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Harnessing Märchen: Enhancing German Reading Literacy and Pronunciation Skills Through Fairy Tales

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ABSTRACT

Reading literacy in a foreign language is often reduced to grammar drills and vocabulary lists, leaving very little space for deep reading, pronunciation practice, and cultural understanding. Such a community engagement project was initiated to fill this gap at one of the senior high schools in Surabaya, Indonesia. For students interested in the German language and culture, there are limited chances to learn authentic literary texts. This project was carried out with the aim to improve the level of German reading literacy and pronunciation (Aussprache) through guided reading of German fairy tales (Märchen), and to support the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 on quality education. An approach based on participation, education, and communication was used by five lecturers and two student assistants in five stages: initiation and socialization, material delivery, reading and pronunciation practice, discussion and reflection, and evaluation. The tales were adjusted to the level of learners, who practiced reading aloud under direct correction by the facilitators. Evaluation was descriptive and used observation indicators for participation, questions and answers, and reading comprehension activities. Facilitators observed that most participants showed high motivation and greater confidence in reading, engaged with new vocabulary, and appeared to understand the stories better than at the start of the session. Separately from these learning and engagement observations, the program produced an educational video, online news coverage, an intellectual property certificate, and a signed cooperation agreement with the partner school, while teaching materials and modules were prepared for handover to the school. The novelty lies in combining fairy tale reading, pronunciation training, and intercultural reflection within one school-based partnership. The findings suggest that fairy tales are a low-cost and culturally rich entry point for foreign language literacy, although longer programs with measured pre-test and post-test outcomes are needed to confirm the effects.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is the foundation on which most other learning is built, and its quality remains a persistent concern in education systems worldwide. The most recent round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which examines what fifteen-year-olds can do in reading, mathematics, and science, recorded the lowest average performance observed so far across the member countries of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in all three subjects, with reading falling by about 14 score points between 2022 and 2025 on average across 35 OECD countries (OECD, 2026a). This followed an already unprecedented drop of about 10 points in reading between 2018 and 2022 (OECD, 2023). The concern is greater in

Indonesia, where only 27% of students reached at least baseline proficiency (Level 2) in reading in PISA 2025, compared with an OECD average of 69% (OECD, 2026b). For a foreign language such as German the challenge is doubled, because learners must decode an unfamiliar language while also constructing meaning from the text. Strengthening reading literacy in foreign language classrooms is therefore closely tied to Sustainable Development Goal 4, which calls for inclusive and equitable quality education.

In many Indonesian senior high schools, German is taught as a foreign language with a strong emphasis on grammar and vocabulary. Studies at schools in several regions report that learners struggle with comprehension and pronunciation, the very skills that grammar-focused lessons leave little room to practice. In a questionnaire study of senior high school students in Cianjur, 92.5% of respondents reported difficulty understanding German texts (Alfaiz, 2013), and in a study of 36 Grade XI students in Cilacap, more than 85% mispronounced specific German phonemes such as /ʒ/ and /ts/ (Syawalia, 2013). Initial observation and discussion with the partner school, SMA IPIEMS Surabaya, indicated the same pattern: students' deep reading skills in German were still low, interest in long literary texts was limited, and authentic literary texts were seldom used in class. The school is located in Manyar Sabrangan, Mulyorejo District, Surabaya, approximately 16 km from the university. It is considered an economically non-productive partner, so the problems discussed here are mainly educational, social, and cultural in nature. Because the learners come from diverse backgrounds, they require flexible literacy strategies.

These conditions define both the problem and the opportunity addressed by this program. Reading proficiency among Indonesian students is low by international comparison, German learners at the secondary level struggle with comprehension and pronunciation, and classroom time at the partner school was dominated by grammar and vocabulary. As a result, students had few chances to read longer authentic texts, to read aloud and receive corrective feedback, or to connect the language with cultural content. Fairy tales offer a practical response to this gap. Their accessible narrative structure and language make longer texts manageable for school learners, their oral tradition suits read-aloud practice and pronunciation feedback, and their cultural content provides a natural starting point for comparison with Indonesian folktales. A fairy-tale-based reading program can therefore address the partner's three linked problems, namely low deep reading, limited pronunciation, and low interest in literary texts, within a single school-based activity.

