

Risks of Using Duolingo by Polish Learners at Primary Level

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Abstract

Despite the advantages of using Duolingo by language learners for learning vocabulary there are also risks which may influence the effects of learning the target language. The text presents some examples of controversial areas which need to be considered by English teachers who want to recommend this crowdsourcing tool to their learners in the Polish context. It can be used as a complementary material but the teacher should monitor the acquisition of the target language to prevent mistakes and misunderstandings. The article provides examples of potentially misleading issues the Polish learners may acquire while learning English with the use of Duolingo.

Keywords: Duolingo, crowdsourcing, language learning, language teaching

1. Introduction

This chapter analyses the linguistic aspects of using Duolingo at primary level. It focuses on the issues that may build a false vision of the structure of the English language in the minds of young learners. It also shows interlingual challenges between English and Polish. This analysis is in tune with the analysis of translation quality from Spanish into English (Garcia, 2013) but exemplified by the difficulties Polish learners face while learning English. Teachers who use Duolingo with their pupils need to be aware of the shortcomings of the learning site.

2. British and American English in the Polish Educational Context

First of all, before starting the Polish-English course in Duolingo, one needs to be aware of fact that the variety of English that is taught on the platform is American English. It may not constitute a problematic issue for older learners who have already graduated from secondary schools, but British English is the variety of English that is preferred in the majority of Polish textbooks and taught in most Polish schools, and therefore, learning with Duolingo might be a confusing experience for those who are still school students and have never been presented with an extensive description of differences between British English and American English. Duolingo itself does not offer any information or guide explaining dissimilarities between those two types of English. It may thus lead to students' inconsistency in using English and their mixing two aforementioned varieties together as well as their receiving lower notes on tests for choosing, e.g., spelling that is incompatible with their student's books. Besides, even Duolingo lacks the consistency when it comes to using one variety of English. For instance, in the word bank accompanying one of the translation exercises, Duolingo offers the word "film", which according to the online Cambridge Dictionary is a word mainly used in the United Kingdom, instead of suggesting the use of the word "movie", which, according to the online Cambridge Dictionary, is the American term referring to the same phenomenon, that is "a series of moving pictures, usually shown in a cinema or on television and often telling a story."

3. Problematic Areas for Polish Learners of English Articles "the", "a", "-"

Even though Duolingo mainly functions as a tool for learning vocabulary, one cannot help but absorb other elements of content presented on the platform as well. The majority of sentences and sequences of words one has to translate seem to be a part of longer texts but are introduced without context. Therefore, a number of them may appear illogical, unnatural and impossible to be applied in real life situations. As a consequence of that, they may trigger unwanted tendencies among Duolingo's users and lead to their making mistakes. This subject primarily concerns the use of articles in exercises on the platform, especially if one takes into account scarce explanations of grammatical rules provided by the programme. Translating detached sentences such as "I am the bear", "The crab drinks water", "She reads the newspapers", "The cat drinks the water", "The ducks drink milk", "The turtle eats rice", "The girls write", "The cat jumps", "A boy and a girl eat" (Duolingo) may help learners to master new vocabulary, but at the same time, it may also influence their understanding of articles negatively and make them forget or never truly realise one of the most fundamental principles, *id est* that "[w]e use the before a noun when our listener / reader knows (or can work out) which particular person(s), thing(s) etc we are talking about" (Swan, 1995). When one tries to analyse more thoroughly the sentences mentioned above, it might render difficult to propose circumstances in which they could be uttered, particularly for learners at the early stage of their English-language education, and thus it might cause confusion. Words offered by Duolingo in word banks accompanying sentences may be a source of further questions. If a sentence or a sequence of words in English contains the article "the" before a noun, many word banks, from which one can choose words needed for a correct translation, provide corresponding Polish articles such as "ten, ta, to", etc., indicating the reference to a specific thing, person, and so on. However, Duolingo is not consistent in this case either. For instance, among Polish words appearing in word banks with such sentences as, e.g., "The crab drinks water", "She reads the newspapers", "The cats drink water", "The turtles eat rice", "the sandwiches", "The turtle drinks milk", "the author", "the model" (Duolingo), there are no articles.

In a normal situation, when one is given a full text or a longer utterance to translate, translating articles into Polish is not always necessary due to other ways of signifying differences between general and specific statements in the language. Yet, for laymen, it may not be obvious and thus may render them oblivious to disparities in the usage of definite and indefinite articles in English.

