

EFL Students' Duolingo English Practice Test Difficulties: A Comparative Study between High and Low Digital Language Test Achievers

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates the difficulties encountered by both high- and low-achieving EFL students when completing the free practice version of the Duolingo English Test (DET). A qualitative, descriptive-comparative design was employed, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five students. The findings reveal that although the DET platform is generally perceived as accessible and supported by clear instructions, students still experience various linguistic, technical, and psychological challenges. Limited vocabulary and grammatical competence, time pressure, demands for spontaneous responses in speaking and writing tasks, and unstable internet connections were among the most frequently reported difficulties, particularly among low-achieving students. In contrast, high-achieving students demonstrated greater confidence and employed more effective strategies, which enabled them to adapt better to the adaptive test format. These findings suggest that students' achievement levels influence how they cope with the demands of digital language assessments. Therefore, this study highlights the need for targeted preparation and improved instructional support to help EFL learners better navigate the tasks in the free practice version of the DET.

Keywords: *Duolingo English Test, EFL Learners, Test Difficulties, Language Testing, Digital Assessment*

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, technological developments and globalization have strengthened international relations, facilitated access to information, and increased cross-cultural interaction. In this context, English serves as a widely accepted global communication tool, despite persistent linguistic and regional differences (Rao, 2019; Syarif et al., 2025; Aksam et al., 2025). As emphasized by Maulina and Sari (2022), English is now recognized as the dominant international language in various fields. In line with advances in digital technology, online English proficiency tests are gaining popularity, particularly among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners seeking to practically measure and prove their language skills (Zou et al., 2021; Faisa et al., 2025; Petriani et al., 2025). One innovation in this area is the Duolingo English Test (DET), which offers a modern solution with advantages in flexibility, affordability, and ease of access compared to conventional tests. Today, this type of digital assessment is gaining popularity, especially among students who require fast, accessible certification from anywhere (Sadaf, 2023). The development of educational technology has also shifted from being merely a medium for entertainment to an inclusive and interactive learning platform (Maulina et al., 2022; Nufus et al., 2025) Digital-based approaches enable learners to evaluate their English skills independently, according to their individual readiness and needs, without being tied to time and location (Cao et al., 2024; Sakina et al., 2025).

One of the most recognized technology based proficiency assessments is the English test from Duolingo (DET). DET is a web-based, adaptive, and time efficient test that assesses the four fundamental linguistic abilities Speaking, writing, listening, and reading through

EFL Students' Duolingo English Practice Test Difficulties: A Comparative Study between High and Low Digital Language Test Achievers interactive tasks (Wagner, 2020). It has been increasingly accepted by global universities due to its affordability, accessibility, and reliability as an alternative to TOEFL and IELTS (Chen, 2024). Along with the official test, Duolingo additionally provides the Duolingo English Test free Practice version, a free version designed to simulate the real test experience. Although Duolingo English Test free practice version does not offer an official certificate, it helps learners estimate their English proficiency level (Burstein et al., 2022; Srirahayu et al., 2025).

However, in an effort to improve their English proficiency, EFL students often face challenges in accurately evaluating their abilities (Nirmala et al., 2025; Sanhas et al., 2025). This highlights the importance of assessments or English such as the Duolingo English Test free practice version. Although Duolingo English Test free practice version offers flexibility and ease of access, EFL students may still experience difficulties or challenge in taking the test. These challenges include listening comprehension, time management, and psychological pressure (Nirmala et al., 2025; Said et al., 2025). Furthermore, previous Research has demonstrated that students with limited vocabulary and weak grammar mastery tend to struggle more in sections involving reading passages and sentence structure, which are commonly found in proficiency tests (Ali, 2023; Saputra et al., 2025). Rashid et al. (2025) Students' performance on digital assessments can be significantly hampered by technological issues, such as inconsistent internet access and a lack of familiarity with the test interface, particularly among those with low digital literacy. These challenges can create barriers to effective learning and assessment, impacting overall academic success.

Theoretically, this study is according to the Sociocognitive Theory of Language Assessment suggested by Bachman and Palmer (1996), which argues that language test performance is influenced by more than just language competency as well as via cognitive, affective, and social contextual factors. This framework is highly relevant to the DET Free Practice Version, which is administered digitally and requires test takers to interact with adaptive tasks. The sociocognitive perspective provides a comprehensive lens for understanding how students' background knowledge, emotional states, and testing environments influence their performance.