Previous research supports this rationale. Fairy tales are easy to follow in their narrative construction and language, and they contain cultural values that are open to discussion. According to Kuzmanovska et al. (2022), the tales of the Brothers Grimm can be used to build foreign language vocabulary among university language students. Li and Wang (2022) similarly argue that fairy tales make language learning enjoyable and raise interest,

vocabulary, and intercultural competence. Similar results appear in secondary education research. Avcı (2023) designed activities based on the German Fairy Tale Route for Turkish secondary school learners of German at the A2 level, after noticing that repeated topics had led to disinterest. Ballester Roca and Méndez Cabrera (2024) showed that reading folktales in a multicultural classroom can foster inclusion, participation, and motivation in second language learning.

Fairy tale reading also lends itself to oral practice. Read-aloud tasks have been used to teach and assess second language fluency, and among Japanese secondary school learners, articulation rate and pauses within clauses significantly predicted how fluent listeners judged the speech to be (Tsunemoto et al., 2023). Digital media can extend such practice beyond the classroom. A systematic review of 71 studies reported mostly positive outcomes when digital storytelling was used with adolescent and adult language learners (Lim et al., 2022), and one of the present authors found that digital German fairy tales from a public broadcaster encouraged active engagement and intercultural reflection among university students (Hardika, 2025).

Despite this growing evidence, Hall (2015) cautions that the value of literature in language education has often been asserted more than it has been demonstrated empirically. To the authors' knowledge, few studies describe a school-based community engagement program that combines fairy tale reading, pronunciation training, and intercultural discussion for learners of German in Indonesia. The present program builds on the team's earlier community engagement work published in this journal (Saksono et al., 2025), which showed that participatory training can strengthen cross-cultural understanding, and it applies a similar participatory logic to school literacy.

The program was designed together with the partner school, which provided the venue, the participants, learning facilities, and accompaniment by its German teacher, while students of the university's German literature study program acted as assistants. This collaborative arrangement distinguishes the activity from a one-off lecture, because it was framed from the start as a partnership intended to continue. The objectives of the program were to (1) strengthen students' comprehension of German narrative texts through guided reading of fairy tales; (2) improve their pronunciation (*Aussprache*) through guided reading aloud with direct feedback; (3) foster reading motivation and intercultural reflection; and (4) establish a basis for sustained cooperation that supports quality education.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT METHOD

This program was based on a participatory community engagement model with education-based, participatory, and communication elements. It was education-based because learning was built around German stories, participatory because students actively read and discussed the stories, and communicative because reading aloud and two-way communication between students and facilitators played an important role in the process. This approach was selected because the partner is an economically non-productive school community that needs educational, social, and cultural activities. Moreover, comprehension and pronunciation are more likely to improve through guided

practice than through lectures alone. The program consisted of one on-site session with the participants, supported by preparatory coordination with the school (see component 2 below). The approach can be replicated in other schools that offer German classes, provided that a team with expertise in German literature and adapted texts is available. Table 1 sets out the partner's baseline problems separately from the solutions the team proposed in response and the outcomes it expected.

Table 1. Partner's baseline problems, proposed solutions, and expected outcomes

Baseline problem (partner)	Proposed solution (team)	Expected outcome
Low deep reading skills in German; lessons dominated by grammar and vocabulary	Guided reading of adapted German fairy tales (*Rapunzel* and *Rotkäppchen*) with reading strategies and vocabulary work	Participants read narrative texts for meaning and understand their content
Limited German reading aloud and pronunciation (*Aussprache*) skills	Read-aloud practice with direct, immediate feedback on pronunciation, intonation, word stress, and fluency	More confident and more accurate reading aloud
Low interest in long and literary texts	Adapted tales read and discussed interactively in groups	Higher enthusiasm and participation
Limited use of authentic literary texts; little cultural context in reading lessons	Intercultural discussion comparing German and Indonesian folktales; reusable modules and materials prepared for the school	Cultural understanding; materials the school can reuse; a basis for further cooperation

