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The Impact of ReadTheory.org on Reading Skills at a Saudi Technical College

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Abstract: **This study examined the use of ReadTheory, a Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) platform, to support English reading development at a Saudi technical college. Two EFL classes were compared in a quasi-experimental design, where one followed regular instruction and the other completed weekly ReadTheory sessions. Reading proficiency was assessed using the Cambridge B1 Preliminary Reading section before and after the intervention, and results were analyzed with standard parametric and non-parametric tests in Excel. The ReadTheory class showed significantly stronger gains than the control class. A companion student survey indicated generally positive perceptions of the platform, especially enjoyment, interest, and practice, although motivation from badges and progress reports was mixed, with most students still rating them positively. Even with generalizability being somewhat limited by the small, all-male sample and the use of intact classes, the findings suggest that ReadTheory can be a practical classroom supplement when teachers guide its use, while also pointing to the need for ways to boost students' motivation beyond course requirements.**

Keywords: **ReadTheory, Saudi Arabia, Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), reading comprehension, quasi-experimental research.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a key skill for EFL learners, and technology has become one way to give students more chances to practice. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) tools are now common in classrooms and can provide practice that is flexible, immediate, and matched to student level. One such platform that is gaining attention is ReadTheory.org (ReadTheory). Even though ReadTheory is widely used, most research has focused on student opinions and general classroom use rather than clear evidence of reading gains. This review first looks at CALL and reading in general, then at studies of ReadTheory with students, and finally at teacher views and theoretical ideas related to the program.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

CALL is now a regular part of language teaching. It gives students extra practice outside of class and offers feedback that textbooks and worksheets cannot provide (Chapelle & Voss, 2016; Stockwell & Reinders, 2019). For reading, CALL programs can change the level of the text and questions to match the student. This means weaker readers are supported while stronger readers are still challenged (Heift, 2021). Additionally, CALL can help students become more independent as digital tools let students track their own progress, which helps promote both autonomy and digital literacy. More importantly, as teachers cannot always give each learner enough attention, CALL may make practice more personal and targeted. Still, much of the research on CALL focuses on motivation and student enjoyment. Fewer studies have tested whether CALL platforms, like Read Theory, improve scores on standardized reading tests. Therefore, it is important to assess different platforms individually to see not only how students feel about using them but, perhaps more importantly, whether they lead to measurable progress in reading.

ReadTheory in Learner Studies

Several studies outside Saudi Arabia have looked at ReadTheory. The results are mixed. In Ecuador, Carrion (2018) tested 25 university students and found no improvement in reading scores. In Indonesia, Setyaningsih (2021) studied 72 first-year university students and found gains in reading, grammar, vocabulary, and even listening on an inhouse English proficiency exam, and students said they had positive feelings about using the program. In Japan, Mork (2018) reported that university students liked how ReadTheory matched the reading to their level. Ismawati and Syafryadin (2022) also found that Indonesian students thought their reading improved, but the gains were described as limited. Additionally, Wangdi and Shimray (2025) studied ReadTheory in Thailand as a self-access language learning (SALL) platform rather than a classroom supplement. They found that students enjoyed the program, showed reading gains, and noted its potential to support learner autonomy. These studies show that students usually like using ReadTheory, but the actual test results are not always strong.

In Saudi Arabia, the limited available literature shows mixed results. Alalwany (2019) studied female undergraduates and found that ReadTheory helped motivation and autonomy, but the study did not measure test scores. Al Roomy and Althewini (2019) used ReadTheory in a blended learning course with medical students and found gains in comprehension and vocabulary, and students gave positive feedback. Alghammas (2025) compared ReadTheory with paper-based reading practice. Students preferred online reading practice because it was flexible and engaging, but there was no significant difference in reading scores. Alqhtani (2024) used ReadTheory together with Write&Improve in a mobile learning project at Umm Al-Qura University. The results showed reading gains, but since two programs were used it is hard to know how much ReadTheory alone contributed.

