

# The evolution of L2 learning through the media

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i  
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**Evolucija učenja stranog jezika kroz medije**

Završni rad

Mentor: doc.dr.sc. Goran Milić

Osijek, 2020.

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Goran Milić, PhD

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# Table of Contents

1 Introduction .....	8
2 Language Learning as a Process .....	9
2.1 Biological Aspect/Nature .....	9
2.2 Social Aspect/Nurture .....	10
3 L2 Learning Through the Media .....	11
3.1 Reading.....	11
3.2 Radio .....	12
3.3 Television .....	13
3.4 Internet.....	14
4 Analysis Design.....	17
5 Analysis of Language Learning Applications.....	17
5.1 Duolingo .....	17
5.2 Memrise .....	21
6 Conclusion .....	24
7. References.....	25
7.1 Cited Sources .....	26

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the evolution of second-language acquisition and, more specifically, the way the modern media have changed the process of acquiring a foreign language. The paper first provides a brief theoretical background of the biological and social aspects that are the prerequisites and play a key role in language learning. The main part of the paper presents the different media that have been used to aid in foreign language learning, and in part foreign language teaching, in the past, most of which are still used today. Upon that follows an analysis of two prominent language learning applications which, seemingly similar on the surface, are vastly different in their approach to learning a foreign language. The reason behind picking these two applications is that one, *Duolingo*, concentrates on grammar while the other, *Memrise*, focuses on vocabulary acquisition.

**Key words:** language learning, language teaching, media, *Duolingo*, *Memrise*



# 1 Introduction

The process of language acquisition is a really intricate term, one that reaches far into the past. The human species had to figure out a more efficient way to communicate as gesturing was not only tiresome, but it also required a direct line of sight to be effective. This sometimes proved impossible with the harsh environments we used to live in. With the inventions that lead to us travelling more, we became more interested in the culture and the way others communicate. Hence why it was imperative that we develop ways to try and ease this strenuous process of language learning. The media has helped this toil immensely, not only by creating new ways of learning but also by keeping the entire process more interesting. From our parents reading children's story books to us as we fell asleep, to the glorious invention of radio and its often dreaded language learning cassette tapes, to humorous TV shows and movies and finally interactive games and applications on the internet, inventors and scientist alike strive to keep humans engaged in further language learning.

This paper first provides brief theoretical background to language learning in general, as well as to the social and biological aspect that both contribute equality. The paper then outlines the vast amount of differences but surprising similarities found among the different forms of media used in L2 learning, as well as their respective quirks, advantages, and disadvantages.

Finally, we provide a brief analysis of two language learning applications, *Duolingo* and *Memrise*, presenting examples of their user experience and addressing some of their advantages and disadvantages when it comes to their respective way of teaching grammar and vocabulary. This is followed by a conclusion.

## 2 Language Learning as a Process

Language has been around for millions of years dating all the way to Homo habilis and Homo erectus. It was primarily used as a tool for communication and explanation. While there is no concrete evidence as to how language came to be, there are many theories that try to unveil the mysteries that shroud our main tool of verbal communication.

While there are many sources and theories as to how language came to be, Dr. Israa Burhanuddin Abdurrahman (2019) divides them into the main four:

1. *Religious Source* - every religion has its own explanation as to how the followers of the religion started using their own respective language
2. *Onomatopoeic Source* - people started mimicking the sounds they heard in nature, for example bang, boom, animal sounds etc.
3. *The Evolution Source* - the human body evolved to accommodate us communicating, be it through the use of hands and feet to convey a message or using our vocal organs to produce sounds and verbally communicate
4. *The Genetic Source* - there are claims that we as humans have some knowledge of language even before birth which is supported by Chomsky's linguistic nativism

When it comes to language learning as a child or L1 learning, "Nature vs. Nurture" is undoubtedly a hot topic among scholars and remains an unresolved question to this day. Language being such an important and widely used tool of communication, meant that humans had to develop external and internal systems to aid us in learning those languages.

