Using *Duolingo* in the EFL Classroom: A Study on Effectiveness and Student Perceptions

Recibido: Julio 31, 2024

Aceptado: Febrero 26, 2025

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ABSTRACT

Technology integration in education is crucial, yet the effectiveness of using applications (apps) to learn languages remains controversial. This mixed-methods study explores the impact of the language learning app Duolingo on the perceptions and proficiency of 12 English learners in a private school in Chihuahua, Mexico. The study explores the students' perceptions of using the app to determine its effective use in the classroom. Research questions focus on students' attitudes and perceptions towards apps and the potential benefits and drawbacks of using them to improve language proficiency. Data was collected from interviews, a questionnaire, and tests. Findings reveal a significant increase in test scores and a shift from negative to positive perceptions of app-based learning. Focusing on communicative practice, the app proved effective when used as a class complement rather than in isolation. These results highlight the potential of technology-enhanced learning to improve EFL proficiency and student engagement.

KEYWORDS

Educational technology, foreign language instruction, gamification, self-instruction, digital learning.

RESUMEN

La integración de la tecnología en la educación es crucial, mas la efectividad del uso de aplicaciones para aprender idiomas sigue siendo controversial. Este estudio mixto explora el impacto de *Duolingo* en las percepciones y competencia lingüística de 12 estudiantes de inglés en Chihuahua, México. Explora las percepciones sobre el uso de la aplicación y su uso efectivo en el aula. La investigación se centra en las percepciones de los estudiantes y las ventajas y desventajas del uso de apps para mejorar la competencia lingüística. Los datos se recabaron a través de entrevistas, un cuestionario, y exámenes. Los resultados muestran mejora en las

calificaciones y un cambio de percepciones negativas a positivas sobre el aprendizaje basado en aplicaciones. La aplicación demostró ser efectiva al usarse como complemento de la clase. Los resultados destacan el potencial del uso de la tecnología en el aprendizaje de inglés y en la motivación estudiantil.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Aprendizaje digital, autoaprendizaje, enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, gamificación, tecnología educativa.

Introduction

Technology is crucial in facilitating communication and fostering connections across borders in today's globalized world. Learning a foreign language, mainly English, has become essential for several purposes, such as better employment, education, networking, socialization, and travel opportunities. Moreover, English serves as a lingua franca, thus enabling international communication and access to scientific and educational information. This is primarily due to the United States' status as a leading political and economic power (Ahmad, 2016).

Despite the importance of English, learners face barriers such as financial constraints and time limitations that prevent them from attending additional language classes to those received at school, which are not always effective (Calderón, 2015). Technological advancements, particularly language learning apps, offer potential solutions by providing accessible, flexible, and often free language practice tools, being Duolingo one of the most influential mobile language learning apps on the market today (Izzyann et al., 2018; Loewen et al., 2019). However, while these apps are popular, students sometimes find them monotonous, boring, and ineffective, resulting in them using the app for a short while before they stop engaging.

In Mexico, where English proficiency varies across regions and socioeconomic statuses, these apps could bridge gaps in language education. Northern states like Chihuahua, which borders the United States, show higher English proficiency rates compared to southern states, but even within the same state, English proficiency varies significantly across regions (Calderon, 2015). This disparity highlights the need for innovative educational solutions to make language learning more accessible.

Therefore, this exploratory mixed-methods study explores the impact of language learning apps on the English proficiency and perceptions of a group of twelve beginner students (A1-A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference) in a private language center in Chihuahua, México. It sought to determine whether these apps can effectively complement regular English classes and motivate students to improve their language skills autonomously by answering the following questions:

- 1. What are students' perceptions of using apps for language learning?
- 2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using apps to reinforce English classes?

Understanding the efficacy and student reception of these tools may help teachers use them as a complement to regular classes to motivate and accelerate the learning of their students, at the same time it could help students develop their learner autonomy and engage with other learners from around the world. Apps can offer a relaxed and engaging way to practice communication, potentially improving vocabulary, grammar, and the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The findings are expected to inform teachers on integrating app-based activities to foster autonomous learning, benefiting students inside and outside the classroom, and making education more inclusive for different socioeconomic groups.

