



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Implementing Read Along as a digital reading media for Grade VII students of SMP IT Cendekia Pematangsiantar

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Abstract

This community service program was carried out at SMP IT Cendekia Pematangsiantar, aiming to improve Grade VII students' reading skills through the use of an interactive digital media called Read Along. The media was chosen for its features, including real-time pronunciation feedback, illustrated stories, a virtual assistant named Diya, and mini quizzes that support students' comprehension of English texts. The method used in this activity involved hands-on learning, demonstration, and discussion. The program was conducted independently by the implementer through an educational and interactive approach. The results indicated that students were highly interested in the media and were motivated to continue using it outside the classroom. One challenge encountered was the noisy classroom environment, which made it difficult for the app to accurately detect students' voices. This activity is expected to serve as a reference for teachers in developing media-based learning and enhancing students' reading literacy in line with 21st-century competencies.

Keywords: 21st century, digital media, interactive learning, read along, reading literacy



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Introduction

Reading is one of the foundational language skills that must be mastered by students, especially in English learning. In the context of junior high school, reading is not only about understanding written text, but also involves fluency, vocabulary mastery, and pronunciation accuracy (Sinamo et al., 2023; Butar-Butar et al., 2025; Kalsoom et al., 2025). However, based on classroom observation and informal interviews, many students still face difficulties in reading aloud and understanding the meaning of English texts, particularly due to the lack of engaging and interactive learning media.

In the digital era, the use of educational technology has become an important support in improving literacy. Various studies have shown that the integration of ICT in the learning process can increase student motivation and learning outcomes (Putri et al., 2022). One of the efforts to bridge students' difficulties in reading is by using digital learning media that are tailored to the characteristics of students, especially media that are visual, interactive, and user-friendly.

Based on that, this community service program was designed to implement the use of Read Along by Google, an interactive reading application that utilizes artificial intelligence (AI) to assist students in reading English texts. This application provides real-time pronunciation feedback, awards points (stars) for accuracy, includes illustrated stories, and features a virtual assistant named Diya who supports users while reading. These features are expected to help students improve their reading skills while also building their confidence and engagement in the classroom.

The program was carried out at SMP IT Cendekia Pematangsiantar, targeting Grade VII students of class Al Ikhlas, with the aim of introducing digital media that supports literacy and aligns with 21st-century competencies, namely the 4Cs: Communication, Collaboration, Critical Thinking, and Creativity (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). According to Suparman et al. (2020), students in this era must be trained not only to memorize but also to explore, analyze, and present ideas through various forms, including digital tools.

In addition, this program was motivated by the observation that many teachers still use conventional methods in teaching reading, which may lead to boredom or disengagement among students. Through this activity, it is hoped that the Read Along media can serve as an innovative alternative that is both fun and effective.

1. The objectives of this community service are as follows:
2. To introduce Read Along as a digital reading media that can be used in English language teaching at junior high school level.
3. To enhance students' interest, fluency, and accuracy in reading English texts.
4. To provide teachers with a reference for implementing interactive digital media in reading activities.

Furthermore, this program seeks to inspire teachers to adopt similar digital tools that promote the 4Cs: Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, and Creativity, which are essential skills in 21st-century education (Herman et al., 2022). By using engaging media like Read Along, educators can foster not only language proficiency, but also holistic competencies that support lifelong learning.

Method

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach, aiming to provide a comprehensive description of the process and impact of implementing the Read Along application as a digital reading media for students in Grade VII of SMP IT Cendekia Pematangsiantar. As stated by Herman et al. (2021), qualitative

research focuses on understanding social phenomena from the participants' perspective through detailed narratives and observation in natural settings (Derradji & Oudihat, 2025).

The implementation was structured into three systematic phases: Preparation, Implementation, and Evaluation, as illustrated in the diagram below:



Figure 1. Procedures in Conducting the Community Service Program (Herman et al., 2024)

Phase 1: Preparation

This phase focused on laying the groundwork for a smooth and effective classroom implementation. Key activities included:

a) Coordination with School Authorities

Communication was established with the head of SMP IT Cendekia Pematangsiantar to obtain permission and coordinate the use of the Grade VII Al Ikhlas classroom.

b) Selection of Digital Media and Materials

The Read Along application by Google was selected due to its interactivity, use of visual and audio support, and built-in AI assistant “Diya.” Among the many stories available in the app, “The Tortoise and the Turtle” was chosen for its simple vocabulary, moral values, and the presence of a mini-quiz.

