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Innovative Approaches to Foreign Language Learning: A Study of Methods Including Duolingo and Beyond

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Abstract:

This article examines the effectiveness of various methods of foreign language learning, including digital tools like Duolingo, traditional grammar-focused approaches, immersive learning environments, and the role of music in language acquisition. Through a comparative analysis, the study highlights the strengths and limitations of each method and advocates for a blended approach that integrates these techniques to maximize learning outcomes. The findings suggest that combining digital platforms, traditional methods, immersive experiences, and supplementary tools such as music provides the most comprehensive path to language proficiency. The article calls for further research into the integration of these methods in formal education systems.

Introduction

In recent decades, the approach to learning foreign languages has undergone significant transformation. Traditionally, language acquisition was grounded in methods such as grammar-translation and audio-lingual approaches, both of which prioritized linguistic accuracy and form over communicative competence. However, with the advent of digital tools and platforms, such as Duolingo, the landscape of language learning has shifted towards more innovative, user-centered strategies. These modern methods capitalize on accessibility, engagement, and learner autonomy, providing alternative paths to language mastery.

Duolingo, a leading mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) platform, exemplifies this innovation by offering learners the flexibility to study languages at their own pace, incorporating gamification elements to sustain motivation. While digital tools have undoubtedly democratized access to language learning, there remains an ongoing debate about their overall efficacy in comparison to traditional and immersive methods. Traditional language learning approaches,

grounded in classroom-based instruction and rigorous grammar exercises, continue to be praised for providing a solid foundation in language structure. Meanwhile, immersive techniques, such as study abroad programs, offer unparalleled opportunities for learners to engage with native speakers and practice the language in authentic contexts.

The purpose of this article is to compare these different approaches—digital tools, traditional methods, and immersive learning—and assess their respective advantages and limitations. By analyzing existing literature and learner experiences, we aim to determine which method or combination of methods offers the most effective path to foreign language proficiency.

2. Innovative Approaches

Digital Tools (e.g., Duolingo)

In recent years, digital tools like Duolingo have transformed language learning by providing convenient access to lessons via mobile and web platforms. Duolingo's approach is distinguished by its gamification, incorporating elements such as streaks, levels, and rewards to keep learners engaged and motivated. The platform is highly accessible, allowing users to fit language practice into their daily routines, which has made language learning more flexible and approachable for a diverse range of users (Loewen et al., 2019).

One of the key advantages of Duolingo is its emphasis on vocabulary acquisition through spaced repetition, a technique that enhances the retention of new words by strategically reviewing them over time. This method allows learners to build a solid vocabulary foundation incrementally. Furthermore, Duolingo is free to use, which makes it an appealing option for learners without access to formal language instruction (Li et al., 2024).

Despite these strengths, Duolingo has limitations. While it effectively builds basic vocabulary and sentence structure, research has shown that it may not fully develop conversational fluency or a deep understanding of complex grammar (Portnoff et al., 2021). The platform relies heavily on translation exercises and multiple-choice tasks, which may not translate well to real-world language use (Psychogyiou & Karasimos, 2019). Additionally, its limited focus on pronunciation and natural speech patterns can leave learners unprepared for actual conversations in the target language. Therefore, while Duolingo is an excellent supplementary tool, it may not be sufficient on its own for achieving full language proficiency.

Cognitive-Based Learning

Cognitive-based learning strategies focus on how the brain processes and retains information, offering a more scientific approach to language acquisition. These methods include techniques such as spaced repetition, mnemonic devices, and chunking, which help learners retain new vocabulary and grammar over the long term (Li et al., 2024). Spaced repetition, for instance, revisits material at carefully spaced intervals to reinforce memory just as it begins to fade, optimizing retention.

Cognitive-based learning also emphasizes metacognitive strategies, which encourage learners to reflect on their learning processes and tailor their study habits accordingly. By understanding their own learning preferences and progress, learners can adjust their methods to become more efficient and self-directed (Li et al., 2024). These strategies foster greater independence in language learning, helping students manage their own progress effectively.

While cognitive-based techniques are powerful tools for enhancing retention and comprehension, they are most effective when combined with methods that provide opportunities for practical language use, such as conversation practice or immersive learning experiences. The success of these strategies largely depends on the learner's discipline and commitment to regular practice (Shortt et al., 2023).