The methodology comprised the following components:

1) Target Community and Participants – The partner was SMA IPIEMS Surabaya (Jl. Raya Menur, Kelurahan Manyar Sabrangan, Kecamatan Mulyorejo, Surabaya, East Java). The school gave access to students who were interested in German language and culture, and its German teacher accompanied the session. A total of 60 students from Grades X and XI took part (30 in Grade X and 30 in Grade XI; German proficiency approximately level A1). Participants were therefore a purposive group of interested students, not a random sample. The partner's needs, identified through initial observation and discussion with the school, are set out in Table 1 and in component 5. The activity was delivered by five lecturers (four from the German literature study program and one specializing in Javanese language and literature) and two undergraduate student assistants.
2) Program Design and Implementation Procedures - The program was planned for February to November 2026 and covered coordination and administration, needs mapping, adaptation of fairy tale materials, preparation of modules and pronunciation media, socialization, training, evaluation, and reporting. The on-site implementation was a single session of two periods of class at the partner school on 15 July 2026, preceded by 2 coordination meetings with the school for needs mapping and scheduling. The session consisted of five stages (Table 2).

Table 2. Stages of the on-site session

Stage	Main activities	Focus
1. Opening and socialization	Opening by the school and the team; explanation of the aims and benefits of fairy tale reading and of the importance of literacy in foreign language learning in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 4; overview of the characteristics of German fairy tales	Orientation and motivation
2. Delivery of material	Interactive presentation, sample tales, and two-way discussion on German fairy tales, characteristics of German narrative texts, reading strategies, vocabulary development through literary texts, and cultural elements in the tales	Comprehension strategies, vocabulary, culture
3. Reading and Aussprache practice	Participants read the tales in turn with direct accompaniment from the team, with attention to pronunciation, intonation, word stress, and fluency, and received immediate feedback on pronunciation errors	Reading aloud and pronunciation
4. Discussion and reflection	Group discussion of characters, plot, moral message, German cultural values, and comparison with Indonesian folktales, followed by reflection	Critical thinking and intercultural understanding
5. Evaluation	Observation of participation, question-and-answer, and reading comprehension exercises	Formative evaluation

3) Tools, Materials, and Instruments – The tools were German fairy tale texts, namely *Rapunzel* and *Rotkäppchen*, selected and adapted to the language proficiency and cognitive level of senior high school students, printed learning modules, presentation slides, audio equipment for *Aussprache* practice, a projector, observation notes, and reading comprehension exercise sheets.

4) Data Collection and Analysis – Evaluation was formative and descriptive. Data were gathered through (a) observation of participants' involvement in reading, discussion, and practice; (b) question-and-answer during the session; and (c) reading comprehension exercises. Facilitators judged participation, reading comprehension, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading confidence, and intercultural understanding against the indicators in Table 3 and recorded their observations in observation notes. Improvement was judged qualitatively: facilitators compared what they observed during the session with the baseline conditions reported by the school (Table 1). No pre-test and post-test scores, rating scale, or formal pronunciation assessment were used, so the findings reported below are descriptive and should not be read as statistical evidence of effect.

Table 3. Indicators used by facilitators to judge participation, comprehension, and pronunciation

Aspect	Indicators observed by facilitators	Source of evidence
Participation and enthusiasm	Taking part in reading turns, discussion, and questions; showing sustained interest throughout the session	Observation during all stages
Reading comprehension	Identifying characters, plot, and moral message; answering questions and exercise items about the story	Question-and-answer; exercise sheets
Vocabulary	Identifying new vocabulary encountered in the tales	Question-and-answer; observation
Pronunciation (*Aussprache*)	Accuracy of sounds, intonation, word stress, and fluency when reading aloud; response to immediate feedback	Observation during read-aloud practice
Reading confidence	Willingness to take a turn reading aloud in front of peers	Observation during read-aloud practice
Intercultural understanding	Naming German cultural values in the tales and comparing them with Indonesian folktales	Group discussion