Moreover, this research aims to evaluate whether language learning apps can effectively complement traditional methods and identify the most impactful features and potential drawbacks of these tools from the students' perspectives.

Literature Review

Nowadays, technology is a fundamental part of education as it may foster student engagement and autonomy. Ahmadi (2017) argues that using technology in the classroom can make learning more accessible and engaging. Teachers find technology essential as it facilitates a dynamic learning environment. For instance, using multimedia like videos and interactive activities can make lessons more interesting compared to traditional methods such as workbooks and audio tapes.

Bulfin et al. (2015) highlight that digital technologies facilitate a creative learning experience, allowing students to actively engage in problem-solving in authentic environments. This active engagement is crucial for developing productive skills rather than passively receiving information. Digital tools allow students to be more active in their learning, promoting autonomy and enhancing the overall educational experience.

Technology in education refers to the application of scientific knowledge to facilitate learning. Herold (2016) and Selwyn (2012) discuss the transformative impact of technology on education over recent decades. Selwyn (2012) notes that the advancement of digital technologies has significantly changed the educational field, making it more efficient and practical. Language teachers, for example, now use online presentations, videos, interactive tools, and even social media to enhance instruction and interaction both in and outside the classroom, making learning more engaging and effective.

Technology in English Language Learning

In language learning, technology plays a vital role. Arifah (2014) contrasts traditional classrooms with technology-enhanced ones, noting that using technology makes learning more engaging, efficient, and appealing to the newer generations. Multimedia elements such as videos, audio, and interactive games can transform a monotonous lesson into an exciting learning experience. However, teachers must stay updated with technological advancements as they quickly change and become outdated.

Mobile learning, defined by Crompton (2013), varies based on context but generally involves using mobile devices to facilitate learning; that is, it may include using computers, tablets, or cellphones to access educational content that adapts to the needs of the students. Winters (2006) explains that mobile learning can mean different things depending on access to technology. It can involve learning on-the-go, making education more flexible and accessible.

Autonomous Learning and EFL

Language learning involves acquiring the ability to communicate in a new language. Cook (2016) emphasizes the importance of language for human interaction and the advantages of being multilingual. Learning a new language opens up opportunities for personal and professional

growth, allowing individuals to connect with different cultures and perspectives.

Autonomous learning is crucial for individuals who cannot attend formal classes regularly. Thanasoulas (2000) defines it as the ability to take charge of one's learning, using available resources independently. Autonomous learners exhibit characteristics such as identifying their learning styles, actively seeking diverse learning activities, and being willing to take risks. They also need to effectively evaluate and integrate their learning into daily life, which can be accomplished by using technology and apps in the classroom (Chik, 2020).

Language Learning with Apps

Choosing the right app is crucial for effective language learning. Golonka et al. (2014) review the effectiveness of various technologies in language learning, highlighting that apps can significantly improve pronunciation and vocabulary and they can also be highly effective in motivating students due to the gamification they offer. However, the effectiveness of apps in teaching other skills such as speaking, reading, and writing varies as some apps focus only on vocabulary and grammar and they do not include exercises that encourage communicative practice. Therefore, teachers must carefully choose apps that offer a comprehensive learning experience, covering all essential language skills according to the needs and ages of their students.

Methodology

This exploratory mixed-methods study was conducted between August and December 2023 as an action research intervention in a private language center in the city of Chihuahua, Mexico. This approach was chosen as the main focus of the study relies on qualitative information as we were interested in exploring the students' perceptions; however, we also gathered quantitative data to measure the impact of the use of apps on the students' proficiency through their grades in exams. We carried out the study as an action research intervention as it allows the researcher to analyze a problem while designing, applying, and analyzing strategies to attempt to solve the issue and learn from the experience (Bourner & Brook, 2019; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The participants of the study were a group of twelve beginner students (Al according to the Common European Framework of Reference) learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a private language center. The students were registered in the second of twelve levels offered at the institution, and they were between 14 and 24 years old. To protect their identity and integrity, the students' names were omitted from the study and they were identified with the letter P (of participant) and a number. They signed a consent form where they agreed to participate and were informed of the details of the study, including that they could leave the study at any point of the research.

