

How a little green owl taught me French... up to a point

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A good app can make learning fun, but a great teacher can take it to the next level.



Lim Sun Sun

If I told you that I have been actively learning French for exactly 1,891 days, you'd probably applaud me for my commitment and perseverance. But the fact that I haven't fallen off the French bandwagon after five long years is hardly due to my passion for the language, inherent discipline or cast-iron will.

Nay, I credit my persistence to a pesky little green owl named Duo – mascot for the language learning app Duolingo. Powered by brilliant technological design that is informed by cognitive science and learning analytics, Duo and his team of animated characters prod and pester you into learning, every single day.

For people juggling work, family and social obligations, our adult learning journeys are often punctuated by humps, detours and diversions. Can a mere app help someone grasp a language as complex and as nuanced as French?

French learners must grapple with words that are pronounced quite differently from how they are spelt, grammar that boasts a confounding multitude of tenses, and gendered nouns and pronouns that arbitrarily flip-flop between the masculine and the feminine. And these are hardly the most discombobulating aspects of this beguiling language that often leave one to utter in frustration, “*je ne sais pas*!”.

So how does an app ensure that someone with my hectic schedule never fails to complete the daily French lessons? Quite simply, by making learning fun.

Through gamifying language learning, Duolingo is so sticky and enjoyable that going on the app is anything but a chore. It makes language learning a real pleasure, granting such a welcome reprieve from the frenzy of everyday life that it leads me to



The writer says that language apps make learning fun for people with hectic schedules, but we also must not lose sight of the marvels of human instruction and the richness of peer learning. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

return to it day after day.

By creating lessons no more than five minutes long, with charming characters and whimsical scenarios, it draws one into stealing interludes where you learn a little, laugh a lot and leave the app feeling better about yourself. Unlike the self-loathing that accompanies social media doom scrolling, the few minutes of micro-learning on Duolingo always feel edifying.

Did I discover a new French word? *Oui!* Do I know how to request another glass of wine? *Bien sur!* Dare I now watch a French Netflix series without subtitles? *Pourquoi pas?*

And it skilfully exploits nudge psychology to keep you committed and consistent. If you ignore Duo and his pals for too long, he'll nudge you with a pushy notification – “Time to practise!” – or a passive-aggressive e-mail: “I'm not above begging. Do your lesson. Please put my heart at ease.”

These emotional blackmail tactics are not just witty copywriting but are also backed by hard data. Marshalling machine learning, Duolingo engineers analyse trends across millions of notifications to identify those that most effectively prompt users of

different languages and levels to complete their lessons.

Besides leveraging the big data on its entire base of learners of different languages, it also tracks the learning paths of individual learners. Using this customised information, it dynamically repeats words and questions learners get wrong so that you practise until you get them right. In leveraging the capabilities of datafication and generative artificial intelligence, it also encourages learners to write short essays that it grades in seconds and lets you practise speaking the language with loveable (and non-judgmental) avatars.

Above all, Duolingo rewards you for your dedication by marking every instance that you sustain your streak of uninterrupted play. When I complete my first game of the day, a mini ceremony unfolds on my screen to extend my streak with a dazzling burst of sound, colour, light and animation. That daily dopamine rush and sense of accomplishment, as well as an aversion to losing my streak, keep me motivated and further ingrain my learning habit.

There are also leaderboards to place your score among those of other learners, spurring you to keep up. No wonder that Duolingo has more than 50

million daily active users and has seen a 41 per cent rise in revenue from the previous year.

NICE. BUT DOES IT WORK?

For all its much-vaunted strengths, has Duolingo actually made me fluent in French? Alas, not quite. Thanks to the constant drills, my vocabulary is extensive, enabling me to read and understand French newspapers rather well. My listening comprehension is passable if the speaker articulates at a moderate pace, but throw in slang and idiomatic expressions and I flounder.

Spoken French is my true Achilles heel. When “in the wild”, I can engage in light banter with Parisian taxi drivers or storekeepers, but struggle to express complex thoughts quickly and spontaneously. In French, I become devoid of any spark or personality.

Which led me to recognise that a return to the classroom was necessary for that distinct human dimension to teaching and learning. Building on the foundations that Duolingo had laid for me after four years of mainly using the app and listening to podcasts, I enrolled in the advanced course at the

Alliance Francaise after a placement test and phone interview.

The first lesson blew my mind. My teacher brought the language to life with her sunny disposition and irrepressible good humour. Gently correcting us while she challenged the class to share our thoughts on topics such as “The things money can't buy” or “What kind of tourist am I”, she made the three-hour lessons on Monday evenings fly by.

From the cheery salutations as we enter and leave, to the complex instructions for written work, as well as play-acting different roles and voicing our opinions on world affairs or sharing celebrity gossip, the dynamic classroom learning environment simply gives you more than you put in. Be it feeling inspired by a classmate's fluency or commiserating in our shared difficulties at finding the right expression, tense or gender, every lesson is an immersive peer learning experience that stretches us and fires our neurons.

Our teacher's ability to relate our discussions to our lived experience and personal contexts also heightens the connections we make with the knowledge we gain. From her patient explanations, we revel in delightful French expressions that bear remarkable similarity to words or idioms in other languages we have grown up with. There is nothing quite like bonding over what is ultimately our shared humanity.

As I trudge home after every French class, I feel both invigorated by my newfound knowledge, but also intimidated by how much more I have to learn before I become fluent. Sitting on the train, I always feel slightly defeated and wonder if I should just call it a day. But I pick up my phone and there's Duo, nagging at me to complete my lesson, and lavishing me with praise when I do: “Zero mistakes! Scientists should study your big beautiful brain.” Then I feel invincible all over again.

As we countenance a future where personalised education will be accelerated by frontier technology, we should certainly harness innovations that support our learning in myriad ways. But we mustn't lose sight of the marvels of human instruction and the richness of peer learning. Whatever the discipline, we should strive for a felicitous blend of online and classroom learning to make the experience complete, *n'est-ce pas?*

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