This study adopts the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) as developed by Dohny et al. (2021) to examine students' acceptance and perceptions of the DET platform. TAM emphasizes two core constructs perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness which determine users' willingness to engage with a technological system. In the context of this research, TAM helps explain how students evaluate the accessibility, clarity of instructions, interface design, and practicality of the DET Free Practice Version as a digital assessment tool.

The development of the questionnaire and interview guide was based on contemporary research on self-regulated learning (SRL) and language learning strategies (Xu et al., 2023), which conceptualizes strategy use as part of learners' ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own language learning process. This framework highlights how the effective use of cognitive, metacognitive, and self-regulatory strategies enables learners to manage task demands and overcome difficulties in language performance, and has been shown to differentiate strategy patterns between high- and low-achieving EFL learners in digital language tasks such as those in the Duolingo English Test Free practice version.

This study adopts a contemporary affective factors framework in second language acquisition, which emphasizes how emotional variables such as anxiety, motivation, and self-confidence significantly influence learners' engagement and performance in language tasks. Recent empirical research indicates that affective factors play a key role in learners' capacity to process language input and perform effectively on language assessments, with higher motivation and self-efficacy associated with better outcomes and heightened anxiety linked to lower performance. The inclusion of this framework in the present study helps explain participants' emotional readiness, anxiety levels, and motivational states while engaging with the Duolingo English Test Free Practice Version tasks, (Cruz, 2025; Sakina et al., 2025) highlighting how affective variables shape test experiences and outcomes.

In recent years, the Duolingo English Test free practice version has gained increasing attention as an alternative assessment of English language competency, particularly in

EFL Students' Duolingo English Practice Test Difficulties: A Comparative Study between High and Low Digital Language Test Achievers situations where cost and accessibility are major concerns. While traditional tests like IELTS, TOEFL, and PTE remain the gold standard due to their long-established validity and widespread recognition, Duolingo English Test free practice version is often favored for its flexibility and affordability, particularly during the global shift to remote education (Isaacs et al., 2023). According to Tabassum (2023), although Duolingo English Test free practice version was not initially well known and had limited institutional acceptance, its practical advantages have driven broader adoption among universities worldwide. As noted by (Maulina, Ilham, et al., 2022), integrating educational technology into language instruction supports students' readiness in adapting to digital assessment formats. In addition, recent studies such as (Ma & Zhang, 2023) have highlighted that while Duolingo English Test free practice version meets the demand for more accessible testing formats, its adaptive question design may still pose challenges for less experienced test takers.

Apart from that, the difference in achievement between students with both high and low achievements in the Duolingo English Test free practice version is an aspect that needs to be studied more deeply. Students with high achievement tend to have more effective learning strategies, higher levels of self-confidence, and better access to learning resources (Huang et al., 2022). This is in accordance with Andriani et al. (2022) who emphasized that self-confidence has a significant influence on students' desire to participate in academic assignments and has a positive impact on their performance. Meanwhile, students with low achievement often face several challenge such as listening, time, lack of vocabulary, and even mental unpreparedness (Nirmala et al., 2025). Apart from that, technical factors such as unstable internet connections and limitations in getting feedback from tests also pose challenges for those who are still at the beginner level (Tabassum, 2023). Therefore, this study seeks to explore the differences in performance between the two groups and identify the factors that contribute to the differences in the results they obtained in the Duolingo English Test free practice version.

Apart from academic and technical factors, psychological aspects also play an important role in student achievement in the Duolingo English Test free practice version. Motivation to learn, anxiety levels in facing exams, and opinions of using technology to learn languages are factors which can influence student test results (Islam et al., 2022). Students with high motivation tend to be more active in exploring effective learning strategies and more confident in facing test challenges, while those with high anxiety often experience difficulty concentrating and understanding questions optimally (Suharsih & Wijayanti, 2021). Additionally, a lack of experience in using adaptive digital platforms such as Duolingo can be an obstacle for students in efficiently navigating the exam system (Bergdahl et al., 2020). This is evident in the listening section, where, as noted by (Maulina et al. (2022), the use of technology-based media has been shown to improve students' listening comprehension and engagement in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning environment. Thus, a deeper understanding of these psychological factors can help in designing more effective learning and exam preparation approaches for EFL students.