We used two interviews, a questionnaire, and two tests for data collection. First, we applied a pretest to see the level of English of the participants and then we proceeded with the two interviews. The first was used to gather students' opinions and experiences with using apps, and the second was to explore their experiences and opinions regarding their English learning process. This information allowed us to design activities for the intervention that were appealing to their likes and needs. Moreover, it showed that most participants did not use any app, thus, we had to choose which one to use in the intervention.

We researched the most popular language learning apps and compared them to see which one would be more appropriate for the students. We chose Duolingo for the intervention as it

is positively rated and free. Moreover, the English course of this app provides practice in the four skills as well as games that make learning more engaging. Then, participants answered a questionnaire about their perspectives and expectations regarding the use of the app; they answered it before and after the study to see if their perspectives changed. Finally, the students were given the same exam they answered at the beginning of the study as a post-test to compare their results and measure if there was any improvement.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and data was analyzed following the Constant Comparative Method by Glaser and Strauss (2012). We analyzed and compared the findings of the instruments to design new instruments for the collection of more data, and used axial coding to find relationships among the data (Stewart, 2024).

Findings

After applying the intervention, where students used the learning app Duolingo as a complement to their English class for three months, we found that there was both an improvement in their proficiency and a positive perception of the app. Thus, we were able to answer the two research questions proposed in the study.

Students' Perception of Using Apps

The first research question aimed to explore participants' perceptions of using apps to learn English as a foreign language. Before the intervention, seven participants mentioned that they had not used any language learning app because they were not interested and because they did not like them even though they did not know how they worked: "I don't use them because I think they are a waste of time" (P10). Moreover, before the intervention, participants claimed that the apps could be only used to practice vocabulary and grammar; thus, they did not perceive them as helpful in practicing communication: "I don't want to use the apps, I think they are boring because you only see things like the verb to be" (P1). Participant 6 agreed: "I think that they can help you write, for example, I use it to practice verbs in past tense and memorize the words".

Thus, participants viewed the use of apps as a tool that could help them improve, but they associated them with negative words such as *repetition, monotony, and boredom*, among others. Therefore, even though five participants did use apps before the intervention, data showed that they did not have a fully positive opinion of them. The following tables show a summary of the results regarding the opinions of the participants before and after the intervention:

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Do you use any apps to learn English?	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
Which aspect of English do you think apps could help you improve?	Grammar	Vocabulary	Reading	Vocabulary	Vocabulary	Grammar and vocabulary
Do you think apps could help you improve your English?	No	Maybe	Maybe	Maybe	Yes	Maybe

Table 1

Participants' perceptions before the intervention

How many hours per week do you think you should spend using apps to improve your English?		Two	One	One	One	One
Do you consider that using apps for extra practice is helpful?		Maybe	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Maybe
What do you think of apps?	Boring	Helpful but monotonous	Interesting	Boring and repetitive	Helpful	Helpful

	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12
Do you use any apps to learn English?	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Which aspect of English do you think apps could help you improve?	Grammar	Vocabulary	Vocabulary	Grammar	Vocabulary	Grammar
Do you think apps could help you improve your English?	No	Maybe	Maybe	No	No	Maybe
How many hours per week do you think you should spend using apps to improve your English?	Less than one	Less than one	One	One	Less than one	One
Do you consider that using apps for extra practice is helpful?	No	Maybe	Yes	No	No	Maybe
What do you think of apps?	Tedious	Repetitive	Useful	Useless	Boring	Repetitive

Note. This table shows the answers provided by the students in the questionnaire regarding their perceptions on the use of apps for language learning before the intervention ocurred.

