Microsoft Teams Based Automated Evaluation of Saudi Undergraduates Reading Fluency

التقييم الآلي القائم على مايكروسوفت تيمز لطلاقة القراءة لدى الطلاب الجامعيين السعوديين

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الملخص:

تعد طلاقة القراءة من أهم عوامل القراءة الناجحة. كان الهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تقييم مهارات القراءة لدى متعلمي اللغة (الطلاقة) بناءً على أداء القراءة لديهم. كما قامت بتقييم مدى فائدة وموثوقية أداة تقدم القراءة لتقييم القراءة. تكونت العينة من 30 طالبًا سعوديًا جامعيًا يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية عبر التعلم المدمج في جامعة طيبة. أظهرت النتائج أن أداء جميع المتعلمين كان مختلفاً عند قراءة النصين الأول والثاني، بناءً على التعليقات الآلية الناتجة عن مايكروسوفت تيمز. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، أشارت النتائج إلى أن المتعلمين كانوا في "المستوى التعليمي" في قراءة النص الأول بينما كانوا في "مستوى الإحباط" في قراءة النص الثاني. ومع ذلك، كان على المعلمين الاستماع إلى التسجيلات والتحقق منها، حيث كانت هناك بعض الأخطاء في النتائج الناتجة. بشكل عام، يوصى باستخدام أداة تقدم القراءة لمساعدة متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية على تحسين أداء القراءة لديهم والتغلب على صعوبات القراءة من خلال تمكينهم من ممارسة القراءة بالسرعة التي تناسبهم. يمكن للأداة أيضًا مساعدة المعلمين على تتبع تقدم المتعلمين وتعيين الأنشطة الفردية بناءً على النتائج.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التقدم في القراءة، مايكروسوفت تيمز، الطلاقة والدقة، مهارات القراءة، طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية.

Abstract:

Reading fluency is one of the most important factors for successful reading. The aim of this study was to assess language learners' reading skills (fluency) based on their reading performance. It also evaluated the usefulness and reliability of the Microsoft Reading Progress tool for reading assessment. The sample consisted of 30 Saudi undergraduate students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) via blended learning at Taibah University. The findings demonstrated that all learners performed differently when reading the first and second texts, based on the automated feedback generated by Microsoft Teams. In addition, the results indicated that learners are at 'instructional level' in reading the first text while they are at 'frustration level' in reading the second text. However, the teachers needed to listen to and check the recordings, as there were some errors in the generated results. Overall, the Reading Progress tool is recommended for helping Saudi EFL learners improve their reading performance and overcome reading difficulties by enabling them to practice reading at their own pace. The tool can also help teachers keep track of learners' progress and assign individual activities based on the results.

Keywords: Reading progress, Microsoft Teams, Reading fluency and accuracy, Reading skills, EFL students.

1. Introduction

Reading, a receptive cognitive skill, is essential in all languages and an important aspect of language learning. Reading skills play a vital role in improving learners' academic performance since reading fluency (RF) is a crucial aspect of effective reading (1-7). However, Saudi students face challenges in reading fluently and accurately. In almost all courses, learners are assessed on their ability to comprehend reading texts and answer related questions (3,7).

1.1 Significance of the study

Few studies have considered oral RF in the Saudi context of English as a foreign language (EFL). For example, Omar et al. (2021) noted that Saudi EFL learners face difficulties in reading and generally fail to achieve fluency (6). Furthermore, although a small number of studies have been conducted in the Saudi context to explore the effectiveness of digital tools, such as the Microsoft Teams Reading Progress tool, in enhancing learners' reading skills, they were mostly based on learners' and teachers' perceptions of digital tools in general (8,9).

1.2 Objectives and Research Questions (RQs)

The study investigates learners' reading performance as assessed by a Microsoft Teams-based tool. It also determines the reliability and usefulness of the Reading Progress tool for assessing learners' reading fluency and accuracy by evaluating the results for two different texts based on a set of items: correct words per minute, mispronunciations, insertions, omissions, self-corrections, and repetitions.

