

Website: Duolingo - <http://www.duolingo.com/>

The Duolingo website offers an online resource with lessons in several languages, including Brazilian Portuguese, and it also has English lessons for speakers of romance languages. The goal of this program, according to its website, is to “build a world with free education and no language barriers”.

Duolingo currently offers 68 blocks/lessons in Portuguese fully available online for free, downloadable as an app for iPhones, and Android phones. The program allows the learners to change between devices at any point without losing their placement in the lesson, or to change between the different languages.

The Duolingo program is custom-made for the individual to learn a language, but it also allows the creation of a group competition among friends. The program is designed to look more like a game than a regular language-learning program. The Portuguese program has a skill tree with themed blocks, and the lessons are inside each of the blocks. The learning process starts with the ‘Basic 1’ block, and the following blocks are not available until the user has completed the previous lesson block, or has tested out of it, as you would find in a videogame. Each block has a different number of lessons, e.g.. ‘Basics 1’ has three lessons, while ‘Basics 2’ has five. By moving the cursor on top of a block the user will see its theme, some sample words, and the requirements for that block. Once the lesson block has been started the block information will also contain the user overall word strength, and achievements. The blocks are composed by a very extensive number of drilling exercises on the block’s theme, as well as the content from previous blocks. The exercises are mainly based on translations between Portuguese-English, English/Portuguese.

The Duolingo website offers the user a profile with information on their progress in the lesson, and the group competition, this being an optional tool. The program offers supplementary practice through original reading material in Portuguese, this is found in the immersion tab. This tab aims to provide users with material to read and translate. The immersion material has different categories, providing the user with the possibility to read and translate articles on a variety of topics. The articles can also be selected in relation to their popularity, the newest additions, or the previously translated material. One of the website's experts has mentioned that Duolingo has been working on a more guided approach to the immersion tab by recommending articles that users can read and translate after they have finished specific lessons. After an article has been selected, the user/learner has three viewing options, the original, the translation or both versions side-by-side. The website also offer discussion boards, so the users can share their feedbacks, comments, and ideas. There is also a tab where all the vocabulary for the blocks is stored, in it the learner can see the word, its different forms, the skill it comes from, when it was last practiced, and the how well the learner did with it, its strength.

As the user starts a new lesson block, there is the option to go through the entire lesson, or to test out of it. In the website, as a particular lesson progresses new words appear highlighted, and with an icon of a small gift, informing the user that it is a new word. At any point during an exercise the user can get a translation, or in-depth explanation on a word or a concept by moving the cursor on top of it. The program allows any question to be answered or skipped. When a question is skipped the bottom of the page becomes a light red color, and it shows the correct answer. Another side effect to skipping a question is the lost of a lifeline; each new block starts with three lifelines. The learner will lose lifelines by skipping or making a mistake, and once the user is out of lifelines, the learner has to restart that block. Most exercises are comprehension

checks, translations from Portuguese/English or English/ Portuguese, from written and/or audio texts; listen and type in Portuguese (letters with diacritics are provided); providing the most likely answer based on pictures (this has a hint in English for the word expected); or multiple-choice exercises. Once a question is answered the user is required to check the answer before moving to the next exercise. The moment a user requests to check an answer, a variety of information is provided, such as a translation, any necessary corrections (correct answers turn the bottom of the screen green, while wrong answers turn it a light red), and advises (such as “pay attention to the accents”). During this step it is also possible to report a problem with the exercise, or discuss it with other users. After checking it, the learner can move on to the next question.

The app is one of the more innovative aspects of this program, which allows the user to learn a language on the go. It resembles the website in most things, but it looks even more like a game than the website, since it is more compact. The way it the app was developed inspires the learner to keep working on the exercises in order to finish a block, and unlock the next one. Overall the lessons are level appropriate, and fun. The vocabulary has been well developed, if the user selects a word that was not in the lesson but that has the same meaning, e.g. ‘menina’, ‘garota’, ‘guria’, the program recognizes it as being a correct answer. However, many of the blocks have too many drill exercises, before a user can move on to the next block. Another aspect that requires review is the quality of the audio files. Some of the files are very difficult to understand, due to its quality or for being too fast. On a positive note, the user can replay the audio file as many times as needed, or select to listen to a slower version of the file (which is much slower).

The downside of Duolingo is the constant use of English translations. The use of more exercises with images could represent a considerable improvement to the program, and also help learners. And considering the game-like style of the program, the use of more images, or videos would help improve the experience as a whole. Another point to consider is the lack of speaking practice. Despite the obvious difficulties presented by the mechanics of how to introduce speaking into the program, the presence of this skill would make Duolingo a more complete program. As a classroom tool, Duolingo presents a couple of difficulties, such as the need to finish a block before getting access to the next one, the large number of exercises to finish at any given block, and the constant use of translation. On the other hand, I can see it as being a fun way for the students to test their knowledge of a specific subject by using the 'test out of this skill' tool, especially for the first few levels.

Above all, Duolingo is a major step towards the use of technology in the process of learning a foreign language. And the fact that it was developed to allow people to compete among their friends, give it a more sociable characteristic than just another online language instruction website. And despite the constant use English in teaching the language, its game like style makes it a more approachable, and fun way of learning a new language.

Ellen M. Oliveira

University of Southern California