EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE USE OF MOBILE-ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING (MALL) THROUGH THE DUOLINGO APPLICATION IN ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING AT A VOCATIONAL SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore EFL students' perceptions of the use of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) through the Duolingo application in vocabulary learning at a vocational high school in Garut. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design supported by a Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)-based questionnaire administered in the initial stage. Participants consisted of 21 students of Class XI Visual Communication Design (DKV) who had used Duolingo for vocabulary learning, with five students purposively selected for semi-structured interviews based on the questionnaire results. Questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively, while interview data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The findings show that students held a positive perception toward Duolingo (overall mean 4.10, High category), with ease of use as the most salient aspect. The interviews revealed eight themes, including the perceived importance of vocabulary, difficulties in remembering vocabulary, gamification-driven motivation, and perceived limitations in feedback. This study concludes that students' positive perceptions are primarily driven by ease of use and gamification features, while vocabulary retention remains a challenge dependent on consistency of use.

Keywords: *Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, Duolingo, students' perceptions, vocabulary learning, vocational school*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi persepsi siswa EFL terhadap penggunaan Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) melalui aplikasi Duolingo dalam pembelajaran kosakata bahasa Inggris di salah satu SMK di Garut. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain deskriptif kualitatif yang didukung oleh kuesioner berbasis Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) pada tahap awal. Partisipan penelitian terdiri atas 21 siswa kelas XI Desain Komunikasi Visual (DKV) yang telah menggunakan Duolingo dalam pembelajaran kosakata, dengan lima siswa dipilih secara purposif untuk wawancara semi-terstruktur berdasarkan hasil kuesioner. Data kuesioner dianalisis secara deskriptif, sedangkan data wawancara dianalisis secara tematik mengikuti kerangka enam fase Braun dan Clarke (2006). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa memiliki persepsi positif terhadap Duolingo (rata-rata keseluruhan 4,10; kategori Tinggi), dengan kemudahan penggunaan sebagai aspek yang paling menonjol. Wawancara mengungkap delapan tema, di antaranya pentingnya kosakata bagi siswa, kesulitan mengingat kosakata, motivasi berbasis

gamifikasi, dan keterbatasan umpan balik aplikasi. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa persepsi positif siswa terutama didorong oleh kemudahan penggunaan dan fitur gamifikasi, sementara retensi kosakata tetap menjadi tantangan yang bergantung pada konsistensi penggunaan aplikasi.

Kata Kunci: Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, Duolingo, persepsi siswa, pembelajaran kosakata, sekolah kejuruan

A. Introduction

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language mastery, as learners cannot communicate effectively without adequate vocabulary knowledge (Richards, 1976; Thornbury, 2002; Alqahtani, 2015). In vocational high school contexts, particularly the Visual Communication Design (DKV) department, vocabulary learning activities still tend to rely on conventional methods such as memorization and translation, resulting in limited vocabulary mastery and low student participation. This condition is compounded by the school's strict smartphone policy, which limits students' access to digital learning resources during class hours and restricts independent technology-based practice to the home environment only. Similar challenges have also been found among vocational school students in general with regard to other English language skills (Milania et al., 2022; Purwati et al., 2023; Dewi et al., 2025).

To address this gap, the English teacher introduced Duolingo as part of the vocabulary teaching strategy through in-class demonstration, which students then continued independently outside of class hours. Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) refers to the use of mobile devices such as smartphones to support flexible and accessible language learning (Kukulska-Hulme & Shield, 2008). Duolingo, as a gamified MALL application, offers interactive exercises, repetition systems, and instant feedback (Kapp, 2012; Rouabhia & Kheder, 2024). Previous studies have documented Duolingo's positive effects on vocabulary learning outcomes (Mardiah, 2023; Hia et al., 2024; Apoko et al., 2023), but most of these studies measured learning effectiveness rather than exploring students' perceptions, particularly in vocational school contexts with restricted mobile phone access.