3. Traditional Methods

Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual Methods

Traditional language learning methods, such as the **grammar-translation** and **audio-lingual** approaches, have been central to foreign language education for centuries. The **grammar-translation method** is primarily focused on the mastery of grammatical rules and vocabulary through direct translation between the target language and the learner's native language. Learners spend significant time memorizing grammar rules and translating sentences, which provides a strong foundation in language structure. This method has long been favored in academic settings due to its focus on written accuracy and its ability to foster a deep understanding of syntax and morphology (Mammadova, 2024).

Similarly, the **audio-lingual method**, which gained popularity in the mid-20th century, emphasizes repetition and drilling of language patterns. Based on behaviorist theories, this method requires learners to engage in frequent practice of sentence structures through repetitive exercises, aiming to create automatic responses in speech. Like grammar-translation, the audio-lingual method offers a solid base in linguistic rules and accuracy, particularly in the early stages of learning.

However, despite their strengths, both traditional methods have faced criticism for their lack of focus on communicative competence. The grammar-translation method, for example, does not provide learners with sufficient opportunities to practice speaking or listening in real-world contexts. This often leads to students who, despite having strong theoretical knowledge of a language, struggle with spontaneous communication and conversational fluency (Fathi et al., 2024). Additionally, these methods tend to be perceived as disengaging, relying heavily on rote memorization and translation exercises that can fail to capture the dynamic, interactive nature of language learning (Khudaverdiyeva, 2024).

As a result, while traditional methods remain useful for building a strong grammatical foundation, they are often criticized for not addressing the practical skills necessary for conversational fluency and real-world language use.

4. Immersive Learning

Study Abroad Programs and Language Immersion Schools

Immersive learning, which places learners in environments where the target language is used for everyday communication, is widely regarded as one of the most effective methods for achieving fluency. **Study abroad programs** and **language immersion schools** allow learners to be fully surrounded by the target language, offering real-world exposure that accelerates the development of conversational skills and deepens cultural understanding. Unlike traditional classroom settings, where language is often learned in isolation, immersive environments encourage learners to practice the language in authentic, meaningful contexts (Fathi et al., 2024).

One of the primary advantages of immersion is its impact on **conversational fluency**. When learners are placed in situations where they must communicate in the target language to navigate daily life—whether ordering food, asking for directions, or engaging in casual conversation—they are compelled to think and respond in the language, often without the crutch of translation. This constant practice not only enhances fluency but also improves pronunciation, listening skills, and the ability to grasp idiomatic expressions. Moreover, immersion exposes learners to cultural nuances, which are critical for understanding the social and contextual aspects of language use (Khudaverdiyeva, 2024).

In addition to language skills, immersion fosters **cultural awareness**. Being surrounded by native speakers and local customs gives learners a more profound understanding of the culture behind the language, helping them to communicate more naturally and effectively. This cultural competence is particularly beneficial in professional and academic settings, where understanding cultural subtleties can be just as important as language proficiency.

However, **study abroad programs** and **immersion schools** also come with challenges. One significant barrier is **cost**. These programs often require substantial financial investment, covering travel, accommodation, and tuition fees, which can make them inaccessible to many learners. Additionally, the **time commitment** required for immersion—often several months or even years—can be impractical for learners with professional or family obligations (Fathi et al., 2024). Finally, while immersion is highly effective for learners who thrive in social and communicative settings, it may be overwhelming for those who are less confident or struggle with anxiety in unfamiliar environments.

Despite these challenges, immersion remains one of the most effective strategies for achieving real-world language fluency, particularly when paired with other methods that address grammar and vocabulary acquisition.

5. Comparative Analysis

Effectiveness of Each Method

Each language learning method discussed has its own unique strengths and limitations. **Digital tools**, such as Duolingo, are particularly effective at helping learners build and retain vocabulary through techniques like spaced repetition. These tools are also highly engaging, leveraging gamification to maintain motivation. However, despite their effectiveness in vocabulary acquisition, digital tools tend to **lag in conversational fluency**, as they lack opportunities for real-world speaking practice and fail to provide deep engagement with complex grammatical structures (Shortt et al., 2023).

Traditional methods, such as the grammar-translation and audio-lingual approaches, excel at providing learners with a **solid foundation in grammar and language structure**. These methods are useful for understanding the mechanics of a language, making them especially beneficial for learners who need academic or formal knowledge of the language. However, they often **lack real-world application**, as they focus primarily on written language and memorization, offering little room for spontaneous communication or conversational practice (Mammadova, 2024).

On the other hand, **immersion** is widely regarded as the most effective approach for developing **fluency and conversational competence**. By placing learners in environments where the target language is used in daily interactions, immersion allows them to practice the language in authentic contexts, accelerating their ability to communicate naturally. However, immersion programs can be less accessible due to **cost, time, and logistical barriers**, which may limit their availability to a broader audience (Fathi et al., 2024).

