

English Language Education Students' Use of the Duolingo App in English Learning

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive qualitative study investigates English Language Education students' perceptions of the Duolingo app, focusing on its perceived disadvantages. The subjects were students from the English Language Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta. The findings indicate that students generally view Duolingo positively, citing its user-friendly design, gamified elements, and interactive learning techniques as key strengths. Features like badges, levels, and game-based exercises effectively maintain motivation and engagement in language learning.

Keywords: Duolingo, Perception, English Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Technology today has played an increasingly important role in education, especially in English language learning. We must exploit the technology we have, and the opportunities it offers, so that we can use apps to learn languages (McGreal, 2004). Various technologies have been used as a means of learning English by students. In English language learning, technology can create a deep and involved learning experience, so that students can learn in a way that is more interesting, involved, and suited to their individual learning styles. In an increasingly advanced digital era, technology will continue to be an important pillar in English education, bringing unlimited innovation and progress. However, many students do not understand the benefits of technology. There are also those who use technology or talk about smartphones just to have fun or play games. So a solution is needed to overcome this problem and it is also a challenge to use smartphone technology wisely and usefully.

The use of smartphones for English learning among Indonesian students has gained attention in recent years. This recent methodology is called mobile learning (m-learning). M-learning provides a way to facilitate the educational process using mobile applications and wireless communications (Kuimova et al., 2018). However, the extent to which students use their smartphones for language learning varies, and there are limitations to this approach. Indonesian students learning EFL commonly use their smartphones for flexible, informal online learning, accessing resources and tools outside of the traditional classroom.

In Indonesia, the growth of technology enhanced learning also influences many aspects of education (Kusmaryani et al., 2019). Indonesia, as a multilingual and diverse nation, has recognized the importance of English proficiency for educational and professional advancement. The Indonesian government has made efforts to enhance English language education, and technology integration has been a key component of this strategy.

Smartphones have gained popularity due to their affordability and accessibility, making them a common choice for students seeking supplementary English language learning resources. Some regions in Indonesia may have issues with technology readiness, including limited access to digital devices and the Internet, financial constraints, and a lack of competent human resources and government support. These factors can impede the adoption and effectiveness of smartphone apps for English learning.

One of the most popular language learning platforms is Duolingo. Duolingo is a language learning app designed to help users learn languages interactively through mobile devices or computers. Founded in 2011, Duolingo has experienced rapid growth and become one of the most popular language learning apps in the world with over 300 million active users. The company is on a mission to provide high-quality education that is accessible to everyone. In Duolingo users will earn points and unlock new levels while improving their communication skills in real-life situations. In addition to focusing on language learning, Duolingo also offers the Duolingo English Test which is an affordable, practical language certification recognized by thousands of institutions around the world. The application is designed like a game, so students do not easily feel bored. There are also native speakers who can help with correct English pronunciation.

English language education students are constantly seeking innovative methods to enhance their language learning experiences. The rise of language learning applications such as Duolingo has provided learners with an accessible and interactive platform to improve their language skills. Duolingo as “the cleverest business model in online education”. Duolingo’s design is inspiring others to look for new ways to apply human computation in education (Tom Simonite, 2012). However, there is a need to understand the impact of Duolingo on English language education students' language learning process. While Duolingo has gained popularity for its gamified approach to language learning, its effectiveness as a supplementary learning tool for English language education students remains unclear. Duolingo is a practical and useful application that could be used in English as a Foreign Language courses to improve students’ language skills. It means that Duolingo application can provides the opportunity to the students to expand their vocabulary knowledge (Bermudez Natanael & Diaz Bayron, 2017).

Literature Review

Duolingo is easy to use because the procedure is simple, so Duolingo can be used for all ages. This means that Duolingo is easy to use and more interesting, so it will be comfortable as a medium that we use in teaching in online classes. This is in line with previous research which shows that students feel satisfied and happy learning languages using Duolingo (Grego, 2012).

