



Exploring University Students' Experiences of English Learning through Duolingo

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Abstract

This study explores university students' experiences of learning English through the Duolingo application. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, the research involved 15 English education students at Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka over a six-week data collection period. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, and then analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, guided by a constructivist learning framework. The analysis identified students' perceptions, perceived benefits, and challenges in using Duolingo as a language learning tool. Findings revealed that Duolingo enhanced students' vocabulary acquisition, learning motivation, and autonomous study habits. However, participants also reported limitations such as repetitive exercises, insufficient opportunities for communicative speaking practice, and reliance on internet connectivity. Results indicate that while Duolingo can effectively supplement English learning, it is most beneficial when integrated with classroom-based instruction and teacher guidance. Overall, the study underscores the importance of combining digital learning applications with formal educational contexts to maximize language development and learner engagement.

Keywords: Duolingo, EFL language learning, student experiences.

Introduction

In today's digital era, mobile technology has become an integral part of education, transforming how students learn and interact with information. A recent survey by Statista (2024) revealed that over 80% of university students in Indonesia use mobile applications to support their studies, including language learning. This growing reliance on technology highlights the increasing importance of digital platforms such as Duolingo, which has revolutionized the process of learning English through interactive, game-based activities.

In recent years, the integration of digital technology into language education

has brought significant changes to how students acquire English skills. Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) provides a highly flexible and personalized learning environment by allowing learners to access materials anytime and anywhere (Hasan & Zarifa, 2024). Among these tools, Duolingo has gained widespread popularity as a free and accessible platform designed to enhance users' vocabulary, grammar, and reading proficiency through gamified exercises. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, such applications offer opportunities for autonomous learning, increased motivation, and frequent language exposure. According to Amin (2021), Duolingo's gamification features—such as leaderboards, achievements, points, and levels—significantly enhance students' engagement by turning language learning into an enjoyable and rewarding experience. Similarly, Hawa and Roslaini (2024) as well as Suryanto (2024) found that Duolingo maintains learners' motivation and supports skill development, though its potential can be further strengthened by promoting authentic language use and meaningful cultural interaction.

Despite these advantages, many Indonesian university students continue to struggle with mastering English, facing persistent challenges related to proficiency, motivation, learning preferences, anxiety, and socio-environmental factors (Grana, 2024; Pratiwi & Sunardi, 2024; Ali & Faisal, 2025). At Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka, these challenges are particularly evident among English education students who must balance academic requirements with limited exposure to authentic English communication. In this context, mobile applications like Duolingo have the potential to supplement traditional classroom learning by providing engaging, self-paced, and easily accessible practice opportunities.

However, while Duolingo's popularity has grown substantially in Indonesia, there remains a lack of in-depth understanding of how university students actually experience using it for English learning—especially in higher education settings. Previous studies (e.g., Azizah, 2024; Hia et al., 2024; Andini & Salmiah, 2024) have primarily examined the application's effectiveness in improving specific language skills, but have paid less attention to students' perceptions, motivations, and lived experiences in authentic learning contexts. To bridge this gap, it is important to explore how students engage with Duolingo and perceive its role within their formal education environment.

Therefore, the present study aims to explore university students' experiences of learning English through the Duolingo application at Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research question namely what experience do the students of Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka have by learning English through Duolingo application? By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute to a clearer understanding of the role of mobile-assisted learning tools in enhancing English language education in Indonesian higher education contexts.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore university students' experiences of learning English through the Duolingo application. The participants consisted of 15 English Education students (9 females and 6 males) from Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka, selected through purposive sampling to ensure they had prior experience using Duolingo for at least three months. The participants were in their second and third year of study, representing a range of English proficiency levels.

Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The interviews included 10 open-ended questions designed to elicit students' perceptions, benefits, and challenges in using Duolingo. Sample questions included: "How often do you use Duolingo for learning English?", and "What features of Duolingo do you find most or least useful?" Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted individually in a quiet setting to allow for focused discussion.

In addition, five classroom observation sessions were conducted over a four-week period. Each session lasted about 60 minutes and focused on students' engagement with Duolingo-related activities during class. The observations examined specific behaviors such as frequency of app use, level of participation, interaction with peers, and task completion. Field notes were used to capture contextual details and nonverbal responses during observation.

Data Analysis

All collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures of Braun and Clarke (2006). The process began with familiarization through repeated reading of the transcripts, followed by initial coding to identify meaningful units related to students' experiences. The codes were then grouped into potential themes, which were refined and named based on recurring patterns. The analysis was conducted manually, supported by careful cross-checking among the researchers to ensure consistency. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged from the final interviews and observations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka. All participants were informed of the study's purpose and procedures and signed informed consent forms prior to participation. Their identities and responses were kept confidential and were used solely for academic purposes. Participation was voluntary, and students could withdraw at any time without penalty.

