Review Article

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A review of Readlang: Multilingual e-reader for language learners

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 29 Sep. 2024 Accepted: 08 Jan. 2025	Reading is a critical skill in language acquisition involving various cognitive and linguistic processes. A good size of vocabulary is required for reading comprehension. However, language learners have been reported to face challenges in grasping unfamiliar words. Recent technological advances might assist learners in language learning in this regard. One instrument is Readlang – a web-based technology that allows users to translate words and phrases in any text on any website. Given the potential pedagogical benefits, this review intends to evaluate Readlang, outlining its features, tackling its affordances for reading skills, and delineating its impediments. Results suggest that Readlang could foster language learning and practice in higher education contexts. **Keywords:** computer-assisted language learning, e-readers, higher education, reading comprehension, Readlang

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a crucial cognitive skill in second language (L2) learning that entails manifold subskills and processes (Treffers-Daller et al., 2022). L2 reading differs from reading in a native language since it involves cross-linguistic processes (Koda, 2005), causing language learners, including college students (Jalilifar, 2010), to face challenges (e.g., unfamiliar vocabulary and meaning inference) when reading in an L2 (Prichard & Atkins, 2021). Additionally, vocabulary and grammar are viewed as pivotal in language proficiency (Richards, 2015), and understanding a text requires a good size of vocabulary knowledge (Webb & Nation, 2013). In this regard, language learners might harness any tools to reduce their cognitive load and ultimately facilitate reading comprehension. It has been shown that learners might capitalize on computer- and mobile-assisted tools for language learning (e.g., reading) (Li, 2022). One such tool is Readlang (https://readlang.com/), an online e-reader for language learners. It essentially allows users to read any text on any webpage by translating words and phrases into languages of their choice and practice the translated vocabulary items through flashcards using the spaced repetition technique. Following Kohnke and Moore's (2022) recommendations, this review aims to evaluate it within the context of L2 reading and explore its potential, given its potential conduciveness for reading comprehension.

DESCRIPTION

Readlang is an online e-reader that allows users to translate words and phrases (registered users only) in more than 60 languages. The tool is user-friendly, with a simple layout and straightforward menus (i.e., home, library, word list, and flashcards). The home menu shows users their native and target languages and a statistic of the words read and practiced, daily goal achievement, a snapshot of the unread texts, or a pop-up window urging for word practice. The library has three submenus (my texts, public texts, and websites), displaying the texts users have read, target texts available in the public domain (adjustable by genre, difficulty, and word count), and websites where they can read the target texts. Readlang also allows users to upload texts in .txt and .epub formats or paste the text and read them on the website. As the name suggests, word lists show all the translated words with their contexts, pronunciations, translations, and sources. Flashcards prompt users to practice words in specific quantities and show a visual statistic of their daily streaks and a table of the reviewed items, including their translation and subsequent review time.

The e-reader also provides users with a sidebar, enabling them to see contextual explanations about the translated vocabulary items, look them up in a dictionary (Wordreference.com and Collins), customize settings (e.g., font size and appearance), edit the texts, add YouTube videos, and share.

Table 1. Free and premium features

Features	Free	Premium
Word translations	Unlimited	Unlimited
Text uploads	Unlimited	Unlimited
Flashcard practices	Unlimited	Unlimited
Maximum phrase length	6 words	12 words
Phrase translations/day	10	Unlimited
Context explanations/day*	10	Unlimited
Word highlighting	Up to 200 words	Unlimited
Practice words from specific texts	Locked	Yes
Speaking mode**	Locked	Yes
Shelves	Locked	Yes
Streak repair	Locked	2 per month

* Context explanations are available in 15 languages
** Speaking mode is available in 23 languages

Figure 1. Interactive translation of multi-word items (Source: https://www.monde-diplomatique.fr/2024/03/BELKAID/66684)

Readlang has free and premium versions (**Table 1**). The first one provides users with unlimited word translations, text uploads, and flashcard practices, but it limits other features. However, the premium version can be obtained through monthly or yearly subscriptions, allowing maximum exploitation of the features. Premium users can get unlimited word highlighting, practice words from specific texts (e.g., popular books), and translate video transcripts (e.g., songs). In other words, they can translate both textual and audiovisual content. The tool allows all users to practice the translated words and phrases on Anki (https://apps.ankiweb.net/) and Quizlet (https://quizlet.com/).

EVALUATION

One of Readlang's great benefits is that it operates on any online text, granting access to boundless and authentic content. This feature creates a personalized learning environment (PLE) where language learners tailor the content to their interests and needs. This means that learners can read in any language on any website without any limit to unfamiliar

Figure 2. Spaced repetition (Source: https://readlang.com/en/dashboard)

words or expressions. Given the significant advantages of PLEs in technology-enhanced language learning (Zhong, 2023), language learners might considerably exploit this feature to adapt to their learning styles. This may further assist college students in recreational reading, contributing to their academic success (Douglas & Helms, 2015). Moreover, in previous studies, college students indicated a clear preference for digital texts (Singer & Alexander, 2017), implying that access to ample texts online could be motivating.

