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Students' perspectives on application of AI-powered technology in learning English pronunciation: a case of reading progress

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ABSTRACT

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly dominating several aspects of human existence, including the realm of English pronunciation instruction. Reading progress is an AI-driven application created by Microsoft in Microsoft Teams to aid language learners in honing their pronunciation skills. Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of research accessible about this use. The objective of this research is to examine students' assessments of the tool's effectiveness in facilitating the acquisition of English pronunciation. This study used a questionnaire consisting of five questions, created using Google Forms, to collect data from 123 students who are enrolled in different English classes at a university located in northern Vietnam. The focus of the research is on the students' pronunciation skills. The study results suggest that learners have a favorable opinion of and see reading progress as a valuable tool for honing their pronunciation skills. This outcome enhances the body of research on the implementation of reading progress in the context of teaching English pronunciation in Vietnam and globally. Thus, learners and English instructors may consult and implement it in order to enhance the efficiency of learning and teaching.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The significance of pronunciation in the acquisition of foreign languages has been emphasized in numerous studies [1]–[4]. Scholars underscore the significance of precise pronunciation in augmenting the efficacy of communication [3], [4] and fostering favorable impressions among recipients [1]. The recognition of the significance of pronunciation in attaining fluency and self-assurance is even acknowledged by the learners [1]. Consequently, it appears that pronunciation is a significant component in the development of effective English abilities.

English learning will be enhanced by artificial intelligence (AI) technology [5], [6]. Personalization of the learning experience and provision of opportunities for consistent practice are two ways in which AI-powered tools can improve language learning skills [7], [8]. The potential of AI technology to augment the process of learning English pronunciation is substantial [9], [10]. Automatic speech recognition (ASR) facilitates immediate feedback regarding pronunciation errors, thereby offering prospects for honing error correction skills [11], [12]. The utilization of AI-driven applications in pronunciation instruction has the potential to enhance learner engagement [13]. Personalization of pronunciation instruction and progress monitoring are two benefits of integrating AI speech recognition and machine learning into educational

systems [14]. Given the benefits, the broader implementation of AI technology in English pronunciation instruction holds the potential to facilitate academic advancement for students.

The reading progress in Microsoft Teams application which was introduced in 2021 was a creation of Microsoft intended to aid instructors in cultivating the pronunciation skills of students [15], [16]. The potential of this technology to improve the experience of learning pronunciation swiftly garnered attention [17]. It has been integrated into teams as a fundamental element [18]. Scholarly investigations have established the considerable applicability of reading progress to various categories of students as evidenced by research examining its effects on Thai and Saudi Arabian students [19], [20].

An appealing characteristic of reading progress is its utilization of AI-powered functionalities that contribute directly to the enhancement of English pronunciation. Students can record their perusal of designated passages using the core functionality [21]. Subsequently, educators are able to assess these recordings and offer specific feedback regarding errors in pronunciation [22]. The individualized methodology aligns with the increasing fascination with AI-powered educational resources [23]. Reading progress is equipped with ASR which further enhances the efficacy of pronunciation practice. Real-time analysis of student recordings is made possible by this technology which may reveal errors in pronunciation, velocity, precision, and omissions [24]. Immediate corrective feedback is a critical element in the process of pronunciation development. Although the reading progress application exhibits considerable promise in enhancing pronunciation skills, Taylor *et al.* [25] underscore the significance of taking stakeholder perceptions into account. It is crucial to comprehend the viewpoints of both faculty and students regarding the usability and efficacy of this tool in order to ensure its successful implementation.

The possible enhancement of reading fluency and pronunciation in English language learners has garnered considerable scholarly interest in the form of reading progress [19], [26]–[28]. Positive effects of reading progress on pronunciation are supported by a number of studies. This instrument can alleviate pronunciation anxiety among Thai English-as-a-foreign-language learners according to Hongnaphadol and Attanak [26]. Students are able to communicate with greater assurance and surmount their apprehensions through the utilization of reading progress's securely managed reading environment. Consistently, the efficacy of reading progress in augmenting listening and speaking proficiencies was observed in a study conducted by Prasetya [22], indicating its potential to refine pronunciation abilities as a whole.

Its efficacy is predicated on the tool's AI capabilities [24]. ASR permits the prompt correction of pronunciation errors in real time thereby enabling instructors to deliver timely and effective instruction. Consistent with established techniques for efficiently learning pronunciation, this individualized approach is implemented. Additionally, in order to accommodate a wide range of learning approaches and proficiency levels, reading progress provides educators with the ability to modify the sensitivity of pronunciation detection [18].