Table 2

Participants' perceptions after the intervention

	P1	P2	P3	P4	Р5	P6
Did you like using the app?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Which aspect of English do you think the app helped you improve the most?	Speaking	Speaking	Writing	Listening	Speaking	Speaking
Do you think the app helped you improve your English?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
How many hours per week did you spend using the app?	Two	Two	Three	Two	Between 2 and three	Two

Do you consider that using apps for extra practice was helpful?		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
What do you think of apps?	Dynamic	Helpful	Interesting	Interesting	Helpful and fun	Interesting

	P7	P8	P9	P10	P11	P12
Did you like using the app?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Which aspect of English do you think the app helped you improve the most?	Speaking	All the skills	Speaking and Listening	Listening	Listening and Speaking	Everything
Do you think the app helped you improve your English?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
How many hours per week did you spend using the app?	Two	Three	Between two and three	Two	Between one and two	Two
Do you consider that using apps for extra practice was helpful?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
What do you think of apps?	Helpful	Dynamic	Fun	Useful	Interesting	Dynamic

Note. This table shows the answers provided by the students in the questionnaire regarding their perceptions on the use of apps for language learning after being part of the intervention.

As can be seen, after the intervention where the students were exposed to the use of a language learning app in a controlled environment, i.e., the teacher asked them to do a specific number of lessons to make sure the students did at least an activity per week including each of the four skills and a game, their perception towards the app positively changed. All the participants found the app useful and they related it more to the practice of the skills rather than of vocabulary and grammar: *"I like to do the exercises because now I understand more when I listen" (P4); "I still think some things are repetitive but with the stories and the podcasts I feel it is more realistic, so now I like it" (P8).*

The intervention was planned so that the students could use the vocabulary and grammar they were learning in the app in real-life activities; for example, if they were practicing *how to order food* in the app, they were asked to role-play a dialogue ordering food at their favorite restaurant in the city. This was done because, according to Aifah (2014), classes should be adapted to the students so that they find learning appealing, useful, and motivating.

Findings also show a change in the participants' motivation to use the app, evidenced by the time spent using it. The tables show that before the intervention, students considered that one hour was enough time to spend using the app. The intervention required them to use it for 50 minutes in the classroom, 10 minutes every class, so that it did not interfere with the course syllabus. However, after the intervention, participants mentioned that they used it for at least two hours, that is, they had at least an extra hour of practice using the app at home. This shows that students were engaged with the app as all of them decided to use it in their free time, even

though it was not required by the teacher, which demonstrates that they were developing their learner autonomy: "I use it at home now when I'm bored because I like the games" (P2).

Therefore, using apps in a controlled environment in the classroom can show students how to use them so that they relate the contents to real life and thus perceive learning more meaningfully. The way the teacher uses the apps in the classroom can thus impact their motivation and autonomy to keep using them at home and practice and improve their skills outside the classroom.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Apps

Using apps as a complement to traditional classroom instruction, which tends to focus merely on the use of textbooks, can have a positive impact on the students' learning and proficiency. As previously mentioned, the intervention caused a change in the students' perception of the use of apps, but it also allowed them to see its advantages and disadvantages, which was what we aimed to explore with the second research question.

Participants claimed that the three main benefits of using this app were that it was easy to use, included a variety of topics and activities to practice their language skills, and that it could be used anywhere as long as they had access to the internet. However, they also mentioned some drawbacks such as monotony and repetitiveness.

To mitigate the drawbacks mentioned by the participants, it is crucial that teachers combine the use of the app with real-life tasks and with the use of other resources or technological tools to offer a wider variety of activities. This may include adding complementary tasks on the same topic but adapted to their context, and using social media to engage in real-life scenarios, games, and multimedia resources, among other things.