Duolingo platform can be used as a medium for learning English, motivating students to learn, increasing English vocabulary, can be accessed anywhere, can be used as a free online course with independent learning, improving grammar skills, can be used as a means of international scale communication, and improving English language skills with more modern features and fun ways of learning (Fauzi Tasyakuriana, 2023). The similarity of the research conducted is that both want to examine the perceptions of Surakarta Muhammadiyah University students and use qualitative methods. The difference in this study is that it only requires 2 random student representatives to analyze their perceptions in depth and in this study the researcher also wants to know the shortcomings of the Duolingo application which is used as a reference for the development of the application in the future.

Duolingo is not only improved students' speaking skills but also increased their confidence and motivation to communicate in English. This suggests that Duolingo can be an effective alternative for learning English (Herlina et al., 2021). The majority of students preferred learning English vocabulary using the Duolingo app because it was easier to understand compared to conventional methods. In addition, the app motivates and makes students excited to learn English vocabulary, eliminates boredom in learning, and

encourages them to explore new ideas in learning (Jaelani & Sutari, 2020). Duolingo most useful for improving listening and speaking skills, including pronunciation and fluency, due to Duolingo's interactive listening exercises and speech recognition features. The findings also suggest the interactive audio-focused and digamified features of Duolingo have the potential to build students' spoken/audio English skills and communicative competence (Ericsson Kamsik & Daud, 2023). Duolingo makes the learning process more enjoyable, improves students' English knowledge and skills, and provides flexibility in learning time (Fadilah, 2022). Duolingo is useful, helpful, and motivates students, and makes it easier for them to master language skills and apply them in everyday life. Duolingo makes the learning process more interesting and fun, so it is recommended to improve students' English skills (Hadina et al., 2023).

The exploration of relevant research reveals similarities in the use of the Duolingo application as a research material, particularly as an independent English learning medium. However, differences exist in terms of subjects, methods, data collection, and data analysis. This study aims to investigate English Language Education students' perceptions of the Duolingo app and identify its disadvantages. By examining these aspects, the research seeks to provide insights into the effectiveness and limitations of Duolingo as a self-learning tool for English language acquisition.

METHOD

This research utilized qualitative methods with a descriptive focus. Qualitative descriptive research is a combination of two methods, namely qualitative and descriptive. The descriptive qualitative research method used in this research describes and interprets the object as it is. This study employs a qualitative approach. The definition of qualitative research explores the meanings, concepts, and characteristics of phenomena through detailed descriptions and interpretations (Berg, 2007). This involves constructing in-depth understandings, analyzing language, reporting participants' perspectives, and conducting research within real-world contexts. This qualitative approach aims to get the perceptions of English language education students at Surakarta Muhammadiyah University in using the Duolingo application. The object of this research is the Duolingo Application in English language learning.

The subjects of this research are representatives of 2 English language education students at Muhammadiyah University of Surakarta with the initials TVS and ADF to be interviewed online and offline with a flexible time and place according to the researcher's needs regarding the experience in learning English using the Duolingo application. In this research, there are two types of data used. The study utilized primary data, meaning the researchers collected the data themselves in the field, specifically from informants, namely individuals interviewed by researchers. Furthermore, there is secondary data, which is data obtained from existing sources. This secondary data serves to support information from primary data, which includes library materials, previous research, books, literature, and others. In this study researchers used the data analysis model from Miles and Huberman, an interactive model. This interactive analysis process is a process of cyclical and interactive. This means that the researcher must move between the collection process data, data presentation, data reduction, and conclusion or verification.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In an interview that has been conducted with TVS, an English education student, revealed that the experience of using Duolingo has been very rewarding and positive. In the interview she said, *"The app offers a very user-friendly interface with a simple yet attractive design."* This opinion shows that Duolingo's gamification-based visual design makes learning more fun. Duolingo has a very attractive and intuitive design that makes it easy to use. In an

interview with ADF, an English Language Education student, she revealed that, *"When I first started using the app, I was enthusiastic about its game-based approach to learning. The points system, badges and daily challenges were very effective in motivating me to learn."*