According to Wagner (2020), although numerous investigations have discussed the general difficulties faced by EFL students in taking the Duolingo English Test free practice version, There isn't enough specific research that comparatively investigates how these difficulties differ between low and high achieving students. Most previous research tends to treat EFL learners as a homogeneous group, without examining how achievement levels influence their experiences, strategies, and psychological responses to the test (Ryu & Lee, 2024). Particularly in the Indonesian context, empirical evidence remains limited regarding the specific challenges faced by lower-proficiency students, such as difficulties in understanding adaptive test formats, limited digital literacy, and heightened test anxiety, compared to their high-achieving peers who often possess stronger strategies and better access to learning resources (Bergdahl et al., 2020; Petriani et al., 2025). Moreover, few studies have adopted a qualitative approach that allows these differences to emerge from the students' own perspectives. This gap needs to be addressed to develop more inclusive and effective test preparation strategies that cater to learners across different proficiency levels.

This research investigates the difficulties students face in taking the free practice version of the Duolingo English Test, especially in comparing the performance of students with high and low achievement, to understand the factors that influence student performance and find solutions to help them improve their English language skills. This study seeks to answer the question: *What types of difficulties do high-achieving and low-achieving EFL students face when completing the Duolingo English Test free practice version?*

METHOD

Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative research with comparative descriptive design to explore the difficulties faced by EFL students in taking the Duolingo English Test free practice version, with a particular focus on comparing the experiences of low and high achievers. The qualitative method is selected because it enables a thorough understanding of the participants' experiences, challenges, and perceptions, which cannot be completely recorded using quantitative techniques alone. By using qualitative methods, this study aims to uncover the underlying factors that influence student performance and provide rich, detailed insights into the specific difficulties faced by EFL students in the Duolingo English Test free practice version.

In particular, qualitative research is suitable for this research because it emphasizes understanding the context and meaning behind participants' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Through interviews, this study aims to collect detailed narratives from students, allowing for a deeper exploration of their test-taking experiences, challenges, and coping strategies.

Participants

The study population comprised 66 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students enrolled in the English Education Department at a private university in Kendari. The participants represented three academic levels: second-, fourth-, and sixth-semester students. All members of this population had previously completed the DET, which served as a prerequisite for inclusion in this research, ensuring that all potential participants had comparable familiarity with the testing format and content.

From this population, a sample of five students was purposively selected. This sampling method was employed to ensure representation from both high- and low-achieving groups on the DET. The achievement levels were determined based on students' performance on the Duolingo English Test Free Practice Version. Specifically, students with scores between 10 and 55 were categorized as *low achievers*, while those with scores between 90 and 115 were categorized as *high achievers*. This approach allowed for a clear contrast between participants with differing proficiency levels.

The sample consisted of three low-achieving students and two high-achieving students. The low-achieving group included one student from each of the second, fourth, and sixth semesters. In contrast, the high-achieving group comprised one fourth-semester student and one sixth-semester student. This selection ensured that participants represented various stages of academic progression, thereby facilitating a broader understanding of differences in English proficiency development across semesters.

The rationale for this sampling strategy was to capture a diverse range of linguistic experiences and learning perspectives among EFL students within the department. By including students with diverse achievement levels and academic standings, the study aimed to provide a more nuanced exploration of their experiences and perceptions regarding the Duolingo English Test Free Practice Version. The categorization of participants based on their DET scores thus provided a structured basis for comparative analysis between high and low achievers, contributing to the depth and validity of the study's findings.

Tabel 1. Students' Profile

Low Achievers	High Achievers
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No.	Initial name	Score	Age	Gender	Sem.	No.	Initial name	Score	Age	Gender	Sem.
1.	LI	30-40	21	M	6	1.	DR	95-105	25	F	6
2.	H	40-50	22	F	4	2.	NA	115-125	21	F	4
3.	JAN	45-55	19	F	2						

The sample size is appropriate for qualitative research since it enables in-depth examination while maintaining manageability in gathering and analysis of data.

Research Instrument

This study used semi-structured interviews to explore in-depth the experiences, challenges, and strategies of EFL students taking the Duolingo English Test free practice version. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions designed based on the research focus and grouped into six main aspects. The first aspect addressed students' general experiences taking the Duolingo English Test free practice version, aiming to determine their perceptions of ease of use and accessibility, as well as which sections of the test they found most helpful or most challenging. The second aspect explored specific challenges students encountered during the test, such as technical glitches, confusing question formats, and time constraints.