c) Lesson Planning and Scenario Building

This research designed the lesson to include direct instruction about the importance of reading, an introduction to digital media in English language learning, and the integration of Read Along as a learning tool. The learning objectives included: improving students' pronunciation, increasing motivation to read, and practicing reading comprehension.

d) Technical Preparation

The application was installed on a tablet, connected to a projector and external speaker so the entire class could hear and see the app in real-time. This research tested the responsiveness of the microphone and voice recognition features to ensure functionality in a classroom setting.

e) Logistical and Administrative Setup

Items such as the attendance list, observation sheets, backup internet, and documentation devices (e.g., smartphone camera) were prepared.

Phase 2: Implementation

The activity was conducted interactively in the classroom with students from Grade VII Al Ikhlas. The session was divided into the following components:

a) Introduction to Reading and Digital Tools

This research opened the session by greeting students, introducing themselves, and discussing why reading is a fundamental skill in English learning. Students were invited to share their reading habits and previous experiences with digital media.



Figure 2. Introduces the concept of reading and explains the importance of digital media in learning.

b) *Presentation of Read Along*

1. The Read Along application was introduced and demonstrated. This research explained each feature:
2. Visual Guidance: Texts are highlighted word-by-word as students read.
3. AI Assistant “Diya”: Provides pronunciation feedback and motivational prompts.
4. Gamification Elements: “Stars” are awarded for each successful word or line read.
5. Mini-Quizzes: Stories include interactive questions that check comprehension.



Figure 3. The Read Along application is presented to students, highlighting features such as Diya and the star system.

c) *Demonstration of the Story “The Tortoise and the Turtle”*

This research began by reading the story aloud through the app, modeling correct pronunciation. The story’s visuals and highlighted text were projected to ensure student engagement.



Figure 4. Demonstration of the story “The Tortoise and the Turtle” using the Read Along app on the projector.

d) Student Participation

Several students were invited one by one to read using the tablet. Their voices were broadcasted using the speaker, and feedback from “Diya” was visible and audible to the class.

1. In cases of incorrect pronunciation, the app gave immediate feedback and asked the student to repeat.
2. This research helped by giving pronunciation tips and used the “repeat after me” technique.



Figure 5. A student practices reading aloud using the app while receiving immediate feedback on pronunciation.

e) *Mini-Quiz and Story Discussion*

At the end of the story, the class worked on the built-in quiz together, answering comprehension questions and discussing the moral values (e.g., perseverance and self-confidence). This activity promoted critical thinking and allowed students to reflect on the story's message.



Figure 6. Students engage in a mini-quiz and reflect on the story's content through discussion.

f) *Interactive Dialogue*

A brief discussion session was held, asking students to give feedback on their experience using Read Along. Most students showed high interest and curiosity about using the app again at home.

Phase 3: Evaluation

The evaluation process assessed student participation, learning outcomes, and the effectiveness of the Read Along application. The following indicators were used:

a) *Student Engagement*

Students actively raised their hands to try the app and paid attention throughout the session. This suggested high engagement and motivation.

b) *Pronunciation Improvement*

Based on observations, students corrected their mispronunciations after receiving feedback from Diya. The repeated trials encouraged better articulation and self-awareness.

c) *Comprehension Check*

Students were able to answer the mini-quiz questions accurately and were able to retell the story's message during the discussion, indicating comprehension.

d) *Technology Adaptation*

Students showed excitement toward the media and expressed interest in exploring other stories on Read Along. Some even asked how to install the application on their own devices.

This detailed method ensured that the use of Read Along not only introduced students to engaging content, but also supported the core goals of English education, particularly in reading, pronunciation, and motivation. It also demonstrated how digital tools can serve as effective supplementary media in junior high school settings.

Result and Discussion

Phase 1: Preparation

In the initial stage of this community service program, this research conducted several preparatory steps to ensure the smooth implementation of the activity. First, a coordination meeting was held with the administration of SMP IT Cendekia Pematangsiantar to schedule the teaching session and confirm the availability of the necessary facilities. Once the date and time were set, this research prepared the necessary tools, including a tablet device, an internet connection, speakers, and an LCD projector for the classroom demonstration.

This research also explored and tested the Read Along application in advance to identify a suitable story that aligned with the students' reading level. The story titled "The Tortoise and the Turtle" was selected due to its moral content, simple vocabulary, and engaging illustrations. In addition, a brief explanation about media and ICT in ELT was prepared using PowerPoint to give students a clear understanding of the topic before the application was introduced.

