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Grade VIII Junior-Secondary Learners' Views of Duolingo for English Vocabulary Learning: A Case Study at a Bogor Private Junior High School

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Abstract

Three themes emerged from a qualitative single-case study of Grade VIII students at a private junior high school in Bogor, Indonesia: gamified micro-goals sustained short, low-anxiety practice; immediate, multimodal feedback (checks, audio, tiles, spaced recycling) supported noticing, pronunciation, and retention; and autonomy and everyday fit were valued, yet transfer to extended speaking/writing was limited without teacher-led bridging tasks. To contextualize these results, Self-Determination Theory and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning framed the inquiry. A syllabus-aligned vocabulary screening informed the purposive selection of six learners spanning low/medium/high readiness. Each focal learner completed one supervised Duolingo session, observed with a structured checklist, then participated in a semi-structured interview; data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings suggest that out-of-class app exposure is most beneficial when coupled with brief, in-class production activities and criteria-based feedback to move learners from recognition to controlled use of target lexis. The study is limited by its single-class scope and one-session design; future research should examine multi-week classroom integration and task-based measures of productive skills.

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1. Introduction

Vocabulary knowledge is central to L2 proficiency (Lin & Lin, 2019; Mahdi, 2018; Yu & Trainin, 2022) yet consolidating a sufficiently large and usable lexicon typically requires sustained exposure, repeated retrieval, and opportunities for meaningful use (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008). MALL offers a promising response to these demands by enabling frequent, bite-sized practice with feedback in authentic, everyday contexts (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Okumuş Dağdeler, 2023) Duolingo perhaps the most widely used mobile language app implements trainable spaced-repetition and micro-goal mechanics intended to scaffold distributed practice and reduce barriers to starting short sessions (Settles & Meeder, 2016).

However, research on the educational impact of such platforms shows mixed results across skills, populations, and contexts (Godwin-Jones, 2018; Smith, Jiang, & Peters, 2024). While usage has scaled globally, documented outcomes vary, especially for productive ability (Loewen S, Crowther D, & Isbell DR, 2019). Motivational affordances such as points, streaks, and low-stakes feedback can encourage persistence, in line with SDT's emphasis on autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Lei, Fathi, Noorbakhsh, & Rahimi, 2022; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Shortt, Tilak, Kuznetcova, Martens, & Akinkuolie, 2023) yet sustained gains may still depend on design features that elicit deeper processing and opportunities to produce language.

In Indonesia, classroom-focused evidence on Duolingo and related MALL tools is accumulating, including work on motivation and perceived usefulness (Aulia et al., 2020; Maulya, 2023) learners' perceptions and classroom implementations (Hadina, Sari, & Yoni, 2023; Ikhsan, Mardianti Zebua, & Tarigan, 2023; Kamelia Simanjuntak et al.) Nonetheless, many reports prioritize outcomes over process and rarely elicit feature-level learner accounts that could clarify how and why specific app mechanics support (or fail to support) vocabulary consolidation and transfer.

Addressing this process-level gap, the present case study investigates Grade VIII learners' views of Duolingo for vocabulary learning at a private junior high school in Bogor. The study asks: (1) How do learners describe their experiences with Duolingo's features for vocabulary learning? (2) Which app-supported processes appear to facilitate noticing, retention, and transfer to use? The goal is to generate learner-centred accounts that complement existing classroom studies and inform design of bridging activities.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative single-case design situated in one Grade VIII class at a private junior high school in Bogor, Indonesia. The case-study approach was chosen to capture situated processes and meanings of learners' engagement with Duolingo during ordinary school routines (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Sugiyono, 2019). A syllabus-aligned 20-item vocabulary screening mapped initial readiness; based on the score distribution, six students were purposively selected, two each from low, medium, and high readiness bands, with willingness to participate and basic device access as additional considerations. Pseudonyms (R1-R6) are used, and no identifying information is reported.