The researcher sought to answer the following two questions:

RQ1: How does the Microsoft Reading Progress tool assess the reading fluency of Saudi EFL students at Taibah University?

RQ2: To what extent is the Reading Progress Tool useful as an assessment tool for monitoring learners' RF and progress?

1.3 Theoretical Background

Huge progress has been made in integrating technological advances into EFL teaching and learning in different contexts. Consequently, teaching and learning practices have changed extensively. Ng (2015) argued in favour of using digital tools and highlighted several benefits of integrating digital tools into education, such as their ability to support and facilitate the learning process, ensure good learning outcomes, and strengthen 21st-century skills (10). The study adopted two theories: informal language learning and technology-based language learning. Dressman (2020) defined informal language learning as "all activities undertaken by learners outside a formally organised program of language instruction" (p. 4) (11). In this study, using informal learning is associated with using technology. Thus, learners read the two texts informally as they need to read them at their own time and pace by using a digital tool. Moreover, technology-based language learning is when learners use digital tools to acquire a skill, for instance, Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) and Computer-assisted language learning (CALL). As aforementioned, the main objective of this study is to utilise a digital tool, 'reading progress', to assess learners' reading skills informally so that learners can achieve accuracy level and then fluency in reading. Lee and Dressman (2018) combined technology and informal learning and termed it 'informal digital learning of English' (cited in Dressman and Sadler: 2020) (12). Dressman (2020: 6) argued in favour of informal language learning and noted that "the conditions of informal learning may provide cognitive scaffolding for learning that more formal conditions do not" (11). Furthermore, one of the benefits of integrating informal learning is that students have some control over their language, which leads to learning autonomously (Hubbard, 2020) (13).

2. Literature Review

Technology plays a key role in the assessment of learners' reading skills. According to Sanz et al. (2015), technology positively affects language learning, particularly RF (14). Sato et al. (2013) claimed that technology applications effectively enhance EFL learners' reading skills. Different technological applications can promote EFL learners' overall language skills because most learners today are taught through blended learning (15).

A huge body of research has been conducted in the EFL context using different online resources, websites, and applications to prove the effectiveness of digital tools in supporting learners' different language skills. For example, Omar et al. (2021) developed a reading model based on male and female lecturers' feedback regarding the challenges and needs of Saudi EFL students. Based on the interview results and subsequent testing, they declared that the model successfully increased RF, improved reading speed and decoding subskills, and fostered positive attitudes towards reading (6). Omar et al. also noted that educational technology provides students with flexible learning environments that respect their skill levels and specific needs. Stanley and Thornbury

(2013) argued that technology is becoming an important component of learning, opening the way for more creative teaching practices (16).

Monitoring learners' reading performance and progress has attracted scholarly attention in recent years. Some scholars (e.g., Al-Mahrooqi & Roscoe, 2014) have emphasised the importance of reading performance for students' academic achievement (17). Yang (2014) contended that RF is significant for EFL students' language development, supporting Krashen and Torrel's (1983) theory that reading has a positive impact on language acquisition by enhancing learners' confidence and competence (2, 11). Likewise, Keezhatta and Omar (2019) studied the integration of MALL systems into second language (L2) reading instruction in Saudi Arabian secondary schools with the aim of enhancing the reading comprehension of Saudi EFL learners (9). They compared two groups (experimental and control groups) and assessed their skills using pre-tests and post-tests. Their findings indicated that MALL developed EFL learners' comprehension skills, although there was a significant difference between the experimental group that used MALL and the control group that did not. They also noted that MALL applications provide an engaging learning environment for reading instruction and positively impact students' reading skills. Furthermore, Keezhatta and Omar (2019) encouraged EFL instructors to 'make use of the technological advances to improve language skills to EFL learners' (p. 439), concluding that digital tools influence students' attitudes towards and motivation for learning (9).