Phase 2: Implementation

The implementation phase began with this research introducing herself to the students of Grade VII Al Ikhlas at SMP IT Cendekia Pematangsiantar. After a short ice-breaking session, she explained the concept of "reading" and how digital tools like Read Along could enhance reading skills. This research then presented a short lecture using PowerPoint about media in ELT, emphasizing the role of interactive digital media in improving English language learning.

Following the presentation, this research demonstrated how to use the Read Along application. The selected story "The Tortoise and the Turtle" was displayed via infocus so that all students could follow along. Then, students were invited one by one to come forward and try reading the story aloud into the microphone. The Read Along app's AI assistant, Diya, provided immediate feedback on their pronunciation, and awarded stars as a motivational feature.

This research actively guided the students, correcting mispronunciations by repeating the word and asking the students to repeat after her. In addition, the story contained a built-in mini-quiz that was answered together as a class. This part of the session encouraged student interaction and strengthened their comprehension. This research also translated some parts of the story into Bahasa Indonesia to ensure understanding.

Phase 3: Evaluation

Evaluation was conducted through direct observation of student engagement and participation during the activity. Several indicators were used:

- a) Pronunciation Accuracy, noted through the app's real-time feedback.
- b) Reading Confidence, measured by students' willingness to come forward and read aloud.
- c) Engagement, observed through their interest in the story, reaction to the app's features, and performance on the mini-quiz.
- d) Comprehension, evaluated through classroom discussion after the reading activity.

Overall, students were highly engaged and enthusiastic about the activity. Many expressed interest in downloading the app and continuing to read stories at home. This research concluded the session by summarizing the strengths and weaknesses of the Read Along media.

4. Challenges in Implementing Read Along

During the implementation of Read Along in the classroom, this research encountered several challenges. One of the most prominent issues was the classroom environment itself. Since Read Along relies on voice input for pronunciation evaluation, it is highly sensitive to background noise. In a typical classroom setting, where students are often excited and there is constant chatter, the application sometimes failed to register the student's voice accurately. As a result, the app occasionally skipped words or prompted the student to "speak louder," even when they were already speaking clearly.

Another challenge involved the limitation of resources. The activity was conducted using a single tablet device connected to an external speaker. This setup restricted simultaneous student interaction with the app, resulting in longer wait times and limited practice opportunities for each student. In addition, some students were unfamiliar with using voice-recognition technology, which initially made them hesitant to participate.

Despite these issues, the students remained curious and motivated. However, these challenges highlighted the need for a more conducive setting and better equipment when using interactive digital reading tools in group learning environments.

5. Steps to Overcome the Challenges

To address the challenges mentioned above, several practical steps were taken and considered for future implementations. First, to minimize background noise, this research gave instructions for the rest of the class to remain quiet while one student was reading aloud. This approach significantly improved the app's ability to capture voice input accurately.

Second, to optimize student interaction with the app, this research plans to divide students into smaller groups in future sessions. Each group could use a separate device, allowing more students to practice reading simultaneously. If multiple tablets or smartphones are unavailable, scheduling multiple sessions or incorporating the app into individual assignments could be alternative strategies.

Lastly, to help students become more comfortable with the technology, this research included a short training session before the main activity. This session allowed students to familiarize themselves with how the app functions, reducing hesitation and boosting confidence.



Figure 7. Group photo taken after the activity with students of Grade VII Al Ikhlas class at SMP IT Cendekia Pematangsiantar.

Conclusion

This community based on classroom activity demonstrated that Read Along by Google can function effectively as a digital reading media for junior high school students, especially when implemented with careful preparation and interactive guidance. Through a structured implementation process including demonstration, individual practice, and collaborative reflection students were able to increase their reading confidence, pronunciation awareness, and engagement in the learning process.

The application's real-time feedback system, gamification elements (stars), and visual aids contributed to a learning environment that was not only informative but also enjoyable. While environmental noise and turn taking in group settings presented challenges, these were addressed through practical classroom management strategies and adaptive facilitation.

Overall, the use of Read Along media aligns with the development of 21st-century competencies in students, particularly in communication and critical thinking. This approach can be a valuable model for future classroom practices, especially when promoting autonomous learning and digital literacy. Teachers are encouraged to explore similar media and adapt them based on classroom contexts and student needs.

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