Furthermore, the third aspect explores the strategies students use to overcome these difficulties, including whether they have any specific methods to make the test run more smoothly. The fourth aspect addresses students' opinions of the exam's difficulty and fairness, like whether the Duolingo English Test free practice version questions are appropriate for their abilities or whether they find them challenging and frustrating. The fifth aspect addresses emotional and psychological factors, including anxiety, stress, and motivation experienced during the test, as well as factors that influence their psychological well-being. Finally, the sixth aspect provides a space for students to share suggestions and feedback to improve their comfort, effectiveness, and experience while taking the Duolingo English Test free practice version.

Interview questions were written in a single language, Indonesian, to ensure participants clearly understood the questions and felt comfortable during the interview process. This semi-structured interview approach allowed researchers to explore information flexibly and in-depth, tailored to each respondent's context and experiences.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process in this study was carried out through several systematic stages to ensure accuracy, credibility, and ethical integrity. In the preparation stage, an interview guide, in the form of a blueprint, containing open-ended questions, was developed to explore students' experiences and difficulties with the Duolingo English Test (DET) Free Practice Version. The research objectives and relevant literature informed the Design of the blueprint to capture three core aspects: linguistic, technical, and psychological challenges. Before the formal data collection began, the interview guide was piloted among a small group of EFL students outside the main sample to assess its clarity, coherence, and relevance. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, and their voluntary consent was obtained in accordance with ethical research standards. In the interview stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted at times convenient for participants, either online or in person, depending on their availability. Each session was recorded with participants' prior consent to ensure data accuracy and completeness. The semi-structured format provided flexibility, enabling participants to elaborate on their experiences while maintaining a consistent focus on the study's guiding questions. Following the interviews, recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' authentic responses. In the data organization stage, all transcripts were carefully compiled, coded, and securely stored to maintain confidentiality. The organized data were then categorized into emerging themes related to the research questions, providing the foundation for the subsequent analysis phase.

Method of Data Analysis

The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved systematically identifying, examining, and interpreting recurring patterns or themes within the dataset. The analysis began with a familiarization stage, during

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FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the study findings based on semi-structured interviews with five EFL students who completed the Free Practice Version of the Duolingo English Test (DET). The findings are organized into four main themes to provide a more systematic presentation: (1) initial experiences using the Free Practice Version of the DET, (2) linguistic challenges related to the test content, (3) technical barriers and time pressure, and (4) strategies, motivations, and suggestions for improvement.

Initial Experiences Taking the DET Free Practice Version

Research results indicate that most participants had a positive initial experience when taking the Duolingo English Test (DET) Free Practice Version. Participants found the platform easy to access, practical to use, and had a simple interface, making it easy for novice users to understand the test flow. This is illustrated by P1's statement that her experience with the Duolingo test was *quite good*. P2 also reported that access to the test was smooth and there were no network issues, although *it sometimes lagged a bit*.

In addition to ease of access, participants also found the directions on the DET relatively lucid and simple to understand. P3, for example, stated that the interface was simple and the instructions clear, although he was *not yet familiar with the format* as it was his first time taking the test. Meanwhile, P4 considered the DET a fun and unobtrusive test, and that it was accessible through various devices, providing flexibility for participants.

Furthermore, P5 stated that the DET Free Practice Version provided a practical experience because it was entirely online. He felt the test could be taken whenever there was a strong enough internet connection. This indicates that the platform's flexibility was a positive factor contributing to participants' comfort when using DET for the first time.

These findings indicate that participants' initial experiences with the DET were positive. Ease of use, flexible accessibility, and clear instructions contributed to participants' comfort when first attempting the test. However, for participants taking a test based on an adaptive digital platform for the first time, some adjustment to the test format may be necessary.

Linguistic Challenges and Test Content in the DET Free Practice Version

The second theme revealed that participants faced various linguistic challenges while taking the DET Free Practice Version. The most dominant challenges included understanding grammar, limited vocabulary, and difficulty constructing answers in the writing and speaking sections. P1 highlighted his difficulties with grammar, stating that it was *confusing... you have to understand verbs, nouns, and conjunctions*. P2 also experienced similar difficulties, admitting

that he encountered a lot of *new vocabulary*, which prevented him from understanding the meaning of some words on the test.