It is worth adding that acquisition of articles which is difficult for learners of English of Polish origin might not be a problem for speakers of other languages. For example, there is no risk for Japanese learners to acquire English words incorrectly while using Duolingo (Kennedy, 2018)

4. Correct and Incorrect Translations

Considering the fact that Duolingo contains a vast number of translation exercises, it seems almost impossible to predict and include all correct translations that users may produce. Hence, a translation containing no mistakes may not be deemed as a right answer by the programme and may get marked as wrong.

For example, if one translates the Polish sentence “Piję mleko, podczas gdy on pije wino” (Duolingo) into English as “I drink milk, whereas he drinks wine”, the answer gets labelled as incorrect on the platform. In addition, the sentence “This sum includes taxes” is only one of many sentences that could be translated into Polish in at least six different ways, but not all of them are accepted by the system. The response generated by the programme may negatively affect students’ perception of what is correct and what is incorrect, and may lead to an erroneous conclusion that a solution proposed by them is false, whereas in reality, it is a perfectly correct answer.

5. Word-for-Word Translation

Translation exercises in Duolingo frequently promote the word-for-word type of translation, which in multiple situations, happens to be incorrect and triggers a wrong approach to translation in general, diminishing its role and distorting its main point. Probably only a small group of Duolingo’s users plan a career as translators or interpreters, but other people are also affected by the site’s content as the majority of translations proposed by Duolingo resemble word-for-word translations. From the perspective of the English language, it may not render harmful, but it definitely has a damaging impact on learners’ quality of the Polish language and encourages the usage of calques.

For instance, according to Duolingo, the sentence “Yesterday we saw them writing a book” should be translated into Polish as “Wczoraj widzieliśmy ich piszących książkę” even though it may sound unnatural and peculiar as in similar cases, users of the Polish language tend to avoid participles and usually opt for subordinate clauses, that is the aforementioned sentence could also be translated as “Wczoraj widzieliśmy, jak (oni) pisali książkę”, but (Yesterday we saw how they wrote a book) that version is not accepted by the programme.

Additionally, the programme very often marks as correct only those translations of English sentences in which the adverbial phrase is placed at the end of the sentence even though in many cases, it is more natural in Polish to put the adverbial phrase at the beginning of the sentence, e.g.,

according to Duolingo, the sentence “I watched that film last night” can only be translated into Polish as “Obejrzałem ten film wczoraj wieczorem” despite the fact that, depending on the context, it could be translated as “Wczoraj wieczorem obejrzałem ten film” (Yesterday evening I watched this film) as well.

6. Punctuation

A number of sentences presented in translation exercises in Duolingo and answers deemed by the programme as correct may trigger, due to their dubious correctness and stylistic problems, more frequent occurrence of mistakes in both English and Polish among Duolingo’s users.

For instance, one does not need to include punctuation marks for an answer to be marked as correct by the platform.

However, punctuation is an integral part of the language and learning rules concerning it should be considered as important as learning rules regarding any other area of the language. If one repeatedly makes the same mistake in Duolingo and gets never corrected, they will make the same mistake in other areas of their life as well, that is at school, at work, while communicating with acquaintances, friends, etc.

Besides, if one makes the same mistake over and over again, it becomes a habit and is much more difficult to fight than it would be at the very beginning of acquainting with a language.

7. Polish Pronouns

Duolingo only accepts translations into Polish with such pronouns as “swój”, “swoja”, “swoje”. Those translations are correct but others are also acceptable. For example, if one translates the sentence “He likes cooking for his family” as “On lubi gotować dla rodziny”(He likes cooking for the family), their answer will be labelled as false and changed into “On lubi gotować dla swojej rodziny” even though in real-life circumstances, a sentence without the pronoun could be uttered.

8. Mistakes

Sentences provided by Duolingo in translation exercises may simply contain mistakes such as, e.g. the sentence “Nie dzięki” (No thanks) lacking punctuation marks, translating “lunch” as “obiad” (lunch is smaller, eaten in the early afternoon or early evening) even though those two words mean different meals, the sentence “Ty przedstawiłeś twoich przyjaciół” with the word “twoich” instead of the word “swoich”, the sentence “The hotel room is including breakfast”, which is not the most natural way of indicating that the price of the hotel room covers the costs of breakfast, translating the sentence “It was hard for him to stop working” as “Trudno było mu zaprzestać pracowania”, which is a calque and should be instead translated as, for instance, “Było mu trudno przestać pracować”, etc.

¹ The difference refers to specific grammatical phenomena in Polish.

9. Ambiguous Content in Duolingo

Notwithstanding the fact that the majority of sentences offered in translation exercises in Duolingo are grammatically correct, the lack of context in which they appear may trammel the process of understanding them and as a consequence, hinder the process of translation and transfer into real-life conversations.