Numerous studies (e.g., Al Nooh & Mosson-McPherson, 2013; Alotaibi, 2022; Keezhatta & Omar, 2019; Morris, 2011) have identified reading difficulties showing that Saudi students face difficulties in comprehending the texts they read (8, 9, 18, 19). They have also explored Saudi EFL learners' challenges in developing reading skills. Keezhatta and Omar (2019) and Alotaibi (2022) revealed that Saudi EFL learners face several difficulties in developing their reading skills, including difficulties with RF (8, 9). Keezhatta and Omar (2019) also noted that 'students did not receive the same amount of attention from the teacher'; students who sat far away from their teachers tried to avoid participating in the class and were described as 'struggling readers' (p. 441) (9). They addressed various problems related to Saudi EFL learners' reading skills. They concluded that teachers need to find ways to improve students' reading ability, including using technology.

In the Saudi context, a significant body of research has focused on teaching reading skills. It has been shown that learners are assessed on their comprehension skills rather than their fluency and reading capability.

Lekwilai (2014) stated that 'fluency instruction is not recognised as one of the reading components, and therefore is not implemented in the reading curriculum' (p. 100) (4). Moreover, Saudi EFL learners tend not to practise reading texts if they are not part of the assessment criteria; hence, this research focused on reading accurately and fluently. Previous studies have indicated that oral fluency is one of the most important elements determining success in reading. However, there is a scarcity of research about RF in the EFL field in general and in the Saudi context in particular (20,21).

To some extent, RF depends on knowledge of the relevant vocabulary. Erten (2018) emphasised that reading comprehension relies heavily on RF since readers who take their time to decode words often fail to comprehend what they are reading (22). He also stated that RF is an important skill because it is the interface between vocabulary and texts. He added that RF is essential because it leads to comprehension and can be enhanced by different digital tools that allow learners to practise reading online (22).

Vocabulary is a key element of English reading. The greater an individual's understanding of vocabulary, the better their reading skills will be. (23). However, Birch (2015) argued that a 'lack of vocabulary remains one of the major obstacles for the [English as a second language] ESL and EFL reader' (p. 128) (24). Thus, reading skills—comprehension, accuracy, and fluency—are primarily determined by a learner's knowledge of vocabulary. Teachers can assign vocabulary for practice based on the most challenging words, which is a feature of the Microsoft Reading Progress tool. Rojabi (2020) noted that instructors may find the tools provided by Microsoft Teams useful, especially for students who do not attend classes frequently (25).

Rasinski (2014) defined RF as 'the essential link between word recognition at one end of the spectrum and reading comprehension at the other' (p. 4) (21). DiSalle & Rasinski (2017) provided another definition: the ability to read any text aloud and accurately (26). Furthermore, it is essential to highlight three key components of RF, one of which is accuracy (27). Accuracy is the ability to decode words accurately (28). Reading fluency involves identifying different aspects, for instance, the number of correct words per minute, incorrect words, repetition of words …etc. (Rasinski, 2014) (21). Hence, accuracy establishes the basis for fluency. In addition, Lionetti (2004) and Lubua (2016) (1,5) argued that RF can be developed by practising reading repeatedly or engaging in extensive reading (Chang & Millet, 2015) (29). Repeated reading involves learners rereading a brief text several times until they acquire sufficient fluency and then repeating the same techniques with other

texts (30).

2.1 Reading Progress Tool in Microsoft Teams

The Reading Progress tool is a feature of the Microsoft Teams platform. Microsoft defines Reading Progress as a free tool that helps students practise their reading fluency' (Microsoft, n.d.[a]) (31). Ray (2021) stated that Microsoft announced the Reading Progress tool as a 2021 update (32). Molenda and Grabarczyk (2022) described Microsoft Teams Reading Progress as a computer-assisted pronunciation training (CAPT) tool, stressing that it includes all the digitalised tools necessary for teaching pronunciation (33). The main purpose of this tool is to enhance learners' RF by reducing common but undesirable mistakes, such as repetitions and omissions (Molenda & Grabarczyk, 2022), and CAPT has the pedagogical benefit of providing feedback to learners (33). Moreover, the Reading Progress tool has several advantages. First, it increases learners' motivation to read (Terzis & Economides, 2011) (34). Second, it allows the quality of students' reading skills to be evaluated by recording and measuring different items such as pronunciation. Third, it facilitates the evaluation of students' progress via the built-in analytical feature.