Furthermore, several participants also experienced challenges in productive skills, particularly writing and speaking, which require concentration, fluency, and the ability to think quickly in English. P3 revealed that the writing and speaking sections were the most challenging because they *require concentration and speed of thought*, and the question format was different from other English tests he had encountered. P4 also stated that speaking was the most difficult section *because it required speaking spontaneously within a limited time and maintaining clear pronunciation*.

For P5, the main challenge wasn't grammar or vocabulary, but rather the test format, specifically the word selection section. He explained that every time he chose a word, the exam page would suddenly return to the beginning, disrupting his focus. This demonstrates that even though his language skills are at a high level, the adaptive test format can still cause confusion and impact test performance.

These findings indicate that linguistic aspects, particularly grammar and vocabulary, were the main obstacles for participants with still-developing English skills. Meanwhile, participants with higher proficiency still experienced challenges in useful abilities like speaking and writing due to demands for spontaneity, language accuracy, and time constraints. Thus, the linguistic difficulties that emerged were not only caused by limited language knowledge, but also by the performative demands of the test conditions.

Technical Barriers and Time Pressure in DET Implementation

The third theme showed that in addition to linguistic challenges, participants also experienced technical barriers and time pressure while taking the DET Free Practice Version. These technical barriers were not always significant, but they still impacted participants' comfort while taking the test. P2 stated that although the internet connection was relatively stable, he experienced minor issues because it *sometimes took a bit of a toll* when moving to the next question. Meanwhile, P3 highlighted *the technical aspects of device use and the surrounding environment*, as the test requires a quiet environment for focus.

Time pressure was also a challenge experienced by participants, particularly in the speaking, reading, and writing sections, which had limited time. P1 stated that he felt rushed because *the time was so short*, which made it difficult to formulate effective answers. P4 also added that the limited time required him to think quickly, particularly in the speaking section, where answers had to be delivered spontaneously without the opportunity to repeat themselves.

Unlike the other participants, P5 stated that the biggest obstacle he encountered was *internet connection issues*. He also admitted to *feeling anxious during the speaking section, especially when having to speak freely using a microphone*. The pressure of the oral production session made him nervous, even though he didn't experience significant difficulties understanding the language.

These findings suggest that technical challenges and time pressure also impacted participants' performance on the DET. While technical challenges were not particularly severe, environmental factors, device availability, and access stability still played a role in determining participants' comfort. Furthermore, time pressure on the test items impacted the quality of participants' responses, particularly in productive skills requiring quick thinking, clarity, and language accuracy.

Strategies for Overcoming Difficulties, Motivation, and Suggestions for Improvement in the DET free practice version

Each participant had their own strategies for dealing with challenges while working on the DET Free Practice Version. P1 focused on the questions and analyzed the wording before providing answers. P2 tended to ask a friend to understand the meaning of unfamiliar words. P3 tried to remain calm, read the instructions slowly, and manage his time effectively. While P4 preferred to find a quiet place and use a headset for clearer voice during the speaking session.

In terms of motivation, P1 felt motivated when the questions matched their interests, P2 was encouraged by the group atmosphere of the test, P3 wanted to assess their English skills, and P4 was driven to achieve a higher score than on their previous test.

P5 explained that the strategy he used to prepare for the test was to review vocabulary before the exam. He also mentioned that his motivation stemmed from his personal interest in English. For improvement, P5 suggested that the platform provide a demo or practice session before the official test, so that participants wouldn't be confused when faced with the adaptive question format.

Regarding suggestions for improvement, participants suggested several things, including: increasing the time required to complete the test, improving the layout and flow of the questions, providing practice without time limits, and providing a demo before the official test to help participants better prepare and reduce nervousness. These findings indicate that learning strategies, motivation, and participant feedback are important aspects that can be considered in the development and refinement of the free practice version of the Duolingo.

Discussion

The results of this investigation reveal that students' experiences with the Duolingo English Test (DET) Free Practice Version evolved from initial familiarity into a more complex interaction with linguistic, technical, and affective demands. Although the platform was perceived as accessible and user-friendly at the beginning, the progression of the test required increasingly higher levels of strategic and linguistic readiness. This suggests that variation in students' preparedness influenced how efficiently they adapted to the digital assessment environment.

