Q&A

Q: We are pleased you could join us at the ACTFL Convention, where thousands of language educators gather annually for the largest professional development opportunity in our field. You spoke there primarily about Duolingo, the software you created which has motivated over 100 million people around the world to learn a new language for free and is currently the most downloaded education app worldwide.

At the convention, you said that you feel Duolingo works best when used in conjunction with a teacher. Could you elaborate on why you believe this is so? What is it about Duolingo that makes it so successful?

A: We never saw Duolingo as being a replacement for a language class. Yes, a lot of times, folks in technology say, “We’ll be able to replace this or that,” but I think replacing language teaching is really hard—and why should we do that? It seems to be working pretty well. So, our goal was never that. I myself am a computer science teacher and I don’t want to be replaced.

In my own experience, I have found that gaming is extremely motivating. I grew up playing games and I’m a big fan of games generally. I also found that, as a professor at Carnegie Mellon, I spent most of my time motivating rather than teaching. I would put things into context. Some teachers have the idea: “I have this material to cover. I’m going to cover it all.” A lot of times, I decided that I couldn’t effectively cover it all, but I could motivate my students to go learn it by themselves. When learning a language, you need to be motivated to spend time beyond class because you can’t learn everything in class.

Duolingo works better with a teacher involved because it can’t answer your questions like a teacher can. It also doesn’t focus on 21st century skills like critical thinking or problem-solving. Teachers are good at motivating. Duolingo’s game mechanics are also pretty motivating but I think that they are motivating in conjunction with a real human that learners look to, someone that is there for them. At least for now, the whole aspect of culture is something we kind of ignore with Duolingo and which teachers are good at explaining. Teachers are great at putting things into context. We know from our data that Duolingo works better with teachers; we have measured it.

The way we think of it is to be a complement to the classroom. About a year ago, we launched Duolingo for Schools, which offers the same app for the students along with a website where the teacher can track students’ progress. We have about 100,000 classrooms all over the world using Duolingo in one way or another.

Q: After you had great success early in your career, you didn’t need to work to make money and so you were able to spend your time and energy on what you really wanted to do, which turned out to be Duolingo. What inspired you to focus on language learning?

A: Coming from Guatemala, a developing country, I always saw that education could either be an equalizer, or at times it could widen the divide between people who have a lot of money and those that don’t. People who have a lot of money can usually buy themselves the best education in the world. So I wanted to do something that would give
equal access to education to everyone. Of course, education is very general—so we decided to focus specifically on language education. The vast majority of people learning a foreign language worldwide are learning English in an effort to get out of poverty. Ironically, most of the ways there were to learn a language through software were very expensive before this. That did not make much sense to us. So, we decided to make Duolingo as a completely free way to learn a language.

We launched it about 3.5 years ago and it has grown a lot. Today, Duolingo is the most popular way to learn languages in the world. We have about 110 million people that have used it to learn a language and about 50 million current users. This is even though we have never spent a single dollar on advertisement.

What I’m most proud of in terms of Duolingo is the numbers and diversity of people using it. For example, every single school that is connected to the Internet in Colombia is using Duolingo to learn English. We have many schools in different countries, low-income kids in public schools in developing countries using Duolingo to learn a language. On the other end, Bill Gates is using it. The richest man in the world uses the exact same tool as very poor kids; this means a lot to me.

The Language Educator

**Q:** How open are you to collaborating with language teachers and second language acquisition researchers? The research done in the field is vast and with projects like the ACTFL Research Priorities Initiative, we have amassed a great deal of knowledge on best practices in language education. You have gathered a lot of data about language learning with users of your app and it seems a natural fit.

**A:** We are very interested in and open to collaboration. One of the things we want to do is open up a lot of our data to further research. We observe our users completing about seven billion exercises per month and we know a lot about each exercise, how they got it wrong, how long it took them, and so on. It’s a pretty interesting dataset across all kinds of languages, so we definitely want to open that up to collaborating with researchers.

With classroom teachers, something we’re doing is sending members of our Duolingo team to a few different schools in the New York and Pittsburgh area, where we observe how teachers and their students use Duolingo in the classroom. We gave iPads to all the students and in exchange we said, “Let us watch how you are using the app so we can keep improving it.” They have had a lot of feedback about how to make it better and we have been listening.

