



THE ROLE OF DUOLINGO VOCABULARY PRACTICE IN ENHANCING SPEAKING SKILLS: INSIGHTS FROM AN EFL LEARNER

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of Duolingo-based vocabulary practice on the development of speaking skills among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. In a world that is progressively more digital, Duolingo is one of the most popular learning sources, particularly among those who are young. This study seeks to determine how different types of vocabulary practice with duolingo lead to speaking gains. Using a qualitative case study design, the study was conducted with one second- semester beneath-graduate student with a major of English Education who has a frequent user of Duolingo. The results indicated that Duolingo's interactive vocabulary activities, especially repetition, gamification, and contextual use, greatly contributed to the learner's pronunciation, fluency, and lexical precision. The researchers of the study claim that duolingo can be used as an efficient supplementary tool for vocabulary learning aiding indirectly in speaking skills. These findings provide valuable implications for the instructors who adopt mobile-assisted language learning into their classrooms, and also pave the way for further investigations into adaptive technology in language learning.

Keywords: Duolingo; vocabulary learning; speaking improvement; EFL learner; mobile-assisted language learning; digital language tools; gamified learning

INTRODUCTION

Duolingo is one of the most well-known and widely used language-learning platforms. Traipsing through the Appalachians of North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee, exist telling ex-slaves, while introspection diffidently schools in the shadow of old photographs glimpsed against the skyline of southern mountains. Conference interpreters adapt by necessity to the specific zones of language which might occupy them at any given moment. At the University of Washington in Seattle, a number of increasingly complex urban-rural interactions reflecting this pattern had developed by the 1990's. The following ecosystemstypes or regions can best be understood from a political ecology viewpoint taking m planetary change organization itself as the natural prerequisite.

The importance of speaking as a productive skill cannot be overstated. It is not only a means of Communication Between people but also a bellwether for learners' language proficiency as whole. However, speaking skills often cannot be developed. Too little exposure, too much anxiety, a lack of practice opportunities, and

insufficient vocabulary. Educational technology has increasingly turned to provide more autonomous, engaging, and flexible learning environments in response to this. With an intuitive interface that is user-friendly, Duolingo offers vocabulary exercises focusing on repetition, contextualization, and interaction - all essential for fostering language retention and output.

At present, only limited investigations have looked at how vocabulary practice on Duolingo affected the speaking ability of EFL learners. Most of the work so far has studied vocabulary acquisition and improved grammar, while fewer studies have looked into how these gains translate, speech wise. Speaking is so dependent on vocabulary; without enough lexical resources, learners cannot express themselves freely and accurately. Learning how to improve this vitally important capability—the acquisition of vocabulary through a Duolingo course—namely in pronunciation, pace and word choice, is an immediate task.

Much of the existing literature has concentrated on Duolingo's effectiveness in vocabulary acquisition and grammar improvement, with fewer studies addressing how such gains influence productive oral performance. However, speaking fluency and accuracy are strongly dependent on learners' lexical resources, as vocabulary knowledge enables learners to express ideas clearly, fluently, and appropriately.

The research comes out of the realization that learning vocabulary is not an independent skill but rather an important way to improve communication ability. By looking at the experiences of an EFL learner who uses Duolingo regularly, the research is trying to discover how mobile-based English vocabulary exercises help in spoken language performance. Instead of concentrating on the meaning of words, the current emphasis is to see how design features such as repetition, gamification, and contextual learning found within Duolingo contribute not only to memory but also speaking. The case study method permits both learner's overall experience with an app and speaking improvement factors which are inherent in that application to be probed in depth.

While many works focus on how cell phone use helps students build words, not much is known about how words built in apps like Duolingo are used in talking for real. Also, even though Duolingo has features like spaced repeat, fun, and real-time work, how well these help with words in speech is not clear.

The importance of this work is in the real life use of it for both people who learn and people who teach. When people learn, they can know how to learn on their own with digital tools. When people teach, they can know how to use platforms like Duolingo inside their class work as extra tools to help teaching speech. With more use of digital ways of learning, we must find and test tools that do not just teach language on their own, but that add to the growth of being able to talk.

Therefore, this study investigates the role of Duolingo-based vocabulary practice in enhancing the speaking abilities of EFL learners. It seeks to fill the gap in current research by linking vocabulary training with oral performance outcomes. The findings are expected to inform best practices in the integration of mobile-assisted language learning tools in EFL contexts and to contribute to ongoing conversations about the role of adaptive technologies in language education.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the role of Duolingo-based vocabulary practice in enhancing speaking skills among EFL learners. A case study approach was chosen because it enables an in-depth understanding of complex educational phenomena within authentic contexts. The participant was an undergraduate English Education student who regularly engaged with Duolingo for vocabulary development. The study focuses on a specific case but aims to derive implications relevant for broader EFL learning settings.