Timeline

Data collection took place over a six-week period from March to April 2025, including scheduling, interviews, observations, transcription, and member

checking.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, triangulation was achieved through the combination of interviews and observations, while member checking was used to validate the interpretations. Field notes and meticulous documentation supported the credibility and dependability of the overall research process.

Results

The analysis of interviews and classroom observations revealed four main themes related to students' experiences with Duolingo: (1) vocabulary enrichment and skill improvement, (2) motivation through gamified learning, (3) perceived limitations of the app, and (4) supplementary use alongside classroom learning. These themes were identified based on recurring patterns in the data and were supported by both participants' statements and observation checklist results.

These themes were identified based on recurring patterns in the data and supported by both participants' statements and observation checklist results. Observations were conducted over three consecutive weeks during English classes and individual study sessions, allowing the researcher to record authentic behaviors related to Duolingo use.

1. Vocabulary enrichment and skill improvement

Most students agreed that Duolingo helped them increase their vocabulary and supported their basic English skills. The short, repetitive tasks and daily reminders encouraged regular practice and improved memory retention.

As one participant noted:

"I can learn new words anywhere, even between classes. The repetition helps me remember better." (P3)

Observation data confirmed that students used Duolingo actively during breaks, self-study hours, and sometimes before class began.

Table 1. Students' Reported Improvement in Language Skills through Duolingo

Skill Area	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Vocabulary	10	83.3%
Grammar	7	58.3%
Reading Comprehension	6	50.0%
Speaking Practice	3	25.0%

These results indicate that Duolingo was particularly effective in enhancing receptive skills (vocabulary and reading), but less effective for productive skills like speaking.

2. Motivation through gamified learning

A strong motivational factor emerged from students' experiences using Duolingo. Most participants described the app's gamification features—such as points, streaks, and badges—as encouraging them to practice regularly.

“It feels like playing a game, so I keep coming back every day.” (P6)

“I don't want to lose my streak, so I make sure to practice even when I'm tired.” (P9)

These elements transformed learning into an enjoyable experience, increasing both engagement and frequency of use. Observation data also showed that students tended to complete at least one Duolingo activity during short breaks, even without teacher prompting.

Table 2. Motivation Indicators Related to Duolingo Use

Motivation Indicator	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Gamification perceived as motivating	9	75.0%
Maintained daily streaks (≥ 7 consecutive days)	8	66.7%
Increased practice frequency (≥ 3 times per week)	7	58.3%

3. Perceived limitations

Despite its advantages, students also identified several limitations. The most frequent issue was the lack of real speaking opportunities, followed by repetitive exercises and unstable internet connections.

“It's helpful for vocabulary, but I can't really practice speaking like in class.” (P5)

A few participants, however, viewed repetition positively, stating that it helped reinforce memory.

Table 3. Students' Reported Limitations in Using Duolingo

Reported Limitation	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Lack of speaking opportunities	9	75.0%
Repetitive tasks	8	66.7%
Internet connection issues	7	58.3%

Interestingly, two participants (P2 and P8) mentioned that repetition “helps memorization,” illustrating a contradictory perspective that repetition can be both a limitation and a benefit depending on learning preferences.

4. Supplementary use alongside classroom learning

Observation data indicated that students treated Duolingo mainly as a complement to classroom instruction. Engagement increased when Duolingo

content was related to current class topics.

“When the topic in Duolingo is the same as what we study in class, it helps me remember more easily.” (P1). “I usually use Duolingo to review what we’ve learned in class.” (P7)

The observation checklist included four indicators—frequency of use, engagement level, task completion, and peer interaction. Observations were conducted during class activities and informal learning sessions, and each criterion was rated based on predefined levels:

- **High** (observed in >70% of sessions),
- **Moderate** (observed in 40–70%),
- **Low** (observed in <40%).

Table 4. Summary of Observation Checklist Data

Observation Indicators	High	Moderate	Low
Frequency of Duolingo use	7	2	1
Student engagement during use	8	1	1
Task completion rate	8	2	0
Peer interaction during activity	5	3	2

These results suggest high engagement and task completion rates overall, but varying peer interaction patterns—some students preferred collaboration, while others chose independent use.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Duolingo provides meaningful support for students’ English learning, particularly in vocabulary development, motivation, and autonomous learning. These findings strengthen theoretical contributions in the field of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) and gamification by demonstrating how game-like features can enhance learners’ self-regulation, persistence, and enjoyment. Duolingo’s use of streaks, points, and badges aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which emphasizes the roles of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in sustaining intrinsic motivation. Through instant feedback and visible progress, Duolingo helps learners feel competent and self-directed, thereby promoting language autonomy (Little, 1991).

These results are consistent with Andini and Salmiah (2024) and Azizah (2024), who found that mobile-assisted applications improve receptive language skills through structured repetition and consistent exposure. The short, interactive activities on Duolingo promote vocabulary retention and foster ongoing engagement (Hia et al., 2024). Moreover, this study supports the claims of Amin (2021), Hawa & Roslaini (2024), and Suryanto (2024) that gamified learning platforms effectively increase student motivation and engagement by transforming

learning into an enjoyable and rewarding process. The observation data further revealed that students used Duolingo voluntarily during their leisure time, reflecting the motivational power of gamification in maintaining independent learning behaviors beyond formal instruction.