Although certain investigations present encouraging findings, other research underscores the necessity for additional scrutiny in certain matters. Potential implementation barriers were identified in the study on the Reading Progress app's utilization by English instructors in Saudi Arabia [28]. Insufficient support for instructors and technical challenges inherent in the platform constitute these issues. To ensure the effective incorporation of this instrument into classroom practice, it is vital to address these concerns.

Equally crucial is stakeholder awareness. Regarding the implementation of the reading progress application in a bilingual program, Taylor *et al.* [25] investigated the viewpoints of administrators, students, and educators in Thailand. Understanding these various viewpoints is crucial for optimizing tool efficacy and user adoption as demonstrated by the study. Hence, the findings indicate that English language learners can benefit from the reading progress application's technologically beneficial accentuation aids. Personalized learning and enhanced pronunciation accuracy are assured by its AI functionalities, particularly ASR and customization options. The long-term effects of the reading progress app on the academic performance of students, however, require further investigation. To further optimize the effectiveness of this instrument in English language teaching environments, it will be critical to consider potential obstacles to implementation and gain a comprehensive comprehension of the viewpoints of stakeholders.

Acknowledging the significance of accurate pronunciation in the acquisition of the English language, the potential utility of reading progress as an aid in this process, and the role of AI applications in English instruction and learning, the objective of this research endeavor is to investigate the perspectives of students enrolled in select English courses at Hoa Lu University during two consecutive semesters in 2022 and 2023 regarding the utilization of reading progress for pronunciation instruction. "What are the perspectives of students regarding the use of reading progress to assist with pronunciation learning?" is the inquiry that motivates this research. It is anticipated that the research findings will elucidate the viewpoints of students regarding the implementation of reading progress for pronunciation learning while simultaneously contributing to the body of knowledge on the utilization of AI in English instruction.

2. METHOD

The study was conducted at Hoa Lu University, located in Ninh Binh province in Northern Vietnam. Commencing with the 2019-2020 academic year, the university adopted the use of the Microsoft Teams complimentary package for qualifying institutions of higher education. The university provided instructors and students with accounts and instructions, facilitating their access and use for instructional purposes in both online and offline modes.

All students pursuing majors at Hoa Lu University are required to take English as a mandatory subject. Students must finish three core English courses, namely English 1, English 2, and English 3, within the first two years. Afterwards, students must register for English for specific purposes (ESP) sessions. The ESP courses offered to economics majors are business English 1, 2, and 3. The ESP course is tailored for tourism students and emphasizes English language skills that are applicable to the Hotel-Restaurant industry. Each course is assigned a teaching-learning schedule that covers a duration of 15 weeks. The SmartChoice series, published by Oxford Publishing, serves as the designated textbook for English courses 1, 2, and 3. The course materials for modules 1, 2, and 3 of the business English courses are sourced from the new market leaders series, which is produced by Longman Pearson.

Table 1 displays the implementation of the reading progress program in five distinct English courses over the span of two consecutive stages. The application has a total of 123 students participating. Phase 1 involves two classes: i) class D12 business administration, which covers fundamental business English 3; and ii) class D14, which concentrates on English 2. This phase takes place during the second semester of the 2021-2022 academic year. The 2022-2023 school year's second phase comprises three classes: i) class D13 business administration, which covers business English 3; ii) class D14 tourism, which concentrates on English for the Hotel-Restaurant sector; and iii) class D14 class 6, which covers English 3.

Table 1. Application of reading progress in classes

School year	Classes	Number of students	Majors	Types of courses
2021-2022	D12 QTKD	9	Business administration	ESP-Business English 3
	D14 TH	54	Primary education	General English-English 2
2022-2023	D13 QTKD	13	Business administration	ESP-Business English 3
	D14 DL	11	Tourism	ESP-English for the hotel-restaurant industry
	D14 MN	36	Preschool education	General English-English 3
	Total	123		

The implementation of reading progress follows the premise of weekly assignment. Class D14, which is a grade 6 English module 3, has the most assigned readings compared to other classes. It consists of 12 lessons that are completed over a period of 12 weeks. Table 2 shows that three courses in the second semester of the 2021-2022 school year have the fewest assignments, with just two assignments each.

