

Duolingo as Pre-Speaking Practice: Enhancing Speaking Performance and Reducing Social Anxiety Among EFL Students

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Abstract:

Speaking performance continues to be a major challenge for many EFL students, particularly when they are required to communicate in English during classroom activities. Difficulties in pronunciation, limited vocabulary, low confidence, and fear of negative evaluation often prevent students from participating actively in speaking tasks. Although numerous studies have reported the benefits of Duolingo for language learning, its role as a pre-speaking practice that helps students prepare both linguistically and psychologically before classroom speaking activities has received relatively little attention. Therefore, this study aimed to explore how Duolingo was used as a pre-speaking practice and how it supported students' speaking performance and social anxiety in an EFL classroom. A qualitative descriptive design was employed involving tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Arosbaya. Data were gathered through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña together with thematic analysis. The findings indicated that students became more fluent, confident, and able to use appropriate vocabulary after practicing with Duolingo. They also felt more prepared to speak, participated more actively in classroom activities, and experienced less anxiety when expressing their ideas in English. These findings suggest that Duolingo can be used as an effective pre-speaking practice to support both students' speaking performance and emotional readiness in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Duolingo, pre-speaking practice, speaking performance, social anxiety, EFL students

Introduction

Speaking performance plays a crucial role in English language learning because it enables students to communicate ideas, opinions, and information effectively in various communicative situations. Despite its importance, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Setiawan and Pranowo (2022) explained that many

EFL learners struggle with speaking due to limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, low fluency, and lack of confidence. Besides linguistic difficulties, psychological factors also influence students' willingness to participate in classroom speaking activities. Marlia et al. (2023) reported that many students experience social anxiety because they are afraid of making mistakes and being negatively evaluated by their classmates. Consequently, these challenges often discourage students from expressing their ideas confidently during English lessons.

To address these challenges, English teachers have increasingly integrated digital technology into language learning. One of the approaches that has attracted considerable attention is Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL), which enables students to access language learning materials anytime and anywhere through mobile devices. According to Maharani and Lolita (2024), MALL provides flexible learning opportunities that encourage students to practice English independently while increasing their engagement in the learning process. Among various MALL applications, Duolingo has become one of the most popular platforms because it combines vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, and speaking exercises with immediate feedback. Khomariyah and Ekowijayanto (2025) argued that these interactive features allow learners to practice repeatedly in a less stressful environment, which may improve both language competence and learning confidence.

Numerous studies have investigated the educational benefits of Duolingo. For example, Maharani and Lolita (2024) found that the application positively supports students' vocabulary development and learning motivation, whereas Khomariyah and Ekowijayanto (2025) highlighted its contribution to improving learners' pronunciation and speaking practice. Other researchers have also suggested that technology-assisted language learning creates a more engaging learning environment and encourages students to participate more actively in English learning. Although these findings demonstrate the pedagogical value of Duolingo, previous studies have mainly emphasized language achievement, students' perceptions, or the effectiveness of the application in improving specific language skills.

However, limited research has examined Duolingo as a pre-speaking practice that prepares students before classroom speaking activities. More

importantly, few studies have simultaneously explored how this preparation supports students' speaking performance while reducing their social anxiety in authentic EFL classroom settings. Considering that speaking performance is influenced by both linguistic competence and emotional readiness, this area deserves further investigation. This gap indicates the need to explore not only whether students improve their speaking ability but also how they experience greater confidence and reduced anxiety after practicing with Duolingo before participating in classroom speaking activities. Therefore, this study explores the use of Duolingo as a pre-speaking practice among tenth-grade students at SMA Negeri 1 Arosbaya. Specifically, it investigates how Duolingo supports students' speaking performance and social anxiety based on their classroom experiences. By focusing on students' perspectives obtained through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, this study contributes to the growing literature on Mobile-Assisted Language Learning, particularly regarding the pedagogical role of Duolingo as a pre-speaking preparation strategy. The findings are expected to provide practical insights for English teachers seeking accessible digital tools to create more supportive speaking activities while improving students' confidence and classroom participation.

Review of Literature

Previous studies have consistently identified speaking performance as one of the most challenging aspects of English language learning for EFL students. Razan and Ulfa (2025) emphasized that speaking performance is reflected in students' ability to communicate ideas through fluency, vocabulary use, and confidence during classroom interaction. Likewise, Setiawan and Pranowo (2022) reported that limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, and low confidence frequently prevent students from expressing their ideas effectively in English. These studies demonstrate that successful speaking performance depends not only on students' linguistic competence but also on their readiness to participate in communicative activities. However, they mainly focused on identifying factors influencing speaking performance rather than examining how technology can be used to prepare students before classroom speaking tasks.

