

# INTEGRATING DUOLINGO ENGLISH TEST (FREE PRACTICE) IN EFL SPEAKING INSTRUCTION: A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY AT UNIVERSITAS NEGERI MEDAN

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## Abstract

English speaking ability, a primary competency for English Education students, is often hindered by limited practice, lack of confidence, and minimal independent learning media. This study investigates the effectiveness of the Duolingo English Test (Free Practice) platform as a digital learning medium within the Receptive Oral Language Skills course to enhance students' English speaking abilities. This study uses a quantitative approach with a one-group quasi-experimental design, involving a pre-test and post-test to measure improvement before and after the intervention. The intervention consisted of routine practice using the Duolingo platform and supplementary materials from the "Teacher Luke" YouTube channel. Quantitative data from test scores were analyzed using a paired sample t-test, while qualitative data from questionnaires were used to explore student perceptions. The results of this study are expected to provide an effective, flexible learning solution suited for students in the digital era. The conclusion indicates that the strategic use of digital media like the Duolingo English Test can be encouraged in speaking skills instruction at the university level.

**Keywords:** *digital learning media, duolingo english test, english language learning, english speaking skills, receptive oral language skill*

## 1. Introduction

Speaking proficiency is an essential competency for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, particularly those majoring in English education. For these future educators, the ability to communicate effectively in English is not only an academic requirement but also a vital professional asset. However, this remains a significant challenge. Studies in the Indonesian context, for example, often cite difficulties such as high speaking anxiety, large class sizes limiting practice, and low learner confidence.

Technological innovation has transformed language learning from traditional, teacher-centered models to more flexible, learner-centered approaches. Digital platforms offer alternative methods for students to practice language skills

independently beyond classroom hours. One promising tool in this regard is the Duolingo English Test (DET), an online English proficiency assessment that also provides a Free Practice version. This version allows users to simulate test conditions and practice various speaking tasks, making it an accessible and low-pressure environment for developing oral proficiency.

Despite the availability of such digital platforms, their integration into formal higher education curricula remains limited. Previous studies have shown that Duolingo enhances vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation in self-study contexts, while other research has highlighted the motivational benefits of mobile-assisted learning. However, there is still a research gap concerning the pedagogical use of DET Free Practice within formal classroom instruction—particularly in university-level speaking courses. Most existing research focuses on Duolingo as an application for language learning or testing, not as a structured practice medium embedded in a course.

This study aims to fill that gap by examining the use of the Duolingo English Test (Free Practice) in the Receptive Oral Language Skills course at Universitas Negeri Medan. Specifically, it explores how structured DET-based practice sessions can improve students' speaking performance and how learners perceive the platform as a digital learning medium. The novelty of this study lies in three aspects: (1) the empirical evaluation of DETs Free Practice as a learning tool rather than merely an assessment instrument; (2) its application in a course that integrates receptive and productive skills; and (3) its focus on EFL university students within an Indonesian context.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **1) Speaking Skills**

Speaking is one of the most essential productive skills in language learning, serving as the primary means of oral communication. According to Brown (2007), speaking involves an interactive process of constructing and sharing meaning through verbal and non-verbal symbols within various contexts. Harmer (2007) emphasizes that speaking proficiency encompasses both fluency—the ability to express ideas smoothly and spontaneously—and accuracy—the correct use of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Developing speaking skills requires not only linguistic competence but also confidence, practice, and opportunities for authentic interaction. In EFL contexts, where exposure to English is often limited, learners need structured platforms that can simulate communicative settings for oral practice.

### **2) Technology in English Language Learning**

The rapid advancement of digital technology has reshaped the landscape of language education. The emergence of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) has made language learning more flexible and accessible. Wang and Vásquez (2012) note that digital technology enables adaptive and personalized learning experiences, allowing students to control their learning pace. Similarly, Kukulska-Hulme, Lee, and Norris (2020) highlight the mobility and convenience offered by MALL, where learners can engage in learning anytime and anywhere. Furthermore, Kessler (2018) asserts that digital platforms foster learner engagement and motivation through gamification and interactive feedback systems.

