



App	Duolingo
Publisher and Contact Information	Duolingo, Inc.
ISBN	N/A
Platform	iOS and Android
Support	https://support.duolingo.com/hc/en-us
Target Languages	Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Irish, Swedish, Danish, Turkish, Norwegian, Esperanto, Ukrainian, and Russian
Target Audience	English L1 speakers looking to learn another language
Cost-Individual	Free

App: Duolingo

Duolingo is a free internet based language learning platform that was launched in November of 2011. It can be used on a laptop computer, mobile device, or tablet and is iOS, Android, and Windows Phone friendly. Duolingo has been recognized for multiple awards over the years including iPhone App of the Year and Google’s Best of the Best in 2013; and TechCrunch’s Best Education Startup and Google’s Best of the Best in 2014. Currently, Duolingo offers learning different languages for L1 speakers of English only. The following languages are offered: Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Irish, Swedish, Danish, Turkish, Norwegian, Esperanto, Ukrainian, and Russian. Classes that are not yet 100% finished but are being developed include: Polish, Hungarian, Czech, Welsh, Vietnamese, Hindi, Hebrew, Swahili, Romanian, and Klingon. For the basis of this review, using the iOS Duolingo app to learn Spanish on an iPad mini will be used to specifically ground the basis of the critique.

The Duolingo app has a beautiful, sleek and streamlined interface that is very appealing to the eye. Each course is broken up into modules that are grouped to form different skill sets. For example, the initial module is Basics 1 and this module contains very basic nouns and pronouns (such as she/he, man, girl...etc), simple verbs, and simple nouns. Each module is represented in a small circle with an image to represent to level. For example, the Basics 1 module is a blue circle with an image of egg hatching. When you open the module the page opens up as the same color of the module circle. This type of pattern is consistent throughout each module and creates consistency and nice visual aesthetics. Moreover, the app is visually enhancing through its “strength” bars beneath each module that serve as a reminder for the learner to should go back and revisit modules to achieve greater strength and retain the information more efficiently.

The interface also provides many different options for learners to progress at their own pace. For example, there is an option to slow the speech of a listening exercise and learners can repeat any modules they would like to work on again. The order in which learners’ progress

through modules is dictated by Duolingo and learners must complete the first modules to unlock more advanced modules. However, there is also an option to “test out of” individual modules and groups of modules or skills if learners feel they are more advanced and would like to surpass a section.

In terms of usability, the app is free and easy to download and set up. Users can find it easily in the app store, download the app, and then set up a profile, choose a target language, set goals, and, finally, get started learning. It is a particularly useful app for visual learners as there are many pictures of vocabulary, and text may be highlighted to show emphasis for grammar points or other relevant highlights. Moreover, Duolingo is a nice fit for impatient learners that want to start creating sentences from day one. The app introduces learners to simple syntactic structures from the first lesson. Within the first basics module, learning is scaffolded for learners to take simple vocabulary words learned and put them into sentences. Progress reports are shown at the end of each lesson that track learners progress visually and show learners where they stand with accomplishing their goals.

Furthermore, Duolingo aids learners to target their weakest areas from the modules. When a module is finished a new module appears that shows the “weakest words” that the app identified as the learner worked through the specific module. This highlights to the learner where they were having troubles and helps them consciously notice their areas of weakness. Learners also have the opportunity to take the weakest word module right after it appears or come back to it later. This aspect also goes hand in hand with the visual strength bars to illustrate the importance of continued practice.

Finally, the app is great at fostering motivation. Duolingo has many motivational methods to try to keep learners engaged. One of these methods is the goal-setting tool. This allows learners to set a goal before they start the program. Within the app, a virtual coach (named *Duo*) keeps learners on track and reminds them whether or not they have met their goal for the day/week. Another motivational method Duolingo uses is offering learners the ability to earn “lingots” which are bonus skill bars that learners can use to buy outfits for *Duo* and enhance their motivational strategies.