### 2.1 Biological Aspect/Nature

While there are many different approaches as to how language in general is acquired, the one that seems most plausible is the theory of *emergentism*. Based on Brain MacWhinney (1999) and his theories, both external and internal processes are involved in acquiring the language.

Neuroscience has made great strides in deciphering language acquisition and helping us understand a bit better how a child's brain and its cognitive processes develop. Research has shown that there is a so-called "sensitive period" in the development of the brain during which the mind

is most primed to absorb a new language. According to a comparative study done by Kuhl P, Stevens E, Hayashi A, et al. (2006) children with regular and normal cognate abilities who are exposed to the language at that “sensitive period” acquire the language without any difficulties.

Sounds play a vital role in the child’s development as well. It was often thought by laymen that a child making sounds, also known as “babbling”, was nothing more than simple imitation of the sounds of the child’s environment. However, “babbling” has been shown to be essential in the process of learning a language. This may be why often children are taught to learn a new language by repetition instead of learning grammar, vocabulary and writing first (Schacter et al. 2011: 351).

According to research done by Bloom L et al. (1974) the child repeating what has been said to him has also been shown to boost their vocabulary acquisition and help with their further cognitive development. It is so important, that children who do not repeat what has been said to them often have indicators of future stunted social and cognitive development.

When the language learning process slows and stabilizes, the language centers of our brains take over. Broca's area is responsible for speech production and Wernicke's area which is associated with language comprehension. Damage to either of these areas can result in difficulty both in communicating and comprehending the language known as “aphasia” (Schacter 2011: 357).

## **2.2 Social Aspect/Nurture**

The interaction between the listener and the speaker is equally as important as the cognitive process behind it. That is why it is of the utmost importance to talk to the child as he/she is in the “sensitive period”.

According to the interactionist approach the process of language acquisition stems from the person's “desire to communicate“ and the need to communicate “with whom we want to communicate with” .<sup>1</sup>

There is much evidence that supports this, as children raised in single parent households almost exclusively say mom or dad as their first words depending on who raised them.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.khanacademy.org/test-prep/mcat/processing-the-environment/language/a/theories-of-the-early-stages-of-language-acquisition> Accessed 15 August 2020

children raised in an upper-class household are more likely to use standardized version of the language and have a richer vocabulary when compared to their lower-class peers.<sup>2</sup>

Positive and negative reinforcement also plays a significant role in language learning as rewarding the person when their pronunciation, vocabulary usage and grammar are good can boost their morale and therefore make their mind more primed for learning the language. In the same fashion, correcting their mistakes can lead them on the right path and avoid future misspeak.<sup>1</sup>

### **3 L2 Learning Through the Media**

While it is important to emphasize that language learning stems both from external and internal factors, through time as we age our language learning abilities get worse and worse. Hence why it was and still is of the utmost importance for humans to develop new engaging ways of learning to make the acquisition of a foreign language easier and more efficient.

#### **3.1 Reading**

The first and probably most time-tested way to learn a foreign language is reading. The reasoning behind it being so important is probably outlined best according to research done in Fijian schools. In their research Warwick and Mangubhai (1983) claim the differences between learning a first versus second language could almost be negligible if reading material provided to the learners is in the language that they wish to learn. The learners in the research “progressed in reading and listening comprehension at twice the normal rate” and after 20 months “the gains had increased further and spread to related language skills” (Warwick & Mangubhai 1983: 53).

While there are many distinct types of reading material such as magazines, books, comic books, foreign language textbooks, etc., the one reading material that proved to be most influential are story books. With their often colorful and attractive stories they “bridge the gap between L1 and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2013/september/toddler-language-gap-091213.html> Accessed 1 September 2020

L2 learning...and increase exposure to the target language” (Warwick and Mangubhai 1983: 56). The interesting material also is an added incentive as an interested and enticed learner is much more likely to adhere to language learning.