Table 2. Assignments and delivery time

Classes	Assignments	Delivery time
D12 business administration	2	Week 10th and week 11th
D14 class 2	2	Week 10th and week 11th
D14 business administration	5	From week 9th to week 13th
D14 travel	4	From week 9th to week 12th
D14 class 6	12	From week 2nd to week 13th

The lecturer chooses material from the assigned textbook for each class, as seen in Figure 1. Lessons are stored as Microsoft Word files in the teaching folder of each class. The duration of each reading varies between 50 and 100 words. Within the Microsoft Teams platform, teachers use the assignments tool to allocate tasks to students. Assignments are posted via the reading progress application inside the learning accelerators section. Once the crucial criteria of the title, directions, due date, and points have been established, the assignment is automatically allocated to every student. There is an automated alerts feature in the MS Teams program that is specifically designed for students who have installed it.

The instructor logs into the system, logs student comments, and sends the findings back to the students when the submission deadline has passed. The AI component of the system will provide students with automatic analytical metrics. In addition to receiving a detailed breakdown of all mispronunciations, insertions, self-corrections, omissions, and repetitions, students will also get an analysis of their reading speed (measured in correct words per minute) and accuracy rate (% of right words). Additionally, the system offers five suggestions for terms that students may use to improve their pronunciation, as shown in Figure 2.