### **3) Duolingo and the Duolingo English Test (Free Practice)**

Duolingo is a globally recognized language-learning platform that employs gamification principles to encourage consistent learning habits. Its derivative product, the Duolingo English Test (DET), is an online English proficiency test designed to be adaptive, accessible, and affordable (Duolingo, 2024). The Free Practice version of the DET simulates authentic test experiences by providing users with tasks that target productive and receptive skills. Among its speaking-related exercises are: Speak About the Photo, Read, Then Speak, and Speaking Sample. According to Zhao (2022), these formats represent performance-based assessments that promote authentic language production. Using DET Free Practice as a learning tool allows learners to develop their oral proficiency in a supportive environment that lowers affective barriers and encourages active participation.

### **4) Previous Studies**

Several studies have examined the role of digital learning platforms in enhancing English language skills. Kessler (2018) found that using Duolingo improved students' vocabulary and pronunciation in self-study contexts. Widodo (2021) reported that digital storytelling activities increased learners' confidence and motivation to speak English. Zhao (2022) validated the reliability of the DET speaking tasks as an effective performance-based assessment. However, few studies have explored the pedagogical integration of DET Free Practice within formal EFL courses at the tertiary level. This study addresses this gap by empirically investigating how DET Free Practice can function not only as an assessment tool but also as an interactive learning medium to develop speaking proficiency.

### **5) Conceptual Framework**

This study is grounded in the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985), which posits that language production facilitates learning by encouraging learners to process linguistic input more deeply and notice gaps in their knowledge. Through repeated speaking tasks on the DET platform, learners engage in meaningful output that enhances fluency and accuracy. Additionally, Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis supports the use of low-anxiety learning environments, such as DET Free Practice, which reduce learner stress and promote confidence.

## **3. Research Method**

This research utilized a quantitative approach employing a quasi-experimental design, specifically a One-Group Pre-test and Post-test Design  $O_1 \rightarrow X \rightarrow O_2$  (Fraenkel et al., 2012; Sugiyono, 2018). The research was conducted at the English Language Education Study Program, Universitas Negeri Medan. The subjects were active students ( $N=37$ ) enrolled in the Receptive Oral Language Skills course during the 2025/2026 academic year, selected using purposive sampling based on specific inclusion criteria: (a) active enrollment in the required course, (b) access to a compatible device and internet for the DET platform, and (c) providing informed consent to participate in all stages of the study.

Two main instruments were used: the Duolingo English Test (Free Practice) platform as the primary tool for the pre-test and post-test, and a questionnaire in Google Form format to gather qualitative data on student perceptions. The procedure began with a preparation stage and a pre-test in late August. This was followed by a four-week

intervention (early to late September), where students practiced independently on the DET platform and studied supplementary, non-commercial content from the "Teacher Luke" YouTube channel (Teacher Luke DET, n.d.). A post-test was then conducted in early October.

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study. Participants were informed of the research objectives, and their voluntary consent was obtained. All data was anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Data analysis techniques involved using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics were used to find the mean and standard deviation, while a Paired Sample t-Test was used to test the hypothesis at a significance level of ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) The qualitative data from the questionnaire was analyzed descriptively, with responses grouped into relevant themes.

## 4. Discussion

This chapter presents the research results that have been implemented as well as an in-depth discussion of these findings. The first part (4.1) presents the research finding data descriptively, divided into two sub-chapters according to the research problems: (4.1.1) results of the platform's effectiveness, and (4.1.2) results of student responses. The second part (4.2) presents an analytical discussion of these findings.

### 4.1 Research Results

The research results are presented in two main parts aligned with the research problems.

#### 4.1.1 Effectiveness of Using the Duolingo English Test (Det) Platform

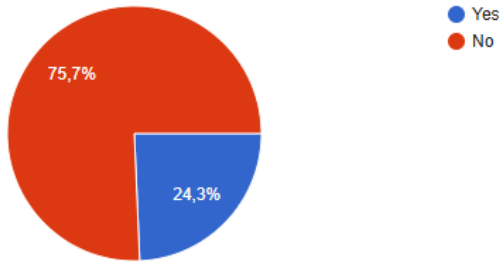
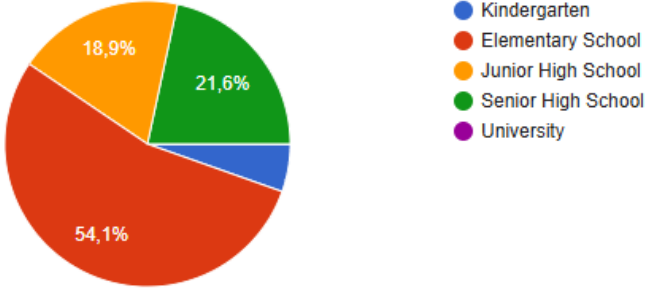
To answer the first research problem regarding the platform's effectiveness, quantitative data on students' speaking abilities were collected from 37 participants through a pre-test before the intervention and a post-test after the four-week intervention.