Some other more sparsely used but just as effective reading materials include:

1. Language learning magazines - they present a more laidback approach and have more relevant and less difficult themes as their main material. The most popular being *Think Language* available in almost all global languages.
2. Comic books - similarly to the aforementioned story books, they connect the picture to the words and create a more engaging learning. They also have different topics making them appropriate for all ages
3. Audiobooks - while they are probably the most modern type of “reading”, they include the best of both worlds allowing the listener (or reader) to do their daily tasks while listening to their desired reading material
4. Dictionary - while flipping through a dictionary may not be everybody’s cup of tea, there is much to be gained when one needs to look up a word or a phrase in the language that they are trying to learn
5. Books - arguably the most difficult way to learn a language but one that can prove to be the most efficient is by reading books written by natives of the language. Several types of the same book (this may only be the case with best sellers and such) can be found such as abridged and simplified versions that can ease the steep learning curve of a new language

It is easy to see why reading was and still is such a prominent way to learn a new language. The vast amount of different and engaging material available to the avid language learner is astonishing. From tales of knights of white horses to true crime horror novels, everybody interested in aiding themselves in the arduous process of L2 acquisition can find something made for them.

### **3.2 Radio**

The act of listening plays an enormous role in language learning and is equally important as reading and talking as all three processes are heavily interconnected. Nowadays, most people associate the radio with old cassette tapes containing monotonous radio speakers regurgitating

phrases and asking you to repeat after them. But radio is much more than that old dust-collection relic of the past.

While it is true that so-called “radio lessons” are a bit outdated by today's standards, they did pave the way for the today's foundation of radio language learning. The radio lessons usually consist of a “teacher” either reading or coming up with material in the foreign language. Similarly to other types of language learning materials, the lessons vary in their difficulty. But unlike reading for example, they allow the learner not only to hear the language being spoken, but also to speak (or repeat) the language.

One other important aspect of radio is music. There have been studies made by Li and Brand (2009) that show that music is a great motivator for studying. “The group with the most songs had a more positive attitude toward their learning of English and greater confidence in their ESL instruction “and the study showed that music, when used effectively, can also boost their vocabulary acquisition and its usage”. (Li and Brand 2009: 82)

Furthermore, music is a highly repeatable source of media and repetition has been shown through research repeatedly to greatly induce our mind's language learning abilities.(Schater et al. 2011: 351).

### **3.3 Television**

The main thing television-based media such as movies, tv shows, reality tv etc. have going for them is its accessibility. Almost every household in the developed countries has access to a TV and watching TV as a group activity has become a staple in our modern life. Furthermore, TV has one distinct benefit that bridges the gap between radio and reading in that not only can one listen to native speakers talk but they can also watch accompanying video material that help keep the potential learners' mind interested and involved. The participants of numerous studies done on the topic of language learning through TV almost equivocally say that the interest in the material is the single biggest motivator for learning of any kind, but especially language learning.

TV watching has become an impromptu nanny for many parents, with shows such as “Sesame Street” being akin to something of a “talking picture book” (Rice and Woodsmall 1988: 421). The reasoning behind TV being so effective as a language learning tool for young minds, lays behind so-called “fast mapping”. According to Rice and Woodsmall (1988), fast mapping involves “initial

partial understanding of a word's meaning" and then reconstructing the meaning of the word and inserting it in the child's (or learner's) lexicon for future use (Rice and Woodsmall 1988: 421).

In the study done by Rice and Woodsmall (1988), older children were more prone to acquiring the vocabulary from the given TV material. The benefit of expanded vocabulary was seen even in younger children, which most likely stems from the child's interest in the material. Nevertheless, the whole process of "noting the presence of a new word and arriving at an instantaneous attribution of meaning" proves that the learner can not only pick up but also use words with "minimum of exposure and with minimum of assistance"(Rice and Woodsmall 1988: 426).