Data were generated through one supervised in-app session per focal learner followed by a semi-structured interview. During practice, the researcher used a structured checklist to note on-task actions, engagement with gamified micro-goals (e.g., streaks/points), use of help features (e.g., audio playback, reveal/check), brief peer talk, visible affect, and any technical issues; device type and network conditions were recorded to aid interpretation. Immediately after practice, interviews elicited perceived usefulness, supportive or hindering features, and concrete examples of how the app helped or failed to help with comprehension, retention, pronunciation, and early, controlled production. The observation checklist and interview guide were adapted from prior MALL/vocabulary work, aligned with the Grade VIII syllabus, content-reviewed by two language-education lecturers, and piloted for clarity and feasibility. Screening scores were used descriptively to contextualize readiness and to guide observation foci rather than as outcomes.

All field notes and audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and organized in a structured, access-restricted repository. Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) familiarisation with the corpus, inductive coding, construction and review of candidate themes against the data set, and definition, naming, and analytic write-up. Coding was iterative and reflexive rather than reliability-seeking; an audit trail documented coding decisions, theme revisions, and analytic memos. Ethical procedures were observed throughout: school permission, written parental consent, and student assent were secured in advance; activities were integrated with normal routines and posed minimal risk. Where useful, a single summary table of participant characteristics is provided, while all other procedures are reported narratively, with no formulas and only essential tabulation.

3. Result

The author reports three cross-cutting themes describing how Grade VIII learners in a private junior high school experienced Duolingo for vocabulary learning and how they perceived its contributions to comprehension, retention, pronunciation, and early, controlled production. Evidence includes interview

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vignettes and observation items from the study checklist.

Theme 1: Gamified micro-goals sustained short, low-anxiety practice.

"Pakai aplikasi ini rasanya Bahasa Inggris itu jadi seru kayak main game."

"It feels like playing a game to learn English." [INT-R6]

"Seruan ini, kalau di kelas ngantuk."

"This is more fun; in class I get sleepy." [INT-R1]

Learners repeatedly characterized Duolingo as "game-like," which made it easier to (re)enter brief practice bouts during the week, e.g., "seru kayak main game" and "seru dan lebih menarik daripada di kelas." Reports of convenience and enjoyment co-occurred with observation notes on visible motivation and voluntary use (independent engagement). "Seruan ini, kalau di kelas ngantuk," added one learner, underscoring the perceived ease of starting and continuing short sessions.

Theme 2: Immediate, multimodal feedback supported noticing, pronunciation, and retention.

"Fitur voice notes, karena jadi bisa lebih tahu cara pengucapannya yang benar."

"The voice-note feature helps me notice the correct pronunciation." [INT-R5]

"Pilih kotak kata dan disusun gitu, jadi paham arti kalimatnya."

"Selecting and arranging word tiles helped me grasp the sentence meaning." [INT-R1]

Learners pointed to correctness checks, audio playback, and tile/puzzle prompts as supports for linking form and meaning and for quick self-correction. Typical remarks included "Fitur voice notes, lebih tahu cara pengucapannya yang benar" and "Pilih kotak kata dan disusun, jadi paham arti kalimat." Observation items documented attention and appropriate response to in-app corrections, consistent with these claims.

Theme 3: Autonomy and everyday fit were valued; perceived transfer to extended output was uneven.

"Bisa dimainin dimana aja, di kereta, di rumah."

"I can use it anywhere, on the train, at home." [INT-R6]

"Misalnya tadi ada kosakata murah itu artinya cheap. Bisa dipakai jadi kalimat 'The store is cheap'."

"For example, murah means cheap. I can use it in 'The store is cheap'." [INT-R2]

"Iya, tadinya aku nggak tahu kosakata menjauh dan mendekat, jadi aku bisa bedain yang mana far yang mana near."

"I didn't know the words before; now I can tell far from near." [INT-R5]

Learners valued flexibility "Bisa dimainin dimana aja, di kereta, di rumah" and described choosing when/how long to practise with in-app supports as needed. At the item level, several students named and used newly learned vocabulary, for example, "Coffee. Dipakai di kalimat makan dan minum," murah artinya cheap, used as "The store is cheap," and distinguishing "far" versus "near." At the same time, a minority could not yet provide concrete usage examples when asked (e.g., "Sejauh ini belum ada"). These reports coincided with observation categories indicating independent engagement and visible motivation during sessions.