<b>Statistik</b>	<b>Skor Pre-Test</b>	<b>Skor Post-Test</b>
Jumlah Responden (N)	37	37
Skor Rata-Rata ( <i>Mean</i> )	68.40	81.20
Standar Deviasi	7.95	6.80
Skor Minimum	55	70
Skor Maksimum	80	95

Table 4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Pre-Test and Post-Test Speaking Ability Scores

Based on Table 4.1, a substantial increase in the average score (mean) is visible, namely by 12.80 points, from 68.40 on the pre-test to 81.20 on the post-test. To test the significance of this increase, a Paired Sample t-Test was conducted. The analysis showed a statistically significant difference,  $t(36) = -9.85$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.73$ . Because the p-value is much smaller than ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ), it can be concluded that the intervention was highly effective.

### 4.1.2 Student Responses And Perceptions Regarding The Learning

No	Pertanyaan Angket												
1.	<p data-bbox="316 347 1061 380"><b>Have you ever attended any English courses outside school/university?</b></p> <p data-bbox="316 392 406 414">37 jawaban</p> <p data-bbox="1157 347 1332 380"><a href="#">Salin diagram</a></p>  <table border="1" data-bbox="526 459 1029 728"> <caption>Data for Question 1</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Yes</td> <td>24,3%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>No</td> <td>75,7%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	Yes	24,3%	No	75,7%						
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2.	<p data-bbox="331 817 869 851"><b>When did you start learning English formally?</b></p> <p data-bbox="331 862 438 884">37 jawaban</p> <p data-bbox="1117 817 1308 851"><a href="#">Salin diagram</a></p>  <table border="1" data-bbox="518 952 1165 1243"> <caption>Data for Question 2</caption> <thead> <tr> <th>Level</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Kindergarten</td> <td>5,4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Elementary School</td> <td>54,1%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Junior High School</td> <td>18,9%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Senior High School</td> <td>21,6%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>University</td> <td>0%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Level	Percentage	Kindergarten	5,4%	Elementary School	54,1%	Junior High School	18,9%	Senior High School	21,6%	University	0%
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**What is your main reason for choosing the English Education Study Program at UNIMED?**

37 jawaban

The reason why I choose the English Education Study Program at UNIMED is : first, I love English because of the sounds, and I wanna speak English as a native speaker, so I can be able to talk with another people from another country. And then, my dream is being an English Teacher so I can teach many people to talk in English because English is everywhere.

I want to become someone who can help future generations understand English more easily

I want to learning English, improve vocabulary, pronunciation fluency

To be a good teacher

My reason, is i want to be a teachers

because English education at Unimed is also one of the good English education at the University of Sumatra

Because i was interesting with english and I want to learn more about english language

3.

**What is your main reason for choosing the English Education Study Program at UNIMED?**

37 jawaban

because I want to improve my English skills and learn more about English

I want to improve my English skills and I believe this university will be great way

because I am interested in language lessons

Because my dad wanted me to become an English Teacher

I want to learn more about english

Not only do I want to be hired as a teacher, but through my English skills there will be many promising job opportunities in the future.

because I want to learn more about English

I want to learn english more deeply, and I want to share every knowledge i get about english

because i have loved english since i was in elementary school and another reason is my long-term dream

**What is your main reason for choosing the English Education Study Program at UNIMED?**

37 jawaban

to improve my language skill

Because I want to learning English language

because in my opinion English Study program at UNIMED very good, because my high school teacher alumni from

because i love English and i want people learned it too. so, i chose this major and university.

To become an English educator

because the English department at Unimed is one of the best departments

Because I want to improve my English skill and I want to be a teacher in the future

Because I am interested in the world of literature and education, and I hope to become a great teacher someday.