Overall, studies in and outside Saudi Arabia show the same pattern. Students usually like ReadTheory and say it helps them. Some studies report real improvement in reading, while others show no difference. This makes it important to test ReadTheory carefully in new contexts. Few, if any, have examined how it works in technical or vocational settings.

Teacher and Learner Perspectives

Some studies have asked what teachers think about ReadTheory. Romeo, Hock, and Plante-Kropp (2016) surveyed over 1,000 teachers and found that most saw it as a useful supplement. They said it helped with extra practice, automatic feedback, and tracking progress, especially in large classes.

Students have also shared their views. In Japan, Mork (2018) found that students liked how the program matched texts to their level. In Saudi Arabia, Alalwany (2019) showed that badges and points kept undergraduates motivated and reading more on their own. In Indonesia, Ismawati and Syafryadin (2022) found that students believed their reading improved, even though test results did not always show big gains. Reviews of gamification in EFL report that reward systems, badges, and progress indicators can boost motivation in many contexts (Chan & Lo, 2024; Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Taken together, these studies suggest that students usually enjoy using ReadTheory and feel it helps them.

Researchers have linked these teacher and student views to learning theories. Alotaibi, Tohmaz, and Jabak (2017) connected adaptive platforms like ReadTheory to self-regulated learning theory, arguing that independent online practice can build habits of autonomy. The gamified features noted by Alalwany (2019), and also described in broader gamification reviews, reflect ideas from motivation theory, where points and rewards encourage students to keep working.

Overall, both teachers and students see ReadTheory positively. It is valued for extra practice, motivation, and independence. However, future studies should examine whether these positive views actually translate into measurable reading improvement, especially in Saudi technical colleges.

Conclusion and Research Gap

The studies reviewed show that CALL can support reading through adaptive practice and independent learning, and that students often enjoy using platforms like ReadTheory. International research on ReadTheory reports mixed results, with some studies showing gains in reading and others finding little or no improvement. Saudi studies have also produced inconsistent results, though students generally report positive attitudes. Echoing earlier findings, teachers view ReadTheory as a practical tool for feedback and extra practice, while theories of autonomy and gamification suggest that it should encourage a persistent and sustained level of engagement in independent study.

Even so, the evidence so far is limited in two ways. First, as mentioned before, many studies focus more on motivation and perception than on clear measures of reading improvement. Second, no studies have looked at ReadTheory in the context

of Saudi technical colleges, where students face different challenges. This leaves open the question of whether ReadTheory can both motivate and improve the reading ability of technical college students in Saudi Arabia.

Research Questions

Based on this gap, this study addresses two questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between the pretest and posttest results in the students' Cambridge B1 Preliminary Reading assessment after the intervention of ReadTheory.org?
2. What are the perceptions of learners regarding the use of ReadTheory.org to improve their reading skills in EFL learning?

III. METHODOLOGY

This study used a quasi-experimental design with non-equivalent groups. Students were assigned to two intact classes at the beginning of the semester. One class served as the control group and continued with normal English lessons, while the other served as the experimental group and replaced one two-hour lesson per week with ReadTheory practice. Both groups completed the same pretest and posttest, adapted from the reading section of the Cambridge B1 Preliminary exam and delivered online via Google Forms.

Participants

The participants were all male Saudi nationals, aged 19 to 25, enrolled in the Foundation Year of an International Technical College (ITC) under the College of Excellence (COE) program. Admission required completion of the secondary school certificate (Tawjihiyah). Courses taught in English included Basic English, Mathematics, and Work Skills, while IT and Islamic Ethics were taught in Arabic. Most students entered with a very low English proficiency, and as (Aljohani, 2016) points out a generally low academic ability, contributing to the attrition noted during the course.

At the beginning of the semester, students were assigned to two intact classes, Class A and Class B. Both classes started with more students, but attendance declined during the semester. By the end of the course, 31 students had completed both the pretest and posttest and were included in the analysis: 14 in Class A and 17 in Class B. These students formed the research sample for the study.

