

STUDENTS' VOICES ON MOBILE ASSISTED LANGUAGE LEARNING: PERCEPTIONS OF SPEAKING PRACTICE AND ANXIETY REDUCTION

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ABSTRACT

This study explores students' perceptions of Duolingo, a Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) platform, in supporting English speaking practice and reducing speaking anxiety. Using a qualitative exploratory design, data were collected through a screening questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with seven English Education students at Institut Pendidikan Indonesia Garut who had used Duolingo for at least three months. The questionnaire was organized into two categories: students' perceptions of Duolingo for speaking practice (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency) and the role of Duolingo in reducing speaking anxiety (accessibility, autonomous learning, immediate feedback, repeated exposure, and a low-pressure environment). Findings show that participants perceived Duolingo positively for developing speaking skills, with an overall mean of 4.41 ("Agree"); pronunciation and grammar improved the most, while fluency improved the least. Regarding anxiety, participants agreed that Duolingo helped reduce their speaking anxiety, with an overall mean of 4.36. Immediate, non-judgmental feedback (4.86) and a low-pressure, judgment-free environment (4.71) emerged as the most influential features in reducing communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety. One participant reported that fear of negative evaluation motivated rather than hindered her preparation, suggesting that anxiety does not always function as a debilitating factor. The study concludes that Duolingo serves as a safe space that bridges independent speaking practice and classroom performance, functioning as a complementary rather than a substitute tool for formal speaking instruction.

Keywords: *Mobile Assisted Language Learning; Duolingo; speaking anxiety; EFL speaking skills; safe learning space*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi persepsi mahasiswa terhadap Duolingo, sebuah platform Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), dalam mendukung latihan speaking bahasa Inggris dan mengurangi kecemasan berbicara. Dengan menggunakan desain kualitatif eksploratif, data dikumpulkan melalui kuesioner penyaringan dan wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap tujuh mahasiswa Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris Institut Pendidikan Indonesia Garut yang telah menggunakan Duolingo minimal tiga bulan. Kuesioner disusun ke dalam dua kategori: persepsi mahasiswa terhadap Duolingo untuk latihan speaking (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency) dan peran Duolingo dalam mengurangi kecemasan berbicara (aksesibilitas, pembelajaran mandiri, umpan balik langsung, pengulangan latihan, dan lingkungan rendah tekanan). Hasil

penelitian menunjukkan bahwa partisipan memiliki persepsi positif terhadap Duolingo dalam mengembangkan kemampuan speaking, dengan rata-rata keseluruhan 4,41 (kategori "Setuju"); pronunciation dan grammar mengalami peningkatan paling besar, sedangkan fluency paling rendah. Terkait kecemasan, partisipan sepakat bahwa Duolingo membantu mengurangi kecemasan berbicara mereka, dengan rata-rata keseluruhan 4,36. Umpan balik langsung yang tidak menghakimi (4,86) dan lingkungan bebas penilaian (4,71) menjadi fitur paling berpengaruh dalam menurunkan communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, dan test anxiety. Salah satu partisipan melaporkan bahwa rasa takut dinilai negatif justru memotivasi persiapannya, bukan menghambat, yang menunjukkan bahwa kecemasan tidak selalu bersifat menghambat. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa Duolingo berfungsi sebagai ruang aman yang menjembatani latihan speaking mandiri dan performa di kelas, sebagai alat pelengkap bukan pengganti pembelajaran speaking formal.

Kata Kunci: Mobile Assisted Language Learning; Duolingo; kecemasan berbicara; keterampilan speaking EFL; ruang belajar aman

A. Introduction

Communication skills in English have become increasingly important in academic, professional, and social contexts amid globalization and digitalization. Among the four language skills, speaking is widely regarded as the most challenging for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because it demands instant production without sufficient time to plan or revise (Hidayatullah, 2024). Limited vocabulary, inaccurate grammar, and fear of making mistakes frequently contribute to speaking failure and trigger acute anxiety (Thornbury, 2005, as cited in Indrianty, 2016). Speaking anxiety is one of the most common psychological barriers

EFL learners face, often arising from fear of negative evaluation, pronunciation concerns, and low self-confidence (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), and it frequently makes students reluctant to participate in discussions or presentations.

A supportive, low-pressure learning environment is essential to help students practice speaking more comfortably (Tarigan, 2015). Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) applications can offer such an environment, allowing learners to practice without fear of judgment (Stockwell, 2010; Reinders & Benson, 2017). Duolingo, one of the most widely used MALL platforms, provides vocabulary, grammar, listening, pronunciation, and speaking exercises

that learners can access independently (Bende, 2017). Although various strategies and technologies have been implemented to improve EFL speaking, many English Education students at Institut Pendidikan Indonesia (IPI) Garut still experience speaking anxiety both in class and in informal settings, and little is known about how Duolingo functions as a safe, non-judgmental space that helps reduce this anxiety during independent practice.