In addition, adding features such as badges and game-like learning levels gives a sense of achievement every time a task is completed which helps maintain motivation. As per the interview with TVS, *"Because the lessons are set up like levels in a game, I feel a sense of accomplishment when I finish a task or get a badge."*

Furthermore, TVS and ADF highlighted the importance of variety in learning methods. Explained in the interview with TVS that, *"Duolingo app uses various methods such as multiple choice, picture to word matching, and sentence completion which makes me active in the learning process."* Interactive features such as multiple choice, sentence completion, and matching pictures with words can help improve English skills, especially in the speaking and listening aspects. This is consistent with the interviewer's statement in the interview, *"The listening and speaking exercises provided by this app really help me."* Interactive features such as sentence completion and matching pictures with words also help improve English skills, especially in the speaking and listening aspects.

In addition, the interview with ADF also explained that, *"One of the positive aspects of Duolingo is the variety in learning methods. With various interactive exercises such as multiple choice, picture to word matching, and sentence completion, I can learn in a non-boring way."* The learning methods in the Duolingo app are so varied that users are not bored in learning. However, the exercises in the Duolingo app are not challenging enough to help ADF remember the material. *"But I think the exercises are not challenging enough to help me really remember the material."*

One aspect of Duolingo is the use of the spaced repetition method. This method ensures that users not only memorize words or phrases, but also remember them in the long run. This is very helpful in strengthening the user's memory of the material that has been learned. Here is the interview data with TVS, *"In Duolingo there is also a scheduled repetition method that works for long-term recall. I have tried this method and it really helps me in strengthening my memory of the material learned."* However, in the case of ADF who has difficulty in memorizing new vocabulary and phrases, the spaced repetition method is less effective in helping to remember previously learned material and words. Here is ADF's interview data, *"Although Duolingo uses the scheduled repetition method to help memorize, I often feel that I forget the words that I have learned a few days before. This repetition sometimes feels less effective because I don't always understand the context in which the words are used well."*

With that said, while there are many positive aspects to Duolingo, it also has some limitations. It is not very in-depth in explaining more complex grammar rules. In an interview with TVS, she explained, *"As an English education student, I often feel the need to look for additional resources to understand more complicated grammar. I think the Duolingo app is still lacking for learning more complex grammar. Also, the translation provided by Duolingo is sometimes inaccurate or out of context which can be a bit confusing, especially for beginners."* In addition, the interview with ADF also explained that, *"The translation in Duolingo is also sometimes inaccurate which makes me even more confused."* The translation feature in Duolingo is still not accurate and effective for its users so this is an obstacle that Duolingo must correct as soon as possible.

In addition, in the case of ADF, who has a busy schedule of college and off-campus activities, inconsistency in the use of this application is also a big obstacle. ADF's learning progress was hampered and she found it difficult to keep up with the consistent learning rhythm in the Duolingo app. As explained in the interview with ADF, *"Due to my busy schedule of classes and other activities, I often go a few days without opening Duolingo. As a result, I find it difficult to learn with the consistency of the Duolingo app. Even though the Duolingo app provides daily reminders, I still find it difficult to build a regular study habit."*

This research found that the Duolingo app was positively received by English language education students. Perceptions of Duolingo as interesting and fun consistently

emerged from both respondents, despite some challenges encountered, such as a lack of depth in grammar and difficulty in maintaining learning consistency.

Perceived Use of the Duolingo

Duolingo as an app-based learning tool has a gamification approach that successfully maintains user interest. As expressed by TVS and ADF, "*Duolingo makes language learning more fun and engaging.*" Gamification elements in the MALL platform not only show how to improve student behavior, engagement, and motivation (Huang, 2013), but also provide a tangible trace of the language learning process itself. (Dehganazadeh & Dehganazadeh, 2020) also explains that most studies have reported increased motivation and engagement among students in the area of gamification use.