Instruments

Three instruments were used in the study. The first was the Cambridge B1 Preliminary Reading test, used as both pretest and posttest to measure achievement. The second was the ReadTheory system, which recorded placement levels and student progress throughout the semester. The third was a survey that asked students about their perceptions of the system which was adapted from Mork (2018). This short survey had nine five-point Likert items and one open-ended question.

Description of Intervention

ReadTheory.org is a free, web-based platform that provides leveled reading passages with comprehension questions. Students first complete a placement test, after which the system automatically assigns a starting level. The reading passages are designed for U.S. grade school students and are rated according to the Lexile Framework. Wei and Van Moere (2021) note that Lexile levels can be associated with the CEFR, an important consideration for EFL teachers. As learners work through the program, the passages adjust in difficulty according to performance allowing for differentiated reading practice. The platform's questions align with the U.S. Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts, which emphasize three areas of competence:

1. The Key Ideas and Details standard focuses on understanding explicitly stated information and identifying main ideas.
2. The Integration of Knowledge and Ideas standard involves interpreting connections, evaluating arguments, and recognizing the author's purpose.
3. The Craft and Structure standard addresses how a text is written, including vocabulary, tone, and the use of context to infer meaning.

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Students receive immediate feedback on each answer, with explanations for incorrect responses. In addition, the program offers optional short written responses, which instructors can score using built-in rubrics. Gamified elements such as points, levels, badges, and progress tracking are designed to encourage continued engagement.

Intervention Procedure

During the semester, the experimental group used ReadTheory once per week for two hours, focusing primarily on reading with some optional writing practice. The control group continued with standard English lessons without ReadTheory. At the end of the semester, both groups sat for the same posttest as the pretest. Only the researcher had access to pretest scores, so students did not know their baseline results. This design allowed for comparison of progress in reading between the two groups.

Data Collection

Data collection followed four steps. First, we recorded the pretest results from the Cambridge B1 Preliminary Reading exam, administered online through Google Forms, and compiled them in Microsoft Excel. Second, ReadTheory system data were collected, including placement levels and records of student progress. Third, the student perception survey was administered online, with results exported to Excel for analysis. Finally, the posttest was given at the end of the semester, and the results were sorted by group to allow for comparison in the same manner as the pretest.

Limitations

The study has some contextual and implementation limitations. As is typical in classroom-based research, rather than randomly assigned groups, it used intact classes. This approach reflects real institutional practices and means that group comparability was based on pretest results rather than random assignment. Attendance declined over the semester, a common issue in ITC/COE programs, which may have influenced students' ongoing engagement. However, all 31 students who began the study completed both the pretest and posttest, strengthening internal validity. Nevertheless, the smaller end-of-term group may represent more motivated or persistent learners, so caution is needed when generalizing these results. Despite these constraints, the study provides rare evidence from a technical college context in Saudi Arabia and contributes to understanding the potential of ReadTheory in this setting.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively through several statistical tests. Both the pretest and posttest score data and the student survey responses were compiled and analyzed using Microsoft Excel. To examine achievement, paired-samples t-tests compared pretest and posttest scores within each group. Statistical significance was assessed using p-values, and effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to indicate the strength of any observed differences. To further compare groups while controlling for initial differences, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) test was conducted with posttest scores as the dependent variable and pretest scores as the covariate. Additionally, given the small sample size and the possibility of non-normal distributions, non-parametric tests were also run. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test compared pretest and posttest scores within groups, and a Mann–Whitney U test compared posttest scores between groups. For the nine Likert-scale items, percentages were calculated, giving a clear description of student perceptions, and the open-ended responses were reviewed for common themes. Together, these methods provided complementary statistical and perception-based evidence to answer the research questions.

Pretest–Posttest Analysis

The control group's average score rose modestly from 18.82 to 21.36, an improvement that corresponded to a moderate effect size (d = 0.41) but no statistical significance, $t(16) = 1.69$, $p = .110$ (Table 1). In other words, while the students did slightly improve, the change was not significant enough to confidently state that it was due to instruction alone.

