BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Can apps teach you a language?

This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Neil
Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Pippa
And I'm Pippa. Apps like Duolingo, Babbel and Busuu all aim to help you learn a language, but do they really help? We'll be trying to answer that question in today's episode of 6 Minute English, and as usual we'll be learning some useful new vocabulary too.

Neil
Yes, and don't forget to head to our website for a transcript of this episode and a free worksheet to test what you've learnt. It's all at bbclearningenglish.com.

Pippa
OK. Neil, let's start with a quiz question. Which of these is not a language you can learn using Duolingo? Is it:

a) Latin,
b) Klingon, or
c) Elvish?

Neil
I'm going to say c) Elvish.

Pippa
Well, we'll find out at the end of the programme. Now, people might be familiar with the app Duolingo. And then there are other apps which say they can help you learn a language quickly – Bussuu and Babbel, for example.

Neil
And listeners might be familiar with how they tend to work. You get short lessons which test you on a repeated set of words.

©British Broadcasting Corporation 2026

Pippa
Right. And many of these apps say they focus on teaching language for situations and **implicit** learning, rather than directly teaching language rules such as grammar. If something is **implicit**, it's suggested but not communicated directly.

Neil
Yes. So, if you think about how children learn to speak their first language, it's mostly **implicit** – they don't have lessons. But can this work for adults?

Pippa
BBC Radio 4 programme Sliced Bread has been investigating the evidence behind language learning apps. Presenter Greg Foot spoke to language learning expert Professor Elizabeth Wonnacott, or Liz, about **implicit** learning.

Professor Elizabeth Wonnacott
There is a very big difference between being a child who gets constantly exposed to this world of language, compared with trying to learn a language a few hours a week. There is quite a bit of evidence that some **explicit** teaching of, for example, grammar and vocabulary is helpful.

Greg Foot
Got you. So, it would be helpful to try to mimic what children do, which is full **immersion**, but realistically you're not going to get to those levels.

Neil
Liz says that while children learn their first language **implicitly** by being constantly surrounded by the language, adults are often learning for only a few hours a week.

Pippa
Yes. So, for adults trying to learn a new language, research has shown that some **explicit** teaching is helpful. **Explicit** is the opposite of **implicit**. So, for example, **explicit** grammar teaching would be somebody explaining a grammar rule to you.

Neil
Right. So, adults can't realistically achieve full **immersion** in a language like children do. **Immersion** means being completely surrounded by something.

Pippa
OK. So, a mixture of the **implicit** teaching of the apps and some **explicit** teaching – for example, learning grammar rules – is useful. But Neil, there's limited research about just how effective these apps can be at teaching you a language.

©British Broadcasting Corporation 2026

Neil
Indeed, Liz Wonnacott has seen one study she thinks could be interesting though, which compares two groups of Spanish speakers learning English – one using an app and one attending classes – for a similar amount of time. She explains more to BBC Radio 4 programme Sliced Bread.

Professor Elizabeth Wonnacott
The **key finding** was that in some of the tests, written grammar tests, the Duolingo learners actually improved a bit more, while actually in a test where they were looking at listening the classroom learners appeared to improve more. So, it's really **promising**, but of course it's **one particular** language, in **one particular** app, against **one particular** school.

Pippa
Liz says the **key finding** from the research is that the app users improved more on written tests, but the classroom learners improved more on listening tests. A **key finding** is the most important conclusion of a piece of research.

Neil
Liz says the study is **promising**, which means it shows signs of being positive.

Pippa
Yes. However, Liz points out the limits of the study. It's only looking at **one particular** language, **one particular** app and **one particular** language school. The repetition of **one particular** here means specific or individual, and Liz would like to see research on more apps, more types of teaching and also more different languages.

Neil
Apps can help us learn some parts of a language, but in this study they weren't as successful at improving listening skills, and so Liz concludes that combining learning in apps with some other ways of studying is the best way to try to improve your language skills.

Professor Elizabeth Wonnacott
Probably moving forwards, some combination of human teaching and these platforms to give us that repetition is probably going to be the right direction.

Neil
As teachers, we'd also suggest doing things that help you improve different skills – speaking, listening, reading and writing. So, listening to podcasts or trying to

©British Broadcasting Corporation 2026

practise speaking with a language exchange partner could be things to combine with learning in apps. Find what works for you.

Pippa
I think it's time to find out the answer to the quiz question, Neil. I asked you which language you can't learn on Duolingo... and you were right. It's c) Elvish, but you can learn Latin and Klingon, the fictional language from the TV series Star Trek, on Duolingo. And if you did want to improve your Elvish, we did find an app specifically for that.

Neil
Right. Let's recap the vocabulary we learned in this episode. **Implicit** means suggested but not communicated directly.

Pippa
Explicit is the opposite of **implicit**. It means something is communicated directly.

Neil
Immersion is the state of being fully surrounded by something.

Pippa
The **key finding** of a research study is the most important conclusion of the research.

Neil
And the phrase **one particular** means specific or individual.

Pippa
Once again, our six minutes are up. Test what you've learned with the worksheet on our website.

Neil
And if you're interested to hear the full episode of Sliced Bread about language-learning apps and the science behind them, there's a link in the notes below this episode. Try listening on 0.5 speed or in short sections if you find it too difficult to keep up.

Pippa
Bye for now!

©British Broadcasting Corporation 2026

Neil
Goodbye!

VOCABULARY

implicit
suggested or understood without being directly stated

explicit
communicated clearly and directly

immersion
experience of being completely surrounded by something

key finding
most important conclusion or discovery from a piece of research

promising
showing signs of being positive

one particular
one specific individual thing or person

©British Broadcasting Corporation 2026