Moreover, participants were reluctant to pay for subscriptions, even if it meant accessing more comprehensive resources within the app. Duolingo, for example, offers a paid version that is ad-free and allows students to practice unlimited lessons daily. Nevertheless, participants mentioned that at least for this particular app, the free version is enough as they do not mind having ads showing up; they claimed they preferred to invest instead in structured English courses (such as the one they are taking), as they consider that interaction with other students is important to improve their communicative skills, and that having a teacher is crucial because they are at a level where they require explanations and guidance from an expert to be able to learn. This aligns with contemporary educational theory, which emphasizes teaching grammar implicitly instead of explicitly, that is, through socialization and interaction with others, which is an aspect that not all language learning apps can offer (Ahmad, 2016; Cook, 2016).

Findings were consistent with these theories, as participants showed improvements in both proficiency and grammar after the intervention, as it allowed them to actively practice the language rather than just completing grammar exercises from the textbook. Before the intervention, students struggled with speaking; they were reluctant to participate and often switched to Spanish. After the intervention, they were able to hold more extended conversations and seemed more confident in their pronunciation: *"Now I am not too afraid to speak because with the app I have practiced speaking, so now I think I pronounce better the words" (P9).* Moreover, reading fluency and comprehension improved, as well as their ability to write longer, more coherent texts with fewer grammar mistakes. Participants also improved their listening skills, as they needed fewer repetitions and translations.

The results of the post-test evidenced the improvements in the English proficiency of the participants, as all the students improved their original scores significantly. Participant 1 improved their score from 35 to 68, Participant 2 from 23 to 46, Participant 3 from 30 to 72, Participant 4 from 37 to 68, Participant 5 from 31 to 75, Participant 6 from 31 to 80, Participant 7 from 29 to 52, Participant 8 from 25 to 48, Participant 9 from 22 to 47, Participant 10 from 17 to 38, Participant 11 from 21 to 46, and Participant 12 from 35 to 73, as seen in the chart below.

Chart 1



Pre- and post-test comparison

Note. This chart shows a comparison of the scores obtained by the students in the pre-test, that is, before the intervention, and in the post-test, that is, after the intervention.

As can be seen, the use of apps contributed to significant improvements in students' English proficiency, although it is important to remember that they also engaged in textbook activities as well as in other communicative activities designed during the intervention. Nevertheless, the practice facilitated by the app played a crucial role in their progress as all the students engaged in it autonomously outside of the classroom, being, therefore, more exposed to the language than before the intervention.

Hence, while apps offer significant advantages as complementary tools, they might not be effective on their own, as they do not provide comprehensive support and interaction so that students can have meaningful learning. Teachers must then carefully select which app to use, and be aware that there is still a need to plan communicative, dynamic lessons to create a classroom environment conducive to learning that motivates students to be autonomous outside of the classroom.

Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight the use of apps, specifically *Duolingo*, to reinforce the learning of English as a Foreign language. The main disadvantages of using apps in the classroom are:

- They can be monotonous.
- They are repetitive.

• Require payment to access more features.

Nevertheless, there seem to be more advantages when using them in the classroom such as:

- They help students practice vocabulary and grammar structures.
- Easily available.
- Include elements of gamification that motivate the students.
- They help build the habit in language learning.

Using the app as a tool to practice communication during the intervention facilitated significant improvements in the participants' language skills. As the app is free to use and easily accessible, participants were able to engage with it outside of the classroom after they realized that it could help them practice not only vocabulary and grammar but also the four skills in a fun and communicative way.

However, findings suggest that apps should be used as a supplementary tool, at least with beginner students. Teachers must integrate various activities and resources, such as textbooks, other technological tools, and exercises that promote communication and interaction among the students to create a comprehensive learning environment, as apps can be monotonous and they may not include explanations needed by the students to understand the language items they are learning.

Even though the results seem promising in using apps in the classroom, this study had limitations such as the small sample size, the age range of participants, and the limited time using the app. Future research should involve a more extensive and more diverse research sample, including students of intermediate and higher levels of English, to determine if the findings can be generalized and if there is a specific level of proficiency in which students can improve their skills solely with the use of the app. Since the participants were young and tended to use technology daily, similar studies should be conducted with different age groups to assess the adaptability and effectiveness of app-based learning across varying demographics. Further research should also investigate if increased frequency and duration of app usage might correlate with more significant improvements in language proficiency, to determine if the extent of improvement is proportional to the time spent using the app.