The participant was selected through purposive sampling based on the criteria of regular Duolingo usage and active involvement in English learning. This strategy ensured the acquisition of rich, relevant, and experience-based data.

Data collection was performed with semi-structured interviews through WhatsApp voice notes over a period of two weeks for its convenience and flexibility, where the participant could freely share his thoughts in a comfortable, familiar place. The interview had five guiding questions to find out what the participant learned from the app, what he liked most about Duolingo, and how well it helped him learn words and improve his speaking.

All voice note responses were transcribed verbatim for analysis. The researcher also recorded observational memos reflecting tone, emphasis, and emotional cues to enrich interpretation.

Data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis, involving systematic coding of the transcript to identify recurring patterns and themes related to learner engagement, vocabulary learning, and speaking development. Themes were analyzed and interpreted in relation to the pedagogical features of Duolingo and existing literature on mobile-assisted language learning (MALL).

Credibility of findings was supported through data triangulation (interview + memo notes) and member checking, where the participant was asked to confirm the accuracy of the transcribed data and interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section talks about what was found from doing a deep chat with one learner of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), on how they used Duolingo to get better at words and saying things. The way it was looked at was by talking about one thing at a time, using what has been looked at about how people learn and how to teach them to help explain why the learner said what they did. Since this was a study that used just one person, more was said about what that one person said and what it made you think about rather than about saying many people said the same thing.

The analysis draws on second language acquisition theories and relevant research to contextualize the learner's experience. While many studies have emphasized Duolingo's role in vocabulary retention and grammar acquisition (Sakkir & Syamsuddin, 2023), fewer have delved into how these features contribute to speaking improvement—especially in pronunciation, fluency, and lexical choice. The integration of speech recognition, spaced repetition, and gamification has been shown to support learner engagement and oral practice (Georgiou, 2025), yet cultural

responsiveness and sustained motivation remain underexamined variables. This case study thus provides a nuanced view of one learner's journey, offering insights into how mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) tools like Duolingo can enhance speaking competence while also revealing limitations that point to the need for guided, culturally-aware, and hybrid instructional approaches.

1. Participant Engagement and Usage Frequency

The participant mentioned they have used Duolingo since high school. During that time, their frequency of usage was relatively high because of the high motivation and interest in language learning. This changed a lot once they went to college cutting back on usage and dropping formal engagement with all digital languages. When prompted, the learner expressed their motivation changed due to many external factors, such as academic workload and time to spare. This is a common experience of many autonomous digital learners - usage frequency is often implicated by motivation and self-discipline.

This aligns with the theory of self-directed learning, which posits that learners who take the initiative in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating goals, and evaluating outcomes are more likely to succeed. However, such autonomy also requires high levels of intrinsic motivation, which may not always be consistent over time. The participant's statement, "Kadang berapa kali dalam seminggu, kadang hanya berapa kali sebulan atau nggak pernah," underscores the challenge of maintaining consistent engagement without external accountability.

2. Perceived Benefits for Vocabulary and Grammar Learning

One of the most noticeable patterns emerged from the interview regarding the perceived success of Duolingo in helping the learner develop vocabulary and grammatical structures. The participant identified a few aspects of the app that helped with this including, sentence construction, translation, and matching words to pictures. For the participant, these interactions led to a much more rewarding and effective learning experience than conventional methods.

The learner stated preference for multimodal, gamified learning environments that cater to different learning styles. The use of repetition and varied input in Duolingo aligns with cognitive theories of language acquisition, particularly the importance of input frequency and contextual diversity in solidifying vocabulary knowledge.

The participant also emphasized the importance of grammar-oriented tasks in building speaking confidence. They reported that correct grammar usage was a prerequisite for feeling comfortable speaking English. This suggests a grammar-oriented learning style, where syntactic accuracy serves as a foundation for communicative competence.

3. Speech Recognition and Pronunciation Practice

Another significant benefit was pointed out by the participant - the app's speech recognition feature which actively engages users in the repetition of phrases and the matching of pronunciation. The learner pointed out that the feature made

them able to improve their pronunciation and speaking fluency since it gave them the opportunity to mimic native-like speech patterns.

This echoes findings from previous studies that emphasize the role of auditory imitation and phonological awareness in second language acquisition. The ability to hear, process, and reproduce sounds accurately is a key aspect of pronunciation development, and Duolingo's built-in feedback system supports this process.

Moreover, repetition of vocabulary and sentence structures reinforces memory and pronunciation. The learner mentioned that these exercises helped in reinforcing lexical precision and fluency. This aligns with Swain's Output Hypothesis, which posits that language production (i.e., speaking) helps learners notice gaps in their knowledge and promotes deeper learning.