Table 1. ***Paired-Samples t-Test Results with Descriptive Statistics for the Control Group (Pretest vs. Posttest)***

Test	*M*	Mean Difference	*t*(df)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Pretest (Mock 1)	18.82	—	—	—	—
Posttest (Mock 2)	21.35	+2.53	1.69(16)	.110	0.41

Note. N = 17. Dependent variable = test scores (Pretest vs. Posttest).

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Contrast this to the experimental group's average score increase from a much lower starting point of 15.36 to 21.35. (Note that the posttest averages were indeed the same.) This 6-point increase was both statistically significant, $t(13) = 3.61$, $p = .003$ and indicated a substantially large effect size ($d = 0.96$) (Table 2). Here the ReadTheory group not only caught up to the control group's performance but clearly surpassed their own pretest level by a wide margin. This was an encouraging result showing that ReadTheory had an impact on the increase.

Table 2. ***Paired-Samples t-Test Results with Descriptive Statistics for the Experimental Group (Pretest vs. Posttest)***

Test	*M*	Mean Difference	*t*(df)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Pretest (Mock 1)	15.36	—	—	—	—
Posttest (Mock 2)	21.35	+6.00	3.61(13)	.003	0.96

Note. $N = 14$. Dependent variable = test scores (Pretest vs. Posttest).

An analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) using pretest scores as a covariate, corroborated this pattern, finding the experimental group's improvement to be significant with $F(1, 29) = 5.23$, $p = .030$, $\eta^2 = .15$ (Table 3).

Table 3. ***ANCOVA Results Comparing Posttest Scores Between Control and Experimental Groups (Pretest as Covariate)***

Source	*SS*	*df*	*MS*	*F*	*p*	η^2
Pretest (covariate)	112.45	1	112.45	2.57	.121	.08
Group (condition)	229.67	1	229.67	5.23	.030	.15
Error	1273.89	29	43.93			
Total	1616.01	31				

Note. $N = 31$. Dependent variable = posttest scores (with pretest as covariate).

Analysis of the two non-parametric tests also pointed to similar conclusions. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test showed a statistically significant gain for the experimental group ($Z = -2.98$, $p = .003$, $r = .80$), but not for the control group ($Z = -1.62$, $p = .105$, $r = .39$). The Mann–Whitney *U* test also confirmed that the experimental group's posttest scores were indeed significantly higher than those in the control group ($U = 65.0$, $p = .015$, $r = .41$) (Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4. ***Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test Results for Pretest vs. Posttest within Groups***

Group	*N*	*Z*	*p*	Effect Size (*r*)
Control	17	-1.62	.105	.39
Experimental	14	-2.98	.003*	.80

Note. $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$. An asterisk (*) indicates significance at $p < .05$.

Table 5. ***Mann–Whitney U Test Results for Posttest Scores Between Groups***

Comparison	*N* (Control)	*N* (Experimental)	*U*	*p*	Effect Size *(r)*
Posttest (Mock 2 scores)	17	14	65.0	.015*	.41

Note. An asterisk (*) indicates significance at $p < .05$.

Taking all of the analysis into account, both groups showed improvement, but all of the analysis showed that the ReadTheory group improved more and that the improvement was significantly so. The takeaway is that for teachers, it suggests that ReadTheory can strengthen their students reading skills when used to supplement EFL lessons, and for administrators, it points to a program worth supporting.

Student Survey Analysis

While the pretest–posttest data showed clear learning gains, numbers alone do not capture the whole picture. To better understand how students experienced the program, a survey was used to gather their perceptions of ReadTheory. These

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responses add context to the test results by showing how learners viewed the platform in terms of interest, usability, and motivation.

This survey was adapted from Mork (2018), originally written in English and translated into Arabic by a bilingual Arabic–English teacher not involved in the teaching of the participants. It was both optional and anonymous. Table 6 provides a summary of the results.