However, some findings also reveal contrasts with earlier research. For instance, Fanni and Maharani (2024) observed that Duolingo's repetitive structure and "lives" system could reduce motivation, whereas participants in this study perceived repetition as a helpful reinforcement for vocabulary learning. This inconsistency suggests that gamification may affect learners differently depending on their goals, proficiency levels, and learning contexts. Likewise, Yundayani et al. (2023) highlighted several limitations in Duolingo, such as unrealistic visual materials and limited interactivity in language assessment—issues that were echoed in this study, particularly regarding the lack of authentic speaking opportunities and dependency on internet connectivity.

Contextual factors in the Indonesian higher education environment, particularly at Universitas Sembilanbelas November Kolaka, appear to play a crucial role in shaping these experiences. Limited digital resources and unstable internet access may explain why students value Duolingo as a supplementary learning aid rather than a comprehensive platform. In this context, Duolingo compensates for the lack of consistent English exposure by offering accessible, self-paced practice, which aligns with Bhat (2023) who emphasizes the importance of thoughtful technological integration in fostering inclusive and engaging learning environments.

Pedagogically, the results underscore that Duolingo should be integrated into a blended learning framework, where teachers link its content to classroom objectives and communicative tasks. Educators can leverage students' motivation from the app by designing follow-up speaking or writing activities that transfer vocabulary and structures into authentic use. This approach bridges digital engagement with communicative competence, ensuring that gamified learning contributes meaningfully to language development.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The sample was small and drawn from a single institution, which constrains the generalizability of the findings. Researcher interpretation and reliance on self-reported experiences may also introduce bias. Future studies should adopt mixed methods with larger and more diverse participants to validate the results and explore longitudinal effects of Duolingo use.

Finally, alternative explanations should be considered. Students' perceived limitations—such as boredom with repetition or lack of speaking practice—may result not only from the app design but also from their low proficiency levels and limited real-world communication opportunities. The "novelty effect" of gamification might also diminish over time, reducing long-term engagement.

Overall, this study contributes to both theory and practice by demonstrating

that gamification can enhance motivation, autonomy, and engagement in language learning when properly contextualized and integrated with formal instruction. It highlights that Duolingo works best as a supportive element of blended learning, where digital gamification complements teacher-guided communicative practice to create an effective and motivating learning ecosystem.

Conclusion

This study examined university students' experiences in learning English through the Duolingo application. The findings reveal that Duolingo effectively supports vocabulary development, learning motivation, and autonomous study habits through its interactive and gamified features. However, several limitations were identified, including the lack of opportunities for authentic speaking practice, repetitive learning activities, and unstable internet connectivity. Additionally, Duolingo was primarily used as a supplementary tool and demonstrated greater effectiveness when its activities were aligned with classroom instruction.

The study's limitations should be interpreted with care. The small number of participants and the focus on a single institutional context limit the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the research did not examine long-term language proficiency outcomes or compare Duolingo with other learning platforms. These constraints suggest that future research should employ longitudinal designs and broader participant samples to provide a more comprehensive understanding of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in higher education.

Recommendations and Implications

1. For Teachers

Teachers are encouraged to integrate Duolingo strategically within blended learning environments. By aligning Duolingo exercises with classroom content and communicative tasks, teachers can extend learning opportunities beyond class hours while maintaining pedagogical coherence. Teachers might also use Duolingo as a formative assessment tool to track vocabulary progress or encourage autonomous learning habits among students.

2. For Curriculum Designers

Curriculum designers should consider incorporating mobile learning applications such as Duolingo into official syllabi, particularly for vocabulary and grammar reinforcement. Doing so could enhance flexibility and learner engagement while ensuring that digital tools complement—not replace—core instructional objectives. Clear guidelines for balancing in-app learning with interactive classroom activities are essential for maximizing outcomes.

3. For App Developers

Duolingo developers could enhance the platform by incorporating more interactive speaking tasks, contextualized dialogues, and localized content relevant to Indonesian learners. Improved offline functionality would also benefit users in

regions with limited internet access, supporting equitable learning opportunities across diverse settings.

4. Policy Implications

At the policy level, this study highlights the growing importance of integrating educational technology into Indonesia's higher education system. Policymakers should support teacher training programs focused on digital pedagogy and allocate resources for mobile-based learning initiatives to promote inclusive and adaptive language education.

Contribution to the Field

This study contributes to the growing body of research on mobile-assisted language learning by offering empirical insights into how university students in Indonesia engage with Duolingo. It underscores the pedagogical potential of gamified learning applications to foster motivation and autonomy while emphasizing the need for thoughtful integration within formal education. By highlighting both the benefits and the limitations of such tools, this research provides a foundation for future innovations in digital language learning practices.

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