

**SFX:** Duolingo Ding

**VO:** Did that sound give you a visceral response?

**SFX:** racing music

**VO:** If so, you probably know of Duolingo, the most used language learning app. But how did the idea for a crowdsourced translation service turn into a multi-million dollar language learning app, becoming the top language learning app used. And more importantly – does it actually work?

**SFX:** transition music

**VO:** In 2011, Duolingo launched a private beta test, with over 300,000 people on the waitlist. Co-founders Luis von Ahn and Severin Hacker met as PhD students at Carnegie Mellon.

Years before, von Ahn sold the idea of captcha to Google. Now, he was looking for a new venture. As a non-native English speaker, he wanted to create an accessible way for people to learn English, especially those from his home country of Guatemala.

**SFX:**

<https://abcnews.go.com/International/meet-luis-von-ahn-guatemalan-immigrant-worlds-popular/story?id=93122372>

**VO:** Many people have the same impression of language learning.

**SFX:** [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=245U\\_kF0qps](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=245U_kF0qps) classroom

**VO:** You go to a class and learn vocabulary and grammar from a textbook, the process is slow and laborious.

But Duolingo sought to change that. While it isn't the first language learning app, it is one of the first to take a gamified approach to language learning. A 2022 study found the app to be so effective, that at Checkpoint 5 in the Spanish or French course resulted in the same reading and listening fluency as 4 semesters of college level classes.

**VO:** You earn experience points, gems, and medals the more lessons you do. There are weekly leagues and tournaments to compete against others. The app pushes users to continue a daily streak, which has resulted in tons of memes about the Duolingo Bird, Duo, threatening you if you don't continue your lessons.

**SFX:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3MgFxcflM>

**VO:** As years passed, they've solidified their place as not only the most used language app, but also a staple of pop culture.

**SFX:** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qsEsgp3H7CU>

**VO:** Since its inception Duolingo has expanded their offerings. They have free podcasts in Spanish and French, lesson guides for teachers, and their English Exam is recognized by over 5000 universities in the world as an official and accurate language exam.

**VO:** Despite these developments, as Duolingo has grown their reputation has slightly soured.

**SFX:** transition music

**VO:** In one example, users have taken note of how the sentences taught aren't necessarily helpful in the real world

**SFX:** of me using the app or like a youtube video.

**VO:** As another example, it's become evident that Duolingo's goal isn't to get you fluent – it's to make money.

**SFX:** saddish music

**VO:** In 2021 Duolingo introduced the heart system – users are given 5 hearts each day, if you get a question wrong you lose a heart. You can wait 6 hours to get a new heart, or simply pay to refill your lives. Another option is to purchase Super Duolingo at \$13 a month.

Some might claim that language learning is forever, these prices are still cheaper than buying a grammar textbook or a private tutor. And while this may be true – it pushed the boundaries of Duolingo's original objective: to have accessible lessons for all.

If the app punishes you for getting the gender of an item wrong, wouldn't you become deeply discouraged to continue usage of the app, if not learning a language entirely?

**VO:** The app has also come under fire for their usage of artificial intelligence, in spite of environmental and ethical concerns surrounding AI.

In 2023, Duolingo launched an AI ChatBox for users to have conversations with AI utilizing GPT-4. This feature is behind a paywall called Duolingo Max. For \$30 a month – double the current minimum wage in many states – users can unlock AI features including roleplays and language explanations.

Despite pushback from users about these changes, Duolingo has doubled down on their mission to make AI a part of their brand. Previously, the app contracted translators for the site's

lessons, but months after the company began using AI a large number of these employees were laid off.

Though the company never officially stated it was because their jobs were replaced by machine learning, the employees laid off are confident that this was the reason. The company is transitioning to using lessons fully translated and created by AI, the contractors NOT laid off are there to check what AI has produced. But as AI becomes more advanced, who's to say they won't be replaced as well?

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/01/10/duolingo-ai-layoffs/>

### **SFX: transition music/conclusion**

**VO:** The same study previously mentioned, also noted that “the self-directed nature of the Duolingo learning platform contributes... to variation and complicates our interpretation of how the amount of learning effort contributes to assessment outcomes; for example, we observed bimodal “leveling up” behavior, where some learners choose to complete more difficult skill levels while others rarely do. It appears that the quality of the time spent in terms of activities, lessons, and attention given, may matter just as much as the quantity of time spent using the app.

<https://investors.duolingo.com/news-releases/news-release-details/leading-language-research-journal-publishes-study-showing#:~:text=Peer%2Dreviewed%20journal%20%E2%80%9CForeign%20Language,for%20reading%20and%20listening%20skills>

**VO:** In all, whether someone has found success or failure in the Duolingo app may not be due to the app itself, but their own willingness to learn.

Just as you can learn a language with Duolingo, you can learn it without it... (not done)

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ri-tzZcGYk0>

**SFX:** me using the app, getting something wrong?