



Affective Dimensions of Language Testing: Insight from Participants in the Duolingo English Practice Test

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 2025-12-25 Revised: 2026-01-13 Accepted: 2026-06-30 Keywords: <i>affective elements, Duolingo English Practice Test ,digital language testing, EFL learners, low-stakes assessment</i> DOI: 10.24256/ideas.v14i1.9084 Corresponding Author: Rika lufiasari rikalufiasari@gmail.com Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, FKIP Universitas Muhammadiyah Kendari	<i>This study examines the affective experiences of EFL learners when taking the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT). Using a qualitative descriptive approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Indonesian EFL undergraduate students and analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings indicate recurring affective themes across participants namely test anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, attitudes toward the test, and perceived personal value while also showing individual variations in intensity. Initial anxiety, particularly in speaking and listening tasks, was commonly reported but tended to diminish as learners became familiar with the test format. The low-stakes nature of the DEPT encouraged positive attitudes, sustained motivation, and realistic self-assessment of English proficiency. Interpreted through Self-Determination Theory, these affective experiences were shaped by learners' perceptions of autonomy and competence. The study highlights the potential of low-stakes digital practice tests as formative tools and offers implications for educators and test designers to integrate affective considerations into digital language assessment.</i>

1. Introduction

Language testing plays a pivotal role in determining educational and professional opportunities in a globalized world. As English continues to function as a lingua franca in academic and workplace settings, the demand for valid, accessible, and equitable English proficiency tests has increased significantly (Kiran, 2023). Alongside this demand, there is growing recognition that language tests are not merely measures of proficiency but also experiences that shape learners' emotional engagement with assessment.

Affective factors such as anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, attitudes, and perceived test value have been shown to influence learners' performance and perceptions of fairness in language assessment. Traditional high-stakes tests, including TOEFL and IELTS, are often associated with intense psychological pressure, which may heighten anxiety and negatively affect test-taker performance (Hartono, 2019). Although these affective dimensions have been widely discussed in assessment research, they are most often examined within high-stakes testing contexts.

In recent years, digital and AI-driven language tests such as the Duolingo English Test (DET) have emerged as alternatives to conventional assessments, offering flexible, adaptive, and user-friendly testing environments. However, despite their increasing prominence, learners' emotional experiences in digital testing formats remain underexplored (Zhang et al., 2023). This gap is particularly evident when considering different test purposes and stakes.

It is therefore important to distinguish between the Duolingo English Test (DET) and the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT). The DET is an officially recognized, high-stakes English proficiency test used for academic and professional purposes, whereas the DEPT is a non-official, low-stakes practice test designed to help learners familiarize themselves with test formats and estimate their proficiency (Wagner, 2020). This distinction is crucial, as affective responses such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence may differ substantially between official and practice testing contexts.

In many EFL contexts, including Indonesia, the shift toward online and AI-based language testing has accelerated, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic (Abderrahim, 2025). Indonesian learners increasingly use digital platforms such as Duolingo not only for language learning but also for assessment practice through tools like the DEPT. For learners from regions with limited access to traditional testing centers, the DEPT often serves as an accessible means of self-assessment. Nevertheless, there is limited empirical understanding of how Indonesian learners emotionally engage with such digital practice tests and what benefits or challenges they perceive (Lee et al., 2019).

Recent studies have acknowledged the influence of affective dimensions including anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, attitudes, and values on language testing performance, particularly in high-stakes environments (Fathi & Mohammaddokht, 2021). Emerging research on digital assessment suggests that remote and adaptive testing formats may both reduce and generate stress, depending on learners' familiarity and perceived control (Mehrotra, 2025). However, much of this research continues to focus on official, proctored tests such as the DET, leaving low-stakes, learner-driven assessments like the DEPT relatively underexplored. Moreover, qualitative studies that foreground learners' voices, especially from Southeast Asian contexts, remain scarce.

To interpret learners' affective experiences more systematically, this study draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2020). SDT posits that motivation and emotional engagement are shaped by the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Within assessment contexts, this framework provides a concise lens for understanding how test design and testing stakes may support or hinder learners' affective experiences.

In addition to affective theories such as Self-Determination Theory, emotional responses in digital language testing environments can also be influenced by learners' interaction with the technological interface itself (Bettis et al., 2022). The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), originally proposed by (Silva, 2015), explains that users' attitudes toward a system are shaped by two key perceptions: perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Although TAM is traditionally used to predict technology adoption behavior, recent studies suggest that these perceptions may also elicit emotional reactions in learning and testing contexts (Fathali & Okada, 2018).