Gamification is also the process of engaging people, motivating action, informing learning, and solving problems by utilizing game mechanics, aesthetics, and game thinking. This is explained by (Kapp, 2012). The use of game elements and ideas outside of games to increase commitment and influence language learner behavior is known as gamification (Marczewski, 2013). Although there has been a significant increase in some research and practical applications of gamification in recent years, academics continue to discuss its definition, necessity and value. In his article also mentioned by (Werbach, 2014) recommended that gamification be described as "the process of creating activities that are more like games". In addition, five components of gamification were identified by (Nah et al., 2013). These include goal orientation or goal setting; successful achievements or experiences; reinforcing certain behaviors in response to results; competition to drive performance desire; and fun orientation to relieve stress and increase engagement. Mobile software that follows these guidelines has a lot of potential.

The first interviewee TVS, an English education student, stated that Duolingo has a user-friendly interface and attractive design. TVS highlighted that each lesson is structured like a level in a game, which gives a sense of achievement every time you successfully complete a task or earn a new badge. This is in line with research showing that gamification in learning can increase student motivation and engagement (Deterding et al., 2011)

Meanwhile, the second interview ADF also mentioned that the design of the app was very intuitive and attractive, but she admitted that it was difficult to remain consistent in its use. While the points system and daily challenges were effective in motivating, inconsistency in learning was a big challenge for the second respondent. This also reflects that without support to build regular study habits, the effectiveness of the app can be reduced.

Duolingo offers an interactive learning method through multiple choice, picture to word matching, and sentence completion. TVS appreciates this approach as it makes learning active and fun. The listening and speaking exercises are also considered very helpful in improving speaking and listening skills.

However, ADF highlighted problems in memorizing vocabulary and phrases. Although Duolingo uses a scheduled repetition method, this respondent still often forgets the vocabulary she has learned. ADF noted that this repetition sometimes feels ineffective due to the difficulty in understanding the context in which new words are used. Research shows that context understanding is essential for better vocabulary acquisition.

Disadvantages of Duolingo

The interviews with both interviewees show that although Duolingo has many benefits, there are some drawbacks that need to be considered in the English learning process. One of the drawbacks expressed by TVS is the lack of in-depth explanation of grammar. In the interview, it was mentioned, "*The app doesn't provide enough in-depth explanation of the more complex grammar rules.*" Meanwhile, ADF also highlighted the shortcomings in the vocabulary aspect by saying, "*I often feel like I've forgotten words that I've learned a few days before, and the repetition given is sometimes not effective enough.*"

This weakness is relevant to previous research which states that Duolingo tends to focus on structured exercises and repetition of words, but lacks in-depth explanations related to grammatical concepts and context. In addition, the difficulty in memorizing vocabulary expressed by ADF is consistent with the findings of (Luthfi, 2021) who stated that Duolingo is less effective in helping long-term vocabulary retention.

Besides the identified shortcomings related to grammar and vocabulary, several other aspects of Duolingo were also expressed by the respondents as challenges in its use. TVS revealed that, *"While the app is engaging and gamified, sometimes the challenges don't feel difficult enough, especially after a few weeks of using the app."* TVS feels that the app is more suitable for beginner and intermediate learners, while advanced users may not find the exercises challenging enough. ADF adds, *"Some of the translations in Duolingo felt out of context, so I was sometimes confused by the use of certain words in real sentences."*

These weaknesses have also been mentioned in several studies. Duolingo is designed to appeal to gamified learners, but this also means that the app often sacrifices depth in favor of fun and interaction. This results in the app being less able to meet the needs of advanced learners who require more complex and diverse material. Furthermore, the problem of inaccurate translations raised by ADF has also been identified by (Hill & Sharma, 2020), who noted that some translations in these apps are not always contextually appropriate, which can be confusing for users in understanding the correct meaning.

CONCLUSIONS

This research shows that Duolingo app is positively received by English language education students due to its user-friendly interface, gamification approach, and interactive learning methods. Features such as badges, learning levels, and game-based exercises successfully maintain users' motivation and engagement in the language learning process. However, there are some limitations found, such as the lack of depth of the grammar material, the effectiveness of the vocabulary repetition method, as well as the inaccuracy of some translations. To overcome these weaknesses, the use of more varied learning methods, such as blended learning, can be an effective solution in improving comprehension and retention of materials for users.

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