

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE USE OF DUOLINGO IN LEARNING ENGLISH VOCABULARY

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore eighth-grade students' perceptions of using Duolingo to learn English vocabulary at MTs. Al-Hikmah. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, with data collected through semi-structured interviews involving students who had experience using Duolingo in their learning process. The data were transcribed, coded, and categorized into four themes: perceptions, motivation, experiences, and challenges. Findings indicated that most students perceived Duolingo positively, describing it as enjoyable, easy to use, and effective for retaining vocabulary. Gamification features such as points, levels, and rewards enhanced students' motivation to learn. However, challenges included boredom from repetitive content, difficulties in understanding instructions and pronunciation, and technical limitations such as unstable internet access and limited personal devices. Overall, Duolingo proved to be a beneficial supplementary tool for supporting English vocabulary mastery among junior high school students.

Keywords: Duolingo, Vocabulary Learning, students' perceptions.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi siswa kelas delapan tentang penggunaan Duolingo untuk mempelajari kosakata bahasa Inggris di MTs. Al-Hikmah. Desain kualitatif deskriptif digunakan, dengan data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur yang melibatkan siswa yang telah berpengalaman menggunakan Duolingo dalam proses pembelajaran mereka. Data ditranskripsi, dikodekan, dan dikategorikan ke dalam empat tema: persepsi, motivasi, pengalaman, dan tantangan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa sebagian besar siswa memberikan persepsi positif terhadap Duolingo, menggambarkan sebagai menyenangkan, mudah digunakan, dan efektif untuk mengingat kosakata. Fitur gamifikasi seperti poin, level, dan hadiah meningkatkan motivasi belajar siswa. Namun, tantangannya meliputi kebosanan akibat konten yang berulang, kesulitan dalam memahami instruksi dan pengucapan, serta keterbatasan teknis seperti akses internet yang tidak stabil dan keterbatasan perangkat pribadi. Secara keseluruhan, Duolingo terbukti menjadi alat bantu tambahan yang bermanfaat untuk mendukung penguasaan kosakata bahasa Inggris di kalangan siswa SMP.

Kata Kunci: Duolingo, pembelajaran kosakata, persepsi siswa.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is one of the most essential components in learning English, serving as the foundation for all language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Mastery of vocabulary is at the core of language competence because, without adequate vocabulary, communication skills are significantly hindered. As emphasized by Munibi (2023), vocabulary and grammar mastery have a substantial influence on reading ability, and a strong vocabulary base enhances students' capacity to comprehend English texts. At MTs. Al-Hikmah, English is a compulsory subject; however, initial observations revealed that many students struggle to master English vocabulary. This difficulty stems from less engaging learning methods, minimal vocabulary repetition, and limited classroom learning time. Consequently, students' ability to understand and apply English vocabulary effectively remains low.

In the digital era, technology plays a pivotal role in enhancing learning, including vocabulary acquisition. One widely used application for language learning is Duolingo, a gamification-based

platform that offers flexible and independent learning opportunities. Duolingo applies a structured repetition system and provides visual and auditory reinforcements, which, according to Zhou and Shardlow (2021), can increase motivation and accelerate vocabulary mastery. Its gamified features—such as points, levels, and daily challenges—offer an interactive learning experience that encourages independent practice (Alqahtani & Rajab, 2020). Despite its popularity, research focusing on junior high school students in formal educational settings, such as MTs. Al-Hikmah, remains limited. It is therefore essential to examine not only students' perceptions of using Duolingo but also the supporting factors—such as motivation and technology access—and the obstacles they face, including limited resources and digital literacy.

This study addresses the need to find engaging, technology-based alternatives for vocabulary learning that provide structure, interactivity, and motivation. Accordingly, the research was conducted under the title “Students' Perceptions Towards the Use of Duolingo in Learning English Vocabulary” with the aim of

describing students' perceptions of using Duolingo for learning English vocabulary and identifying the challenges they face when using the application. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for teachers, students, and researchers by offering an alternative teaching strategy, motivating students toward independent learning, and contributing to the development of educational technology in language learning.