Expected Outcomes and Priorities - The expected outcomes follow directly from the baseline problems in Table 1. Three priorities were discussed and agreed with the partner institution: low German reading literacy, little use of literary texts as teaching tools, and limited variety in reading techniques. Before the program, classes emphasized grammar and vocabulary and rarely used literary texts. After the session, the team expected students to read with more enthusiasm and fluency, to understand narrative texts, to pronounce German more accurately, and to have resources for further cooperation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The program was implemented on 15 July 2026 at the partner school following the stages of planning from partner coordination to assessment (see Table 2). The school provided the venue, the participants, the learning facilities, and the guidance of the German teacher at the school. The results are reported in two groups: participant learning and engagement outcomes, and program outputs and partnership outcomes.

Participant learning and engagement outcomes. Based on the observations, question-and-answer activities, and reading comprehension exercises, the facilitators reported that almost all participants showed high enthusiasm throughout the session. Participants appeared more confident in reading German texts, identified new vocabulary, and showed understanding of the stories' content. During read-aloud practice, the facilitators observed positive development in pronunciation after direct feedback on errors. In the discussion, participants identified the characters, plot, and moral messages of the tales, talked about German cultural values, and compared the tales with Indonesian folktales. According to the facilitators, learning through fairy tales was more engaging than conventional instruction because participants encountered cultural understanding through stories and not only through language structures. Table 4 summarizes the initial

conditions and the conditions the facilitators observed. These observations are descriptive: no pre-test and post-test scores or formal pronunciation assessment were collected.

Table 4. Initial conditions and observed participant conditions after the program

Aspect	Initial condition	Observed condition after the program (facilitators' observation)
Reading focus	Instruction emphasized grammar and vocabulary; deep reading was not a main focus	Participants read narrative texts for meaning and discussed characters, plot, and moral message
Interest and motivation	Interest in long and literary texts was low	Most participants showed high enthusiasm throughout the session
Reading aloud and pronunciation	German reading and pronunciation skills were still limited	Facilitators observed greater confidence in reading aloud and positive development in pronunciation after direct feedback
Cultural understanding	Cultural context was not yet a main focus of reading lessons	Participants discussed German cultural values and compared the tales with Indonesian folktales



Figure 1. Guided reading aloud and group discussion of German fairy tales at the partner school

Program outputs and partnership outcomes. Beyond the learning activities, the program generated the outputs and partnership outcomes listed in Table 5. These are products of the program and not evidence of student learning, so they are reported separately from the participant outcomes above.

Table 5. Program outputs and partnership outcomes

Type	Output or outcome
Media and dissemination	Educational video; online news coverage
Intellectual property	Intellectual property certificate
Teaching resources	Fairy tale texts, printed learning modules, and a pronunciation practice guide, prepared for handover to the school

Type	Output or outcome
Partnership	Signed cooperation agreement with SMA IPIEMS Surabaya, providing a basis for teacher training, joint research, student teaching practice, and development of German learning materials

Discussion

Scope and participants. The observations come from a single session with 60 students (30 in Grade X and 30 in Grade XI) who were interested in German and were made available by the school. They are not a random sample, and the observations were not analyzed separately by grade or proficiency level. The findings therefore describe this group of students and cannot be generalized to all learners of German.

Initial and post-program conditions. Before the program, German instruction at the partner school emphasized grammar and vocabulary, deep reading was weak, and literary texts were rarely used. After one guided session built around fairy tales, the facilitators observed more engaged and confident reading, and participants had a first experience of reading German narrative as a cultural text (Table 4). This pattern is consistent with the motivation that Avcı (2023) reported when Turkish secondary school learners of German worked with fairy-tale-related material. It is also consistent with the interest and vocabulary gains that Kuzmanovska et al. (2022) and Li and Wang (2022) associate with fairy tales in foreign language teaching. However, the shift described here rests on the facilitators' observations and on classroom exercises, not on a statistical comparison. It should therefore be treated as an indication and not as proof of effect.