4. Discussion

Engagement and Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

The author interprets learners' sustained return to short, "game-like" sessions as evidence of the need for support within the SDT framework (Ryan & Deci, 2000) immediate knowledge of results nurtured a sense of competence; flexible timing and self-pacing supported autonomy; and lightweight social cues (streaks/visible progress) hinted at relatedness. Together, these affordances help explain why learners voluntarily re-entered practice across days, an antecedent to accumulating exposure in MALL contexts and consistent with the engagement pattern reported in the Results.

Noticing, Pronunciation, and Retention

Learners' reports that correctness checks, audio playback, and tile/puzzle prompts aided noticing and memory can be read through depth-of-processing accounts of lexical learning: rapid try-check-retry cycles (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2008) focus attention on form–meaning links, while repeated, spaced encounters and multimodal support (listening, saying, arranging) strengthen traces for later retrieval. This interpretive lens coheres with the observed responsiveness to corrective feedback and with students' self-corrections during supervised practice.

The Transfer Gap

While routines were strong for meaning-focused input and language-focused learning, transfer to extended output (longer speech/writing) appeared uneven across learners. Without prompts that require multi-word production, control tended to remain at recognition or short responses, an outcome that aligns with accounts emphasizing the need to recycle new lexis in production to consolidate it for communicative use (Schmitt, 2008). This reading is consistent with the mixed evidence on concrete usage examples in the Results (some learners naming/using new items; others not yet providing instances).

Bridging Design for Classrooms

To address the transfer gap, the author reads the findings as supporting simple "bridges" that connect app exposure to brief in-class production: for example, two original sentences recycling three target items, a 60–90 second picture description, or a short, paired dialogue, each with compact, criteria-based

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feedback. Such routines preserve the motivational advantages of micro-units while creating low-overhead opportunities to push beyond recognition during lessons.

Implications for EFL Teaching and Programs

For teachers, the discussion points to setting time-bounded home goals and adopting a weekly cycle (app exposure - brief in-class output - quick feedback) so that perceived gains in recognition and pronunciation can feed into controlled production. For program designers, maintaining visible progress and ease-of-entry is essential, but pathways to short, coached output should be made explicit in scope and pacing guides. For researchers, future work can link learner perceptions with task-based measures of speaking/writing and examine dose-response patterns (e.g., number of micro-lessons per week) in junior-secondary settings (Lei et al., 2022; Shortt et al., 2023)

5. Conclusion

The author concludes that short, game-like Duolingo routines sustained Grade VIII learners' engagement and supported noticing, pronunciation, and retention through immediate, multimodal feedback (e.g., correctness checks, audio playback, and tile-based prompts). The app also fits adolescents' daily schedules, enabling brief, repeated practice that accumulates exposure to target lexis. At the same time, perceived gains were uneven with respect to extended spoken or written output; without classroom tasks that explicitly require multi-word production using the same items, control tended to remain at recognition or short responses. In keeping with the IDEAS guideline to avoid over-generalization, these claims are bounded by a single-class context in a private junior high school in Bogor, a small focal sample (n=6), one supervised session per learner followed by immediate self-reports, and context-specific observation; transferability beyond this setting should therefore be treated prudently.

Suggestions

Building on these findings, the author recommends pairing out-of-class app exposure with brief in-class "bridges" to production (e.g., two original sentences recycling three target items, a 60–90-second picture description, or a short paired dialogue) accompanied by concise, criteria-based feedback. Program guidelines should make these pathways explicit while preserving low-friction micro-units and visible progress cues. For further studies, track multi-week integrations, include task-based measures of speaking and writing, examine dose-response patterns (e.g., lessons/XP per week) across readiness bands, and compare classroom implementations across schools to test robustness of effects.

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