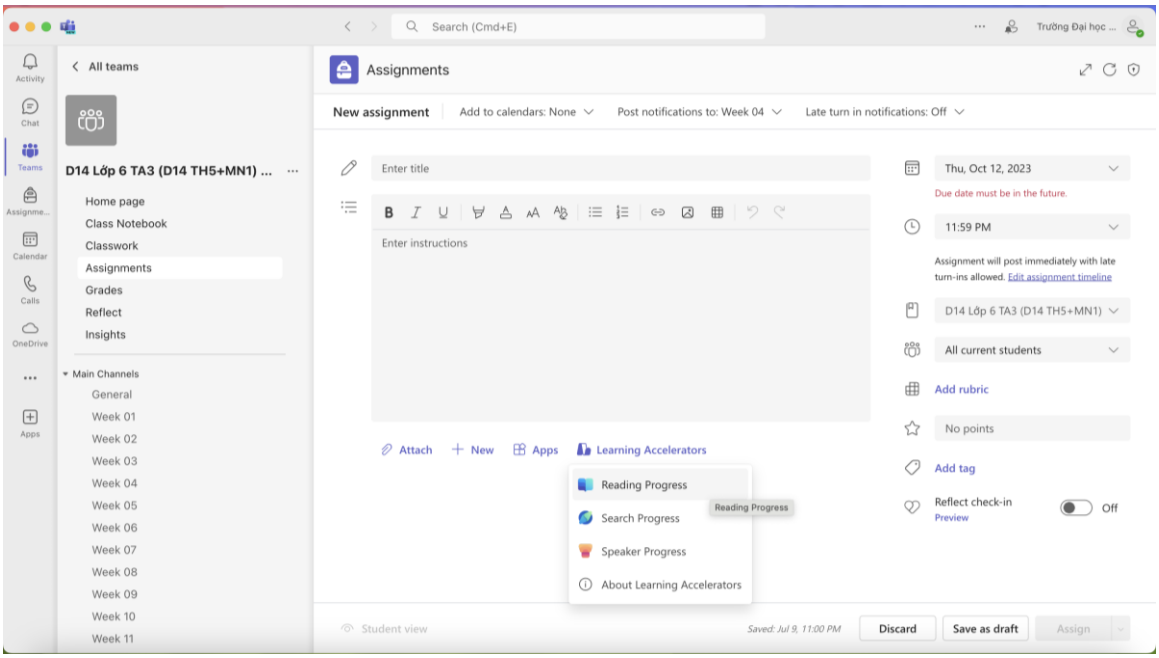

Figure 1. Reading practice assignment interface in reading progress

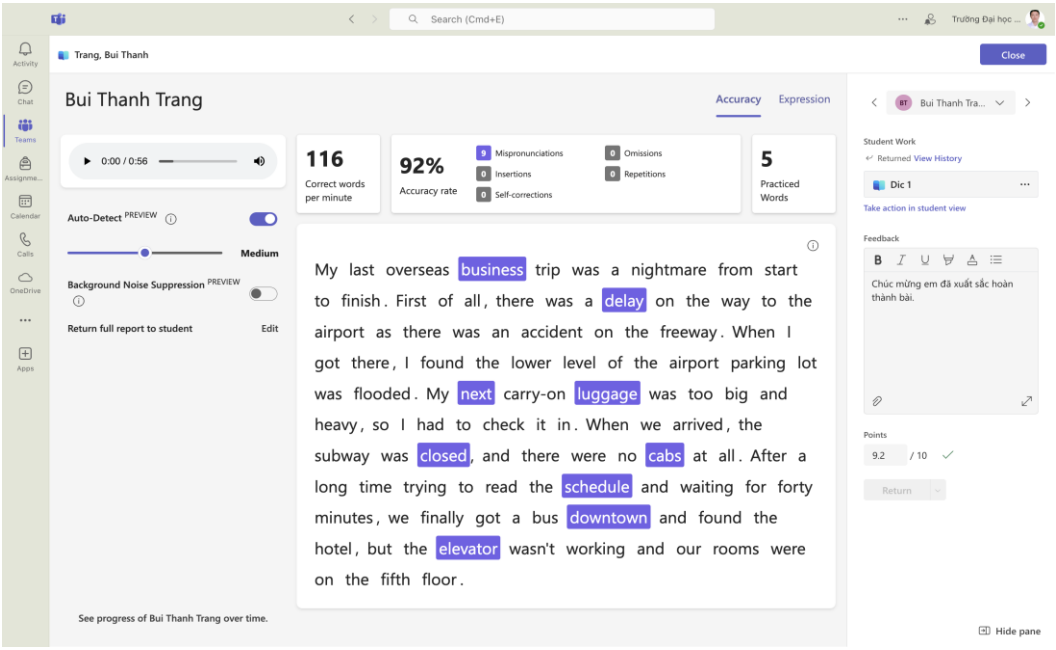

Figure 2. Returned results analyzed by AI for pronunciation of reading passages

Questionnaires offer a valuable tool for educational research due to several key advantages [29]–[31]. Firstly, questionnaires can efficiently gather data from a large population, reaching a wider range of participants than individual interviews [30]. This allows researchers to gain broader insights into educational experiences or opinions. Secondly, questionnaires promote standardized data collection. Since respondents answer the same questions, the results are easier to compare and analyze statistically [31]. Finally, questionnaires can be relatively inexpensive to administer, particularly online versions, making them a cost-effective option for educational research [30]. While there are limitations such as potential for bias and lack of in-depth exploration, questionnaires provide a strong foundation for gathering data in educational settings.

In order to gather students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the reading progress program in enhancing pronunciation skills throughout the study of certain English modules, this research used an online survey consisting of five questions, which were created using the Google Forms. The first question asks for your evaluation of the reading progress app. Students choose answer levels ranging from 1 (very dull) to 5 (very engaging), with each level representing a different degree of interest. Question 2 aimed to ascertain students' perspectives on the efficacy of reading progress in facilitating students' acquisition of English pronunciation. Students provide responses based on a scale of 5 levels: degree 1 represents the lowest degree of agreement, indicating complete disagreement, while level 5 represents the greatest level of agreement, indicating complete agreement. Question 3 gathered data about students' viewpoints on several areas of reading progress, including its effectiveness in enhancing word pronunciation, sentence stress exercise, reading speed improvement, and fluency enhancement. Students have the ability to choose more than one alternative from the provided possibilities. Simultaneously, pupils have the ability to express their own views in the designated "Other" response box. Question 4 examines the adverse circumstances that hinder kids from using reading progress. Specifically, the question indicates three challenges: sluggish internet connection, inadequate device settings, and intricate features used in reading progress. Question number 3 in this case has a similar open-ended structure, but it also includes an extra space for "Other" views. The last question, Question No. 5, inquires about individuals' viewpoints about the suggestion to include reading progress more extensively in the instruction and acquisition of the English language. Question 5 has 5 answer levels, ranging from level 1 (completely disagree, the lowest level) to level 5 (completely agree, the highest level).