The integration of digital technology into English language learning has encouraged the use of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) applications, particularly Duolingo. Maharani and Lolita (2024) found that Duolingo increased students' learning motivation and promoted independent language practice. Similarly, Khomariyah and Ekowijayanto (2025) reported that the application's interactive features supported pronunciation practice and speaking development by providing immediate feedback in a low-pressure learning environment. These findings confirm Duolingo's potential to facilitate English learning. Nevertheless, the primary emphasis of these studies was on language development and students' perceptions of the application, while its role as a pre-speaking practice before classroom speaking activities received limited attention.

Researchers have also highlighted the influence of psychological factors on students' speaking performance. Ajiza et al. (2023) found that social anxiety often discourages EFL students from participating in classroom discussions because they are afraid of making mistakes and receiving negative evaluation from others. Likewise, Hameed and Jawad (2024) argued that a supportive learning environment is essential for reducing anxiety and encouraging active participation during speaking activities. Although these studies clearly demonstrate the relationship between emotional factors and speaking participation, they did not investigate how digital learning applications can help students reduce anxiety before engaging in classroom speaking tasks. Taken together, previous studies indicate that Duolingo contributes to language learning, while reduced social anxiety supports better classroom participation. However, these issues have generally been examined separately. Limited qualitative research has explored Duolingo specifically as a pre-speaking practice that simultaneously supports students' speaking performance and social anxiety in authentic EFL classroom contexts. Therefore, the present study extends previous research by investigating how Duolingo prepares students both linguistically and emotionally before classroom speaking activities through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the implementation of Duolingo as a pre-speaking practice and its relationship with students' speaking performance and social anxiety in an EFL classroom. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to investigate students' experiences, perceptions, and classroom behaviors in their natural learning environment. This design was used to provide a comprehensive description of how students experienced Duolingo before participating in classroom speaking activities.

The research was conducted at SMA Negeri 1 Arosbaya, Bangkalan, Indonesia. The participants were tenth-grade students who had experienced the implementation of Duolingo as a pre-speaking practice during English lessons. They were selected through purposive sampling because they met the characteristics required for the study and could provide relevant information related to the research objectives.

The primary data consisted of classroom observation notes and interview transcripts. Classroom observations were carried out to examine students' speaking performance, particularly their fluency, vocabulary use, and confidence during speaking activities. In addition, observations focused on students' comfort and participation as indicators of classroom social anxiety. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted to obtain more detailed information about students' experiences, perceptions, and feelings after using Duolingo before classroom speaking activities. The researcher acted as the primary research instrument and was supported by an observation checklist and an interview guide developed according to the research questions.

Data collection was conducted in two stages. First, classroom observations were undertaken during English speaking lessons to record students' learning behaviors and classroom interactions after implementing Duolingo as a pre-speaking practice. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected participants to gain deeper insights into how Duolingo influenced their speaking performance and emotional readiness. The interview questions were designed flexibly to encourage participants to explain their experiences while ensuring that the discussion remained relevant to the objectives of the study.

The collected data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The interview recordings were first transcribed before being organized according to the research questions. Both observation and interview data were then coded and categorized using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to students' speaking performance and social anxiety. Finally, the findings from both sources were interpreted comprehensively to ensure that the conclusions accurately reflected the participants' experiences during the implementation of Duolingo as a pre-speaking practice.

Results and Discussions

Duolingo and Students' Speaking Performance

The findings were obtained from classroom observations involving ten students and semi-structured interviews with five selected participants. The observations focused on students' speaking performance before and after using Duolingo as a pre-speaking practice, while the interviews provided deeper insights into students' learning experiences.

Table 1. Students' Speaking Performance Before and After Using Duolingo

Indicator	Before Using Duolingo	After Using Duolingo
Fluency	Students frequently paused and hesitated while reading English sentences.	Students spoke more smoothly with fewer pauses and hesitations.
Pronunciation	Many students mispronounced unfamiliar English words.	Students pronounced words more accurately after listening to Duolingo's audio model.
Vocabulary	Students showed limited familiarity with English vocabulary.	Students demonstrated better understanding of vocabulary used in speaking activities.
Confidence	Students were reluctant to speak and were afraid of making mistakes.	Students became more confident and willing to speak in front of the class.

Classroom observations revealed that students initially experienced considerable difficulties when performing English speaking tasks. Most students hesitated while reading English sentences, paused repeatedly, and mispronounced unfamiliar words. Several students also appeared reluctant to read aloud because they were unsure of the correct pronunciation. These findings indicate that students' speaking performance before using Duolingo was still limited, particularly in terms of fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary, and confidence. One participant admitted, "*Saya tidak tahu cara bacanya, Kak*" (P2), while another participant stated, "*Bingung, Kak*" (P3). These responses

suggest that students lacked confidence because they were unfamiliar with English pronunciation and vocabulary.