Another strength of Readlang is that it allows users to translate interactively without resorting to external resources. This saves learners time looking up words in multiple languages across manifold dictionaries (e.g., monolingual, bilingual, and collocation) since Readlang provides translations for single and multiple-word items in supported languages (**Figure 1**). Previous research indicated higher scores in reading tests and quicker readings for college students who used dictionaries to meaning translations than those who did not (Luppescu & Day, 1993). In addition, college students were found to have positive attitudes toward using online translation tools and fare well in vocabulary (Alamri & Hakami, 2022). Considering college students' challenges in academic literacy (Holschuh, 2019), this translation future might facilitate their comprehension.

A third robust feature of Readlang allows users to practice the translated and saved words through flashcards using the spaced repetition approach (**Figure 2**) on Anki and Quizlet. Learners are shown the translated words and asked to recall their meanings in the practiced language. They are then asked to assess whether they have remembered (through multiple choices). Previous research indicated the considerable impact of spaced repetition on vocabulary gains (Nakata & Elgort, 2021), suggesting the potential contribution of this feature. Additionally, it was previously demonstrated that college students needed vocabulary practice (Wang, 2016). In this
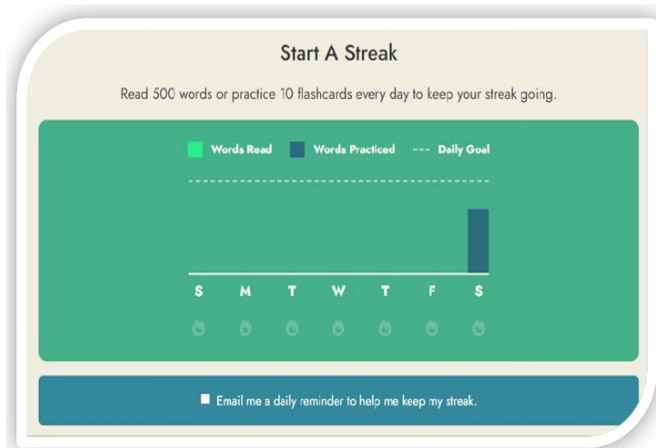
Figure 3. Progress check (Source: https://readlang.com/en/dashboard)

Figure 4. An example of a mistranslated lexical item (Source: https://elpais.com/economia/2024-03-09/una-ola-de-huelgas-en-el-transporte-sume-a-alemania-en-el-desconcierto.html)

sense, this feature might cater to their need for lexical practice.

Indeed, a recent study supported this claim, reporting that digital flashcards contributed to the vocabulary knowledge of university students (Boroughani et al., 2023).

A further asset is that learners can monitor their progress on the website, with Readlang displaying a weekly progress graph (**Figure 3**). Progress checks are essential to improving learning performances (Zarrinabadi & Soleimani, 2022). This feature can, therefore, be claimed to be pedagogically promising for language learners. It was shown earlier that college students disfavored course readings because of time constraints, lack of motivation, and disregard for reading skills (Kerr & Frese, 2017). With this feature of Readlang, university students could monitor their progress without any obligations on countless digital texts. Moreover, self-assessing their performance through vocabulary reviews might enhance their self-regulation retention (Mahlberg, 2015).

A final prominent feature is that Readlang provides language learners with helpful tools (e.g., contextual explanations and a sidebar dictionary) for additional information and reference. This feature might serve as scaffolding for low-proficiency learners who might need the assistance of "more knowledgeable others." In previous studies, online platforms and tools were shown to serve as more knowledgeable others (Stojanov, 2023), strengthening this argument. Also, providing extra explanations contributed

to university students' costudents'on of content (Chen et al., 2019).

Notwithstanding the affordances, there are some issues regarding Readlang's use. First, some vocabulary items may be mistranslated.

As seen in **Figure 4**, "ola de huelgas" means "strike wave," but it was translated as "hit wave" in Turkish. This might be challenging, especially for learners with lower language proficiency. Still, they can consult the sidebar dictionary in such cases.

Another drawback might be the limited language practice. The developers might consider adding new features to help users practice various language skills. In addition, given the tool's convenience, learners might be inclined to depend primarily on Readlang's translations. An additional downside concerns the free-premium dichotomy. However, the features provided to basic users might be adequate for language practice. Lastly, as in other online platforms, a stable internet connection is required to use Readlang.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Readlang is an online tool that offers promising affordances for language learning, particularly reading comprehension and vocabulary learning, including access to limitless authentic content, interactive translation, practice via spaced repetition, monitoring progress, and helpful tools as scaffolds. However, significant concerns include inaccurate translation, limited language practice, learners' tendency for overreliance on translation, features limited by the premium version, and the requirement for an internet connection. Nonetheless, Readlang primarily serves as an online e-reader that can be leveraged to improve reading skills. Hence, it can be used as a supplementary material in higher education contexts.

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