While most of language learning when it comes to consuming TV material comes from indirect exposure to the content, there are also direct language learning programs and TV shows available. Arguably the most popular one is Dora the Explorer, an originally American animated television series that features a little girl with her pet monkey speaking Spanish, has become somewhat of a phenomenon. Almost every country nowadays has their own translated version, with Croatians for example using this medium as a chance to teach their future generations English instead of the original Spanish. According to Fallahkhair et al. (1999) a combination of both indirect and direct exposure of the content to cover all bases is the best approach "For beginners, a structured approach, using a book or a course, possibly computer based, was seen as most effective, with authentic material such as films reserved for those with some expertise" (Fallahkhair et al. 1999: 4339).

One potential problem arises from the context of the media that is being watched. In the same study Fallahkhair et al. (1999) it was shown that it was difficult for the learners to apply the same vocabulary from the given context to a different context. The researchers also gave a potential solution saying that maybe a combination of the same content in different forms (ex. TV and reading the newspaper) could prove as the beneficial in the long run.

### **3.4 Internet**

This enormous medium of information has slowly but surely become even more prevalent than TV as the main source for entertainment. Some research suggest that internet usage has gone

up by more than 500% since 2011.<sup>3</sup> Almost 55% participants in a study done by Jamalifar, G., and Chalak, A. (2014) have said that “they use the internet for the purpose of language learning.” (Jamalifar and Chalak 2014: 3) with 93% of the participants after the study “agreed that the internet helped them learn English”(Jamalifar and Chalak 2014: 5). This is why it is to no surprise the internet has become an effective and fundamental language learning tool.

With its ever growing database containing almost all the aforementioned forms of media in some shape and form, the vast amount of up-to-date information available for the learner and teacher alike, and its growing community of native speakers willing to help anybody interested in learning their language it is a great place for all of the learner’s needs.

In the past, it was often thought that the Internet isolates people and makes them antisocial. But contrary to that belief, internet provides a way to connect native speakers to potential learners in order to help them through the difficult journey of language learning. Communication and discussion are imperative in effective L2 learning. Online language learning has spiked in the recent years because of its effectiveness and ease of use with online language learning apps on the rise. *Google Translate* also revolutionized the way we see dictionaries. With its seemingly endless library of languages it allows the learner to instantly translate text either by entering manually the word in question or, even more conveniently, take a picture of the whole text and have it be translated.

It is also remarkably interesting to look at the recent uptrend in text messaging, and with it the abbreviation of text messages, or so-called “textspeak”, such as

1. gr8=great
2. tmrw=tomorrow
3. 2day = today
4. asap= as soon as possible
5. lol = laughing out loud

Contrary to the popular belief that this dumbed down version of the language is doing damage to language, John McWhorter argues that this is nothing more than a new version of bilingualism. “What we’re seeing is a whole new way of writing that young people are developing, which they’re using alongside their ordinary writing skills ...”<sup>4</sup> The fact that they can understand this abbreviated

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<sup>3</sup> <https://qz.com/1303375/internet-usage-will-finally-surpass-tv-in-2019-zenith-predicts/> Accessed 28 July 2020

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.digitaltrends.com/features/dt10-language-and-tech/> Accessed 25 July 2020



version of the text shows great language skills and this could easily translate into them having an easier time with L2 learning.

While most of the language learning content on the internet consists mostly of TV media and reading material, one noteworthy way to learn foreign languages are games. They provide an interactive way to acquire a language, with them not only being engaging but also very adaptable to the learner's abilities.

There are many different renditions of language learning games, although most have a very similar premise:

1. *Scrabble* - arguably the most popular one, in this game the players earn points by combining letters to form new words
2. Typing video games - such as *The Typing of the Dead*, where you have to type the corresponding vocabulary words on the screen in order to kill the living dead
3. Word association - a game where you have to “associate” words that correspond to the original word
4. *Kahoot* - quiz type game, more of a tool with wide uses, can be used to learn vocabulary

According to comment made by a participant from a study done by Fallahkhair et al. (1999) “you are having fun because it is labelled as a game, and you are learning much more” (Fallahkhair et al. 1999: 4339). And at the risk of sounding like a broken record, interesting, fun, and engaging activities are great motivators for learning of any kind.