Most previous studies in the EFL context have focused on teachers' and learners' attitudes towards and perceptions of Microsoft Teams as a learning tool rather than exploring how teachers can utilise different tools, such as progress reading tools, to enhance learners' performance (25, 35-38). Pangriptaningrum (2022) used Microsoft Teams for online learning and assessed its effect on the reading interest of lower-grade students. The findings revealed that Microsoft Teams was beneficial in increasing and enhancing learners' reading interest (39).

As mentioned previously, few studies have investigated the Microsoft Reading Progress tool in EFL/ESL contexts to assess learners' reading skills. The studies have mostly explored learners' perceptions of using Microsoft Teams, although a few scholars have used the tool in their research. For example, Molenda and Grabarczyk (2022) investigated the feedback accuracy of a pronunciation module incorporated into the Microsoft Reading Progress tool for English learners. They compared two pronunciation assessments: one automated by the Reading Progress tool and one conducted manually by two pronunciation teachers. Their findings demonstrated that the reading progress tool is not yet ready to be employed as a digital assessment tool. However, Molenda and Grabarczyk (2022) stated that automated feedback is the most useful function of the Reading Progress tool and may benefit learners by providing valuable information; however, they noted that

instructors and researchers need to be cautious about using automated feedback because the tool cannot distinguish accents (33). According to Molenda and Grabarczyk (2022), the Reading Progress tool seeks to improve learners' RF by focusing on undesirable performance factors, such as repetitions, insertions, omissions, self-corrections, and similar (33).

Prasetya (2022) investigated the influence of the Reading Progress tool on EFL learners' speaking skills by comparing an experimental group and a control group and applying different research tools—speaking tests and questionnaires. Prasetya (2022) concluded that using the Reading Progress tool significantly improved students' speaking skills and fostered a positive attitude towards online learning (40).

In the Saudi EFL context, reading assessment criteria are generally based on assessing learners' comprehension when they read texts and answer questions. However, it rarely assesses learners' RF, which, as Erten (2018) asserted, is as important as reading comprehension. Notably, focusing on learners' RF is vital for helping them enhance their reading comprehension. Moreover, in face-to-face classes, it is challenging and time-consuming for a teacher to assess each student, give them feedback about their RF, and correct each mistake (22). However, online assignments can give learners the opportunity to develop their oral RF and provide the teacher with a clear idea of their students' learning levels and areas for development. The focus of the Reading Progress tool is on RF. In addition, the tool allows teachers to create assignments for students and share them via links, and the tool then enables students to read the assigned texts aloud, record themselves, and submit their recordings. Teachers can track students' progress over time and provide them with feedback. Technology is beneficial for improving general and specific language skills because learners can work at their own pace, which gives them flexibility and reduces pressure to read during the class. In addition, despite several studies addressing the importance of reading fluency, none of the publications have comprehensively discussed the important roles of the reading progress assessment tool built into Microsoft Teams in the Saudi context. This study was an attempt to make an original contribution to the EFL field by analysing the impact of the Reading Progress Tool on learners' overall reading performance (accuracy and fluency) and highlighting some implications for teachers and future researchers.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study followed a quasi-experimental research

design as it assessed the use of the Reading progress tool on students' reading accuracy and fluency through reading two texts. Insights in Microsoft Teams were utilised to analyse learners' reading performance (fluency), including correct words per minute, mispronunciations, insertions, omissions, self-corrections, and repetitions. Microsoft Teams Teams ' built-in statistics feature generated the scores (in percentages) for all items. The total scores for all items provide the accuracy rate percentage, clearly understanding the students' RF. Students' accuracy level (independent - instructional - frustration) was determined according to the accuracy rate percentage (See Table 2).