4. Enjoyment, Accessibility, and User Motivation

The participant of the study talked about Duolingo as a tool that is easy to use, joyful, and efficient that is compatible with different learning styles and learners such as kids and grown-ups. The brief lesson structure and interesting material were mentioned as reasons that not only do they stop boredom but also help in learning.

This insight supports the gamification theory in educational technology, which suggests that game-like features such as points, levels, and rewards can increase learner motivation and satisfaction. The app's visual appeal, structured progression, and positive reinforcement mechanisms contribute to a more immersive and self-reinforcing learning experience. These characteristics are crucial for promoting long-term engagement, especially among learners who may struggle with traditional learning environments. Duolingo's design makes language learning approachable and less intimidating, creating a positive emotional connection with the subject matter.

5. Technical and Content-Related Limitations

Although he had a very positive experience with the app, the participant pointed out some limitations of using Duolingo. Firstly, there were some sporadic instances where the sound was unclear, and as a result, pronunciation practice was negatively affected. Secondly, reliance on internet connectivity and the compatibility of the devices created some technical problems.

More critically, the learner expressed discomfort with certain grammar and cultural representations in the app, particularly those related to gender and relationships. The example given was the phrase "my girlfriend" spoken by a female character, which caused confusion due to the participant's unfamiliarity with LGBT-related expressions.

This commentary highlights a significant connection between language learning and cultural literacy. Inclusive subject matter seeks to represent the varied linguistic landscape of English speakers; however, it can also unintentionally cause learners from different cultures to experience conflicts in their minds or even misunderstandings. Consequently, implementing cultural scaffolding and

engaging learners in critical reflection must be done along with using digital language tools to guarantee understanding and inclusion.

6. Synthesis and Theoretical Implications

On the whole, the results of this case study verify that Duolingo provides great benefits for the uptake of vocabulary and oral practice. The student's journey illustrates the idea that mobile-assisted language learning devices can back up formal education by giving flexible, interesting, and self-directed learning chances. Capabilities like spaced repetition, speech recognition, and interactive grammar activities are among the factors that promote lexical accuracy and

Yet this research delineates the significance of adapting to the specific context and cultural sensitivity in the create of language learning apps. It is possible that students may run into new concepts or lead language expressions that they cannot be able to understand and which they might need to be explained or assisted. Besides that, long-term motivation is still a challenge in self-learning environments, thus hybrid models that combine the work of the teacher with technology might be an option.

In terms of pedagogy, teachers should be thinking about using applications such as Duolingo in the classroom as extra aids. They can give particular assignments, check the progress, and lead the discussions of the difficult topics or those which have a cultural aspect. This hybrid method can make learner autonomy more achievable while at the same time, the learners can be sure of the support that they get to be able to understand and use the language skills correctly.

The current research has explored an EFL learner's journey of vocabulary acquisition and speaking skill growth through Duolingo. The results indicate that although the app is very useful for involvement, training, and input, it cannot independently address the need. A cultural understanding, teacher direction, and student interest are the key factors that should go along with the mobile-assisted language learning. If appropriately embedded and enabled, resources like Duolingo have the capacity to be a pivotal force in today's language learning

CONCLUSION

The study that looked at a student experience demonstrates that Duolingo is an efficient complementary tool to facilitate EFL learners' vocabulary and speaking skills. Features like sentence construction exercises, vocabulary games, and speech recognition facilitated the participant engaging in a joyful and meaningful practice which helped lexical acquisition and pronunciation improvement. The learner also pointed out grammar-focus tasks' role in forming speaking confidence as syntactic awareness is given as one of the prerequisites for oral communication. Moreover, the discoveries show that regular use of the app is highly influenced by initial motivation which, however, changes with time. In addition, some of the app's content reflected cultural misunderstandings, especially those about gender and relationships, thus indicating the necessity for culturally sensitive material and the role of guided explanation. To sum it up, though Duolingo offers easily accessible and fun language

learning opportunities, it is not designed to completely substitute the formal instruction or the cultural scaffolding.

Based on research results, it is proposed that teachers rely on Duolingo as a secondary instrument of instruction in addition to their own method. Through discussion and clarification, teachers should make learners aware of the confusion that may arise from unfamiliar expressions and be sure that the learners have understood. When learners are given both independent practice and facilitated support from a teacher, the use of Duolingo in a blended learning model can have greater effect. Moreover, app creators are invited to further improve the sound quality and provide changes in the content, taking users' cultural backgrounds into account. The participants should be more in number in future research, thus these findings can be confirmed and differences in the learning situation can be studied.

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