

Help, the Duolingo Owl is Going to Kill Me: Comparing Language Apps

Harrison's 2nd Week

Well, I guess the first thing to say is Happy New Year- ¡*Feliz año nuevo!* I hope everyone reading this enjoyed their holidays. As for resolutions, I guess learning Spanish is going to be mine. Ohhhh boy.

My daily routine so far has been pretty simple. I try to set aside an hour for myself every day, where I do a couple lessons on a language learning app, go through a couple flash cards from my Anki flash card deck of Spanish words (highly recommend Anki), and maybe watch a TV show or YouTube video in the Spanish language. Lately, I've been watching the Netflix show "Narcos" about the notorious Pablo Escobar, the drug kingpin. Is it cheating that I'm watching an American-made show in English subtitles when trying to learn Spanish? Absolutely. But hey, give me a break, it's only my second week.

Why did I choose these particular learning methods, you ask? Well, that's a topic for another article. What I'm here to talk with you about *this* week are those pesky language learning apps you hear so much about in YouTube ads and TV commercials. Now, out of all these apps, there are probably two that most of you out there hear about most often: Babbel and Duolingo. What do these apps have to offer? Well, according to its own website, Babbel is the "shortest path to a real conversation." Designed by experts, Babbel claims that its method helps you retain what you learn in your long-term memory, while also helping you refine your pronunciation. On the other hand, you have Duolingo, with its mascot, the infamous Duolingo Owl. You know, the guy who threatens to burn your house down if you miss a Korean lesson (it's a meme, Duolingo, please don't sue me for libel). Duolingo has more than 300 million users worldwide, and, like Babbel, offers a wide variety of languages. Unlike Babbel, Duolingo has a more game-like feel to it. It has a scoreboard, where users can be placed in Emerald Leagues and Sapphire Leagues depending on how well they do, as well as a tree from every language that users must complete in order to "learn" the language, or "win" the game.

So, which one is better? Before I get into that, I just want to remind everyone reading that this is simply my opinion. Everybody learns differently, so what works best for me may not work best for you. This is just something to keep in mind when deciding how to go about your own language learning. Furthermore, I do realize there are more than 2 language learning apps out

there- these are just the two I have personally tried. If there's a specific app or website you think I should try, leave me a comment!

Okay, so now that we have that stuff out of the way, let's start with Babbel. I've used this app before, back when I was learning German, and I have to say, I was very impressed. Babbel interacts with its users in a number of different ways; they will show you a couple key phrases at the beginning of a lesson, and you'll have to identify and write the words out later in that lesson. Babbel also encourages listening. There will be a dialogue or a story, and you will have to pick out certain words or answer questions about what's going on. Like Duolingo, Babbel divides its lessons up into different courses: for example, all the Beginner ones are grouped together, all the ones that have to do with Grammar and travel, etc.

I really enjoy using Babbel. I feel like it succeeds in engaging you just enough with the dialogue and phrases for you to retain the info. It doesn't pound it into your head quite like Duo does, but if you're really paying attention you should be able to retain most of the info. If you need to repeat a course, you can do so by all means.

However, Babbel does have some downsides. Whereas Duolingo is free, Babbel does require a monthly (or yearly) subscription; I think I'm currently paying something like \$60 a year, which isn't horrible, depending on your financial situation. Also, I remember the German course on Babbel being quite substantive, however I was a bit underwhelmed with their Latin American Spanish one. I remember starting it, and flipping through their courses and thinking *that's it?* Now, they do have a European Spanish course that's been around longer and may have more content, but if you're looking to learn Spanish this is just something to keep in mind.

Now, for Duolingo. Like I mentioned earlier, where Babbel teaches its lessons like you might find in a classroom setting, Duolingo tries to hook you by acting more like a game. If you've ever been hooked on things like Angry Birds or Candy Crush back in the day, Duolingo will probably work for you. Your course is laid out in the form of a "tree", starting with the intro beginner material and branching down into more complex territory. Along these branches are different categories; for example, you might have a category for "clothes" or "greetings" that you have to make it at least partly through before you can advance down the tree. Like Babbel, I'm sure the quality of Duolingo trees vary depending on how much time and work the developers have put into a specific language. But speaking for Spanish and German at least, there is *definitely* enough content on this app for you to keep at it for twenty minutes a day for months.

I've even seen people with Duolingo streaks lasting more than a year. Another great thing about this app is that it's free.

Like Babbel, Duolingo puts emphasis on listening and you repeating words you've heard. I've also gotten quite addicted to the story feature that Duolingo has, where you listen to a story based on lessons you've completed and then answer questions based on the story. It's great for comprehension and when you understand every word in a story you definitely feel great about yourself.

Of course, Duolingo also has its downsides. The game-y aspect of it means that you may not get as much out of it as from Babbel or from reading a textbook. If you're just going through the motions and scoring those points, you may not be storing what you've learned in your long term memory; keeping a flash card deck of words and phrases you learned through an app like Anki might help with that. Also, Duolingo lessons seem to have a bit less depth than Babbel. A Duolingo lesson will hit you over the head again and again with the same phrase in one lesson that you will never use in real life, like "the beetle is drinking the milk" or something like that. Babbel's lessons at least seem to be grounded in situations you may find yourself in.

So, with that out of the way, the question remains: which of these two apps do I (personally) prefer and recommend. And the answer will probably make you a little angry with me: I'd recommend both. They're both really good apps that offer great info for beginners and when used at the same time with one another can really help you memorize the content and get better quicker. Throw in a flash card deck in there like I do, and you're good to go! Of course, if you're strapped for cash, Duolingo is the obvious way to go.

Now, I would also like to throw in a quick disclaimer before ending this week's article. Don't fool yourself into thinking you can *just* use one of these apps and you'll become fluent in a language. That just won't happen; language learning is a painful (yet rewarding) process that takes time to get good at, like any other skill. These apps are wonderful supplements in your language journey, and I would recommend you using them to learn the basics if you don't know where to start. But just make sure when you have enough background in the language through them, you add other language learning techniques to your daily regimen.

But for now, start a Duolingo or Babbel course! It's a great place to start. I'll see you next time.