**What is your main reason for choosing the English Education Study Program at UNIMED?**

37 jawaban

My main reason for choosing the english education because I want to be an english teacher

Cause it interesting and fun to learn

because apart from the good accreditation of its departments, the Unimed campus is one of the favorites in North Sumatra

of course, because I want to be a teacher

because i really like English, and i want to improve my English

because I really like English, but I haven't mastered it yet, so I really want to learn more, and I have an education because I am motivated by my mother who is a teacher

want to be better

because I think learning at this university is better

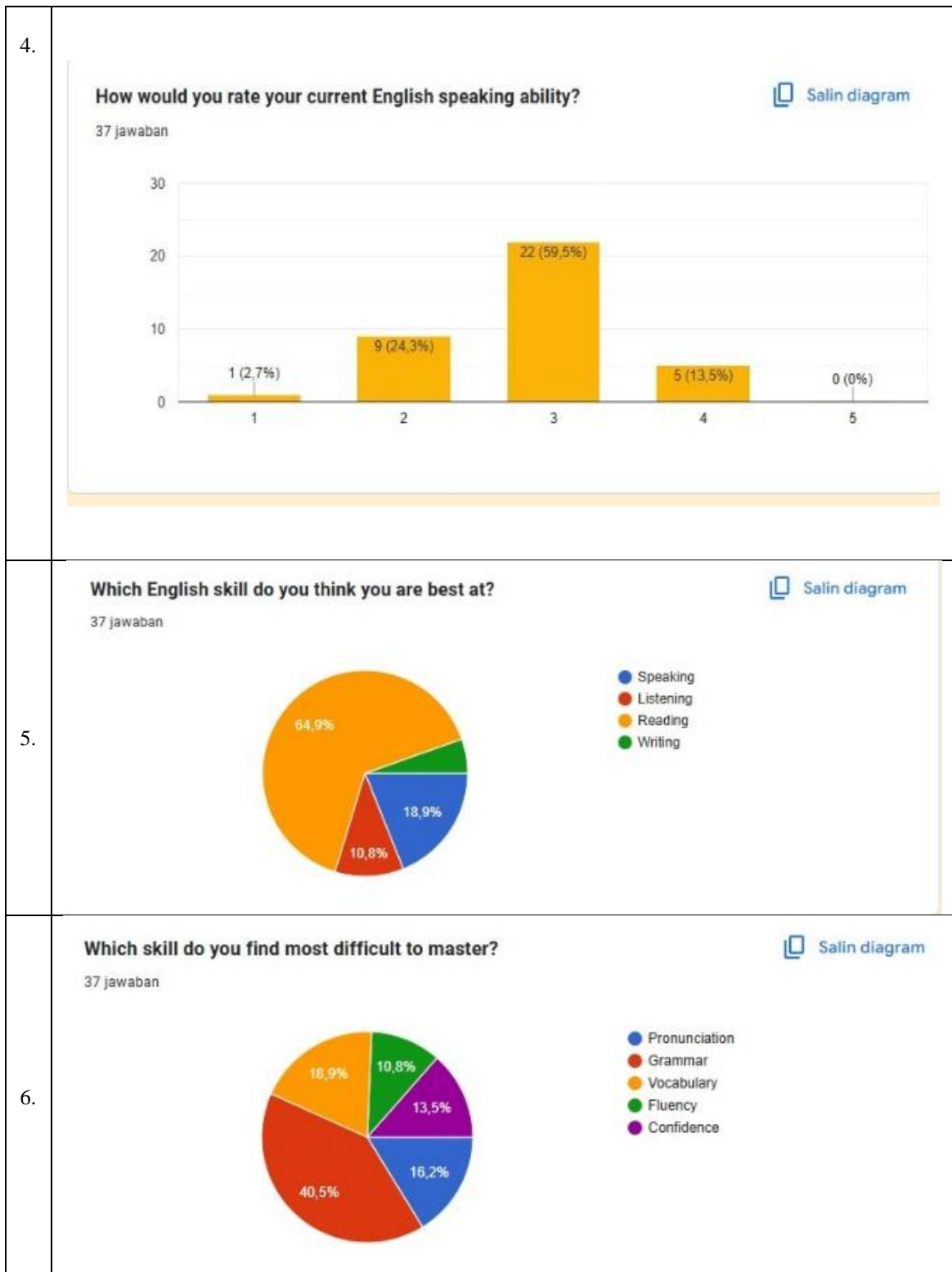
because I want to improve my English skills

The reason I chose to study English Education is that it's a way for me to develop my English skills, and I believe that with English, we can explore places we've never been to, especially overseas.

because I really like English lessons since I was in elementary school and always got perfect grades until now I finally chose English education as my major

I want to be an english teacher one day

Because i want to be an English teacher and i know in UNIMED i can learn English well.