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that apps and technology be incorporated into classroom instruction. This can be done by planning activities where students use the app in the classroom or as homework. A suggestion is to ask the students to practice their pronunciation using the *Let's learn English sounds* section of Duolingo's English course, or to ask them to review their grammar or vocabulary by completing the daily tasks it sets. Moreover, it is suggested that teachers explore language learning apps as they are constantly changing, especially nowadays with the addition of artificial intelligence (AI). The incorporation of AI to everyday's life, including education, is an emerging topic that should be addressed by teacher researchers. This is to make sure that teachers select tools that align with their students' needs and characteristics, as mobile learning's effectiveness can vary by context, level, and age. It is thus crucial to stay updated about the latest educational technologies so that teachers can create engaging and effective learning experiences that encourage skill development and learning motivation.

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- d) **Results:** Here, the writer presents the main findings, the degree to which the research objectives were reached, and the answers to the research questions.
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- g) Conclusions. Describe the main conclusions generated from the answers to the research questions.
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- 9. Human values in language teaching
- 10. Personal development and growth in language professionals
- 11. Research and professional development
- 12. Educational technology in languages

Format:

- Title using Arial font, size 14
- Text using Arial font, size 12
- Margins: top 2.5, bottom 2.5, left 2.5, right 2.5.
- Spaces: 1.5
- No indented paragraphs

Length of the articles:

- 8 to 15 pages containing text (from 3000 to 5000 words approximately)
- Containing 20 to 40 references (using the American Psychological Association APA format)

Languages: The articles can be written in English or Spanish.

The editorial process includes a review by a strict pair of "blind" reviewers and using *Plagius software* to verify that ethical standards are respected and that there is no plagiarism in any of the documents. Then, authors are advised to verify the submissions including the call elements and format in advance.

The evaluation of submissions starts in the editorial process, which may end in declining submissions if they do not match the call and format requirements. When the editorial board accepts a submission, it continues to the double-blind peer review process as the final evaluation with the following results:

- A. Accept Submission or Accept Submission with Modifications
- B. Revisions Required or Resubmit for Review
- C. Decline Submission

It is important to mention that if a blind reviewer declines the article or essay it will not be accepted.

Please upload the articles on the CIEX JOURNAL WEBSITE: http://journal.ciex.edu.mx

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TINDEY-DIRECTORIO

LICENCIATURA EN INGLÉS MAESTRÍA EN LA ENSEÑANZA DEL IDIOMA INGLÉS Y LINGÜÍSTICA APLICADA



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El Centro de Idiomas Extranjeros "Ignacio Manuel Altamirano"

CONVOCA

A los aspirantes interesados en cursar la **Licenciatura en Letras Inglesas** (Modalidades: Presencial y/o en línea) o la **Maestría en la Enseñanza del Idioma Inglés y Lingüística Aplicada** a participar en el Concurso de Selección para el ingreso al Ciclo Escolar 2025-2026, presentando el examen de admisión que se realizará mediante previa cita hasta el 29 de agosto de 2025, conforme a los siguientes:

REQUISITOS

Los interesados en participar deben realizar todos los trámites y procedimientos institucionales, además de cumplir con los requisitos descritos en el cronograma y el instructivo correspondiente a esta Convocatoria, los cuales son:

- » Leer y aceptar los términos y condiciones de la convocatoria y su instructivo.
- » Realizar el registro en las fechas establecidas en esta Convocatoria.
- » Comunicarse a la institución para realizar una cita para el examen de admisión.
- » Pagar el derecho de examen de selección.
- » Presentar el examen de selección y una evaluación de valores y actitudes en el lugar, día y hora señalados, mediante previa cita.
- » Ser aceptados mediante un concurso de selección, dentro de los periodos que al efecto se señalen.
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