



# CAREER TALK

- 2021 -

**Interviews conducted  
by “Careers, Cultures,  
& Languages” students**



# ELIZABETH STRONG

**Elizabeth Strong is currently a Senior Curriculum Designer at Duolingo. She has taught K-12 language classes for 9 years before she decided to make a career transition and ended up at Duolingo. Strong's academic path is pretty traditional for language majors: she did her undergraduate in the University of Texas, Austin in French, German, and Japanese, and her Master's in French Linguistics. Then she went to Purdue University and did a Ph.D. in Linguistics.**

**1) What is a Senior Curriculum Designer at Duolingo responsible for? What is your day-to-day work like?**

As a Senior Curriculum Designer, I supervise the writers of the actual sentences that go into the app, and occasionally write some of the course content on my own. Now, I primarily manage the contractors for the Japanese course for English speakers. By the way, we have a separate course for each language pair. My day-to-day work is half meeting and half working on the actual content, making suggestions and tweaking things. During the meetings, we try to determine what other Curriculum Designers across different courses should work on and make sure that we are making consistent choices. One specific example is that we are currently working to align all of our courses to the CEFR, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

**2) I heard that you work across different languages. How is that experience? Do you ever work on languages that you don't already know?**

Yes, I've also managed contractors for different languages. For Senior Curriculum Designers, Duolingo tries to have generalists, like me. I know several languages at least. It can be really hard, however, to find someone who is proficient

in, say Norwegian and Mandarin. For these rare language pairs, we will try to use our linguistic backgrounds to figure out the kinds of questions that need to be asked. Then, we hand the work to contractors who are experts on those languages and have them quote the actual sentences. I will coach them on how the app works and how to create the best learning experience.

### **3) What are the standards/qualifications for Duolingo contractors?**

Duolingo contractors are typically graduate students in language who have some teaching experience. A lot of them work for Duolingo 20-30 hour per week as side-work. Ideally, for each language pair, we try to make a balanced project team that has someone being native in one language and someone being native in the other language, so that we can have both teacher and learner perspectives when developing the course.

### **4) I noticed that there used to be a volunteer contributors program, what happened to it?**

We used to have the volunteer program when the company was just starting up. It wasn't feasible to have experts on every language pair when the company was small. However, there were demands for more languages in the Duolingo app and lots of people who knew different languages grew interested in the app. So, we ended up hiring experts for the big courses and had volunteers working on smaller languages. We gave volunteers basic training on technical stuff, like how to put sentences into our app. Since last year, our team has drastically increased in size, and we are now able to hire a lot more people. Therefore, the company decided to stop the volunteer program, transition to contractors mode, and offer monetary awards to those who volunteered in the past. In terms of future opportunities to work with Duolingo, it's unlikely that you will get a Curriculum Designer position without some formal teaching experience.

**5) What would be some suggestions for an undergraduate student who is not a language major and is interested in the type of work that you are doing at Duolingo?**

For undergraduate students, I would suggest that you go on to pursue a Master's and gain some (language) teaching experience. Oh, and try to take a few linguistics courses and see if you really like the subject. As for being a language major, I don't think it is a requirement because the undergraduate language majors are often very literature-focused. But, what you really need for the work is the linguistic knowledge. How is the language changing and how do you teach people about it? Also, Natural Language Processing is something that is getting bigger nowadays. As I mentioned, I work on the curriculum side, where more people have a graduate background. However, at Duolingo, there are also opportunities to work on artificial intelligence, machine learning, and more technical things like that if you have a strong undergraduate background.

**6) Please tell me more about the non-latin script project that you're working on.**

We found that for languages like Japanese and Chinese, where there are non-latin scripts, people have a hard time when they first see the characters. We can see from the retention rate of those languages that people drop off pretty quickly compared to the roman script language pair courses. Japanese is one of our largest languages with about 10 million users, and we hear a number of common concerns from our learners on social media. The script is one problem; another problem is the text-to-speech part of our Japanese course. This is why we decided to really devote time and effort to make some big changes to the course. One thing, as you mentioned, is deciding to focus on teaching the script better. So, we created this feature where, instead of learning the Kanji with random vocabularies, you learn just the Kanji, the characters, separate from the meanings. Right now this

this feature is only available on Android, but we hope to make it available on other platforms. We'd also like to eventually expand the character feature to all the courses that need it. One common thing you'll find at tech companies is that they have software engineers specializing on different platforms, so when we develop a new feature, we will test it on a single platform first. If it works well on that platform, we will then add the feature to all the platforms: Apple, Android and web browsers.

*The interview was conducted by Cathy (Ruoyi) Chen.*