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to investigate students' perceptions, motivations, experiences, and challenges in using Duolingo for English vocabulary learning. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences in their natural learning environment (Creswell, 2021). The participants were 15 eighth-grade students from class 8B at MTs. Al-Hikmah, selected because they already had a basic understanding of English and were in the process of expanding their vocabulary. The relatively small number of participants enabled a deeper examination of individual learning experiences. The primary data were obtained from semi-structured interviews, while secondary data were drawn from relevant literature

on vocabulary learning, gamification, and the use of Duolingo, as well as teacher-provided information on students' vocabulary skills prior to using the application. Semi-structured interviews were used as the main instrument, enabling the researcher to explore students' perspectives while allowing flexibility for follow-up questions. Interviews were conducted individually in a quiet setting to encourage open and honest responses, recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. The interview questions focused on the usability of Duolingo, its effectiveness in supporting vocabulary retention, and the challenges faced by students. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved data reduction through reviewing transcripts to identify key responses, categorization into themes such as perceptions, motivation, experiences, and challenges, and data display in narrative form to highlight patterns and variations. Conclusions were drawn by interpreting the themes to answer the research questions, with verification through cross-checking against raw data to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the perceptions, motivations, experiences, and challenges of eighth-grade students at MTs. Al-Hikmah in using the Duolingo application for English vocabulary learning. Data obtained through semi-structured interviews were analyzed thematically into four main categories: students' perceptions, motivation, experiences, and challenges.

A. Students' Perceptions

Overall, students expressed positive perceptions toward Duolingo, describing it as fun, engaging, and user-friendly. Gamified elements such as points, levels, and rewards were considered motivating, while the interactive interface and visual design created an appealing learning environment. Students appreciated the flexibility to learn independently, repeat lessons as needed, and access the application outside school hours. These findings align with Wang et al. (2020), who emphasized that positive learner perceptions enhance engagement and motivation. The sense of autonomy offered by Duolingo appeared to strengthen students' ownership of the learning process, supporting a more

sustained and self-directed vocabulary acquisition.

B. Motivation

Gamification played a central role in fostering students' motivation. Features such as points, badges, streaks, and levels provided a sense of achievement and encouraged consistent practice. Many students reported that they actively maintained their learning streaks and aimed to achieve higher scores, demonstrating intrinsic motivation alongside the initial extrinsic incentives. These results are consistent with Munday (2021), who noted that gamified learning environments can promote persistence and enjoyment. In this context, Duolingo's design transformed vocabulary practice into an activity that students were eager to repeat, promoting long-term engagement.

C. Students' Experiences

Students' experiences using Duolingo were generally positive, with many describing the application as flexible, enjoyable, and less stressful compared to traditional classroom methods. The use of repetition and interactive exercises supported vocabulary retention, consistent with the principle of spaced repetition in

language learning. Students valued the freedom to learn at their own pace and preferred the application's supportive feedback system. However, challenges emerged in listening and speaking exercises, where unclear pronunciation or complex sentence structures caused difficulties. These findings suggest that while Duolingo effectively supports independent learning, its impact can be maximized when complemented by teacher guidance and peer interaction, echoing the recommendations of Zainuddin et al. (2020) regarding blended gamified learning approaches.

D. Challenges Faced by Students'

Despite the overall positive response, several challenges were identified. Students reported difficulties in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary without visual support, boredom from repetitive tasks, and technical barriers such as limited internet access or lack of personal devices. Internal challenges, including heavy school workloads and time management issues, also hindered consistent use. Moreover, some students felt discouraged by Duolingo's strict auto-correction system, particularly when minor mistakes resulted in failure

messages. These obstacles reflect the ongoing digital divide and highlight the need for adaptive learning features. Stockwell (2022) similarly noted that device accessibility and connection stability are critical for mobile learning effectiveness. Addressing these challenges requires both technical and pedagogical interventions, such as incorporating varied task formats, offering additional pronunciation support, and integrating teacher feedback to sustain motivation and learning consistency.

In summary, the results indicate that Duolingo offers an effective, engaging, and flexible platform for vocabulary learning when supported by conducive learning conditions. Positive perceptions, gamification-driven motivation, and enjoyable learning experiences were key strengths, while challenges related to technical access, content variety, and learner support require further attention to optimize its use in formal education contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the perceptions, motivations, experiences, and challenges of eighth-grade students at MTs. Al-

Hikmah in using the Duolingo application for English vocabulary learning. The findings revealed that students generally hold positive perceptions toward Duolingo, viewing it as a fun, engaging, and accessible learning tool. Gamification features, such as points, badges, levels, and streaks, effectively motivated students to practice vocabulary consistently. Learning experiences were enhanced by the application's interactive design, flexibility, and supportive feedback, which promoted learner autonomy and reduced learning anxiety.

However, the study also identified several challenges, including difficulties in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary without visual cues, boredom from repetitive exercises, technical limitations such as unstable internet access, and time management constraints due to school workloads. Additionally, certain application features, such as strict auto-corrections and complex listening or speaking tasks, occasionally discouraged learners.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that Duolingo is a valuable supplementary tool for vocabulary learning in junior high school settings,

especially when integrated with teacher guidance and pedagogical support. Addressing technical barriers, diversifying task formats, and enhancing pronunciation guidance can further improve the application's effectiveness. Future studies could explore the long-term impact of Duolingo-based learning and compare its integration with other digital learning platforms.

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