

Exploring Young Learners' Experiences in Using Duolingo for English Learning in an Islamic Elementary School



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ABSTRACT

Technology requires language teachers to utilize online media, including the internet, websites, social media, and virtual platforms, to enhance teaching and learning. This research focuses on exploring of the Duolingo application on students' English learning. Researchers used qualitative methods to explore students' experiences while learning English with the Duolingo application. The instruments of this research were observation, interviews, and documentation. The study involved 22 students in class 4 of the Islamic Elementary School who expressed positive attitudes toward foreign language learning using the Duolingo online application technology. Learning a foreign language through game-based applications is more effective in fostering enthusiasm for learning, despite complaints from some students who lack internet coverage at home. Researchers hope that, in the future, by conducting this research, English teachers and schools can consider providing technological facilities.

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INTRODUCTION

English should be taught to all children from a young age, as it is a worldwide language and is no longer considered a luxury or a privilege for a certain group of children (Schlueter, 2019). The education industry has kept up with a world that is changing quickly in terms of studying English as a foreign language. Modern technology highly influences every part of human activity, including education. (Rastislav Metruk, 2022).

Most instructors still need more time to acquire new material and learn how to use technology in the classroom. Teachers take on a more active role in the school when mobile devices are used, and they must start creating learning experiences for their students. (Szymkowiak et al., 2021). Language instructors must be competent to teach in the facilities made accessible by online media due to the increasing usage of technology. Digital resources that may help with language teaching and learning include the internet, specific websites, social media, and virtual media. (Amin & Sundari, 2020).

Technology use affects language use because it affects the facilities for teaching and learning languages in the classroom. Duolingo is one of the educational applications that experts recommend for learning English. This software is a platform that uses games to teach different languages. Both computers and mobile devices may utilize Duolingo. This program is compatible with Windows, iOS, Android, and the web.

The researcher collected preliminary information regarding the use of the Duolingo program as an online tool for learning English based on the pre-observation. This study focused on class 4 at the Islamic elementary school. The participants were encouraged by the researchers to use technology to support their English language learning. Since only a small

number of the students were familiar with Duolingo, the researcher introduced the application to them.

Despite the growing integration of technology in education and the well-documented benefits of digital tools such as Duolingo for language learning, there is a notable lack of research focusing on their application at the primary school level, particularly within Islamic elementary schools in Indonesia. While numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of Duolingo among older learners or in general educational contexts, limited attention has been paid to young learners, especially those with restricted access to technology.

Using online-based technology in teaching and learning activities requires familiarity with online learning applications. These are the future challenges for researchers: to be able to educate teachers and children about the use of online applications to help them learn English more easily. The reasons why researchers use the Duolingo application as an application-based supporting media for children are, first of all, this application is one of the best online applications in the world for learning foreign languages; secondly, the Duolingo application is easy to use for beginners; and thirdly, the game features in it can build children's enthusiasm for learning English. This research aims to find out whether or not the Duolingo application is effective in helping students learn the English language.

To avoid a lack of interest, primary school students are more engaged in studying materials that provide a variety of games. The researcher chose Duolingo as a learning experience of a gaming intervention, which forms the basis for this research. The app's gamification features and interactive approach can make learning more interesting and challenging, increasing learning motivation (Sakina et al., 2024).

Problem of the Study

What are the experiences of young learners in using the Duolingo application for English learning in an Islamic elementary school?

Objective of the Study

The research objectives of this study were to explore the experiences of young learners using the Duolingo application to learn English in an Islamic elementary school.

METHOD

Study Design

This research applied a descriptive qualitative method. Grove et al. (2015) define qualitative descriptive techniques as "providing a specific description of a situation as it happens naturally." As such, this approach emphasizes capturing the complexity of the phenomena, often through observation, interviews, or detailed text analysis.

Teachers' positive attitudes toward technology can be a strong motivator for students to use it. The theoretical foundation is used as a guide to guarantee that the study's focus aligns with the factual information in the field. Researchers compare several previous studies with the same variables. Then the researcher used qualitative methods intending to discover new phenomena. The researcher intends to pay attention to the voice of participants or observe them in their natural environments, and the interviews are conducted using a semi-structured model. Qualitative researchers focus their research on exploring, verifying, and representing people and their natural environments.

Data analysis

An individual session that involves a dialogue between the interviewer and the participant is known as a face-to-face interview. These interviews may go into intimate subjects and current or former situations. To get a general grasp of the problem, open-ended interviews are the first step in most qualitative research projects. (Moser & Korstjens, 2018).

To fully document the answers to these questions, the activities started with notes. With an emphasis on fourth-graders, the researcher conducted interviews with English instructors at Islamic primary schools to collect data. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher presented a pre-research permit and explained the aim of the visit to the principals of the Islamic primary schools. The researcher was led to the English professors after obtaining authorization.