## 4 Analysis Design

With language learning applications on the rise and new ones coming out daily, it would be difficult to analyse them all. The motivation behind picking these particular two specifically lies behind their distinct differences. *Duolingo* is a language learning application which provides its user with content centering around grammar with some aspects of vocabulary, while *Memrise* uses a more vocabulary-based approach with little to no grammar. The two are also the most popular language learning applications on the market<sup>5</sup>, and both have formed huge communities of eager language learners.

The analysis will include their respective selection of languages, ease of use, the friendliness of the user interface, the positive and negative reinforcements (rewards versus punishments) as well as incentives to keep using them, and their general approach to language learning. The free versions will be the ones tested, as the premium ones do not offer a substantial advantage over the former. Lastly, all differences and similarities between the application will be noted as well.

## 5 Analysis of Language Learning Applications

### 5.1 Duolingo

*Note:* English was chosen as the language to be learned. The user experience may or may not be different if another language is chosen.

One of the pioneers of language learning applications, *Duolingo* has been around from 2011, now boasting more than 300 million users.<sup>6</sup> While the application has changed a lot as technology progressed, the core application has remained mostly the same.

Upon opening the application for the first time, the user is urged by a friendly, waving, green *Duolingo* owl to create a profile and sign up for an account. The user is then offered a choice

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<sup>5</sup> <https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/top-5-free-language-learning-apps> Accessed 1 September 2020

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/parulguliani/2016/07/22/duolingo-looks-to-dominate-the-mobile-education-market-with-new-flashcard-app/#3472e5c91c1d> Accessed 20 August 2020

between 95 language courses in more than 40 languages. Upon selecting the language, the owl returns to set a goal for daily learning and the user can choose between *Casual* (5 minutes a day), *Regular* (10 minutes a day), *Serious* (15 minutes a day), *Insane* (20 minutes a day). The last step in the making of the account is the familiarity (or lack thereof) with the language. The application asks the user if they are learning the language for the first time or if they already know some of the language, making it suitable for all degrees of language knowledge.

The user is then given a sample language lesson including tasks such as:

1. Translate the sentence
2. Typing what you hear – a native speaker saying a phrase is played through the speaker and the user must pick the right words from the ones given
3. Select the correct translation
4. Typing the correct translation

Upon successful completion of the lesson, the user is given a “golden chest” containing “XP points” (experience points) and a gift. The gifts range from “time freezing” to outfits the Duolingo owl can wear.

Multiple tabs are then given, which the user can peruse freely. In the first tab, the user can partake in lessons which vary in themes and their use. The list of available lessons is extremely extensive and there is an interesting topic for each and every eager learner:

- |  |                  |
|--|------------------|
| 1. Phrases                                       | 9. Date and Time |
| 2. Names   | 10. Numbers      |
| 3. Jobs  | 11. Clothing     |
| 4. Grammatical Tenses (present, past and future) | 12. Animals      |
| 5. Grammatical Cases                             | 13. Places       |
| 6. Adverbs                                       | 14. Directions   |
| 7. Adjectives                                    | 15. Mathematics  |
| 8. Nations                                       |                  |

After completing a certain amount of lessons, the user reaches a checkpoint at which they are tested to see if they qualify for the next set of lessons. With every completed lesson, a “crown” is

given they can spend in the in-app store to purchase the gifts or outfits mentioned above. While the user is using the application, the system monitors their progress and if they keep making the same mistakes from a previously completed lesson, it will urge the user to redo the lesson to refresh their knowledge.

