

THE EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL OF DUOLINGO AS A SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCE FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

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The abstract explores the educational potential of Duolingo, a popular interactive platform for learning foreign languages, as a supplementary extracurricular resource. It is currently used by the students of the Faculty of International Relations for upgrading their linguistic skills on an out-of-class basis. The article explains the basic principles of the platform's operation and provides a critical evaluation of its strengths and problematic areas based on the practical experience of using it for learning French. A conclusion is formulated about the relative efficiency of Duolingo for forming basic skills of grammar and improving the skills of listening and reading comprehension. However, the platform's capacity for teaching speaking skills is limited. With all its advantages, Duolingo cannot fully substitute traditional classes that are aimed at attaining higher levels of language fluency (levels B2 and higher).

Keywords: gamification; Duolingo; language learning platform; international language exams; Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR).

ОБРАЗОВАТЕЛЬНЫЙ ПОТЕНЦИАЛ *DUOLINGO* КАК ВСПОМОГАТЕЛЬНОГО РЕСУРСА ДЛЯ ИЗУЧЕНИЯ ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКОВ

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В статье рассмотрен образовательный потенциал *Duolingo*, известной платформы для изучения иностранных языков, в качестве вспомогательного учебного ресурса. В настоящее время он используется студентами факультета международных отношений в целях совершенствования языковых навыков как одна из форм внеучебной деятельности. В статье описаны принципы работы языковой платформы и представлена критическая оценка ее преимуществ и менее сильных сторон на основе непосредственного опыта изучения французского языка. Сформулирован вывод об относительной эффективности образовательного ресурса *Duolingo* для формирования базовых грамматических умений и совершенствования навыков аудирования и чтения. Вместе с тем, отмечена его недостаточность для работы над навыками устной речи. При всех преимуществах, интерактивная платформа *Duolingo* не может полностью заменить традиционное обучение, направленное на достижение высокого уровня владения иностранным языком (уровни B2 и выше).

Ключевые слова: геймификация; *Duolingo*; платформа для изучения иностранных языков; международные языковые экзамены; общеевропейские компетенции владения иностранным языком (CEFR).

One of the most remarkable global trends in modern language learning is connected with the shift towards independent work with the implementation of various digital platforms that are aimed at enhancing relevant linguistic skills. The growing popularity of such supplementary educational resources can be chiefly explained by their accessibility, relative inexpensiveness and an attractive gamelike interface. Among them, Duolingo maintains a leading position: as of 2024, the interactive language learning platform reached about a billion downloads, with more than 100 mln active users monthly. Moreover, its rate of paid subscriptions has been showing an upward trend in recent years [1]. The given abstract will describe its principles of operation and highlight its advantages and disadvantages as an extracurricular educational resource that is used among the students of the Faculty of International Relations of the Belarusian State University as a form of independent out-of-class work.

The Duolingo method is based on the following 5 pillars.

1. *Interactive character.* First and foremost, the platform provides constant feedback on a learner's performance. The users are encouraged to practice their language skills by doing test-like exercises. Of special value is an option of mistakes correction at the end of each lesson. This allows platform users to hone problematic areas of knowledge and upgrade relevant language skills.

2. *Personalised training.* The second principle logically follows from the first one. Duolingo implements a model that involves artificial intelligence (AI) and tracks a learner's individual performance with regard to one's pace and the overall level of correctness. In a way, the platform «tailors» its lessons to each particular user by means of applying AI tools. They allow to determine an appropriate level of difficulty, balancing familiar language material with a certain degree of challenge.

3. *Structured content.* Duolingo course sections are linked to international standards that measure a learner's command of a foreign language. The most well-known ones have been developed within the Council of Europe. They are referred to as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Each learner receives a certain score depending on one's progress. In such a way the whole process of language learning is measurable.