3.2 Participants

The study sample was selected using purposeful sampling. The sample consisted of 30 female students from an academic English class at Taibah University. The participants were taught English via blended learning, and their speaking and writing skills were assessed after they submitted their assignments online via Blackboard. Moreover, their mid-term and final tests were computerised, and they were consequently familiar with using different online tools. Moreover, students were observed during the class, even fluent, and students tried to avoid reading short paragraphs. Moreover, students were encouraged to read, and then it was decided to integrate some reading materials from the textbook into the reading progress tool to determine the student's learning levels and areas for improvement.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected from Insight reports generated by Microsoft Teams for each student. The Insight reports provided comprehensive information about the learners' progress, accompanied by statistics, tables, and figures. Thus, the findings were interpreted based on the output from Microsoft Teams.

Furthermore, the data were analysed based on the generated results of the two reading texts. Regarding the texts, the tool measured the correct words per minute, the number of mispronounced words, insertions, omissions, self-corrections, and repetitions. Table 1 shows the items that were evaluated based on information drawn from Microsoft Teams. Saudi EFL learners' reading performance was analysed based on the students' recordings of their reading of texts and reports generated via the Reading Progress tool. The scores for all items were calculated using the built-in feature in the reading tool to create an accuracy rate percentage, which provided a clear understanding of the students' RF. The results were divided according to the first and second assignments. The reason is to find their performance when

reading a short text with unlimited attempts and a longer text with limited attempts.

3.4 Procedures

In the current study, learners' reading skills were evaluated by considering certain evaluation items and assessing the learners' reading performance using the Reading Progress assessment tool on the Microsoft Teams platform. Regarding the research procedures, reading progress assignments were created and shared with the learners via a link. The participants were given instructions about logging in, joining Microsoft Teams, and completing the assignment (see Appendices 2 and 3 for sample screenshots of the learners' performance when reading Text 1 and Text 2, respectively). Then, Microsoft Teams reports were analysed according to the aforementioned items to assess the student's performance for both assignments. Finally, learners' recordings of their readings were reviewed to ensure that the outcomes (automated feedback) generated by Microsoft Teams were as accurate as possible in terms of the Microsoft declaration:

Pronunciation detection for each language is generalised based on common pronunciation and may not recognise accents and dialects well. This is just a starting point, and we are working to ensure that those with accents and dialects are included. Use your discretion to mark errors manually when the speech detection does not meet your student's needs (Microsoft, n.d.[b]) (41)

3.5 Material

The two texts (see Appendix 1) were chosen from learners' English textbook *Cambridge Unlock 3, 2nd edition, Reading and Writing,* to ensure that the learners had practised the vocabulary in advance and would not find any words difficult. Thus, learners were familiar with the topics, had already practised them, and had engaged in activities regarding these paragraphs. The length of the first text was 162 words, whereas the length of the second text was 299 words. The first assignment was a single paragraph for the students to read, and they were allowed unlimited attempts. The second assignment, delivered two months later, gave the students three paragraphs to read, and they were allowed only three attempts.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Participating in the study was voluntary, and only 30 students out of 57 agreed to take part. The students were asked to sign a consent form to use the recordings to evaluate their readings, and they were assured that their participation would remain anonymous. Their

recordings were used for research purposes only. The researcher's official Microsoft Teams account protected and accessed all students' data.