After students completed the Duolingo activities, noticeable improvements were observed during the subsequent speaking practice. Most students pronounced the sentences more accurately, produced fewer pauses, and spoke with greater confidence. The interview data also showed that students felt better prepared after listening to the pronunciation model provided by the application. As one participant explained, "*Lebih mudah, jadi tahu cara bacanya, tidak terlalu bingung lagi*" (P2). Another participant commented, "*Lebih gampang, Kak, tidak terlalu ragu*" (P3). These responses indicate that Duolingo helped students become more familiar with English pronunciation before performing classroom speaking tasks.

These findings support Razan and Ulfa (2026), who argued that speaking performance is reflected through students' fluency, vocabulary use, and confidence during communication. The findings also reinforce Maharani and Lolita (2024), who emphasized that Mobile-Assisted Language Learning applications provide learners with opportunities to practice English independently through repeated exposure. In the present study, repeated pronunciation practice and immediate feedback from Duolingo appeared to help students improve not only their pronunciation but also their readiness to participate in classroom speaking activities. Therefore, Duolingo functioned as an effective pre-speaking practice that prepared students before engaging in oral communication.

Duolingo and Students' Social Anxiety

Besides improving students' speaking performance, the findings also demonstrated changes in students' social anxiety during classroom speaking activities. Classroom observations showed that before using Duolingo, many students appeared nervous when asked to speak in front of their classmates. Some students avoided eye contact, laughed awkwardly, or refused to read aloud because they were afraid of making mistakes and being judged by others.

Table 2. Students' Social Anxiety Before and After Using Duolingo

Indicator	Before Using Duolingo	After Using Duolingo
Comfort	Students appeared nervous and uncomfortable during speaking activities.	Students looked more relaxed and comfortable when speaking.
Fear of Making Mistakes	Students were afraid of making pronunciation mistakes.	Students showed less fear after practicing with Duolingo.
Participation	Students were hesitant to participate in classroom speaking activities.	Students became more willing to participate and speak voluntarily.

Interview data confirmed these observations. One participant stated, "*Takut salah nanti ditertawakan*" (P4), while another explained, "*Saya tidak berani, Kak*" (P5). These responses indicate that students' fear of making mistakes and receiving negative evaluation reduced their willingness to participate in classroom speaking activities. Such emotional barriers negatively influenced both their confidence and speaking performance. Following the implementation of Duolingo, students demonstrated more positive attitudes toward speaking activities. Classroom observations showed that they appeared more relaxed, volunteered to read aloud more frequently, and participated more actively in classroom interaction. The interview findings were consistent with these observations. One participant reported, "*Tidak, Kak, soalnya sudah dengar tadi*" (P4), while another stated, "*Lebih berani, Kak, tidak terlalu takut*" (P5). These responses suggest that listening to the pronunciation model before speaking helped students feel better prepared and reduced their fear of making mistakes.

The findings are consistent with Ajiza et al. (2023), who reported that social anxiety often discourages EFL students from participating in classroom communication because they fear making mistakes and receiving negative evaluation. Likewise, Hameed and Jawad (2024) emphasized that reducing anxiety is essential for increasing students' participation during speaking

activities. In this study, Duolingo provided students with opportunities to practice pronunciation individually before speaking in front of others. This preparation appeared to increase students' confidence, improve their emotional readiness, and encourage more active participation during classroom speaking activities. Consequently, the findings indicate that Duolingo contributed not only to students' speaking performance but also to reducing their social anxiety in the EFL classroom.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that Duolingo served as an effective pre-speaking practice by supporting both students' linguistic and emotional preparation before classroom speaking activities. Regular practice through the application enabled students to improve their fluency, pronunciation, vocabulary use, and confidence, resulting in more active participation during speaking tasks. Beyond enhancing speaking performance, Duolingo also helped reduce students' social anxiety by providing a low-pressure environment in which they could practice English independently before speaking in front of their classmates. This preparation allowed students to feel more comfortable and less fearful of making mistakes during classroom interaction.

These findings suggest that integrating Duolingo into English language instruction can extend its function beyond language practice to become a practical pre-speaking strategy that promotes students' confidence and emotional readiness. For English teachers, incorporating digital learning applications before classroom speaking activities may create a more supportive learning environment and encourage greater student participation. Future research is recommended to investigate the effectiveness of Duolingo with larger participant groups, different educational levels, or mixed-methods and experimental designs to further examine its long-term impact on students' speaking performance and social anxiety.

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