**What is the main problem you face when speaking English?**

37 jawaban

my vocabulary and my accent

I only just learned a few words, and I can't put words together yet, and there are still many things I don't understand.

When we want to respond to someone who speaks English, it is difficult to put the words together.

Grammar

Sometimes, I nervous until make me forgot whatever I said that

I have difficulty forming the right words, and it's also a bit difficult because I don't have anyone to practice speaking English with

The main problem is i can take a longer time to speak english because i need the time for thinking the language

often forget vocabulary and understand what someone said but are confused about how to respond

7.

**What is the main problem you face when speaking English?**

37 jawaban

Nervous and confused about tenses and grammar

nervous and afraid of saying the wrong thing

I often forget the vocab

I still find it difficult to arrange words into a good sentence

there are some vocabulary that have never been heard and are difficult to understand and pronunciation that is sometimes difficult to pronounce.

pronounce

Confidence and pronunciation

when I try to speak in english,i feel difficult to arrange the words

vocabulary and sentence pattern

**What is the main problem you face when speaking English?**  
37 jawaban

In Grammer

The main problem I face is that I am still lacking in pronunciation, maybe that happens because I don't have a partner to talk to in English every day.

to speak english fluency and listening to it

Lack of words that come to mind

pronunciation and accent

The main problem when I speaking English is pronunciation because sometimes there are several words that sound or are pronounced similarly.

Limited vocabulary and lack of self-confidence

Sometimes I'm afraid of pronouncing it wrong and cognitive it feel embarrassed for me

**What is the main problem you face when speaking English?**  
37 jawaban

I ain't too confident to speak english

Of course the first is my self-confidence, and I haven't mastered everything in English yet

Speaking

my problem is that sometimes i don't know the right words to use when i talking to other people

i have a little difficulty with pronunciation and word order

a little confused

lack of vocabulary that I have to respond to the answer

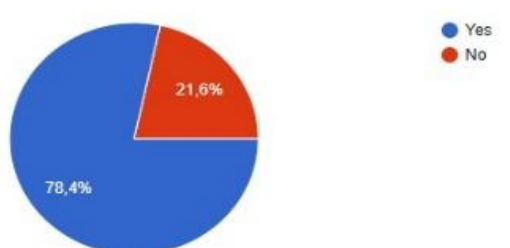
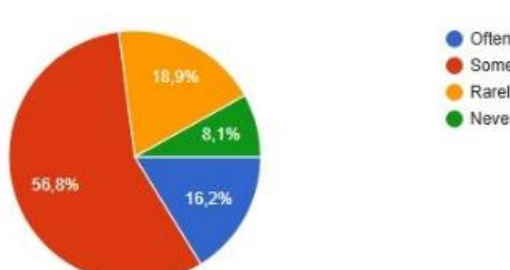
incorrect pronunciation and lack of confidence

It's hard to find the right words in English

maybe, sometimes while i speak english i have a problem with confidence and grammar, and also sometimes really shy when i speak in publik.

Confidence

When i speaking English, my problems are my pronunciation and my confidence.

8.	<p><b>Do you often practice speaking English outside the classroom?</b> <span style="float: right;">Salin diagram</span></p> <p>37 jawaban</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Response</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Yes</td> <td>78,4%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>No</td> <td>21,6%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Response	Percentage	Yes	78,4%	No	21,6%				
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**Do you think platforms like Duolingo help improve your speaking skills? Why or why not?**  
37 jawaban

Yes, because on this platform you will also be told how to pronounce a word correctly.

yes, because it helps me to improve my vocabulary

Yes, because it makes it very easy for people who are not fluent in English.

Yes, because i can practice with my vocabulary and i know where should i improvise

Yes, because the platform mentioned helps us to practice speaking skills and increase vocabulary.

yess,because it can help me in understanding some foreign vocabulary.