4. Results

This study sought answers to the two previously mentioned questions. The results were based on different evaluation items: mispronunciations, omissions, insertions, self-corrections, and repetitions to find out the accuracy rate. Two sets of reading results were analysed (one for each text). Figure 1 shows the teacher's view of each student's reading task (regarding reading progress). The scores for all evaluation items were combined to provide an accuracy rate percentage. In Figure 1, Student A read Text 1 in 1:54 minutes (calculated automatically by the tool), achieved 76 correct words per minute, mispronounced 13 words, inserted 3 words, and omitted 3 words. However, the student had zero repeated words and zero self-corrections, and the total accuracy rate was 88%.

In Figure 2, Student B read Text 2 in 3 minutes, had 94 correct words per minute, mispronounced 8 words, inserted 19 words, self-corrected 2 words, omitted 8 words, and repeated 5 words. All evaluation items are highlighted in the same colour in the text. The student's total accuracy rate was 89%.
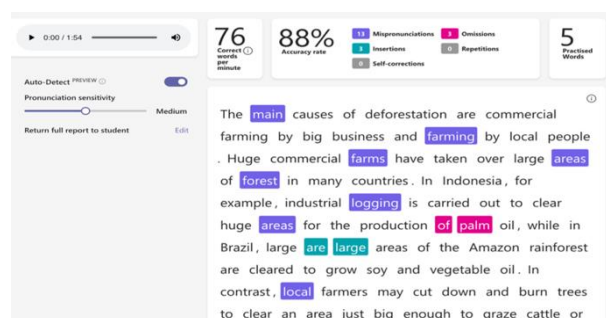
Figure 1: *A Teacher's View of Student A's Performance when Reading Text 1*
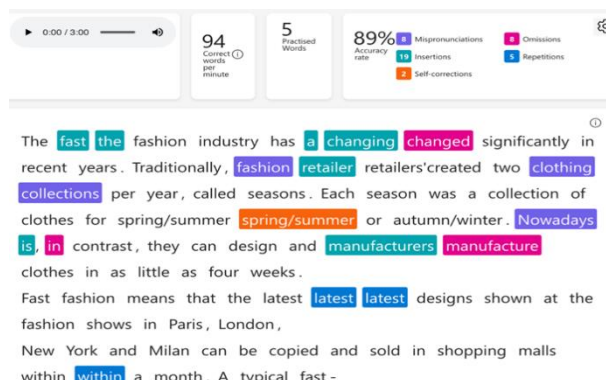

Figure 2: *A Teacher's View of Student B's Performance when Reading Text 2*

Table 1 demonstrates the outcomes of the two assignments for all students in the first and second texts. The tool generated the average percentages for all students, which is the accuracy rate (out of 100%). The average accuracy rate for the first text was 93.1%, whereas the accuracy rate for the second text was 89.2%. See Table 1 for the percentages for all Text 1 and Text 2 evaluation items.

Table 1: *Evaluation Items (First and Second Texts)*

Items of Evaluation	Text 1 (short, un-limited attempts)	Text 2 (long, 3 attempts only)
Mispronun-ciations	2.30%	2.90%
Omissions	1.20%	3.10%
Insertions	3.40%	4.80%
Self-correc-tions	0.10%	0.20%
Repetitions	0.30%	0.70%
Accuracy rate %	93.10%	89.20%

Table 2 below shows the students' reading accuracy levels. In the first text, the learners' accuracy rate was 93.1%, which is 'Instructional level', while the accuracy rate for the second text was 89.2%, which is 'Frustration level'.

Table 2: *Levels of accuracy in reading, adopted from Rasinski, 2004*

Independent Level	Relatively easy for the student to read (97% - 100% word accuracy).
Instructional Level	Challenging but manageable for the reader (90% - 96% word accuracy).
Frustration Level	Difficult text for the student to read (less than 90% word accuracy).

Apparently, students showed more accuracy in their first reading with fewer percentages in all evaluation items, which led to a higher accuracy rate and placed them at the 'Instructional level'. However, in reading the second

text, results indicated that students showed less than 90%-word accuracy, which placed them at the 'Frustration level'.

