

Tourism and apps: all you need to learn a language, right?

According to the Google Play Store, the mobile app whose official name is "Duolingo: Language Lessons" has surpassed 100 million downloads. It has an average rating of 4.7 stars after more than 17 million reviews, and there's a reason for that. Language learning apps like this present an effective way of putting world language study into everyday life. On top of that, the negative opinion of games for educational purposes doesn't really exist anymore. Learning is a playful act, and it benefits adults just as much as kids. As a language instructor, I have seen how much you can learn from vocabulary and grammar exercises available on your phone. However, you can see from the most popular, top reviews on Google that even Duolingo fans recognize the contradiction: playing alone isn't a way to eventually talk to others.

With this problem, like in all contexts under capitalism, the dominant response comes from the bourgeoisie. "You can only learn languages by traveling abroad", they repeat while selling us tourism and exoticism as solutions for language learning. As a result, language acquisition is seen as a luxury that costs too much for the working class. This mythology makes us think that multilingualism has no place in our own local communities when it's actually the extractivist conception of foreign languages that we should not allow. We don't have to wait for the vacations that will never happen under this system. If technology is already connecting us, why not appropriate these connections for our own purposes?

We must recover the lost tradition of pen pals because, contrary to the adventure pics we see on Instagram or the points earned for consecutive days on Duolingo, true internationalism is based on interpersonal connections, not on looks or rewards. Luckily, there are already other apps we can use that are perfect for this! They're not exactly for studying languages but instead are for communicating, for video calls, for attending conferences around the world, and for updating us on the daily lives of people in various international contexts.

The first thing is to overcome the isolation and geographic distance that, in the past, separated far-off communities. By reorienting email and business meeting platforms, we can make them work better for us. The problem is not the internet, which we all depend on to connect us internationally; the problem is the false promise that we will find language skills like treasure on exotic beaches. When it comes to learning about different cultures, there isn't really anything like traveling to other countries since the famous "total immersion" isn't always as productive as we might expect. Tourists don't have access to the "authentic" experience of a culture without having already met local people beforehand, without having formed friendly relationships before arriving at the chosen destination. Again, my main

proposal for solidarity updated for the 21st century: let's use things like email to become corresponding comrades.

From the beginning of the process of learning a new language, it's possible to start by writing: emails introducing yourself, simple comments on social media posts, and short responses via direct messages to interesting people or organizations. Don't already know any people or social media accounts in your target language? Give in to the natural ability of humans to lose ourselves in the labyrinth of the internet. It's easy to endlessly binge watch educational videos in your preferred language. This drop in a bottomless well will cause the algorithm to recommend more and more content in the language that you want to learn. Also, following accounts from various countries that address similar themes makes it clear that the information on the internet is much more vast than what can be understood in one language.

In my decades of contact with foreign language learning, on both sides of the student/teacher dynamic, I have encountered recurrent doubts about the fruitfulness of these approaches. Students say that it's too bold to contact people directly, that it's confusing where and how to start, that the discomfort is too much. To me, this is a perfect description of an international, multicultural, and plurilingual situation, full of complications and difficult to navigate. Yes, it can be intimidating, but only at first, until you get used to it. For this reason, practice is just as important as knowledge. Because the internet reduces the social pressure of communicating, it works perfectly for experimenting and for growing, little by little, the confidence to participate in conversations with people you already know about subjects that are already familiar with.

Ultimately, mobile apps should be used to help us to overcome the fear of communicating directly with others when we are learning a new language. They will not teach us how to speak or listen, but they can help us begin to escape a monolingual and monocultural perspective. The knowledge offered by Duolingo, much like the myth of touristic language immersion, can't change our original perspective. That perspective is anchored in our native language and country of origin. However, we can gain a new perspective by participating in international conversation: a multifaceted view rooted in the diversity of its many participants. We can use the internet to establish connections with real people, who can teach us about their actual lives. These connections will expand the reach of our local, cultural communities and will strengthen the international solidarity of the working class.