4. *Enhanced motivation.* The platform is using an attractive visual interface, a developed system of so-called «language leagues», which adds a competitive edge to the process of learning. These «leagues» are updated on a weekly basis. It really takes a lot of time and effort to stay in the top-leagues. The most widely known form of keeping up motivation also includes daily reminders as the digital application underscores the importance of regular exercise.

5. *In-built entertainment.* Duolingo offers hilarious content supposing that even senseless examples may be useful for learning grammar patterns and contribute to better memorisation of lexical units [2]. For example, a sentence like «If I were a king, I would ban all boring homework» may not seem highly communicative. However, it trains a pattern for forming conditional sentences

of the second type. Practice shows that even experienced language learners often make mistakes with the use of conditionals.

It has to be said that quite a number of students of the Faculty of International Relations have personal accounts with this interactive language learning platform. Some of them have joined it during their school years. Not all the students who have their profiles on Duolingo practice their skills regularly. At the same time, some of them may be characterised as its committed enthusiasts.

Among the obvious advantages, Duolingo provides an opportunity to subscribe to user profiles. This allows to monitor each other's day-to-day progress. Judging by their oral reviews, the students of the Faculty of International Relations are more oriented towards cooperation rather than competition. Expanding their network on the platform seems to be more important for them than outperforming someone. Taking part in 'Friends Quests' contributes to the development of the skill of cooperation among the learners and better group cohesion.

According to students' opinion, Duolingo may be quite beneficial for practicing their grammar skills as well. This is particularly relevant in respect of those languages that they start learning from the Beginner level at university: German, French, Italian, etc. It is worth clarifying that students often choose English as the main language in the set-ups of the digital application. On its basis they get on mastering other languages, thus training two foreign languages simultaneously. Practicing grammar skills is essential at the formative stage, one cannot develop fluency of a foreign language without the knowledge of the basics of grammar.

Another advantage is a user-friendly interface. Graphic design, sound effects, a system of visual stimulation and instant gratification make it attractive for representatives of the so-called «Generation Z». For instance, on successfully passing a unit one may get a push-up message like "o mistakes. Scientists should study your big, beautiful brain." Compliments like that are taken humorously, but they contribute to a better self-esteem as they create a sense of achievement.

However, even the most devoted users of the interactive platform tend to think that they are learning a language superficially. They do not expect to achieve fluency solely relying on Duolingo. In a way, such an opinion echoes some of the critical voices of the researchers from the Russian Federation. For instance, M. A. Murashko claims that the progress on the platform is often illusory, the maximum possible level that can be achieved is B1 (Intermediate) [3, p. 722]. V. A. Kopylov and M. V. Tsyguleva are convinced that the platform does not provide sufficient content on important cultural concepts, and its users are learning an unnatural language [4, p. 431].

From hands-on experience of learning French on Duolingo and a consequent attempt of taking an A2 DELF exam (Diplôme d'Études en Langue Française, an international language exam of levels A1–B2), it is possible to make an inference that the platform is quite instrumental in training the receptive types of speech activity: reading and listening comprehension. The result of 24 points

out of 25 for section «Listening» and 23 points out of 25 for section «Reading» give an opportunity to partially agree with an opinion of Duolingo experts: the digital application is improving in training these types of speech activity [5]. At the same time, such an essential part as speaking requires additional practice for achieving fluency. The result of 22 points out of 25 is acceptable, but the students who have studied French in the Faculty of International Relations and taken the same A2 level exam scored 24.5 points out of 25. What needs to be given more attention is phraseology. One cannot say that one is fluent in a foreign language without the knowledge of clichés, idioms, proverbs and popular sayings. Regrettably, the free version of the digital application does not train them.

To conclude, a mindful attitude to the process of language learning demonstrates an adequate approach on the part of the students of the Faculty of International Relations. Working with Duolingo can be captivating, but it cannot substitute offline classes. At the same time, the application may be used as an additional form of extracurricular activity at the Beginner and Intermediate levels for better memorisation of basic lexical and grammar concepts and training the skills of listening and reading comprehension.

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