Building on this gap, this study explores the experiences of English Education students at IPI Garut in using Duolingo as a supportive environment for speaking practice and anxiety reduction. Specifically, the study addresses two research questions: (1) How do students perceive the use of MALL in practicing English speaking? and (2) How does MALL, through Duolingo, help reduce students' speaking anxiety? Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature on MALL and learners' emotional comfort in EFL speaking practice; practically, it offers insight for educators considering the integration of mobile-based platforms into speaking instruction, and for learners seeking low-pressure ways to build

speaking confidence before performing in more evaluative academic settings.

B. Research Method

This study employed a qualitative method with an exploratory design to investigate students' perceptions of using MALL, specifically Duolingo, to practice speaking and reduce speaking anxiety. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows an in-depth understanding of participants' feelings, perceptions, and personal experiences rather than a quantitative measurement of outcomes (Creswell, 2014). The exploratory design was appropriate because the use of Duolingo as a low-pressure environment for reducing speaking anxiety at IPI Garut has not been extensively discussed in existing literature.

The study was conducted at the English Education Department of IPI Garut, chosen because many students in this department experience speaking anxiety during class discussions, presentations, and informal conversations, and are generally familiar with Duolingo. Seven English Education students

from the 2023 cohort who actively used Duolingo participated in the study, selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: having used Duolingo for at least three months, having experienced speaking anxiety, and being willing to share their experiences openly. The number of participants followed the principle of data saturation in qualitative research (Creswell, 2014).

Two instruments were used. The first was a 24-item questionnaire divided into two categories: Category A (8 items) addressed students' perceptions of Duolingo for speaking practice, developed from Derakhshan et al.'s (2016) speaking indicators of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency; Category B (16 items) addressed the role of Duolingo in reducing speaking anxiety, developed from Stockwell's (2010) MALL indicators (accessibility, autonomous learning, immediate feedback, repeated exposure) and Reinders and Benson's (2017) concept of a low-pressure learning environment. The second instrument was a semi-structured interview guide of 15 questions organized into three clusters: students' experience using Duolingo for speaking practice

(Cluster A), speaking anxiety and the role of Duolingo (Cluster B, linked to Horwitz et al.'s (1986) types of speaking anxiety), and reflective closing questions (Cluster C).

Data were analyzed using Creswell's (2014) five-step qualitative analysis: organizing and preparing the data (transcribing interviews and grouping questionnaire responses), reading through all data to gain a general understanding, coding meaningful text segments, organizing codes into broader themes aligned with the theoretical indicators, and presenting the findings as descriptive narratives supported by direct quotations. Member checking was conducted with participants to verify that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences, thereby ensuring the credibility of the findings.

C. Findings and Discussion

Data were collected through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with seven participants from the English Education Program at IPI Garut, class of 2023. Direct quotations from the interviews are used to support the findings below.

***Students' Perceptions of Duolingo
for Speaking Practice (RQ1)***

All seven participants perceived Duolingo positively for improving their speaking skills across Derakhshan et al.'s (2016) four indicators — pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency — with Category A receiving an overall mean of 4.41 (“Agree”) (see Table 1).

Pronunciation received the highest mean in Category A (4.52, “Strongly Agree”), attributed mainly to Duolingo's speech-recognition feedback, which requires learners to repeat words until their pronunciation is accepted. P2 explained that when her pronunciation was inaccurate, the application would not accept her answer until she repeated it correctly, which made her more aware of correct pronunciation. P3 similarly noted that the app flags mispronounced words with a visual warning. P4, however, felt this support was only partial, since Duolingo focuses more on grammar and vocabulary than on pronunciation specifically.

Grammar also scored highly (4.50). Participants indicated that improvement occurred gradually through repeated exposure to sentence patterns rather than explicit

instruction — P1 described unconsciously absorbing grammar patterns through Duolingo's recurring sentences, while P7 reported becoming more confident distinguishing Simple Present from Simple Past.

Vocabulary (4.36) was reported as one of the most noticeable benefits. P4 described shifting from repeatedly using “good” to more varied words such as “excellent” or “wonderful” depending on context, while P6 and P7 noted that vocabulary related to everyday topics, encountered repeatedly in the app, made word retrieval easier during speaking activities or presentations.

Fluency received the lowest mean (3.79, “Agree”), consistent with Tran et al.'s (2024) finding that fluency development depends on multiple factors beyond a single learning tool, including environment and motivation. P2 and P3 both noted a reduction in long pauses and filler words, but P5 observed that this improvement was more evident in casual conversation than in formal academic speaking, suggesting that Duolingo alone may be insufficient for developing fluency at the academic level.

The Role of Duolingo in Reducing Speaking Anxiety (RQ2)

Category B received an overall mean of 4.36 (“Agree”), indicating that Duolingo meaningfully contributed to reducing participants’ speaking anxiety. Immediate feedback (4.86) and a low-pressure environment (4.71) were the two most influential features (Table 1).

Participants valued Duolingo’s private, non-judgmental feedback system. P5 explained that mistakes on Duolingo were never judged, so there was no need to feel embarrassed, while P1 emphasized that automatic correction felt different from being corrected directly by another person. The absence of social evaluation was similarly the central reason participants felt comfortable practicing: P4 explained feeling more comfortable because no classmate or lecturer could see her results, which built confidence before speaking in class, while P3 contrasted this with classroom practice, where using an incorrect word invites immediate criticism from others.