In the second tab, the user can change the information on their profile, see their statistics such as the daily streak of using the application, the experience they have gained as well as the amount of “crowns” they have. They can also see their friends and the friends’ statistics, making the learning more engaging and fun as they can compete with others. There are also achievements that encourage the user to overcome certain challenges the application may impose in order to get even better rewards.

The third tab consists of leaderboards. The leaderboards contain players around the world of similar skill levels. There are five leagues in total through which the user can “rank up”, but also “demote” if they stop using the application or perform poorly. This is further incentive to keep the users interested and engaged, keeping them coming back to use the application every day. There is also a tab on the Duolingo website, where they can leave any comments and questions they might have. Native speakers in the community can then answer and help the user with any mistakes and questions.

As far as vocabulary is concerned, the lessons mostly teach fixed phrases or single words with an emphasis on speaking vocabulary. Instead of giving the user whole sentences at once, the application splits the sentence into multiple words and, after a couple of interconnected lessons and mastering the use of the word, gives you the entire sentence at once. For example, in the lesson “Jobs” the user is taught the word for “doctor”, through many different contexts and uses. The word is then repeated many times through many different tasks, most likely because word repetition was connected closely with knowledge retention. (Schater et al. 2011: 351). In the next lesson, “Places” the user is taught how to determine where something is and some of the most common places one might visit. Thus, when the user reaches the aforementioned “Checkpoint”, they are given a phrase such as “Is there a doctor in this restaurant?” where the learner must connect what they previously learned. The user can then progress to more lessons, but the concept of vocabulary learning through repetition remains the same. This is fine for the beginning stages of the language learning, but the application fails to advance to more abstract notions and vocabulary and therefore misses the nuances of expressing thorough the language. There is also no indicating

how polite or formal a certain phrase is, something that can be crucial and change the whole context of a certain discourse.

While basic words and phrases can certainly be useful, for example, while travelling, *Duolingo* has glaring issues when it comes to grammar. In the grammar lessons, the user is simply given the correct sentence without any teaching involved. Particles, more specifically, adverbial particles, turn out to be particularly problematic. The application will sometimes include a phrasal verb such as “look up” and give just one meaning that fits the current context. For example, “I will *look up* the meaning in the dictionary.” the application will just give “search” as an explanation. But the application fails to mention the fact that “look up” has many more meanings. This can be particularly problematic as the user might use the same word in a different context effectively changing the meaning of the word completely. This, in turn, can cause confusion if the learner tries to communicate to someone more proficient in the language. There are plenty of reasons why the application failed to include more robust types of grammar lessons. The one that seems most likely is that most learners despise grammar and find it to be a chore. The application instead turns to indirect exposure to grammar, “hoping” the learner picks up the grammar by themselves.

The main problem with language in this application is the nature of the multiple-choice tasks used. While they can certainly be good at the beginning stages of language learning, the majority of learners cannot form sentences without the added prompt, leaving them with the knowledge of basic vocabulary but without the ability to form simple, let alone complex sentences.

Overall, the application is easy to use and has a plethora of incentives to keep language learning enjoyable and exciting. While the application is adaptable to the learner’s skill level with its wide variety of topics, its rather simplistic vocabulary and poor execution of grammar lessons make it suitable for the more casual crowd and for only the most basic of conversations. Ultimately, the application might be best used as a side companion to a grammar book in order to combat its glaring faults.

## 5.2 Memrise

*Note:* English was chosen as the language to be learned. The user experience may or may not be different if another is chosen.

*Memrise* is the other fierce competitor among the language learning application market amassing more than 35 million registered users. It is a slightly older application than *Duolingo*, launching in 2010.<sup>7</sup>

When opening the application for the first time, the user is greeted in a comparable way to its rival. You pick among the available 16 languages in the application, with more available on the website. The user also can pick their level, be it an intermediate learner or an advanced one. An interesting feature the application has is its learning reminder. Our species is a forgetful one, so it is nice to have a daily reminder to keep language learning consistent.