Table 6. ***Summary of Student Survey Responses***

Survey Item	**% Disagree (1–2)**	***% Neutral (3)***	***% Agree (4–5)***
I enjoyed using ReadTheory	8%	12%	80%
I was interested in using the system	7%	8%	85%
The passages were interesting	10%	16%	74%
ReadTheory was easy to use	7%	15%	78%
ReadTheory was good practice	9%	18%	73%
My reading skills improved	13%	28%	59%
I plan to use ReadTheory in the future	12%	29%	59%
Progress reports motivated me	11%	20%	69%
The badges were motivating	18%	12%	70%

Note. *N*= 27-31

The majority of students responded positively. Over 80% reported enjoying the program, and 85% said they were interested in using it. About three-quarters agreed the passages were interesting, though some noted that names and topics drawn from U.S. contexts felt culturally distant.

Ease of use was another strong point, though many students initially struggled with English instructions and unfamiliar item types. Over time, most adapted and reported few problems navigating the system.

Roughly three-quarters agreed that ReadTheory was good practice, and over half felt their reading skills improved. A smaller majority (59%) indicated they would continue using the program in the future, while motivation from reports and badges received mixed reviews. Reports were not always checked, but badges seemed to encourage many students, even if a minority dismissed them.

Open comments reinforced these findings. Most were favorable ("excellent," "great," "pretty nice"), with one student writing that they "benefited" from the system. Others mentioned negatives such as passages being "too long" or responded neutrally ("no comment").

The survey shows that students generally viewed ReadTheory positively, especially in terms of enjoyment, interest, and perceived practice. Motivation features had uneven appeal, but overall the program was accepted and seen as useful in supporting language learning. Taken together, the test results and survey responses offer both quantitative and qualitative evidence of ReadTheory's impact in this context.

V. CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING TEACHING/LEARNING

In conclusion, this study addressed both research questions. It found that ReadTheory, when used as a structured in-class supplement, led to significant, measurable gains in students' reading proficiency on a standardized test, and the participating students generally had positive perceptions of the platform. However, caution is needed when interpreting these results. The sample was small and all-male; the groups were intact classes rather than randomly assigned; and uneven student attendance/attrition over the semester could have introduced differences unrelated to the intervention. Motivation to use ReadTheory is perhaps more conditional or extrinsic in this context (for example, the course requirements) than fully internalized (Alrabai, 2011; Al-Seghayer, 2014a; see also Ryan & Deci, 2020). This aligns with our general classroom observations where the students engaged more when the activity was structured and supervised.

Implications for Teaching and Administration

ReadTheory is a practical supplement providing leveled practice and immediate feedback that can be hard to deliver consistently. Because badges and reports did not motivate all students equally, scheduling a brief weekly ReadTheory teacher check-in session with students on their progress can help sustain engagement. These check-ins can emphasize feedback tied to competence and simple self-monitoring routines.

Wider Relevance

Although the setting for our study was a Saudi technical college, it faced constraints common in many EFL contexts. These challenges are not unique, as many under-resourced programs contend with similar conditions. The results here, including strong learner perceptions and measurable reading gains under structured use, suggest that platforms like ReadTheory can be effective when integrated thoughtfully. At the same time, weaker independent use reinforces the need for teacher-guided implementation, a pattern also noted in other contexts (e.g., Mork, 2018; Setyaningsih, 2021; Wangdi & Shimray, 2025).

Directions for Future Research

Future research could include larger, campus-wide studies, including, though somewhat difficult to do in a Saudi context, mixed-gendered groups. Also, to help improve the overall generalizability, a study that looks at comparisons across multiple institutions may offer meaningful insights. Moving away from looking at ReadTheory as a tool to improve reading, it might also be interesting to incorporate measures of self-regulated learning, such as goal setting, progress tracking, and strategy adjustment over time (Zimmerman, 2002; Panadero, 2017). This could show whether platforms such as ReadTheory can help students move from structured use in the classroom to a more independent one. Another idea would be to use elements of self-determination theory, especially features that nurture autonomy and competence, and investigate how this may guide future research design into ReadTheory (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Taken together, these directions would allow future research to explore how digital tools like ReadTheory can serve not just as short-term supplements, but as steppingstones toward self-directed learning.

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