Impact of Combining Methods

A **blended approach**, which combines the strengths of these various methods, offers the most comprehensive path to language proficiency. By integrating **digital tools** for vocabulary and basic grammar, **traditional methods** for linguistic structure and depth, and **immersion** for real-world conversational practice, learners can benefit from a more holistic language learning experience. For example, learners could begin with digital platforms to build foundational skills, use traditional methods to solidify grammatical knowledge, and then engage in immersive experiences to apply these skills in real-world situations (Li et al., 2024).

This **synergy** allows each method to compensate for the limitations of the others. For instance, while digital tools may fall short in conversational fluency, pairing them with immersion experiences can provide learners with the opportunity to practice speaking in natural settings. Similarly, traditional grammar-focused learning can be complemented by digital applications that promote frequent practice and engagement. The result is a more well-rounded approach that caters to the various aspects of language learning—vocabulary, grammar, conversation, and cultural understanding.

6. Related Research on Music and Language Learning

Music has emerged as a significant tool in language acquisition, as highlighted by Sadiqzade (2024). In their research, Sadiqzade emphasizes the **cognitive benefits** of incorporating music into

language learning, pointing out how rhythm and melody enhance memory retention, pronunciation, and vocabulary acquisition. Music activates various brain areas associated with language processing, making it easier for learners to internalize new linguistic structures (Sadiqzade, 2024). Furthermore, the study shows that music reduces language learning anxiety, boosts motivation, and provides a natural method for practicing intonation and pronunciation, especially for languages with distinct tonal variations.

Sadiqzade (2024) also discusses the **practical applications of music** in language pedagogy. Techniques such as listening to and translating song lyrics, using rhythm to teach sentence stress and pronunciation, and engaging in sing-alongs to reinforce vocabulary are identified as effective ways to supplement traditional language learning methods. Integrating music into lessons not only enriches the learning experience but also allows learners of all ages to engage with the language in a more relaxed and enjoyable manner. The research suggests that further studies should explore how music can be systematically incorporated into language curricula to maximize its potential benefits.

7. Opinion: Blended Approach for Future Learning

The future of language learning lies in adopting a **blended approach** that combines the strengths of digital tools, traditional methods, immersive experiences, and supplementary aids like music. While digital platforms like Duolingo offer accessible and engaging ways to learn vocabulary, they need to be paired with **traditional grammar-focused** methods to provide learners with a solid linguistic foundation. On top of this, **immersion** remains vital for achieving conversational fluency and cultural competence, giving learners the chance to practice the language in real-life situations. The integration of **music** into language pedagogy adds an additional dimension, aiding in retention, motivation, and pronunciation.

This blended approach, which leverages the best aspects of each method, addresses the diverse needs of learners in a more **holistic** manner. Digital tools can serve as an introductory phase, providing learners with the basics and encouraging regular practice. Traditional methods can then help solidify grammatical understanding, while immersion ensures that learners can apply their skills practically. Music, as demonstrated by Sadiqzade (2024), can further enhance memory and pronunciation, making it an effective supplementary tool.

The future of language education should focus on **combining these methods** in a structured way to provide a more comprehensive and enjoyable learning experience. By blending digital innovation with established educational practices and creative tools like music, language learners will have greater opportunities to achieve fluency in a more efficient and engaging manner.

8. Conclusion

In this article, we explored various approaches to foreign language learning, including digital tools like Duolingo, traditional methods such as grammar-translation, immersive learning experiences, and the emerging role of music in language acquisition. Each method offers distinct advantages:

digital platforms excel in vocabulary retention and engagement, traditional methods provide a strong grammatical foundation, immersion fosters conversational fluency and cultural understanding, and music supports memory, pronunciation, and motivation. However, no single method can fully meet the diverse needs of language learners.

A **blended approach** that integrates the strengths of digital tools, traditional learning, immersive experiences, and music-based strategies offers the most comprehensive path to language proficiency. By combining these methods, learners can benefit from vocabulary acquisition, grammatical precision, conversational fluency, and cultural competence, all while enjoying a more dynamic and engaging learning experience.

Looking ahead, the future of language learning lies in **further research** into how these methods can be systematically combined in educational contexts. In particular, exploring the incorporation of music as a core component of language pedagogy could unlock new possibilities for enhancing learners' motivation and retention. As language education continues to evolve, a more flexible, multimodal approach will be crucial for addressing the varying needs of learners across different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

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