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The activities began with notes and documentation to thoroughly record responses to these inquiries. The researcher gathered data through interviews with English teachers at Islamic elementary schools, focusing on grade 4 students. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher obtained permission from the principals of the Islamic elementary schools by presenting a pre-research permit and explaining the purpose of the visit. Once permission was granted, the researcher was directed to the English teachers.

The researcher interviewed English teachers according to the title they wanted to research. The following are interview questions from researchers to the English teacher and students. The English teacher was asked, "What technology-based English learning media did grade 4 students use to help them build enthusiasm in increasing the attractiveness of learning English?" (Question 1). Interview questions for students: Did students use online technology to learn English? (Question 2). The next question is related to students' experiences after using the Duolingo application: " What do you think after learning English using the Duolingo application?" (Question 3). Interviews were conducted with 5 students as a sample of student data from 22 students

After the data was successfully collected, the researcher found problems in the classroom from the teacher's point of view, first related to English mastery through smartphone technology.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Developing students' enthusiasm in learning is the most crucial aspect of teaching English at a beginner's level. Therefore, to choose the best teaching strategies and resources for their students, educators must be aware of the characteristics of each student. (Like Raskova Octaberlina, 2023). Alvons Habibie (2021) researched the same topic, specifically the utilization of the Duolingo application. The interview technique in this study was face-to-face and telephone. The following is an example of a short interview script from previous research:

*Have you ever used the internet as a tool to find information?
How often do you open the internet in a day?
Do you like using applications on your Smartphone to learn English?
What is your opinion about learning to use the application?
Have you ever heard of the Duolingo app before?
What do you think about the Duolingo application?
Can the Duolingo application enhance your motivation to learn English?
Which of you thinks is more effective, learning using the Duolingo application or face-to-face learning?*

The results of this research showed that all students in class 4 of the Islamic Elementary School responded positively to the Duolingo application. The researcher first carried out observations of the English teacher who taught in the class. Researchers questioned: What technology-based English learning media did grade 4 students use to help them build enthusiasm in increasing the attractiveness of learning English?

In the interview, the teacher explained : "Most of the students in our class can already use smartphones according to their age limit. For the use of online applications related to English learning, they have not used them yet. The school doesn't allow students to bring smartphones, so teachers can't help them practice English, like improving vocabulary with online apps. Thus, they must be taught how to use their phones to learn English at home. Maybe this will be an evaluation for us as teachers in the future.

(Siswa di kelas kami sebagian besar sudah bisa menggunakan smartphone sesuai batas usianya, untuk penggunaan aplikasi online terkait pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris masih belum mereka gunakan, Beberapa faktor salah satunya adalah sekolah tidak mengizinkan mereka membawa smartphone sehingga guru di sekolah tidak bisa membimbing mereka berlatih Bahasa Inggris misalnya untuk meningkatkan vocabulary melalui aplikasi online, oleh karena itu perlu di arahkan lagi bagaimana cara agar mereka bisa memamfaatkan

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 smartphone mereka untuk belajar Bahasa Inggris dengan baik di rumah.
 Mungkin ini akan menjadi evaluasi bagi kami sebagai guru ke depannya.)"*

The research was conducted over seven meetings. The following list includes the names of five informants or students who were selected as samples for data collection during the first meeting. The interview aimed to determine whether the students use online technology to learn English.

Interviewed student :

Student A : I only learn English at school using non-digital media. I don't know much about special applications for learning English.

(Saya belajar Bahasa Inggris cukup di sekolah saja dengan media non-digital, saya belum banyak mengetahui kalau ada aplikasi khusus untuk belajar Bahasa Inggris)

Student B : Yes, I learn English through YouTube and online games, but sometimes it's boring because English is too difficult for me to learn. *(Ya, saya belajar Bahasa Inggris lewat youtube dan game online tapi terkadang membosankan karena Bahasa Inggris terlalu sulit untuk saya pelajari.)*

Student C : Not yet, even though I have a smartphone, I only have one and don't really use it for studying, especially studying English. *(Belum, meskipun saya sudah punya smartphone tapi hanya sekedar punya, saya tidak begitu memakainya untuk belajar terutama belajar Bahasa Inggris.)*

Student D : No, I only study English at school. *(Tidak, saya hanya belajar Bahasa Inggris di sekolah saja.)*

Student E : Yes, I learn English vocabulary on YouTube and some online games. *(Ya, saya belajar kosakata Bahasa Inggris di youtube dan beberapa game online.)*

The researcher concluded from the outcome of the interviews with the 5 students above, their limitations in learning English were influenced by the lack of guidance from their parents and teachers about how to utilize current technology to learn foreign languages. From student B's statement, the researcher explored the meaning of student B's reasons for saying it was boring, that at their age, they still needed to be given interesting online learning methods to stimulate their stimulus. It is hoped that the Duolingo application here is suitable for them because the features in it are game-based, such as guessing vocabulary.