The format of a typical lesson/module is composed of a variety of activities: translation, listening, matching, and speaking. The learner practices a variety of translation exercises that involve typing into a text box to translate or dragging from a present word bank to form the translation. The listening sections also provide a variety of exercises that consist of selecting what was said by a recording, typing what was said by a recording, or forming the response from a word bank of options. Similarly, the categories of matching and speaking employ a variety of activities for the learners to practice their skills. Matchings activities sometimes include pictures and other times only include sentences. The speaking section usually engages the learner to speak into the app microphone and try to pronounce various sentence constructions. Having a variety of different types of exercise for each category may help the learner stay more engaged.

Some caveats of the app include little control over course content and the order of learning. Because learners have to progress to “unlock” different levels or vocabulary topics, learners may need to learn topics that are not necessarily relevant to their learning objectives. There is no way to skip ahead if a learner feels that a module is not relevant to their language learning goals and they cannot advance without achieving a certain level of mastery on the

modules. Thus, if a learner really wanted to practice the future tense for example, they cannot just skip the modules before it to get there. They have to progress through all of previous modules. This could be discouraging for students with content specific or specific purpose goals for their language learning.

Moreover, another disadvantage is the lack of *real* speaking interaction. The “speaking” exercises on Duolingo are more or less repetition exercises, almost in an audio-lingual style where correct pronunciation seems to have the most importance and less focus is on meaning or alternative pronunciation varieties. This type of pronunciation exercise might also be discouraging and demotivating for students, especially if they do not have anyone to explain to them what elements of their pronunciation need to be improved or altered.

Consequently, the app allows little room for learners to make use of improvising techniques and strategies. In real language situations, learners often times find themselves in situations where they do not know specific words or phrases and they negotiate for meaning with the speaker by describing and using other words or phrases to arrive at a shared understanding. This is an important strategy and skill in language learning and development. Duolingo does not provide much flexibility for improvising and using different strategies for learners to get their point across. Additionally, the exercises that students encounter are very much predetermined and learners have time to think and formulate a response. There are no activities that prompt learners to think quickly and form a response without having time to plan. Accordingly, although Duolingo has many great features, it is not a standalone course, largely because it lacks opportunities for learners to employ real-time speaking strategies and have to quickly formulate responses.

In comparison to other digital language learning courses, Duolingo is the by far the most economical and versatile course offered in an app. In comparison to Rosetta Stone, for example, Duolingo can save learners hundreds of dollars for a very comparable product. Furthermore, Duolingo is a much more innovative and recent product, undergoing changes and improvements on a regular basis. Rosetta Stone, although continually improving, seems to have much less of an agenda for innovative changes like Duolingo. That said, Rosetta Stone may offer some advantages over Duolingo attributed to its years and years of experience as a well-established language learning program. As a whole, Duolingo’s biggest surmising feature is it’s free product and ad-free domain.

Duolingo’s tech support is grounded in their *Help* page on their website. They have several links to various tech support areas and also offer a field to ask a question directly to the tech support staff. Additionally, they offer a sort of customer forum where users can post questions for one another to ponder and discuss. An internet connection is needed to use all of the full features of Duolingo. However, when using the Android or iOS app, a handful of lessons are available without the internet, but not all lessons are accessible and progress made while offline will not be recorded until an internet connection is made.

Overall, Duolingo is a great tool for language learners that already possess some background knowledge and experience with a language and want to sharpen their skills and upkeep their abilities. It provides them with activities to work on most aspects of a language (listening, reading, writing, and pronunciation). It is also a fun and motivating way to practice, as it resembles a game and provides rewards and incentives for continued practice. Often times, people become rusty with a language or loose quite a bit of a language they once knew very well

because they are no longer in an area where they can practice it regularly. Duolingo provides a fun platform to practice virtually anywhere.

On the contrary, Duolingo is not a standalone course and is not enough to use alone to fully upkeep a language. Learners, especially at more advanced levels, need conversation situations where they must think on their toes and respond without having the opportunity to plan their response. Duolingo does not offer any features like this. Additionally, Duolingo is not very suitable for new language learners as a standalone course. For learners that are very new to a language more explanation of the features of the language might be necessary and more situations to produce more relevant forms of the language is also required.

In sum, Duolingo is a great app to practice and maintain language skills of a language that one has prior experience with. Its sleek interface, engaging activities, and fun game-like structure provide learners with a versatile, take anywhere language tool they can use to sharpen their language skills regardless of being in a place where the language is widely used or not.

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