These positive first impressions are consistent with the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) (Al-Dokhny et al., 2021), which emphasizes that the perceived utility and simplicity of usage support technology acceptance. Interface design, device flexibility, and clear instructions helped reduce initial barriers for test takers, aligning with Sadaf (2023) argument that digital accessibility enhances assessment readiness. Within the socio-cognitive Theory of Language Assessment (Bachman & Palmer, 1996), these experiences demonstrate that initial contextual and cognitive demands can be addressed. Despite this, some participants expressed greater confidence and comfort with their results, while others remained focused on familiarizing themselves with the test's adaptive structure.

As the test progressed, linguistic challenges became increasingly apparent. Limited vocabulary, grammatical strength, and spontaneous language production impacted task performance, particularly in extended responses. These findings align with Ali (2023) and Nirmala et al. (2025), who stated that inadequate linguistic knowledge exacerbates difficulties in timed communicative tasks. From a socio-cognitive perspective, inadequate linguistic resources impair comprehension and production.

Meanwhile, some students did not experience significant language barriers but were instead hampered by the adaptive nature of certain item types, suggesting that non-linguistic factors may also hinder performance.

Technical conditions and time pressure also impact student learning outcomes. Although technological glitches are not severe, occasional instability such as delayed item responses or fluctuating connectivity impairs concentration. These findings support Tabassum (2023), who emphasized technological readiness as a factor in the success of digital assessments. Time constraints on productive tasks increase anxiety and cognitive load, confirming Lin (2008) Affective Filter Hypothesis regarding the negative impact of heightened emotional states on language learning outcomes. Some learners appear more susceptible to these pressures, while others are more affected by external technical limitations than by processing demands.

Differences in coping approaches further clarify variation in digital assessment experiences. Based on the Language Learning Strategies Theory (Griffiths, 2004), students with greater strategic awareness employed metacognitive planning, task monitoring, and situational control to maintain performance. Conversely, others relied on basic or reactive strategies, which were less effective when dealing with adaptive item progression.

This implies that self-regulation skills contribute significantly to navigating the challenges of adaptive language assessments.

Motivational influences also have a major influence in shaping performance. Learners who exhibit stronger internal motivation tend to maintain composition and actively respond to task demands, in line with Lin (2008) view that lower affective inhibition facilitates more successful language performance. Meanwhile, those who rely on external stimuli show vulnerability when anxiety levels increase, consistent with Suharsih and Wijayanti (2021), who emphasize emotional sensitivity in the context of digital learning.

Thus, differences in performance are not solely determined by linguistic knowledge but also by emotional readiness during adaptive testing.

Finally, students suggested improvements such as extending the duration of assignments, refining item transitions, and providing untimed practice opportunities. These insights reinforce Wagner (2020) emphasis on designing digital tests that promote fairness and reduce unnecessary stress for learners of varying levels of preparedness.

Their suggestions highlight the value of preparatory scaffolding for increasing confidence in adaptive testing settings.

Taken together, the integration of TAM, socio-cognitive theory, Language Learning Strategies Theory, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis provides a holistic interpretation of how digital proficiency, linguistic preparedness, emotional resilience, and strategic capability interact in shaping students' engagement in the DET Free Practice Version. Consequently, differences in readiness appear to determine how effectively students respond to the complexities of digital adaptive assessment.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the difficulties experienced by both high- and low-achieving EFL students when finishing the Duolingo English Test (DET) Free Practice Version. Although students initially found the platform accessible and supported by clear instructions, their testing experience still involved linguistic, technical, and psychological challenges. Limited vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, spontaneous speaking and writing demands, device and connection constraints, and time pressure emerged as the most prominent difficulties, especially among low-achieving students. Meanwhile, high-achieving students were generally better prepared, employed stronger learning strategies, and demonstrated greater self-confidence, which helped them adapt more effectively to the adaptive test format. These findings indicate that differences in preparation and familiarity with the test format influence EFL learners' linguistic readiness and anxiety levels, particularly among low-achieving students. However, this study involved a small number of participants from just one organization, which may limit the broader suitability of the results. Future studies should expand the participant pool and explore other digital testing platforms to obtain a deeper comprehension of learners' challenges within online language assessment.

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