This study is grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), which identifies Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, and Attitude Toward Using as key determinants of technology acceptance. Accordingly, this study aims to explore EFL students' perceptions of the use of MALL through Duolingo in vocabulary learning at a vocational school in Garut, guided by the research question: “How do EFL students perceive the use of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) through Duolingo in vocabulary learning?”

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design supported by a TAM-based questionnaire in its initial stage. The participants consisted of 21 students of Class XI DKV at a vocational school in Garut who had used Duolingo for vocabulary learning, following its introduction by the teacher in class and subsequent independent practice. All 21 students completed a TAM-based questionnaire covering three constructs: Perceived Usefulness, Perceived Ease of Use, and Attitude Toward Using. Based on the questionnaire results, five students representing varied perceptions were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews, coded S21, S18, S16, S14, and S1 to preserve their anonymity.

The questionnaire data were analyzed descriptively to obtain an overview of students' perceptions and to inform participant selection for the interview stage. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

C. Results and Discussion

The questionnaire, consisting of 20 items across five constructs, obtained a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.876 (Reliable/Good). The overall mean score was 4.10 (High category), with the Perceived Ease of Use construct obtaining the highest mean (4.48, Very High) and the Vocabulary construct obtaining the lowest (3.96, High).

Table 1
Mean Questionnaire Scores per Construct

Construct	Mean	Category

English Language Learning	4.19	High
Vocabulary	3.96	High
Perceived Ease of Use (PEOU)	4.48	Very High
Perceived Usefulness (PU)	4.07	High
Attitude Toward Using (ATU)	4.03	High

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed eight themes: (1) the perceived importance of English and vocabulary for DKV students; (2) difficulties in learning vocabulary, particularly forgetting words that are rarely reused; (3) the perceived ease of use of Duolingo; (4) the perceived usefulness of Duolingo for vocabulary and its application in real-life contexts, such as writing design portfolio captions; (5) motivational factors such as streaks and leaderboards; (6) perceived limitations, particularly insufficient feedback explanation when answering incorrectly; (7) comparison with textbook-based learning, which students found less enjoyable than Duolingo; and (8) willingness to continue using and recommend the application.

Participant S18, who had the lowest frequency of use (every 2–3 days), showed markedly lower engagement across nearly all themes despite generally positive questionnaire scores — indicating that quantitative and qualitative data together provide a more complete picture than either alone.

These findings align with the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989): the very high PEOU score, together with participants' consistent descriptions of Duolingo as easy to use, supports the proposition that ease of use is a strong predictor of technology acceptance, while the real-life application of vocabulary reflects the Perceived Usefulness dimension. The prominence of gamification-driven motivation is consistent with Rouabhia and Kheder's (2024) finding that Duolingo's gamification elements increase learners' motivation and consistency, as well as with Kapp's (2012) gamification principles.

The limitation regarding unclear feedback is consistent with Sutrisna's (2025) finding that the absence of real-time correction in MALL applications risks fossilizing learners' errors, as well as with Rachmawati and Fadhilawati's (2025) finding on the continued need for external guidance in MALL-based vocabulary learning. The variation in engagement between S18 and the other participants illustrates Stockwell's

(2010) argument that MALL effectiveness depends on how learners integrate the tool into their existing study habits, rather than on the tool's portability alone. Furthermore, students' difficulty in remembering rarely-reused vocabulary is consistent with Nation's (2001) vocabulary mastery framework, which emphasizes the importance of repetition and repeated use for long-term retention.

D. Conclusion

This study concludes that EFL students of Class XI DKV at a vocational school in Garut generally hold a positive perception toward the use of Duolingo as a MALL tool for vocabulary learning, driven primarily by its ease of use and gamification features. Nevertheless, vocabulary retention remains a persistent challenge, and the benefits perceived by students appear closely tied to the consistency of application use. Teachers are advised to provide supplementary feedback on vocabulary items students frequently answer incorrectly, while students are advised to maintain consistent daily practice. Future research could examine the long-term effects of Duolingo use on vocabulary retention across more diverse vocational school contexts.

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