The survey was distributed to students in the specified courses simultaneously through a hyperlink on both Microsoft Teams and Zalo, a widely used social networking application in Vietnam. The questionnaire was administered during the final week of the semester. After one week, the period for accepting responses concluded. The response rate of all students in each subject was 100%. The total number of respondents and their respective percentages are used to mechanically evaluate the data collected from the survey on Google Forms.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the survey highlight students' perspectives on the "reading progress" application, focusing on enjoyment, effectiveness, benefits, challenges, and the potential for broader curriculum integration. Data from 123 participants reveals overwhelmingly positive feedback, with high ratings for enjoyment and effectiveness in improving English pronunciation. Despite some challenges related to internet speed and device configuration, the majority of students support incorporating reading progress more extensively into their curriculum, underscoring its value as a learning tool.

The data collected for survey question number 1 shows that 123 participants rated the amount of enjoyment of the "reading progress" application on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 representing "very boring" and 5 representing "very interesting". According to statistical data, some observations may be made: a significant proportion of users (58.5%, or 72 individuals) were awarded the highest rating of 5, indicating a strong preference for this program. Level 4 has a somewhat elevated percentage (33.3%, corresponding to 41 individuals), suggesting that a substantial proportion of consumers also experience satisfaction. A minimal number of people gave it bad ratings (1 and 2), with just one individual rating it as 2 (0.8%) and no one selecting 1. This indicates that the program seldom causes dissatisfaction among users. A minority of users (7.3%, corresponding to 9 individuals) rated the program with a score of 3, indicating that they see it as average or below their expectations. Generally, the "reading progress" app receives favorable ratings from the majority of users. The data from the figure indicates that most survey participants, over 90%, rated the app as average to extremely good in terms of satisfaction. This program is a valuable tool for enhancing and advancing reading abilities, making it a beneficial tool for learning.

Questionnaire item 2 pertained to students' assessment of the efficacy of reading progress in facilitating the acquisition of English pronunciation. The data obtained comprises 123 replies and a grading scale ranging from 1 (indicating complete ineffectiveness) to 5 (indicating complete effectiveness). Evidence demonstrates that a significant proportion of students evaluated the efficacy of reading progress favorably, with 58.5% assigning the highest rating of 5. Approximately one-third of students (31.7%) gave it a rating of 4. Merely a minuscule proportion of pupils assessed it as 3 (8.9%), while an even more negligible proportion ranked it as 2 (0.8%). None of the students assessed it as entirely ineffective (1). According to these statistics, most students regard reading progress to be a useful tool for improving their English pronunciation.

The survey results for question number 3 demonstrate the favorable attributes of reading progress as evaluated by 123 student respondents. More precisely, the majority of students, including 65% (80 out of 123 students), assessed reading progress as beneficial for practicing English pronunciation. Additionally, 64.2% (79 out of 123 students) believed that reading progress really improved their pronunciation. A majority of students, namely 52.8% or 65 out of 123 students, said that reading progress contributed to an enhancement

in their reading speed. Additionally, 53.7% or 66 out of 123 students stated that reading progress helped them read more fluently. Only a minuscule fraction of students (0.8%) said that reading progress significantly improved their communication skills or facilitated better communication with others, while also choosing all of the aforementioned options. The findings indicate that students saw reading progress as primarily successful in enhancing pronunciation skills, while also positively influencing reading speed and fluency. A smaller number of students evaluated other advantages, such as enhanced communication, highly.

Item 4 of the questionnaire addressed the adverse aspects that impact the use of reading progress in Microsoft Teams. The primary issue that has the greatest impact on the use of reading progress, as reported by 55.3% of students, is the slow speed of the internet. Additionally, 30.1% of students are affected by the low configuration of their devices. The heavy Microsoft Teams software is considered a negative factor by 24.4% of students. Lastly, 19.5% of students find that the features used in complex reading progress are a factor that affects their usage. A small percentage of students (2.4%) either had no issues or gave Microsoft a high rating. Similarly, an equal percentage (0.8%) had no opinion or considered Microsoft Teams to be inefficient in terms of storage space. According to this research, the primary variables that have a negative impact on students' experience with reading progress in Microsoft Teams are internet speed and machine settings. Additional concerns, such as the intricacy of the program and the capability of Microsoft Teams, were also brought up, but they were not as often cited.

Question 5 of the survey asked students for their views on whether reading progress should be included more into the curriculum. The collected data consists of 123 replies and a rating scale ranging from 1 (indicating complete disagreement) to 5 (indicating complete agreement). The findings indicate that a significant majority of students strongly support the idea of incorporating reading progress more extensively into the curriculum, as seen by 69.1% of students giving it a score of 5. A minority of students (22%) expressed agreement with this perspective and rated it with a score of 4. Only a tiny fraction of students, namely 8.9%, assessed it as neutral, which corresponds to a score of 3. All students rated it at least neutral, with no ratings of 1 or 2. This data demonstrates that a significant proportion of students advocate for the further integration of reading progress in the curriculum. Specifically, 91.1% of students achieved scores of 4 and 5, indicating a high consensus in favor of this viewpoint.