Numerous sentences such as “A boy and a girl eat”, “He says”, “The girls write”, etc. would be much more straightforward and much clearer if they were accompanied by objects. Moreover, a number of sentences seem to lack adverbials. Sentences such as “I eat three apples”, “We are watching five movies”, “The children eat an apple” do not make much sense separated from their source texts and would definitely benefit from adding information on the exact time or frequency in which the activities occur.

In addition, many of sentences on the platform appear as if they were produced by a machine automatically combining words into sentences which, in the result, are devoid of logic. For instance, one may encounter in Duolingo such sentences as “The cat reads a book”, “The cats drink beer”, “I am a duck. I speak English”, “I eat under the table”, “My tiger is vegetarian”, etc.

The aforementioned sentences may be grammatically correct, but they promote false or unlikely information and may move students’ focus from studying to trying to interpret what the author exactly meant by those examples. Besides, learning progresses more smoothly if it is based on real-life and authentic content to which one may refer later in conversations, compositions, etc.

10. Evaluation from the Learner’s Perspective

On the one hand, one of the most important advantages of Duolingo is definitely the fact that learners can use the platform whenever they desire to and that there are no restrictions which could limit their time spent on the site. Duolingo may also catch the interest of learners as both beginners and more advanced students can partake in courses and thus either start learning a language from scratch or significantly enrich their vocabulary.

What is more, one can use Duolingo for free. Therefore, if one is not satisfied with the program, they can cease to exploit the platform at any time without bearing any financial costs.

On the other hand, students beginning to learn a language may accept content in Duolingo uncritically since they do not possess sufficient knowledge enabling them to evaluate the quality of materials and to detect mistakes. Besides, the content presented in Duolingo may not render attractive to everyone. Some students may deem lessons on the platform too monotonous and repetitive, and mistakes occurring in exercises too distracting. However, it is only a matter of personal taste and the background of a student.

Whereas some learners might be of the opinion that exercises in Duolingo are absorbing and help them acquire new vocabulary more efficiently, others may regard courses on the site as boring and claim that they promote bad habits.

11. Evaluation from the Teacher’s Perspective

Since teachers are more knowledgeable when it comes to various teaching techniques and methods, they may render more critical of Duolingo than most users and analyse risks and benefits that using the platform may generate more thoroughly. Even though the main conclusion of their analysis might be that benefits generally outweigh risks connected with using Duolingo, it is still not a sufficient reason for teachers to recommend the programme to students if other, less harmful, ways of expanding one’s vocabulary are available.

Participating in the courses on the platform definitely helps one improve their vocabulary to a certain extent as doing exercises is naturally more beneficial than doing nothing, but if students can be presented with content containing much fewer mistakes and exercises which are not based on the highly criticised translation method, the teacher should avoid speaking favourably of Duolingo and use it only as a tool to sensitise students to the fact that they have to be especially wary of the Internet language teaching resources created by non-professionals and be critical of content found online. For instance, during lessons, teachers may devote time to showing mistakes which can be encountered in Duolingo and analyse them with students so that learners can develop their critical thinking skills, become aware of the fact that every resource may contain errors and acquire strategies helping them to evaluate the accuracy and correctness of content.

12. Conclusions

In the case of younger students, one should be more careful before recommending them to use Duolingo since children and adolescents’ brains are tremendously receptive and if one combines it with the fact that younger learners are very often only at the beginning of the process of developing a critical approach to the content they encounter on the television, on the Internet, etc., participating in lessons in Duolingo may pose a threat and trigger bad habits due to mistakes and ambiguous examples occurring on the platform. However, content found in Duolingo may also help achieve positive results since showing this tool to students and analysing it with them may contribute to the process of developing students’ critical thinking skills and to the process of developing various language learning techniques. To sum up, using Duolingo may render a beneficial tool for learning vocabulary if only one approaches this method sensibly and is aware of the fact that the platform may include errors. Even though translation is frequently regarded as a poor technique of learning languages, in the end, it is a student who decides what suits him best. If translating sentences generates satisfying results and helps the learner to expand their vocabulary, there is no reason for them to stop using the method they deem most efficient.

Further work may focus on (a) the content analysis of Duolingo vocabulary and its relevance to CEFR levels PreA1, A1, B1, e.t.c. ; (b) the learners, what they get while practicing vocabulary with Duolingo; (c) pedagogical value of the material provided on the platform, that is at what stage of the language lesson it can be used effectively (d) the role of teacher as a mediator between the Duolingo content and learners.

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