Much like *Duolingo*, there is a beginning lesson with a nice twist. There is an accompanying video or a picture with the word and its translation in the selected language. This little interactive part really brings something new to the table by not only having the learner listen to the speaker but also having the speaker gesture the meaning of the word. This can potentially show to the learner a bit about the culture of the language they are trying to master. Exposure to culture and culturally specific gestures can help with partial immersion which, in turn, can help with language learning. While the lesson is advancing, a little plant appears in the top right corner to signify progress. If the user is doing well, the plant will eventually blossom into a flower. Upon completing the lesson, the user is informed about the mistakes made and the words learned.

After the introduction, there is a tab much similar to that of *Duolingo*. There are many lessons that can suit the needs of any learner:

1. Phrases
2. Small talk
3. Numbers
4. Local Tips
5. Days of the week

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<sup>7</sup> [https://techcrunch.com/2018/06/11/memrise-raises-15-5m-as-its-ai-based-language-learning-app-passes-35m-users/?guccounter=1&guce\\_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly9lbi53aWtpcGVkaWEub3JnLw&guce\\_referrer\\_sig=AQAAAGNMq1\\_yzVs\\_cLvDSibJcuIT4DOYPTu1vnNUdLQXWu38O9NyFarDWU-K1JYLOfh41Ar5MeufhrWiB3qZ5uT2CV0tOLyud7hyYvyXa-RKF83yc2KakBY5YTQC8ZkKfXwTNwpBXVVvW-jliYipzSG3ZHJjja\\_VtlvID99pmGs4XrB-G](https://techcrunch.com/2018/06/11/memrise-raises-15-5m-as-its-ai-based-language-learning-app-passes-35m-users/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly9lbi53aWtpcGVkaWEub3JnLw&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAGNMq1_yzVs_cLvDSibJcuIT4DOYPTu1vnNUdLQXWu38O9NyFarDWU-K1JYLOfh41Ar5MeufhrWiB3qZ5uT2CV0tOLyud7hyYvyXa-RKF83yc2KakBY5YTQC8ZkKfXwTNwpBXVVvW-jliYipzSG3ZHJjja_VtlvID99pmGs4XrB-G) Accessed 29 August 2020

6. Food
7. Family

The tasks in the lessons are mostly the same as in *Duolingo*:

1. Pick the right translation
2. Translate the given word
3. Pick the word the speaker said

The user also has the ability to unlock the full course by paying and gain access to all the lessons at once, which seems counterintuitive as building a solid foundation of basic words and phrases through constant repetition is one of the main drivers of language learning. (Schater et al. 2011: 351) Unlocking every lesson from the beginning may be beneficial to someone with previous knowledge of the language or someone with a desire to master a certain topic, but beginners should focus on the basic lessons before jumping into the more difficult ones.

There are leaderboards in this application as well, but they are less engaging than in *Duolingo*, having the user only compete with friends and not globally. Nevertheless, some may find this is incentive enough. There are no immediate rewards here, but this may be on purpose. While *Duolingo* has tried to “gamify” its approach to language learning, *Memrise* boasts its robust nature more suited to experienced learners.

The application boasts its ability to teach the learner new words. Through the vocabulary lessons, there is constant repetition of the same word/phrase and, if the learner is paying attention, they can quickly learn more than 50 words a day. The “flashcard” approach the application takes has been proven beneficial to learning, with research indicating that “spaced repetition” or “repeated exposure to information at planned intervals, is the most powerful way to fix knowledge in one’s memory.”<sup>8</sup> It takes a very similar approach to *Duolingo* with its repetition and knowledge retention association, but takes it a bit further. Unlike *Duolingo* where the learner is given the same word in different sentences and contexts, *Memrise* just focuses on the learner learning the base word. For example, in the “Jobs” vocabulary lesson the word for “doctor” was repeated 9 times in *Memrise* and only 3 times in the same vocabulary lesson in *Duolingo*. The benefits of this much repetition of the same word may come down to the personal preference of the learner and the style of learning they learn best with. A sort of middle ground approach might be best, where both the word and the context the word is most commonly found is repeated to the user a couple of times in the lesson.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.wsj.com/articles/flashcards-get-smarter-so-you-can-too-1430253560> Accessed 17 August 2020