5. Discussion

In this study, learners were given the opportunity to practise reading texts in their own time and at their own pace using the Reading Progress tool. Based on the Insight reports, two sets of data were evaluated: the first set for the short text, with the students allowed unlimited attempts to repeat reading the text; the second set for the longer text, with the students allowed only three attempts to repeat the text.

The first research question relates to how the Microsoft Reading Progress tool assesses the reading fluency of Saudi EFL students at Taibah University. It was apparent that the students performed differently when reading the first and second texts across all evaluation items, with slight individual differences. For this study, the researcher did not compare the results for the two texts, but an attempt was made to evaluate the students' performance when reading two different texts.

Students' level of accuracy in reading text 1 was 'Instructional level', with only a few mispronunciations and insertions, which is considered cchallenging but manageable for the reader. Thus, learners need to practise mispronounced words and pay attention to reading the given words. However, students' level of accuracy in reading text 2 was 'Frustration Level', which is a difficult text for the student to read, bearing in mind that the text was longer than the first one, and fewer attempts were allowed. Additionally, learners avoided repeating the text because it was long and may have seemed boring; few students read it three times. Learners must carefully consider three evaluation items when reading: mispronunciations, insertions, and omissions. Learners need more practice to increase their accuracy rate and improve their levels and should concentrate on avoiding insertions, deletions, or repetitions of words. Teachers can use the 'repeated reading' approach to help students reach a good level of accuracy, which is an available feature in the reading progress tool by letting students repeat the text as much as they can. It can be concluded that practising reading helps students read texts, correct themselves to improve fluency and achieve accuracy rates. The findings align with Sanz et al.'s (2015) and Sato et al.'s (2013) observations since the use of the online tool had a positive impact on the learners' reading accuracy rate (14, 15). In summary, achieving fluency is essential for overcoming reading difficulties (6).

The second research question ascertains to what extent the Reading Progress Tool is useful as an assessment tool for monitoring learners' RF and progress. Students' recordings were reviewed, and some pronunciation errors were found. Some of these errors were not counted as errors by the tool, while other correct pronunciations were marked as errors. For example, one student omitted the second 'c' in the word 'accent' and only pronounced the first one as a 'k'. The tool did not count it as an error. Microsoft Teams advises that teachers mark errors manually to provide accurate feedback. These findings are in line with previous findings that teachers need to be cautious when using automated feedback, review recordings manually, and give students individual feedback rather than depending on the automated feedback given by the tool (33).

Despite this issue, the Reading Progress tool enables teachers to conduct class-wide assessments instead of assessing students individually, which can save time. The tool is highly effective in assisting teachers in keeping track of their student's progress and assigning different activities based on their student's performance and needs to improve their accuracy and fluency, such as practising the most challenging words based on the outcomes. Improving fluency is crucial because it improves comprehension (22). Hence, it can be said that the tool is an effective way to evaluate students' reading skills and improve fluency. It is useful for both teachers and learners. Learners can improve their accuracy and fluency, while teachers can evaluate their students' learning levels and assign appropriate materials/activities according to the outcomes of the Reading Progress tool. However, teachers need to manage pronunciation problems by reviewing recordings. Microsoft is working hard to accommodate more regional accents in Microsoft Teams and improve the Reading Progress tool.

These results reflect those of Ng (2015), who proved the usefulness of digital tools (10). Omar et al. (2021) supported the use of technology in education because it provides learners with flexible learning environments (6). Additionally, two studies proved the positive impact of the Reading Progress tool on learning learners' reading interests and on learners' speaking skills (39, 40).

As an assessment tool, the Reading Progress tool has pedagogical benefits for EFL teaching and learning. it enhances learners' learning experiences, gives learners the opportunity to work without pressure in their own time and at their own pace, and can help shy, low-confidence, low-level students improve their reading skills. Digital tools can also enhance learners' overall performance. In this vein, Zainal Abidin et al. (2023) stated that 'students and lecturers are encouraged to use this medium for teaching and learning sessions' (p. 35) (42).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study assessed Saudi EFL learners' reading performance (accuracy and fluency) by using a Microsoft Teams-based tool. The results of this study indicate that Saudi EFL students were at an 'instructional level' when reading the first text and a 'frustration level' when reading the second text. Furthermore, they needed to improve their pronunciation of some words by practising them individually.