On the second and third day, the researcher introduced an online-based application, namely Duolingo, to students. The researcher explains the application, from its functions to the reasons why students need to use the Duolingo application as a supporting tool in learning English. The researcher asked for permission to connect the cellphone layer to the LCD screen so that all students could easily pay attention to the tutorial on using the Duolingo application. Researchers then explained step by step how to use the application.

How Researchers Introduce the Duolingo Application to Students

As a preliminary assessment, the researcher asked five students to demonstrate how well they understood the fundamental expressions from Unit 1. The researcher owned the smartphone that was utilized as practice material for the Duolingo program. The researcher stated on the first attempt to use the Duolingo app on the second day of the study.

"After the vocabulary was sorted into the appropriate phrases, the five student eagerly guessed the words based on the Indonesian translation. I instructed and coached them while they rehearsed, asking them to do so in shifts."



If a student answers incorrectly, there will be one less heart in the right corner. Once the heart is lost, one more mistake will lead to failure in study or practice. When a lesson or exercise is completed, one additional XP is earned for each remaining heart, in addition to the base XP earned for completing the lesson or exercise. Below is how they responded after using the Duolingo application:

Student A : It's really easy because I was helped to answer, later I want to play by myself at home. (*Mudah sekali karena dibantu untuk menjawab, nanti saya ingin main sendiri dirumah.*)

Student B : It's fun and challenging, even though I can't answer correctly, but I want to practice using this app more often. (*Seru dan menantang meskipun saya tidak bisa menjawab dengan benar tetapi nanti ingin latihan pake aplikasi ini lebih sering lagi.*)

Student C : It's not boring but I'm not very fluent in answering it, there are still many mistakes. (*Tidak membosankan tapi saya tidak begitu lancar sekali menjawabnya masih banyak pertanyaan yang salah.*)

Student D: It's like playing games while studying, so it doesn't get boring. (*Seperti bermain game sambil belajar jadi tidak cepat bosan.*)

Student E : The application's use includes pictures, makes it very good. (*Aplikasinya bagus karena di sertai gambar.*)

The interviewee's first experience practicing was difficult because they had to adapt the vocabulary to the translation, so they needed to focus more when practicing at home later.

Students' Acquired Skills as Beginner Duolingo Users

In the fourth and fifth meetings, researchers conducted interviews with English teachers and students. The teacher inquired the students' parents to help guide their children in using their smartphones while practicing their vocabulary, listening, and writing on the Duolingo application as a beginner level. As young English learners who are still beginners, this application helps them the most in memorizing their vocabulary.

Examining how young learners perceive its impact on vocabulary acquisition, it was found that all of the learners' comments about the influence of digital storytelling on vocabulary acquisition were positive (Leong et al., n.d., 2019). Students can utilize English with their pronunciation of words, since games may also help them become more flexible and involved with the teaching and learning of the language (Octaberlina, 2023)

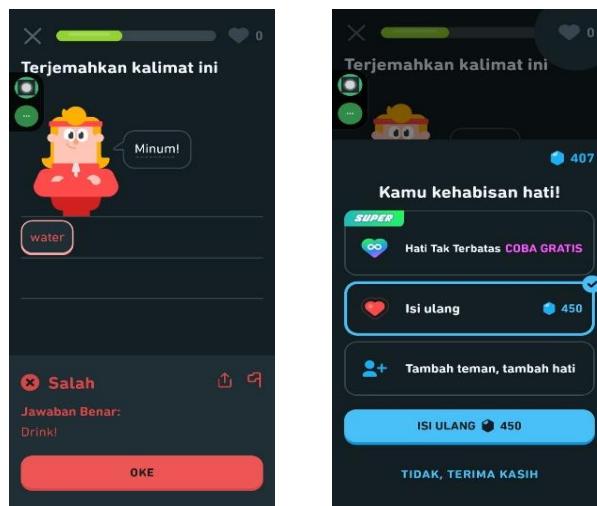
The Effectiveness of the Technology Duolingo Application on Student Learning

In recent studies, gamification may improve foreign language learners' motivation, engagement, and performance (Chaib, 2023). Gamification improves learning foreign languages by improving learners' motivation, engagement, performance, and self-confidence while also maintaining motivation and giving them immediate feedback. Many of the student have studied English at home under the supervision of their parents, based on their

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 experiences with the beneficial effects of the Duolingo program on the enjoyment of the language. Some of the 22 students have had trouble downloading the app because of parents who didn't know how to use it and had limited internet connections. On occasion, parents are perplexed and unsure of how to educate their children in the digital age; they envision purchasing digital gadgets and phones for their education.