The videos of native speakers gesturing the meaning of the word in the vocabulary lessons are more than just a gimmick of the application. There is much scientific research such as Macedonia (2014) that supports the fact that gestures help the learner connect the meaning behind the new L2 word they are learning to their previous knowledge of the same word in L1, as well as that gestures can enhance L2 learning and are not just “symbolic and arbitrary” (Macedonia 2014: 2). *Memrise* also pays more attention to the formality and politeness of the words used allowing the user to click on the word and have multiple context-based explanations available, making it more suitable to advanced language learning. After building a nice foundation with a well-rounded vocabulary, the application features more advanced vocabulary lessons, venturing into writing vocabulary and presenting some more abstract notions with the language.

*Memrise* has a much more robust approach to grammar learning and avoids its rival’s “patronizing” simplicity. Upon opening the grammar lesson, the application gives you a brief explanation behind the grammatical topic at hand. It also shows the semantic role of the grammatical topic and how it impacts and changes the languages. For example, in the “Present Simple” lesson, the application showcases the different uses of the tense and some of the irregular forms the verbs can take in the tense such as *to be*. While this is more time consuming for the user, the knowledge of proper grammar use is greatly beneficial in the long run. The user is then given concrete examples in different contexts and, upon their completion, the user is given a task. Unlike *Duolingo*, after the user makes a grammatical mistake in the lesson, the application not only corrects the mistake, but also explains why that mistake is ungrammatical and why the correct alternative is supposed to be used. Tasks that include typing out the words instead of just picking are also more prevalent, and research suggests that writing can prove beneficial when learning grammar and its usage Chin (2000). After the lesson is completed, there is a short review of the grammar in the lesson for a quick catch up if it is needed. The grammatical lessons are also laid out cohesively, ranging in their difficulty. From tenses to phrasal verbs and sentence structure, the learner can get a clear picture to the grammatical properties of the language and their usage.

To summarize, the application is a bit more complicated to use, but feels more like a complete package when compared to its rival. The application takes a “quality over quantity” approach having less languages than *Duolingo*, but the lessons available are more organized and well-thought-out, particularly the ones concerning grammar. It has some really innovative features such as seeing the speaker gesture the word’s meaning, however due to its more difficult lessons, the application is more suited for perhaps a more serious language learning crowd.



## 6 Conclusion

The impact the media has had on our L2 learning abilities and interest in L2 learning is apparent by anybody who has had any exposure to it. There are so many different ways humanity has tried to make L2 learning simple, that there is a new way to learn coming out seemingly daily. There is a form of learning for each and every learner out there, whatever their preference may be. The effect of L2 learning through media being a valid tool in the ever-growing crowd of language learning can also be seen in the increasing number of positive studies outlined in the paper.

Media focusing on interest and repetition has been shown to be most effective and it is to no surprise to see them thriving. “Older media”, such as reading and radio, are having a resurgence with more interesting and interactive types of content. It is important to keep modernizing in order to keep up with the uptrend of children using technology. While the excessive screen time can certainly be a bad thing, their newfound interest in technology can be translated easily into using that same technology for L2 learning.

The spike in the popularity of language learning application should be attributed to their ease of use, accessibility, and adaptability. Both *Duolingo* and *Memrise* use constant word repetition as their main drives for vocabulary learning, with *Memrise* taking the edge with its better execution of grammar lessons. They are certainly not a substitute for a well-trained language teacher or a conversation with a native speaker, but their sheer convenience is unrivaled. The fact that one can pull out their phone out of their pocket/purse and have a whole language learning course (however basic it may be) and be connected to native speakers who are willing and able to communicate means that, now more than ever, humanity is primed for future L2 learning.

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