In digital testing platforms such as the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT), when users perceive the system as intuitive and easy to navigate, they are more likely to experience positive emotional states, including relief, calmness, and confidence. Conversely, technical difficulties, unclear instructions, or non-intuitive interfaces may trigger frustration, anxiety, or emotional disengagement (Dewaele et al., 2020). Therefore, interface design and system usability can indirectly shape learners' emotional engagement, making TAM a relevant supporting framework for understanding affective responses in technology-mediated language testing (Alsaiani et al., 2024).

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to explore the affective experiences of Indonesian EFL learners when engaging with the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT). Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the study investigates how learners experience and respond emotionally to the DEPT in terms of anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, and other affective states before, during, and after the test. By focusing on a low-stakes digital testing context, this research seeks to address a gap in the literature and to offer culturally and contextually grounded insights into effect in AI-based language assessment.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research question: What affective elements do participants experience when taking the Duolingo English Practice Test? The novelty of this study lies in its qualitative focus on a low-stakes digital practice test and its contextualization within an Indonesian EFL setting, which remains underrepresented in existing research.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the affective experiences of EFL learners when engaging with the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT). A qualitative approach was selected because the purpose of the study was not to measure affective variables statistically, but to gain an in-depth understanding of learners' emotional experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the testing process. This design is particularly appropriate for capturing complex affective dimensions such as anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, attitudes, and values, which are best understood through participants' narratives.

The participants consisted of five undergraduate students from the English Education Department at a private university in Kendari, Indonesia. All participants were female and were selected using purposive sampling based on criteria relevant to the research objectives, namely having taken the Duolingo English Practice Test at least once and being willing to reflect on and articulate their emotional experiences during the test. In terms of academic level, one participant was from the second semester, two participants were from the fourth semester, and two participants were from the sixth semester.

This variation in semester level allowed the study to capture affective experiences from learners at different stages of undergraduate study, providing a broader perspective on how familiarity with English learning and assessment may shape emotional responses to the DEPT. Although the number of participants was limited, this sample size was considered appropriate for an in-depth qualitative inquiry. Data collection was guided by the principle of thematic saturation; after the fifth interview, no substantially new affective themes emerged, indicating that the data were sufficient to address the research question within the scope of this exploratory study.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility for participants to express their experiences while ensuring that key affective themes were consistently addressed. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted face-to-face at a time and place convenient for the participants. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview questions focused on learners' emotional experiences before, during, and after taking the DEPT, including anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, attitudes, and perceived value of the test. The interview guide was

conceptually informed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which emphasizes the role of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in shaping motivation and emotional engagement. This theoretical framework guided the formulation of interview questions to ensure alignment with the study's focus on affective experiences in a low-stakes digital testing context.

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke. The analytic process involved familiarization with the data through repeated reading of the interview transcripts, generating initial codes related to affective experiences, grouping related codes into broader categories, reviewing potential themes in relation to the coded data and the entire dataset, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. To enhance analytic transparency, an example of the coding process is provided. For instance, a statement such as I felt nervous at the beginning because I did not know what kind of questions would appear was initially coded as *initial anxiety*. This code was then grouped under the category emotional responses to test format, which contributed to the broader theme of test anxiety.

Several strategies were employed to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. Analyst triangulation was conducted by involving a second reviewer to examine the coding scheme and emerging themes, and differences in interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached, supporting inter-coder reliability. In addition, participants were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy (member checking), and an audit trail was maintained to document analytic decisions throughout the research process. Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study.

Participants were informed about the research objectives, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all data were stored securely and accessed only by the researcher. These procedures ensured respect for participants' confidentiality, autonomy, and well-being during data collection and analysis.

3. Result

The analysis of interview data from five participants (P1–P5) revealed several recurring themes related to their affective experiences while engaging with the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT). The themes were generated through thematic analysis of the interview transcripts across participants. Although individual responses varied in intensity and emphasis, clear shared patterns emerged. Overall, the findings illustrate dynamic emotional responses, sources of anxiety, perceptions of English proficiency, and the roles of autonomy and social support, which can be understood in relation to key constructs of Self-Determination Theory (SDT).

Emotional Experiences during the Duolingo English Practice Test

All participants reported experiencing mixed emotions when first engaging with the DEPT. Feelings of nervousness and anxiety were commonly expressed at the beginning of the test, mainly due to unfamiliarity with the test format. For instance, P2 stated, At the beginning I felt nervous because I didn't really know what kind of questions would appear. Similarly, P4 described feeling tense but curious at the same time, indicating emotional ambivalence.