Considering their Duolingo experience, students reported being able to talk, listen, build sentences, and acquire new vocabulary. Some of them, like the cardiac system, express behaviors like playing games. Students will run out of heart if they commit the same mistake three times. If students practice frequently, they will get more hearts.



The positive impact of using the Duolingo application technology for students during practice at home is based on interviews with five students who practice there.

Student A : It can make me more enthusiastic about learning English with Duolingo like playing a game. Previously, I didn't really like English because it was difficult, especially since I only learned English in class and didn't use a cellphone. (*Bisa membuat saya lebih semangat lagi belajar Bahasa Inggris dengan Duolingo seperti bermain game, sebelumnya saya tidak terlalu suka Bahasa Inggris karena sulit terutama saya hanya belajar Bahasa Inggris ketika dikelas saja dan tidak memakai handphone.*)

Student B : It's easier for me to learn and understand English because it's not boring. (*Saya jadi lebih gampang untuk mempelajari dan memahami Bahasa Inggris karena tidak membosankan.*)

Student C : I enjoy playing games, practicing composing sentences in Duolingo challenges me because there are 3 lives to be defended, so I can't answer wrongly. Duolingo is an interesting application, playing while learning. (*Saya senang bermain games, praktik menyusun kalimat di duolingo membuat saya tertantang karena ada nya 3 nyawa yang harus dipertahankan, jadi saya tidak boleh salah jawab. Duolingo aplikasi yang menarik, bisa bermain sambil belajar.*)

Student D : My parents support me playing duolingo instead of just playing games that have no educational value at all. (*Orang tua saya mendukung bermain duolingo dibanding hanya bermain games yang tidak ada edukasinya sama sekali.*)

Student E : In the future, this could help my English grades, which have dropped because studying from books sometimes doesn't enter my brain. (*Ke depannya ini bisa membantu nilai Bahasa Inggris saya yang anjlok karena belajar dibuku saja itu terkadang tidak masuk ke otak.*)

Five students were interviewed, establish Duolingo's enthusiasm for English language learning that is appropriate for their age group. However, extended smartphone usage needs parental consent, underscoring possible drawbacks. Parents permit their kids to spend more than an hour playing on their smartphones. The teacher also advised us that using a phone for extended periods might have negative effects.

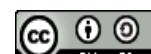
This research has several advantages. It examines a little-studied setting—young students in an Islamic elementary school—and offers practical perspectives on their Duolingo experiences. By capturing the real experiences of students, qualitative approaches enhance the data. The research also shows how Duolingo's gamification features might improve novices' motivation and vocabulary learning. Additionally, it emphasized how crucial support from parents is to at-home mobile-assisted learning of languages.

Limitations

The study is not without its limitations. One major issue is that not all 22 students owned smartphones or had access to online learning apps like Duolingo, which have been shown to enhance the foreign language learning experience. Another limitation relates to the data collection process—specifically, the researchers were unable to collect interview responses from all participants regarding their satisfaction with learning English with Duolingo. However, the available data suggest that students who used Duolingo reported high levels of satisfaction. They quickly adjusted to the game-like features and found the app enjoyable. Duolingo also allows learners to interact with others by following each other, particularly through the web-based version of the platform.

Another important limitation is the small number of participants who actively engaged with Duolingo throughout the study. Only five students frequently used the app, which limited the scope of the findings. Nonetheless, the app did help students improve their vocabulary, making it easier for them to remember and pronounce new words. This study supports previous research findings, such as Dewi Yana's (2021) study, which showed that the Duolingo application can improve students' learning development, especially in vocabulary mastery, with a success rate of 76.7%. The current study also confirms the potential of mobile applications to help language learners master the target language.

Most importantly, this study addresses a gap in the existing literature. Few studies have examined the use of digital language learning tools such as Duolingo in Islamic elementary schools in Indonesia. Future research should take into consideration involving extensive and more manifold samples, using more rigorous qualitative or mixed-methods approaches, and investigating long-term learning outcomes. Additionally, providing teachers and parents with appropriate training in digital learning tools can further enhance the effectiveness of educational technology, especially in under-resourced schools. The researchers hope that the positive results observed in this study will encourage the continued use of engaging language learning apps, not only during the study but also as a long-term strategy in the English classroom.



CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the use of Duolingo to espouse young learners' English language learning in Islamic elementary schools. The findings showed that Duolingo's game-based features helped improve students' motivation and vocabulary mastery. The strengths of this study lie in its real-life classroom context and focus on an understudied group. However, the study faced limitations, such as limited access to smartphones, a small number of active users, and a lack of in-depth data analysis. The study also addresses a research gap, as not many studies have focused on Elementary school. Future research should involve larger samples and examine long-term effects. Teachers and parents are encouraged to support the effective use of digital devices in language learning.

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