Regarding the specific types of speaking anxiety identified by Horwitz et al. (1986), communication apprehension (4.07) and fear of

negative evaluation (4.07) both declined gradually with repeated practice, while test anxiety (4.43) declined the most. P2 contrasted the pressure of formal, graded speaking assessments — where nervousness increases because many people are listening — with independent Duolingo practice, where mistakes can simply be repeated. Interestingly, the item “more confident about starting conversations with others” received the lowest score in Category B (3.86), suggesting that confidence gained through self-directed Duolingo practice does not always transfer readily to spontaneous real-life conversation.

A noteworthy exception emerged from P5, who reported that fear of negative evaluation functioned as a motivating rather than debilitating force, pushing her to prepare more thoroughly before speaking or presentation tasks. This finding echoes Alpert and Haber’s (1960) distinction between facilitating and debilitating anxiety, suggesting that the relationship between anxiety and performance is not uniformly negative.

Table 1 Summary of Mean Scores per Theoretical Indicator

Indicator	Source	Mean	Cat.
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Pronunciation	Derakhshan '16	4.52	SA
Grammar	Derakhshan '16	4.50	SA
Vocabulary	Derakhshan '16	4.36	A
Fluency	Derakhshan '16	3.79	A
Accessibility	Stockwell '10	4.57	SA
Autonomous Learning	Stockwell '10	4.43	A
Immediate Feedback	Stockwell '10	4.86	SA
Repeated Exposure	Stockwell '10	4.14	A
Low-pressure Env.	Reinders & Benson '17	4.71	SA
Comm.	Horwitz et al. '86	4.07	A
Apprehension	Horwitz et al. '86	4.07	A
Fear of Neg. Evaluation	Horwitz et al. '86	4.07	A
Test Anxiety	Horwitz et al. '86	4.43	A
Overall Mean		4.38	A

Note. SA = *Strongly Agree*; A = *Agree*.

Discussion

The findings align with Stockwell's (2010) argument that immediate feedback and repeated exposure are among the most effective MALL features for supporting both language development and affective comfort, and with Reinders and Benson's (2017) claim that mobile technology creates a more private, stress-free learning context that encourages risk-taking. They also corroborate Rachman's (2025) finding that communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety significantly reduce students' willingness to speak in formal

situations, and Quvanch et al.'s (2024) and Rahmawati et al.'s (2025) findings on the variability of learners' coping strategies and behavioral responses to speaking anxiety.

From a cognitive-processing perspective, MacIntyre and Gardner's (1994, as cited in Abdurahman & Rizqi, 2020) input–processing–output framework helps explain these results: Duolingo's repetitive, accessible design appears to ease anxiety primarily at the processing and output stages by familiarizing learners with sentence patterns and pronunciation before they must produce spontaneous speech, consistent with participants' reports of fewer pauses and filler words.

The two research questions are also interconnected: improvements in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar (RQ1) appear to feed directly into participants' growing confidence and reduced anxiety (RQ2), with immediate feedback (4.86) functioning as the single mechanism most responsible for both outcomes. This supports the view that Duolingo functions not merely as a skill-building tool but as a space for psychological preparation before formal, evaluative speaking situations

— although, consistent with Park et al. (2025), participants agreed that Duolingo's everyday-language content only partially overlaps with the more academic, structured demands of university-level speaking courses such as Speaking for Academic Purposes.

D. Conclusion

This study concludes that English Education students at IPI Garut hold a generally positive perception of Duolingo as a MALL platform for developing speaking skills (RQ1: mean 4.41) and for reducing speaking anxiety (RQ2: mean 4.36). Pronunciation and grammar improved the most, largely through immediate speech-recognition feedback and repeated exposure to sentence patterns, while fluency improved more slowly and mainly in casual, rather than academic, speaking contexts. Regarding anxiety, Duolingo's accessibility, autonomous-learning features, and — most importantly — its immediate, non-judgmental feedback and low-pressure, judgment-free environment were identified as the key mechanisms that gradually reduced communication apprehension, fear of negative

evaluation, and test anxiety. One participant's report that fear of negative evaluation motivated rather than hindered her preparation suggests that speaking anxiety does not always function as a purely debilitating factor. Overall, Duolingo appears to function as a bridge between independent speaking practice and classroom performance, developing linguistic competence and reducing anxiety in a mutually reinforcing way.

These conclusions should be read in light of several limitations: the small, single-institution sample of seven participants limits generalizability; reliance on self-reported data may be subject to social desirability bias; the study examined only one MALL application; and speaking performance was assessed through participants' perceptions rather than objective pre-test/post-test measures. Future research is encouraged to involve larger and more diverse samples, combine qualitative data with objective speaking-performance assessment, compare Duolingo with other MALL platforms such as ELSA Speak, Cake, or HelloTalk, and examine the alignment between MALL content and university

speaking curricula over a longer period. In the meantime, educators may consider integrating Duolingo as a supplementary, low-pressure out-of-class speaking task, while learners are encouraged to use it consistently as a safe space to rehearse and build confidence before performing in more formal, evaluative academic settings.

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