Reading aloud and pronunciation. Pairing comprehension with read-aloud practice follows the logic that oral reading makes pronunciation audible and therefore correctable. Tsunemoto et al. (2023) found that articulation rate and pauses within clauses predicted perceived fluency in a read-aloud task, which points to concrete features that later cycles of this program could track, such as speech rate and pause patterns in recorded readings. In the present cycle, pronunciation was judged by the facilitators during practice using the indicators in Table 3, without a formal pronunciation assessment, so the pronunciation findings are especially provisional.

Community involvement and participation. Participation was high on both sides. Students acted as readers and discussion participants rather than passive recipients of information; the German teacher attended and observed the process; and the school provided space and equipment. Comparison with Indonesian folktales gave participants a familiar starting point, which is consistent with Ballester Roca and Méndez Cabrera's (2024) account of the role of folktale reading in encouraging participation and inclusion in multicultural settings. The signed cooperation agreement suggests that the partner considers the model worth continuing.

Adoption and sustainability. The modules and the cooperation agreement provide a basis for future sustainability, but long-term continuation has not yet been evaluated. The reusable resources left at the school (fairy tale texts, modules, and a pronunciation practice guide) can be used by teachers and students after the program ends. The signed cooperation agreement provides a basis for further activities, including teacher training,

joint research, student teaching practice, and the development of German learning materials. The team also intends to create fairy-tale-based teaching materials for various proficiency levels and to deliver them through digital platforms. This plan is consistent with the generally positive results reported for digital storytelling (Lim et al., 2022) and with earlier findings on digital German fairy tales (Hardika, 2025).

Challenges and possible solutions. Three challenges were identified. First, a single session limits how far pronunciation habits can change. Regular short sessions or teacher-led practice with audio models would help consolidate them, in line with Avcı's (2023) observation that the few lessons available each week constrain the implementation of such activities. Second, because participants come from heterogeneous backgrounds, their proficiency is likely to differ, so materials should be levelled, with shorter or more heavily glossed tales for beginners. Third, the evidence of effect is currently descriptive, and Hall's (2015) caution about assertion versus evidence applies to this report. Future cycles should add pre-test and post-test comprehension scores, a short reading motivation questionnaire, and scored recordings of reading aloud, and should turn the indicators in Table 3 into scored rubrics.

Novelty, strengths, weaknesses, and generalization. The novelty lies in integrating three features in one school-based project: understanding of fairy tales, pronunciation practice, and intercultural reflection. The strengths of the model include its low cost, its authentic and culturally rich texts, and the high level of participant involvement. Its weaknesses are the limited time span and the absence of measured evaluation results. The model could be applied to other foreign language classes in Indonesian schools and to other kinds of narratives, such as Indonesian folktales. Future research should expand the number of sessions and conduct quantitative analyses.

CONCLUSION

This community engagement program introduced guided reading of German fairy tales (*Rapunzel* and *Rotkäppchen*) to 60 Grade X and XI students at SMA IPIEMS Surabaya in a single on-site session. The session combined an opening, delivery of material, guided reading aloud with direct feedback, discussion and reflection, and formative evaluation.

Based on the facilitators' observations, participants showed high enthusiasm, greater confidence in reading, engagement with new vocabulary, a better grasp of the stories, and positive development in pronunciation. Because this evidence is descriptive and comes from one session without pre-test and post-test scores or a formal pronunciation assessment, these findings are indications of benefit and not proof of effect.

The program also produced an educational video, online news coverage, an intellectual property certificate, teaching materials and modules, and a signed cooperation agreement. The materials and the agreement provide a basis for future sustainability, teacher training, joint research, and media projects, although long-term continuation has not yet been evaluated.

The main limitations are the short duration and the absence of measured outcomes. Future cycles should add pre-test and post-test comprehension scores, a reading motivation questionnaire, and scored recordings of reading aloud. On this basis, fairy

tales appear to be a promising and culturally appropriate medium for foreign language literacy and quality education in the school setting, pending evaluation in longer programs with measured outcomes.

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