

Can I successfully learn a language online?

Technology has changed the way people learn and access education, particularly languages. But can you successfully master a language only using online tools?

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Is it possible to learn a language only using technology? Photograph: Asia Photopress/Alamy

There are more people actively learning a language through DuoLingo than in the entire US public school system," says Luis von Ahn, founder of the free language learning app. Since its launch in 2012, more than 30 million people have downloaded the 2013 Apple app of the year, which gamified education and attracted new demographics of language learners.

The growth of technology for educational use has transformed the way in which people learn and access education. This is particularly true for languages, an area in which the explosion of mobile apps and interactive software has provided choice to a range of people who were previously unable to access foreign language education.

Von Ahn says that when he founded DuoLingo he was determined to find a way for people to learn a language for free. "There's an irony that the people who need to learn a language the most don't have much money, but learning a language costs a lot."

Free access to languages was something Von Ahn had a personal interest in addressing: he grew up in Guatemala, where he was surrounded by people all trying to learn English, half of whom were failing to do so and the majority of whom could not afford it.

One of the big changes caused by tech is the demographic shift in language learners. Languages have long been associated with the elite, but now people from less privileged backgrounds are finding affordable ways to learn. English remains the resoundingly most-in-demand language – the British Council estimates that by 2020, 2 billion people will be learning English across the world – due in large part to the advantage it offers economic migrants.

To learn with online tools, users need a smartphone or an internet connection, but Von Ahn says that's not as unrealistic a scenario as it might seem. "In the lower middle classes of developing countries like Guatemala, they usually have a smartphone – a lower-end Android phone," he says.

Provider of online lessons with tutors in their native countries italki also wants to see tech being used to make learning more accessible. Comparing the language learning social network to the sharing economies of startups such as Taskrabbit and AirBnB, italki's chief executive, Kevin Chen, says: "Our belief is that helping people connect is helping students that were previously unable to get access to native teachers, and teachers that were previously unable to teach students outside of their cities."

Rosetta Stone, the longstanding provider of language-learning software, has poured time and resources into its research of the market and concluded that mobile is the way forward. Rosetta Stone has added apps to its suite of language-learning tools. "Mobile is becoming the big disrupter to traditional self-paced learning," says Donavan Whyte, vice president of Europe, the Middle East and Africa (EMEA). "We're getting increases every week on the number of people accessing the app. People are so hooked on being mobile, whether that's an iPad or any other device they can lug around."

Von Ahn says an unexpected result of DuoLingo being an app is that it's attracted an unlikely type of user. DuoLingo was designed to be like a game, and what the company has found is that many users aren't even necessarily diehard language fans, they're just looking for an educational way to kill some time.

"They're still procrastinating from something else, but at least it's somewhat useful," says Von Ahn. "The truth of the matter is that learning a language takes months or years. We have to find a way to keep them interested and that's where the gamification came in."

Chen says that technology is not only offering the personalisation, but is encouraging users to take a more active approach to their learning. "There is a sense from [italki] students that they have to take responsibility for their own education," he says. "More and more students are trying non-traditional methods to educate themselves, and this has made it a great time to be an education technology startup."

While advances in tech may have created opportunities for more people to access education, the question remains as to whether it is actually possible to learn a language only using online tools.

"It depends what you mean by learn a language," says Von Ahn. "You can learn to the point where you can navigate and have relatively simple conversations but you probably won't be writing any great works of literature."

Whyte thinks that technology wouldn't remove the need to be very motivated to learn: "I think it is possible to learn a language on your own via some tech-based platform, but I think it would take you a long, long time and you would need to be very disciplined."

Whyte and Chen agree that online tools are going to be most effective when used as one component of a bigger arsenal of learning tools.

"Education should come from as many different sources as possible," says Chen. "Education will be personalised for the student, so that they can learn in the most efficient way for them. For italki, we're just one piece of this ecosystem."

The online language learning challenge

The Guardian wants to find out if it is possible to learn a language only using online tools. Over the next six weeks, three writers will each try to learn a language using a piece of language-learning technology.

Matt Hambly, deputy editor of Esquire Weekly, will be learning French with Rosetta Stone; Alan Haburchak, adjunct professor at Columbia Journalism School, will use DuoLingo to learn Spanish; and freelance journalist Anna Parkin will be learning Russian with a Skype tutor.

We're not expecting them to reach anything near fluency, but can they gain at least a basic grasp of a new language, and how will the experience of self-directed, tech-based learning work out for them?

Follow their progress with the case for language learning series or on Twitter using the hashtag #LearnALanguageOnline.

[The Digital Language Divide – How does the language you speak shape your experience of the internet?](#)

Source: *The Guardian* used for educational purposes