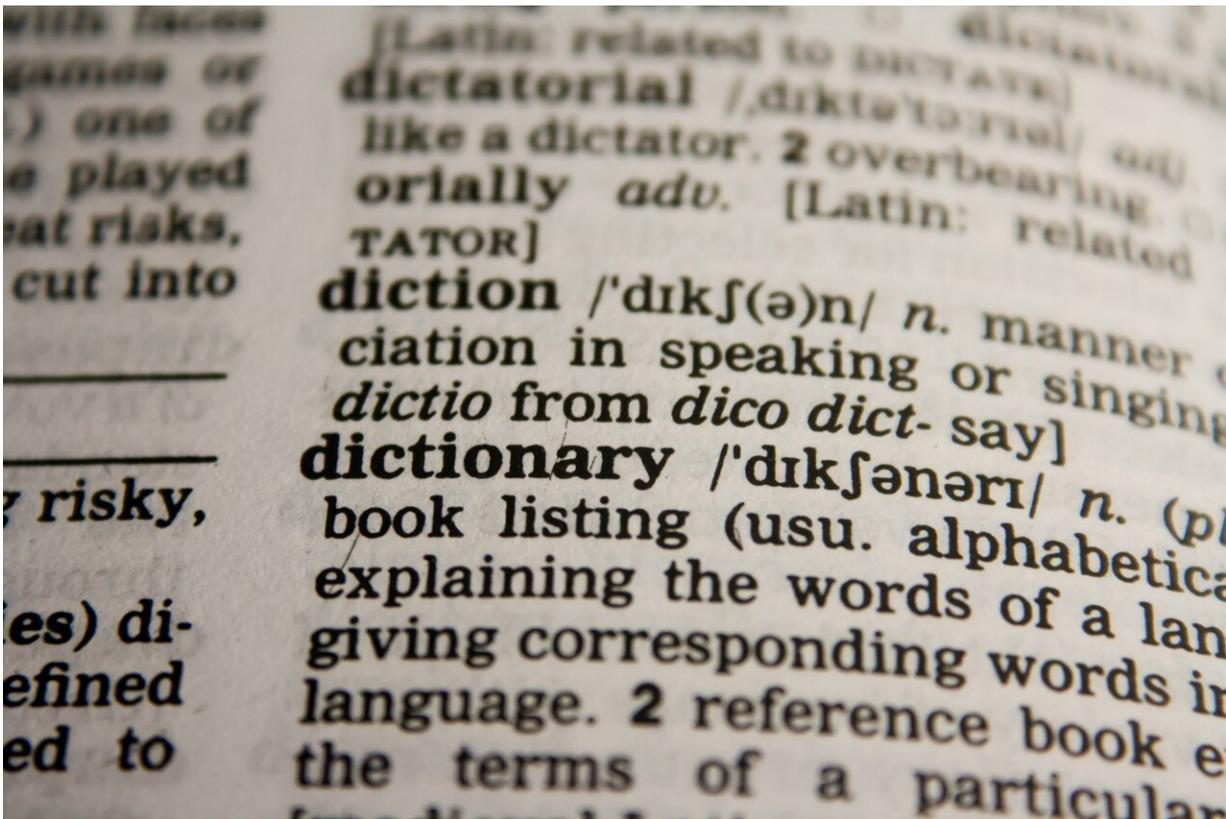


Just how effective are language learning apps?

June 17 2015, by Mike Groves, Diana Hopkins And Tom Reid



Credit: Pixabay from Pexels

Around [70 million people](#) – including [Bill Gates](#) – have signed up for the language learning app [Duolingo](#). The app has received plenty of [media attention](#), and its creators claim that it can help anyone with a smart

phone learn a new language.

The [app](#) is free, and promises all kinds of cutting edge features, such as adaptive algorithms to suit users' learning speed, as well as gamification to boost motivation. They also claim that this app can provide members of poorer communities with access to [language](#) learning that would otherwise be denied them; a worthy aim indeed.

For those who haven't tried it, Duolingo works as follows. The user is introduced to some vocabulary, and then every day they spend a few minutes doing language exercises, such as translating sentences.

