

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of study

In the current era of globalization, English proficiency has become an increasingly essential skill, particularly in non-English speaking countries such as Indonesia. However, data suggests that the level of English proficiency among Indonesians remains a significant concern. In the EF English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) 2024, Indonesia is placed 80th among 116 countries with a score of 468, categorizing it as "low proficiency" (EF Education First, 2024). Such ranking underlines the immediate requirement to evolve better and more interesting methods of learning the English language in Indonesia, especially under the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Simultaneously, the rapid growth of educational technology has opened new opportunities for language learning. Among various digital platforms, Duolingo has become one of the world's most widely used language-learning applications. According to Duolingo's Second Quarter 2024 financial report, the platform surpassed 103.6 million monthly active users, 34.1 million daily active users, and 8 million paid subscribers, reflecting its increasing popularity and global adoption (Duolingo, 2024). Globally, Duolingo reported 103 million monthly active users in 2024, with daily active users reaching 34.1 million a clear indication of its growing role as a preferred medium for language learning in the digital age (Duolingo, 2024). The availability of technology such as language learning apps through

mobile devices has revolutionized how individuals approach learning a language (Jiang et al., 2024).

One of the key features that distinguishes Duolingo from conventional learning methods is its use of gamification — the integration of game-design elements such as points, levels, streaks, badges, and leaderboards into the learning process (Deterding et al., 2011). Gamification has been shown to positively impact student' motivation (Rosyidah et al., 2023). In the 21st-century learning environment, many English teachers have adopted gamification as an instructional strategy to make learning more interactive and enjoyable (Jaelani & Sutari, 2020). Duolingo offers these advantages through a game-like system that makes users feel as though they are learning while playing, which is particularly appealing to learners who prefer interactive and self-directed experiences (Habibie, 2020).

In the English language learning, one of the most persistent challenges is students' difficulty in sustaining motivation and consistency when studying English self-directed learning settings, particularly in countries where English is a foreign language such as Indonesia. Many traditional classroom-based learning activities are not able to cater for different learning styles in students. Some students are more interactive in class while others are more comfortable learning through technology (Pilu et al., 2025). There are many educators and learners who use Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) tools to support their learning. One of the most popular learning tools for language learning is Duolingo, which is well known for its fun and gamified learning features (Shortt et al., 2023).

Research on how Duolingo's gamification can influence students' motivation in Indonesia is still limited. Although there are some studies on Duolingo's effectiveness in vocabulary learning and language learning outcomes (Santi et al., 2023), and previous studies have demonstrated that Duolingo can improve learners' motivation and language achievement, relatively few studies have examined how specific gamification elements such as points, badges, levels, leaderboards, and streaks influence learners' motivation and learning behavior from a qualitative perspective in EFL contexts (Shortt et al., 2023). This gap highlights the need for further investigation into how gamification in Duolingo supports or shapes the learning process, particularly among university students who use Duolingo independently as a self-directed language learning tool.

Therefore, this study seeks to investigate how the use of gamification in the Duolingo application influences the motivation and learning experiences of university students studying English as a foreign language. By focusing on students' perceptions and interpretations of Duolingo's gamification elements, this research aims to contribute both theoretically — through its engagement with Self-Determination Theory and gamification frameworks — and practically, by offering insights that may inform the integration of technology-based learning media in Indonesian EFL education.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the background of the study described above, the research questions are as follows:

1. How do university students perceive the role of Duolingo's gamification features in their motivation to learn English as a foreign language?
2. How do students' experiences with Duolingo's gamification elements support or frustrate their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their English learning process?

1.3 Purpose of Study

This study aims to:

1. To explore how university students perceive the role of Duolingo's gamification features in their motivation to learn English as a foreign language.
2. To describe how students perceive and respond to the gamification elements in Duolingo and how these elements shape their learning engagement and experience.

1.4 Significance of the Study

1. Theoretical Significance

This study is expected to contribute to the body of knowledge in the fields of educational technology and gamification in English as a Foreign Language learning, particularly by linking empirical findings to established frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory and Gamification Theory.

2. Practical Significance

- a. For Teachers: This study can serve as a reference for integrating gamified digital media like Duolingo into English language teaching.
- b. For Students: It provides an alternative, interactive, and engaging medium for learning English.
- c. For Future Researchers: This research can serve as a foundation for further studies on the effectiveness of gamified learning applications in education settings.

1.5 Scope and Limitation

1. Scope

This study concerns the application of Duolingo as a gamified learning tool for the support of English language learning among university students in an EFL context in Indonesia. It looks at the effects of gamification features, such as points, levels, badges, and streaks, on student' motivation and engagement with learning. The research was carried out in Universitas Muhammadiyah Ponorogo.

2. Limitation

The study is limited to Duolingo as the only mobile platform, leaving out other language learning applications or gamification tools. It is also restricted to a certain duration and a specific educational institution, which may not allow the findings to be generalized to other populations or

learning environments. Neither prior English proficiency nor internet access nor student learning styles are probed deeply in this study.

1.6 Definition of Key Terms

- Gamification:** Gamification is defined as the integration of game-design elements such as point systems, levels, rewards, leaderboards, badges, and progress tracking into non-game environments, including education. In this study, gamification refers to the use of these features to enhance the learning experience and improve students' motivation in learning English (Deterding et al., 2011).
- Duolingo:** Duolingo is a digital language-learning platform that delivers lessons through a gamified system. It uses features such as daily streaks, XP (experience points), badges, and level advancement to maintain user interest. In the context of this study, Duolingo serves as the main tool representing mobile-assisted gamified learning to teach English to Indonesian students (Permatasari & Aryani, 2023).
- Learning Motivation:** : Learning motivation refers to the internal and external drives that initiate and sustain a learner's engagement in the learning process. In this study, motivation is

analyzed through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which distinguishes between intrinsic motivation (driven by enjoyment and personal interest) and extrinsic motivation (driven by external rewards or recognition).

EFL: EFL refers to the teaching and learning of English in countries where English is not the primary language of communication. In the Indonesian context, EFL instruction typically occurs in education settings such as schools or universities, where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