The generated results can be used to provide insights into using the Reading Progress tool to monitor students' reading skills. There are some recommendations for EFL teachers. For example, instructors should monitor learners' progress over time by giving them a text to read every week for 8 or 10 weeks (throughout a semester). Also, teachers could provide texts in class to ensure that learners develop other skills during the class. The tool can also allow teachers to focus on instruction and, moreover, provide teachers with the opportunity to conduct assessments, particularly for low-level students, which would save class time and help what Keezhatta and Omar (2019) called 'struggling readers' (9).

This study has some limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it focused on female students because of gender segregation in education in Saudi Arabia. Including male students in the study would have provided valuable findings and enabled the researcher to compare the results in terms of gender. Another limitation was the length of the texts and the number of attempts allowed. Providing the learners with two texts of the same length and the same number of attempts would have allowed the researcher to compare the learners' performance across texts. Future research might focus on a small number of shy students or low-level students (perhaps 10 willing participants) for a longer period to obtain comprehensive findings and help them reach high levels of fluency.

The study findings contribute to academic English teaching and the improvement of reading skills by showing the effectiveness of the tool in assessing learners' reading performance. Additionally, the results provide evidence of the tool's reliability and usefulness for monitoring learners' reading accuracy and fluency progress.

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Appendix 1

Text 1

The main causes of deforestation are commercial farming by big businesses and farming by local people. Huge commercial farms have taken over large areas of forest in many countries. In Indonesia, for example, industrial logging is carried out to clear huge areas for palm oil production, while in Brazil, large areas of the Amazon rainforest are cleared to grow soy and vegetable oil. In contrast, local farmers may cut down and burn trees to clear an area just big enough to graze cattle or grow crops. However, the land can no longer be used after two or three years, so the farmer moves to another piece of land. Normally, clearing land takes around ten years to recover, but in populated areas, the land is never allowed to recover. This constant reuse of land leads to heavy erosion—the loss of the top layer of soil that protects the ground. Erosion, in turn, can cause flooding in heavy rain.

Text 2

The fashion industry has changed significantly in recent years. Traditionally, fashion retailers created two clothing collections per year, called seasons. Each season was a collection of spring/summer or autumn/winter clothes. In contrast, they can design and manufacture clothes in as little as four weeks. Fast fashion means that the latest designs shown at the fashion shows in Paris, London, New York and Milan can be copied and sold in shopping malls within a month. A typical fast-fashion retailer can stock 10,000 designs annually, compared with 2,000 for its high-fashion competitors. The largest fast-fashion retailers have annual sales in the billions of euros. The advantages of rapidly changing fashions are clear. Shortening the life cycle of a product means that if a design doesn't sell well within a week, it is removed from the shops and replaced with a new one. This is good for manufacturers as it means a greater volume of sales. It is also good for customers, who can keep up with fast-moving trends cheaply and who can enjoy finding something new every time they visit the shop. However, there are also a number of disadvantages to the fast-fashion approach. Perhaps the biggest concern is the impact of wasted clothes on the environment. The low cost of most fast fashion enables shoppers to buy several new sets of clothes each season instead of wearing the same outfits year after year. This means that a huge amount of clothing is thrown away. Furthermore, with fashions changing so quickly, cotton growers need to produce more cotton more cheaply, and that means using more pesticides and chemicals. A third problem is the theft of ideas. Fashion houses invest a lot of time and money in new designs, only to see these ideas stolen and copied by fast-fashion companies.

Appendix 2

Sample screenshots of the learners' performance (Text 1)

Appendix 3

Sample screenshots of the learners' performance (Text 2)