As the test progressed, most participants reported a gradual reduction in anxiety as they became more familiar with the interface and question types. P1 noted, After a few questions, I felt calmer because I started to understand how the test worked. Upon completing the test, many participants expressed feelings of relief and satisfaction, regardless of how well they believed they had performed. This recurring pattern suggests that participants' emotional experiences were dynamic rather than static and were closely related to changes in perceived competence, a central construct of SDT.

Test Challenges as Sources of Anxiety

A recurring theme across participants was test-related anxiety triggered by specific components of the DEPT. The speaking section was consistently identified as the most anxiety-provoking due to time pressure and the need to respond spontaneously in English. P3 explained, The speaking part made me anxious because I had to answer quickly and I was afraid my grammar was wrong.

Listening tasks were also reported as stressful by some participants, particularly because of concerns about missing important information. In addition, individual participants mentioned technical issues, such as unstable internet connections, as factors that heightened their anxiety during the test. For example, P5 stated that connection problems made it difficult to concentrate. While these experiences varied individually, together they formed a shared pattern indicating that anxiety was influenced not only by language ability but also by task demands and technical conditions. From an SDT perspective, these factors may undermine learners' sense of competence during testing.

Perceptions of English Proficiency and Self-Confidence

Participants reported that taking the DEPT increased their awareness of their English language proficiency. Several participants expressed confidence in receptive skills such as reading, while productive skills particularly speaking were perceived as more challenging. P1 commented, I think my reading is okay, but speaking is still difficult for me.

Although some participants were satisfied with their overall performance, others described their self-confidence as developing rather than fully established. These responses reflect a shared pattern of realistic self-evaluation, with

individual differences in perceived strengths and weaknesses. The DEPT thus functioned as a reflective tool that helped learners assess their level of competence, aligning with the SDT construct of perceived competence.

Autonomy and Social Support in the Testing Experience

Most participants indicated that their decision to take the DEPT was driven by personal initiative, such as curiosity, academic needs, or the desire to evaluate their English skills. P3 stated, I took the test by myself because I wanted to know my level. This pattern reflects a strong sense of autonomy across participants.

However, experiences related to social support varied. Some participants reported receiving encouragement or guidance from friends, seniors, or lecturers, which helped reduce anxiety and increase confidence. For example, P2 mentioned that advice from a senior helped her feel more prepared. In contrast, other participants completed the test independently without external support. These findings suggest that while autonomy was a shared motivating factor, social support functioned as an additional resource that enhanced emotional comfort, corresponding to the SDT construct of relatedness.

Meaningfulness of the Test and Its Impact on Motivation

Participants generally perceived the DEPT as a meaningful experience because it provided opportunities for self-evaluation and reflection. Many participants reported increased motivation to improve their English skills after completing the test. P5 explained, After seeing my result, I realized which parts I need to improve, especially speaking.

This recurring pattern indicates that the DEPT contributed to learners' motivation by helping them identify personal goals and areas for improvement. From an SDT perspective, this theme reflects the fulfillment of autonomy and competence needs, as learners felt more motivated when they could connect test outcomes with their own learning objectives.

4. Discussion

This study examined the affective experiences of Indonesian EFL learners engaging with the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT) in a low-stakes, AI-based assessment context. Guided by Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the discussion systematically interprets the findings by linking the identified themes to the psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, while clarifying the study's contribution to affective language assessment research.

Participants' emotional experiences during the DEPT followed a dynamic trajectory, shifting from initial anxiety and uncertainty to increased comfort and relief as the test progressed. This pattern can be primarily understood through the SDT construct of competence. At the beginning of the test, unfamiliarity with the format, adaptive tasks, and time constraints temporarily undermined learners'

perceived competence, resulting in nervousness and tension. As participants became more familiar with the test interface and task types, their sense of competence increased, which corresponded with reduced anxiety and greater emotional regulation. This finding supports SDT-based research emphasizing the central role of perceived competence in shaping emotional engagement, particularly in digital assessment environments.

Test challenges especially speaking tasks, listening demands, time pressure, and technical issues emerged as prominent sources of anxiety. Although the DEPT is a low-stakes practice test, these challenges still triggered emotional pressure, suggesting that the absence of formal consequences does not eliminate anxiety entirely. From an SDT perspective, such challenges represent moments when competence needs are threatened. However, unlike in high-stakes testing contexts, participants were generally able to reframe these difficulties as part of the learning process rather than as indicators of failure. This finding extends previous research by showing that low-stakes digital assessments may reduce the negative impact of anxiety by positioning challenges as formative rather than punitive.