The students who utilized reading progress to acquire English pronunciation regarded it as an engaging and efficient resource, as evidenced by the positive feedback it received in the research findings presented previously. According to the survey findings, a significant majority of students (33.3%) and a proportion of 58.5% regarded the tool as moderately intriguing. Regarding efficacy, 31.7% of respondents deemed it extremely effective, whereas 58.5% deemed it completely effective. Consistent with the wider body of research, these findings underscore the potential of the tool's AI functionalities to improve pronunciation.

Students at Hoa Lu University share the results observed in other regions, as evidenced by their high level of engagement and favorable perception of Reading Progress. In Thailand, for instance, Hongnaphadol and Attanak [26] found that Reading Progress app helped students experience less pronunciation anxiety and more self-assurance. In a comparable vein, Prasetya [22] discovered that the instrument proved to be efficacious in enhancing both speaking and listening proficiencies within the Indonesian context, indicating its wide-ranging suitability in diverse linguistic and cultural milieus. Reading Progress's efficacy is heavily reliant on its AI functionalities, specifically its ASR technology. Consistent with efficacious pronunciation learning methodologies referenced in the literature, this technology furnishes instantaneous feedback on errors in pronunciation, enabling prompt correction and practicing. By accommodating a variety of learning approaches and proficiency levels, the additional usability features of Reading Progress, such as the ability to modify the sensitivity of pronunciation detection, are substantially improved.

The implementation challenges encountered at Hoa Lu University, including sluggish internet speeds and inadequate device configurations, underscore a prevalent concern that has been identified in other research endeavors, despite the evident advantages of Reading Progress. In Saudi Arabia, analogous challenges were recognized by Jarrah [28], who underscored the importance of providing educators with sufficient training and resolving technical issues to guarantee the effective integration of the instrument into the classroom environment. This study, along with other research, highlights the superior efficacy of reading progress in reducing anxiety and delivering personalized immediate feedback when compared to conventional pronunciation training schemes. In practice areas where timely corrections are critical for learning pronunciation, this is especially critical. Notwithstanding this, further investigation is required to comprehensively examine the enduring effects of reading progress on student achievement and its relative merits in comparison to conventional approaches. For educational technologies to be adopted successfully, it is critical to comprehend the viewpoints of stakeholders. In order to enhance the efficacy of tools, research by Taylor *et al.* [25] underscored the significance of incorporating the perspectives of administrators, students, and educators. This is consistent with the results obtained from the research conducted at Hoa Lu University,

where a significant proportion of the student body voiced their deep endorsement for a more comprehensive incorporation of reading progress into the academic program.

4. CONCLUSION

Evidently, both studies conducted at Hoa Lu University and other studies provide the same outcome, affirming that Reading Progress is an effective instrument for honing English speaking skills. The tool's promise is shown via positive assessments from students and notable improvements in pronunciation. According to the findings of this study, English training institutes and English teachers might consider the following three pedagogical recommendations. Initially, it is imperative to include reading progress more extensively into the curriculum, and educators should be motivated to use reading progress consistently in pronouncing workouts and periodic evaluations to track student advancement. Furthermore, it is crucial to arrange comprehensive training programs for educators, focusing on the proficient use of reading progress's AI capabilities to enhance teaching outcomes. Furthermore, the customization options offered by reading progress should be used to cater to the various learning requirements and styles of pupils, therefore enhancing their comfort and confidence when practicing pronunciation.

As a future research direction for the reading progress application, researchers can undertake extensive studies to assess the long-term effects of the application on students' pronunciation skills and English communication abilities. Additionally, they can investigate and propose solutions to address technical challenges such as slow internet speeds and low computer configurations, in order to ensure optimal learning experiences for all students. In addition, researchers have the ability to carry out comparison studies between reading progress and conventional pronunciation training techniques in order to definitively ascertain the advantages and drawbacks of each approach. The reading progress program not only aids students in enhancing their pronunciation but also plays a significant role in fostering innovation in English instruction. Further investigation and use of this technology will provide more advantages to the process of language acquisition and instruction.

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