There is a level of adaptivity: words that you get wrong come up again and again, while words that you get right come up less often – although they do still appear. This recycling and repetition is a core element of the app – it is what the creators hope will eventually lead to acquisition of new vocabulary. As users complete the exercises successfully, they can move up through the "levels", and unlock bonus lessons on "flirting" and "idioms".

Language learning in theory

As experienced language teachers, we wanted to think about whether or not this technology is really cutting edge. Clearly the delivery mechanism is new, and textbook writers would be amazed at selling 70 million copies. But in a field filled with spirited – and sometimes acrimonious – academic theorising about [language learning](#), it's worth investigating where Duolingo fits in.

The earliest modern language instruction was called "grammar translation". It focused on translating sentences and learning the rules of the grammar as the primary goal. This type of rote learning is how many people learned Latin – including Monty Python's Brian. It is also the

method used by the teachers of generations of happy English tourists to France, who ended up knowing how to conjugate a verb, but utterly unable to make themselves understood without shouting in a strange type of pidgin English with a French accent.

After World War II, a method called "audiolingualism" took over. This was based partly on the idea that positive rewards reinforce behaviour, and that rules and patterns form the primary systems of language. The drill – where students repeated sentences over and over – became the main learning activity. The American Army claimed great success with one form of audiolingualism, which became known as the "[Army Method](#)". But it [has been suggested](#) that the motivation was more important than the method; and a soldier's [motivation](#) is radically different to a school child's.

In the context of the classroom, generations of school children sat in rows, chanting grammatically correct sentences after their teacher. But when they went to France, they could say little more than "*la plume de ma tante est sur la table*" ("my aunt's pen is on the table"). This didn't help in restaurants.

Through the 60s and 70s a number of new methods started to come to the fore, often based on a holistic, humanistic philosophy. From a contemporary point of view, these range from the charmingly eccentric "silent way" – where this teacher is forbidden from speaking – to the clearly charlatan "[suggestopedia](#)" approach, where students and teachers are encouraged to have a parent-child relationship, and read out long dialogues to musical accompaniment. Some students objected to being psycho-analysed in class, and others were still unable to order their meal in a restaurant.

Communication is key

Over time, a lot of ideas coalesced into what is generally known as the "communicative approach". This catch-all label refers to methods which prioritise the function of language as communication, not structure. The idea is that, if you are speaking to someone, it's good to get the grammar right, but it's OK if you don't: if you do get the grammar right, but your pronunciation is so bad that the person can't understand what you are saying, that's much worse. It's equally bad if you are so worried about getting the grammar completely correct that you are too hesitant to take part in a conversation.

The great beauty of the communicative approach, or some would say its great failing, is its ability, like language itself, to adapt and adopt new ideas. It brings in ideas and techniques from all the history of language teaching, and as long as they help the students communicate effectively, they are accepted.

So where does Duolingo fit in with this theoretical background? Well, when using the app to learn, say, Italian as a beginner, you are drilled on sentences like "I am the child", or "I have a bowl". This is audio-lingual drilling: there is no communication happening. Instead of basic communication, the users are drilled again and again in decontextualised, effectively meaningless sentences.

But there are two things that no theorist would deny about learning a language: the importance of learning a lot of words, and the need for constant effort. And this is where an app like Duolingo really comes into its own: it reminds you every day to practise, and reinforce the words you have learnt, while encouraging you with virtual rewards (if that's your thing). Since the chunks of time needed are so small, it can be done in the coffee queue, allowing the users to learn without sacrificing other things in their lives.

We believe that apps like Duolingo can be a useful supplement when you

are learning a language – but not a substitute. It can help you learn some words, and some basic constructions, but it isn't going to allow you to leap into a conversation in a new language. It's better than nothing, but there are plenty of more effective options out there.

But perhaps we are missing the point. Language plays an incredibly powerful gatekeeping role in many societies. Speaking the right language, in the right way, provides a huge number of opportunities: so we maybe shouldn't be thinking whether this app will help comfortably–off European tourists to better enjoy their holidays. Perhaps the creators are right, and we should be thinking about whether apps like these can provide any [opportunities](#) for those in the world who otherwise have none. If these apps can be used to tackle issues such as [global literacy](#), then the aims of their creators can only be applauded.

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