

The Secret to Learning Any New Language May Be Your Motivation

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If you want to effortlessly become an expert in a new language, you're probably too late. That's an opportunity largely reserved for children.

And yet, adults regularly set out to study a second (or third, or fourth) language. They embark on the difficult journey for different reasons. Some want to gain better job prospects, others seek to socialize in new circles, while still others just want an educational way to entertain themselves.

Research is revealing that these reasons may influence how far someone is able to travel toward proficiency. So programs intended to make that process easier and faster are tapping into the science of motivation to improve their methods. That includes the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, which helps members of the military gain proficiency in new languages in as little time as nine months.

“Without that intrinsic personal motivation, it's hard to reach the levels we expect and hope,” says Parandeh Kia, associate provost for educational technology at the institute. “Achievement is not comparable.”

Of course, not everyone has access to an intensive, in-person training program run by the U.S. government. But technology-enabled tools that aim to deliver language instruction at scale are also building incentives into their systems to help learners make more progress.

“We've really learned that the most important thing is to keep people motivated,” says Bozena Pajak, director of the learning science team at Duolingo, a language learning app developer. “We can't teach them if they don't come back.”

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Dueling for Attention

Work is not the primary reason people use Duolingo. The company, an [edtech “unicorn” with a \\$1.5 billion valuation](#), says the bite-size lessons that its app offers in 36 languages compete largely with social media platforms and mobile games for people's time and attention.

People come to the app for a variety of reasons. According to a recent survey of more than 15 million users, 22 percent of respondents in the U.S. say they use Duolingo for school. (This may have something to do with the fact that half of the app's users are under age 30.) The next most-popular purpose was for “brain training,” the [disputed idea that certain activities convey cognitive benefits](#) for staying mentally sharp. Travel, work, and family each notched about 11 percent of the votes.

Duolingo supplements these personal motivations by building gamification techniques into its lessons. It rewards users based on how long they keep up their “streaks” of daily use, recognizes top achievers in leaderboards, and gives out “gems” that users can spend in the Duolingo shop to buy digital costumes for its owl mascot.

The company is constantly running A/B tests and experiments to try to keep people coming back to the app, says Pajak, the company’s director of learning science, who has a doctorate in linguistics. With such a heterogenous user pool, making changes that appeal to some users without alienating others can be tricky. For example, the company got positive results when it tested a feature permitting, but not requiring, users to explore more levels of instruction within a lesson unit before moving on to the next one.

“This allowed us to give to learners this extra depth, the harder experience, through leveling up, while also allowing learners who were not ready for it to do more content further down the course,” Pajak says.

With its colorful graphics and gamified rewards, Duolingo is fun to use. As a free tool, it’s widely available and widely tried. But no matter how driven people are to return to the product, one question remains: Does its language training work?

“It’s definitely more straightforward to measure user engagement, because the metrics are easy,” Pajak says.

Yet Duolingo is collecting evidence to prove and improve its effectiveness, too. Last month, the company published results of a study showing that 225 people who used the app to study Spanish and French [reached the same level of listening and reading proficiency in half the time](#) as people studying those languages through university programs.

(Study participants were chosen randomly from among a pool of users who met certain criteria, including having little prior knowledge of Spanish or French and not taking additional language courses. The study was run by Duolingo scientists and a professor at Northern Arizona University.)

Still, Duolingo is designed to offer people choices. Depending on what users are looking for, they can aim to finish a whole course, or just brush up on a few lessons.

It all comes back to ... motivation.

“The way we look at it,” Pajak says, “our learners can get what they want out of Duolingo.”