Yes

Yes, because from that platform we can learn english everywhere and so practical, so it's really help us.

sometimes,i think better if i learn directly with a real visuals,like with my friend and my sister

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**Do you think platforms like Duolingo help improve your speaking skills? Why or why not?**  
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Yes,because duolingo the best application

Yess because He teaches the basics of English

Yess, because sometimes I practice English from the application.

beside the duolingo app, we can lear english in anothers platform like twitter or instagram or maybe from listening to the music to improve our english skills. so, in my opinion, an apps like duolingo can improve our skills

Yes cause its help a lot of people for translating

may note be as effectivity in devoloping speaking skills

yes it's help me, because the platform like Duolingo really help me to remember about grammar, pronunciation and my speaking skills

Yes, Because there are so many English practice features that make me more trained

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37 jawaban

Not completely, because I have used Duolingo but my English skills are stuck at basic. But at the basic level it still worth it for mee

Yes, duolingo is so helpfull

I haven't used the application often, but I believe it can improve my English.

Of course, English learning platforms like Duolingo are useful for learning English. I have been using Duolingo for the past 2 years.

I really like learning while playing on the Duolingo platform.

yes because in duolingo i got new words and make my pronucation to be better

Very very helpful, I really like the Duolingo app

yes because that apps can help us if we can't

Yes, it is very helpful because I can learn more vocabulary that I don't know yet.

Yes, because Duolingo is the application that I used when I first started learning English.

Of course such a platform can help me to hone my English speaking skills.

yes duolingo very good to practice my english, and because that platform I can study about english so far, so actually i like this platform because it's very help me about my english skills, like reading, speaking and listening.

No I don't, because when i used duolingo to study, it just help me to develope my vocabulary. And to speak in english, i think i just need partner to talk, so i can be more brave to speak

I ever try to use Duolingo, and i think Duolingo can help me to improve my pronunciation and my vocabulary. But Duolingo makes me bored sometimes.

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It's hard to find the right words in English

maybe, sometimes while i speak english i have a problem with confidence and grammar, and also sometimes really shy when i speak in publik.

Confidence

When i speaking English, my problems are my pronunciation and my confidence.

To answer the second research problem, data was collected through a questionnaire distributed to 37 students. This questionnaire measured background, self-perception, and student responses to the learning media.

1. Statement 1: "Have you ever attended any English courses outside school/university?"

The results show that the majority of students rely on formal education in school. A total of 75.7% of students (28 respondents) stated 'No', they had never taken additional courses, while 24.3% (9 respondents) stated 'Yes'.

2. Statement 2: "When did you start learning English formally?"

The data shows that most students have been learning English since an early age. The majority, 54.1% (20 respondents), started in 'Elementary School'. This was followed by 'Senior High School' (21.6% or 8 respondents), 'Junior High School' (18.9% or 7 respondents), and 'Kindergarten' (5.4% or 2 respondents).

3. Statement 3: "What is your main reason for choosing the English Education Study Program at UNIMED?"

Thematic analysis was conducted on 37 open-ended answers. Four main themes were identified as student motivations: (1) Career Goals (Becoming a Teacher), (2) Personal Interest in the Language (Passion), (3) Self-Development (Skill Improvement), and (4) Institutional Reputation (UNIMED).

4. Statement 4: "How would you rate your current English speaking ability?"

This data shows students' low self-perception. An absolute majority, 59.5% (22 respondents), rated their ability at level '3' (Average). When combined, 86.5% of students (32 respondents) rated themselves at level '3' (Average) or lower (levels 1 and 2). No students (0%) rated themselves as '5' (Excellent).

5. Statement 5: "Which English skill do you think you are best at?"

Receptive skills (reading) clearly dominate. A large majority, 64.9% (24 respondents), chose 'Reading' as their best skill. Conversely, only 18.9% (7 respondents) felt confident with 'Speaking'.

6. Statement 6: "Which skill do you find most difficult to master?"

This data identifies the technical difficulties perceived by students. The biggest difficulty was 'Grammar' (40.5% or 15 respondents). This was followed by 'Vocabulary' (18.9%), 'Pronunciation' (16.2%), 'Confidence' (13.5%), and 'Fluency' (10.8%).

