

Students' Difficulties in Mastering English Vocabulary Using Duolingo at SMP IL Kapten Nasipanaf Kupang

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<https://doi.org/10.31004/jerkin.v4i4.6203>

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 25 Mei April 2026

Revised: 24 Mei 2026

Accepted: 1 Juni 2026

Kata kunci :

Kesulitan siswa; kosakata bahasa Inggris; Duolingo; SMP.

Keywords:

students' difficulties; English vocabulary; Duolingo; junior high school



ABSTRACT

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis kesulitan siswa dalam menguasai kosakata bahasa Inggris melalui aplikasi Duolingo di SMP IL Kapten Nasipanaf Kupang. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif melalui observasi kelas, angket siswa, wawancara guru dan siswa terpilih, serta analisis dokumen. Data dianalisis melalui reduksi data, penyajian data, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa mengalami kesulitan pada pengucapan, ejaan, penggunaan kata secara gramatikal, serta pemahaman makna dan retensi. Faktor penyebabnya meliputi rendahnya motivasi belajar, kurangnya latihan di luar aplikasi, pemahaman fitur yang terbatas, akses internet yang tidak stabil, dan keterbatasan perangkat. Duolingo membantu pengenalan awal kosakata melalui latihan berulang dan fitur gamifikasi, tetapi belum cukup mendukung penggunaan kosakata secara produktif. Oleh karena itu, penggunaan Duolingo perlu dipadukan dengan pendampingan guru dan aktivitas kelas berbasis praktik.

This study aimed to analyze students' difficulties in mastering English vocabulary through the Duolingo application at SMP IL Kapten Nasipanaf Kupang. A descriptive qualitative method was used through classroom observations, student questionnaires, interviews with English teachers and selected students, and document analysis. The findings showed that students faced difficulties in pronunciation, spelling, grammatical usage, meaning, and retention. These problems were influenced by low learning motivation, limited practice outside the application, insufficient understanding of Duolingo features, unstable internet access, and limited availability of mobile devices. Duolingo supported initial vocabulary recognition through repetition and gamified exercises, but it did not fully support productive vocabulary use in real communication. Therefore, Duolingo should be combined with teacher guidance, speaking practice, sentence writing, and contextual classroom activities.



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How to Cite: Agripina Fomeni et al (2026) Students' Difficulties in Mastering English Vocabulary Using Duolingo at SMP IL Kapten Nasipanaf Kupang <https://doi.org/10.31004/jerkin.v4i4.6203>

INTRODUCTION

English is an international language that plays an important role in various aspects of life, especially in the current era of globalization. Mastery of English, particularly vocabulary, is a key component in improving communication skills, both spoken and written, because vocabulary provides the basic foundation for understanding meaning, expressing ideas, and building communicative competence (Hatch & Brown, 1995; Nation, 2001; Alqahtani, 2015). According to Nation (2001), having an adequate vocabulary is essential for students to understand and use English effectively in

various communication contexts. Vocabulary learning also involves several elements, including word meaning, pronunciation, spelling, grammatical use, contextual application, and dictionary-based understanding of word form and meaning (Ur, 1996; Ur, 1997; Thornbury, 2002; Wehmeler, 2003). However, many students still experience difficulty mastering English vocabulary. Various factors, such as lack of interest in learning, monotonous learning methods, and minimal English practice in everyday life, may cause these difficulties (Amin, 2019; Arifin, 2020; Gushendra, 2017). In junior high schools, especially at SMP IL Kapten Nasipanaf Kupang, these challenges are evident because some students show low ability in understanding and using English vocabulary correctly.

The use of Duolingo in English learning is expected to provide an alternative solution to help students expand and deepen their vocabulary mastery. Mobile-assisted language learning can support language practice by providing flexible access, repeated exposure, and interactive exercises outside the classroom (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Kusumadewi & Widyastuti, 2018). Duolingo offers an easy-to-use interface, motivating gamification features, and an adaptive learning approach according to users' abilities. In addition, Duolingo provides repetitive exercises that may strengthen students' memory of new words, although its effectiveness depends on students' consistency, motivation, and the integration of application-based learning with classroom activities (Vesselinov & Grego, 2012; Pangkuh Ajisoko, 2020; Bennani & Mosbah, 2022). At SMP IL Kapten Nasipanaf Kupang, Duolingo has been used as a medium for English language learning. However, based on initial observations and interviews with English teachers, several challenges are still encountered by students in mastering English vocabulary through the application. These difficulties include understanding word meanings, pronunciation, and using words correctly in sentences. External factors, such as limited internet access, lack of teacher guidance, and low learning motivation, also influence the effectiveness of Duolingo in vocabulary learning (Rahmawati, 2022; Sari, 2021).

Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing the difficulties faced by students in mastering English vocabulary through Duolingo. The study is directed toward identifying the forms of vocabulary difficulties, the factors contributing to these difficulties, and the extent to which Duolingo supports or fails to support students' vocabulary acquisition at SMP IL Kapten Nasipanaf Kupang.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. This approach was chosen to obtain a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The qualitative method allowed the researcher to explore the complexity of students' experiences, perspectives, and behaviors within their natural learning context. This design was considered appropriate because vocabulary difficulties are related not only to linguistic aspects, such as meaning, spelling, and pronunciation, but also to students' learning behavior and interaction with digital learning media (Nation, 2001; Thornbury, 2002; Godwin-Jones, 2011). The primary objective was to describe the specific difficulties faced by students at SMP IL Kapten Nasipanaf Kupang in mastering English vocabulary and to examine the influence of technology-based learning media on their vocabulary acquisition process.

To ensure the validity and richness of the data, the researcher used four primary data collection techniques: classroom observation, interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. The instruments included an observation checklist, interview guide, questionnaire forms, field notes, and recording devices. The participants consisted of Grade VII students and English teachers at SMP IL Kapten Nasipanaf Kupang. The collected qualitative data were analyzed systematically through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data triangulation was applied by comparing information from observations, questionnaires, interviews, and documents to strengthen the credibility of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study involved interviews with students (N=20) to identify the specific challenges they encountered while using Duolingo for vocabulary acquisition. The difficulties were categorized into four main aspects of vocabulary knowledge: pronunciation, grammar or usage, spelling, and meaning or retention. These aspects are closely related to the components of vocabulary mastery, which include knowing a word's form, meaning, use, and pronunciation (Hatch & Brown, 1995; Nation, 2001; Ur, 1997). The findings indicate that students often had difficulty recalling new vocabulary, understanding contextual word use, distinguishing similar-sounding words, and pronouncing certain English words

accurately. Such problems show that vocabulary learning requires more than memorizing word lists; it requires repeated exposure, contextual practice, and meaningful use in communication (Thornbury, 2002; Alqahtani, 2015).

The students' difficulties were influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors included low sustained motivation, weak self-regulation, and limited practice outside the application. Some students used Duolingo only when instructed by the teacher and did not consistently repeat vocabulary exercises independently. Previous studies also indicate that students' vocabulary development may be affected by motivation, learning habits, learning strategies, and the availability of supporting learning environments (Amin, 2019; Arifin, 2020; Rahmawati, 2022). External factors included unstable internet access, limited availability of mobile devices, and distracting home learning environments. These conditions interrupted the learning process and reduced students' opportunity to practice vocabulary regularly, which supports the view that digital language learning requires both technological access and pedagogical guidance (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Sari, 2021).

The research confirms that Duolingo is a valuable and accessible tool for initial vocabulary acquisition; however, it has limitations in supporting deeper vocabulary mastery among Grade VII students at SMP IL Kaptan Nasipanaf Kupang. The students particularly struggled with productive aspects of vocabulary, such as correct pronunciation, grammatical usage in sentences, and long-term retention. These aspects are less emphasized by the application's gamified and recognition-based format. Similar findings have been reported in studies on digital and mobile language learning, which suggest that applications can support vocabulary recognition but still need to be combined with teacher feedback and communicative practice (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Vesselinov & Grego, 2012; Pangkuh Ajisoko, 2020; Bennani & Mosbah, 2022). The findings are consistent with second language acquisition perspectives which argue that vocabulary mastery requires not only input and recognition but also meaningful output, contextual practice, and feedback (Nation, 2001; Ur, 1996; Thornbury, 2002). Therefore, Duolingo should be used as a complementary medium rather than as the only learning tool. A hybrid model is needed, in which teachers integrate Duolingo-based input with classroom activities that require students to speak, write, and use vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Grade VII students of SMP IL Kaptan Nasipanaf Kupang experience four major types of vocabulary-related difficulties in using Duolingo: pronunciation, spelling, grammatical usage, and meaning or retention. These difficulties confirm that vocabulary mastery involves multiple interrelated dimensions, including form, meaning, pronunciation, and appropriate use in context (Hatch & Brown, 1995; Nation, 2001; Ur, 1997). These difficulties emerge because Duolingo mainly emphasizes receptive recognition tasks and provides limited opportunities for contextual input, productive practice, and explicit grammar explanation. As a result, students still struggle to apply newly learned vocabulary in real communication.

Duolingo can support vocabulary learning when it is used consistently and accompanied by appropriate teacher guidance. To maximize its benefits, teachers should combine the application with classroom activities that promote pronunciation practice, sentence construction, contextual vocabulary use, and student output. This recommendation is in line with the view that technology-based language learning should complement, not replace, meaningful classroom interaction and teacher feedback (Godwin-Jones, 2011; Vesselinov & Grego, 2012; Thornbury, 2002). Future studies may involve a larger number of participants or compare Duolingo with other digital vocabulary learning media.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researcher expresses gratitude to SMP IL Kaptan Nasipanaf Kupang, the English teachers, and the participating students who contributed to the implementation of this research and the preparation of this article.

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