Learners' perceptions of English proficiency and self-confidence further illustrate the role of competence in affective experiences. Participants used the DEPT as a reflective tool to identify strengths and weaknesses, particularly noting confidence in receptive skills and challenges in productive skills such as speaking. Rather than leading to discouragement, this realistic self-assessment often supported developing self-confidence and heightened awareness of learning needs. This finding contributes to affective assessment research by demonstrating that low-stakes, AI-based practice tests can foster reflective learning and competence development, not merely measure performance or elicit emotional reactions.

Autonomy also played a significant role in shaping participants' affective experiences. Most learners chose to take the DEPT voluntarily, motivated by curiosity, academic needs, or personal goals. This sense of choice and control aligns with SDT's assertion that autonomy enhances intrinsic motivation and positive emotional engagement. The flexibility of the DEPT allowing learners to take the test at a convenient time and in a familiar environment appeared to reduce pressure and strengthen learners' sense of agency.

From the perspective of the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), participants' affective experiences were also influenced by their perceptions of the DEPT as a technological system. When the test was perceived as useful for self-assessment and easy to navigate, participants reported feeling more relaxed, confident, and motivated during the testing process.

These perceptions correspond to the TAM constructs of perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, which indirectly shaped learners' emotional engagement with the test. Conversely, moments of confusion, time pressure, or technical concerns temporarily increased anxiety and emotional tension, indicating that

usability-related issues can negatively influence affective responses even in low-stakes assessment contexts. This finding supports TAM-based research suggesting that system usability and interface clarity play a significant role in shaping users' emotional reactions. Thus, TAM complements Self-Determination Theory by explaining how technological factors interact with psychological needs to shape learners' affective experiences in digital language testing environments.

Experiences of social support, related to the SDT construct of relatedness, varied across participants. Some learners benefited from encouragement or guidance from peers or lecturers, which helped reduce anxiety and increase confidence, while others completed the test independently. These findings suggest that relatedness functions as a supportive rather than essential factor in low-stakes testing contexts. When present, social support enhanced emotional comfort; when absent, it did not necessarily hinder engagement. This nuanced role of relatedness adds depth to SDT-based interpretations of affective experiences in language assessment.

The perceived meaningfulness of the DEPT and its impact on motivation reflect the interaction between autonomy and competence. Participants viewed the test as useful for self-evaluation, practice, and preparation for future high-stakes assessments. This perceived relevance enhanced intrinsic motivation and encouraged continued learning and self-improvement. These findings support SDT's claim that motivation is strengthened when learners perceive assessment activities as meaningful and aligned with personal goals.

Overall, this study contributes to affective language testing research by shifting the focus from high-stakes assessments to low-stakes, practice-oriented digital testing contexts, which remain underrepresented in the literature. By foregrounding learners' voices through qualitative inquiry, the study captures affective experiences as dynamic processes rather than static variables. The systematic integration of SDT provides a coherent explanation of how competence, autonomy, and relatedness interact to shape emotional engagement in AI-based practice testing.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings suggest that educators may consider integrating low-stakes digital practice tests such as the DEPT as formative tools to help learners build familiarity, reduce anxiety, and develop realistic self-assessment skills prior to high-stakes exams. Test designers are also encouraged to consider affective dimensions by offering clear instructions, practice opportunities, and user-friendly interfaces that support learners' competence and autonomy.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the affective experiences of Indonesian EFL learners when engaging with the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT) in a low-stakes, digital assessment context. The findings reveal that learners' emotional experiences were dynamic and multifaceted, encompassing anxiety, motivation, self-confidence, attitudes, and perceived value. Even in the absence of formal

consequences, affective factors remained salient, indicating that low-stakes digital tests are not emotionally neutral experiences for learners.

Drawing on Self-Determination Theory, the study demonstrates that learners' affective experiences were strongly influenced by the satisfaction of psychological needs related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Opportunities for choice, perceptions of ability, and contextual support played a central role in shaping learners' emotional engagement and motivation during the testing process.

Overall, the findings indicate that learners' affective experiences in the Duolingo English Practice Test (DEPT) are shaped not only by the satisfaction of psychological needs related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness as explained by Self-Determination Theory, but also by learners' perceptions of the test's usability and usefulness, highlighting the complementary role of the Technology Acceptance Model in understanding affective responses in low-stakes, technology-mediated language assessment, these findings suggest that the design and implementation of digital language tests should consider both learners' psychological needs and system usability in order to foster positive emotional engagement and reduce anxiety.

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