In terms of how we can provide more data, if you go to the Teacher Dashboard at Duolingo.com right now, you can see that educators can get feedback about students using the app. We want to start giving a lot more precise data back about how they are doing and where they have problems and how long it takes to do each exercises, so that teachers can identify areas to focus their lessons. We don’t, however, collect demographic data because we take privacy concerns seriously.

**Q:** Right now the app follows the topics and grammar in a particular order. Do you have any plans to make it more able to be personalized for individual teachers?

**A:** Our dream would be to teach every single language in the world, so, yes, we are trying to expand. When we launched Duolingo, it was a way to learn Spanish. Then we started with English, then on to German, and we kept going. Now we have many languages—some of which are much less commonly spoken or taught. So, for example, on Duolingo right now, you can learn Swedish, Norwegian, Esperanto, and Irish. We just launched Catalan. We’re working on more but it’s going to take a while since there are 7,000 of them. People always ask why we don’t teach Chinese and Japanese. We have been working on that but we do not feel like the product that we have envisioned is good enough yet. It’s difficult because we don’t yet have a great way to teach the characters.

What to do about ASL is a common conversation at the Duolingo offices. We have thought a lot about it but it really is a very different teaching method than spoken and written languages. When using Duolingo, there is a lot of typing and it would have to be pretty different from what we do now. So that’s why we haven’t done anything on American Sign Language yet, but we do want to address this as well.

**Q:** You speak the language most commonly studied in the United States, Spanish, and Duolingo focuses in large part on the most popular language in the world, English. As you well know, less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) often have limited materials and access. Do you have any vision to offer Duolingo in more LCTLs? Have you thought about how to adapt what you have developed in Duolingo for American Sign Language (ASL)?

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wrong, so then the lesson is personalized for him or her. That was our first step really, but next we want to start letting teachers choose what their students can do. We’re working on that now. We hear a lot from teachers that they’d like to coordinate the Duolingo exercises to go along with their curriculum.

Q: What can you say about variation in different languages or among learners? Do you teach people who learn in different ways? Do you teach German differently than Spanish or English? What is your vision in terms of addressing interculturality? How would you infuse the opportunity to use language in a cultural context?

A: People don’t realize what sophisticated things are happening when you start a lesson on Duolingo. You may think that we just have a prewritten lesson that is the same for everyone, but it’s actually a pretty sophisticated artificial intelligence. When a user clicks Start, it goes back to our server and looks at that user and every single thing that he or she has done. For example, we know things like every time we show you the word for pineapple you take an extra 800 milliseconds. We take all these things into account to be able to generate a lesson for you. When we started doing that (instead of preset one-size-fits-all lessons), it made a huge increase in the amount that people learned and also the length of time people stuck around. We teach distinct languages differently, and even teach the same language differently to different learners. For example, we teach English differently to Chinese speakers than we do to Spanish speakers because the type of things that Chinese speakers have trouble with are different than the types of things that Spanish speakers have trouble with.

I do think that culture should be infused in language learning. We’ve thought a lot about this. We originally planned and launched this as a tool that would just teach languages by itself without culture, but now I don’t know if that was a good idea or not. Right now it’s pretty devoid of culture. We’re starting over time to regret that and so we are going to start teaching more about cultures.

Note: This interview was compiled from Luis Von Ahn’s plenary session at the 2015 ACTFL Convention, his responses to attendee questions, and a one-on-one interview he gave to the Editor of The Language Educator.

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Learn a Language While Translating the Web

Check out this brief video ([duolingo.wikia.com/wiki/File:Duolingo_Intro](duolingo.wikia.com/wiki/File:Duolingo_Intro)) to learn more about what Duolingo does to help translate the web into different languages.

From the introductory video:

“We’ve developed . . . a way for you to learn a language for free, while at the same time helping to translate text from the web, enabling a wealth of language-shackled information to be liberated for all of humanity. It’s called duolingo. Here’s how it works: Let’s say you are a native English speaker who wants to learn Spanish. We start by giving you a sentence from a Spanish website and asking you to translate it . . . Duolingo only gives you sentences that fit your language level . . . Because you create valuable translations while you learn, we return the favor by offering Duolingo completely free of charge.”

See this video in TLE Online at www.thelanguageeducator.org.