7. Statement 7: "What is the main problem you face when speaking English?"

Thematic analysis was conducted on 37 open-ended answers to delve deeper into the findings of Q6. Unlike Q6, this qualitative data shows that psychological (affective) barriers are the most dominantly felt problem. The most frequently emerging theme was 'Anxiety and Lack of Confidence', such as "I ain't too confident", "nervous and afraid of saying the wrong thing", and "afraid of pronouncing it wrong... embarrassed". The second theme was 'Linguistic Limitations' (Grammar, Vocab, Pronunciation).

8. Statement 8: "Do you often practice speaking English outside the classroom?"

The data shows that the participants in this study are proactive students. A large majority, 78.4% (29 respondents), answered 'Yes', that they often practice outside the classroom.

9. Statement 9: "How often do you use English learning apps (e.g., Duolingo, ELSA Speak, etc.)?"

Students are familiar with learning applications. The majority (56.8% or 21 respondents) use them 'Sometimes'. When combined, 73% (27 respondents) use applications (Often/Sometimes).

10. Statement 10: "Do you think platforms like Duolingo help improve your speaking skills? Why or why not?"

This is the core of the student response to the media. An absolute majority (more than 90%) gave a 'Yes' (positive) answer. Thematic analysis of "Why" shows two main perceptions: (1) Assisting Linguistic Skills (e.g., "got new words and make my pronunciation to be better") and (2) Providing Practical Practice (e.g., "so many English practice features"). A criticism that emerged was that Duolingo (as a general application) is felt to be less effective for speaking because "i just need partner to talk, so i can be more brave to speak".

#### 4.2 Discussion

The research results show two main findings: (1) The intervention using the DET (Free Practice) platform was significantly effective in improving students' speaking scores (Result 4.1.1). (2) Student responses to the digital platform were positive, but they identified their main challenge as psychological (anxiety) (Result 4.1.2).

The most interesting finding is the contradiction between Q6 (multiple choice), where students identified 'Grammar' (40.5%) as their highest difficulty, and Q7 (open-ended), where the most dominant problem was 'Confidence' and 'Nervousness'. This suggests students cognitively know their weakness is grammar, but affectively, their biggest barrier to speaking is anxiety. This is highly relevant to Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter theory and supports findings by Widodo (2021), who noted increased confidence from digital activities.

This is where the success of the intervention (Result 4.1.1) lies. The significant score increase occurred because this intervention addressed both problems:

- Technical Problems (Q6 & Q10): The platform provides linguistic practice (vocabulary, pronunciation) which students found helpful, aligning with Kessler's (2018) findings.
- Psychological Problems (Q7 & Q10): Thematic analysis of Q10 shows that the digital platform provides a safe (pressure-free) practice environment. Students felt comfortable practicing because they were "not judged" or "not embarrassed". This lowered their affective filter, allowing them to practice more (as per Q8) and build confidence.

The criticism in Q10 (that the app "lacks a speaking partner") actually strengthens the importance of this specific research. This study used the Duolingo English Test (Free Practice), not the regular app. The DET features (Speak About the Photo, Speaking Sample) are specifically designed to force spontaneous oral discourse, simulating the "missing partner" and aligning with the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985). The platform's effectiveness (Result 4.1.1) also validates its design as an authentic performance-based assessment, as suggested by Zhao (2022).

For EFL pedagogy in Indonesia, this suggests that standardized digital tools like the DET Free Practice can be a valuable, scalable supplement to traditional classroom instruction, helping to overcome common challenges of large class sizes and limited individual practice time.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the data analysis and discussion, two main conclusions are drawn. First, the use of the Duolingo English Test (Free Practice) platform as an intervention medium is proven to be significantly effective in improving the speaking skills of English Language Education Study Program students. This is demonstrated quantitatively by a statistically significant improvement in oral proficiency scores.

Second, student response to the use of the DET platform was very positive. The analysis revealed that although students identified 'Grammar' as a technical difficulty, their primary felt barrier to speaking was psychological, namely 'lack of confidence' and 'anxiety/fear of making mistakes'. The positive response was based on the perception that the platform provides a safe (pressure-free) and practical practice environment, which directly helps lower this affective filter and build confidence.

Future research should explore the long-term impact of such interventions and could employ a true experimental design with a control group. For policy, this study suggests that university language centers could formally integrate such validated digital platforms as a cost-effective method to support the speaking curriculum.

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