

Applications that promote English Learning for beginner EFL students

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(0) Introduction

Minister Haraguchi of Internal Affairs and Communications issued the Future School Project in Vision II in 2010¹⁾ to promote consecutive Japanese economic growth. The purpose of the Future School Project is to realize Educational Reform by the use of ICT – Information and Communication Technology. Since this project was publicized, all schools and educational institutes in Japan have been working on introducing ICT to all students in Japan.

In this study, I will first review the existing technical tools used in classrooms, and then, propose possible usages of tablets by EFL students in grades 4-5. After that, an application called Mingoville for iPads is examined in terms of its applicability as an EFL complementary material for grade 4-5 English class.

(1) Information Technology Tools and usages seen in the English Teaching classroom

1. DVD and CD players

For a long time, DVD and CD players have been necessary tools for English listening. They remain staple tools of technology for teaching. Many textbooks or alternative teaching books still come with CDs for listening practice and DVDs for presenting concepts. The technically better players contain both DVD function with projector and/or screen monitor hookup and CD playing capability with proper speakers.

2. Desktop or Laptop computer with a projector

Computers have been serving teachers for a long time allowing them to get necessary materials ready for class using word-processing and/or presentation software. The desktop computer is generally used by the teacher or students in the class, though laptops are effective in the classroom for its mobility. For instance, students performing group tasks can be online to search information on their objectives and then present it to the class. It is also important for teachers to have the computer operating system set up by the school IT technician so that they can link any student ideas on the computer to the rest of the class.

3. Interactive Smartboard²⁾

A smartboard is an interactive white/ black colored electronic board now gaining popularity throughout Japan. It has the capability of being written on or erased using both fingers and smartboard pens. Smartboards eliminate the smell or dust associated with whiteboard marker pens or chalk. Moreover, the smartboard functions as a large computer screen showing actual student/ teacher computer screen content or sharing each student's iPad image. This function allows teachers to expand and share the idea they are focusing on. A smartboard is also equipped with many applications to enhance studies teachers couldn't do before. Usually the smartboard and classroom tablets (often Apple iPads) are connected together by some kind of application. One of those is called TabletSync using Apple TV as a network player.

4. Tablets

Even though the word tablet was not well-known to the public a few years ago, it has now reached all over Japan. They are smaller than laptops and larger than smartphones, which have become very popular as the choice of cellphones. These days tablets are made by Apple company, Samsung Electronics Co., Amazon.com Inc. (maker of KINDLE), AsusTek Computer Inc. and Barnes and Noble Inc. (maker of the NOOK) At school, tablets are lent to each student or small group of students on which to do many activities and to share with the teacher through a smartboard or any projector. Now tablets are gaining favor over laptop computers due to their portability and versatile usages. There are generally five tablet sizes and are based on display size:

5 inch, 7 inch, 9 inch, 10 inch, and 13 inch. Dimension is usually given by the Imperial standard of inches, not by metric.

(2) Tablet usages by EFL learners

1. Examples of applications to be used in EFL class

In the background of the ongoing Future School Project, there is an important learning factor to consider, the generational times of students. Tapscott (2009) describes current students as the "Net Generation" Learners who grow up with technologies which craft new norms and characteristics into their personalities. As Tapscott says:

"They prize freedom and freedom of choice. They want to customize things, make them their own. They're natural collaborators, who enjoy a conversation, not a lecture. They'll scrutinize you and your organization. They insist on integrity, They want to have fun, even at work and at school. Speed is normal. Innovation is part of life.'

The "New Generation" Learners often described are usually students in the USA. Their situation and

personal characteristics are, of course, not the same as their Japanese counterparts who grow up under different encultured situations and attitudes. Nevertheless, Tapscott's view about technology and students can be applied to Japan which has adapted much of American life styles. Actually, Cooper, Tsukada, Yamaguchi, and Naruse (2011) suggested that with the recent increase of students' numbers in Japanese classrooms, students do not have the chance to speak and practice their conversational skills with each other. Thus, having a virtual interview with the computer via specific software will improve the students' communicative ability in English.

Uenosono and Yamao (2013) state that the Future School Project promoted tablet usage in class due to its user friendly interface even for younger students. Instead of using a keyboard and a mouse which requires a degree of eye-hand coordination, students can use their own fingers to tap in words or even draw pictures by sliding a fingertip. Thanks to the interactive smartboard set in the classroom, a teacher can share students' images one by one or all at once with other students so that students see the other ideas and understand other points of view or give opinions about shown images or writings.

Tada (2013) recommends the following applications for EFL classrooms with iPads.

- Flash cards creator
- Gogaku player as sound player
- TubePlayer as movie and video player
- Dropbox and AudioMemos for listening, dictation, shadowing and speaking

Flash card creator should be very helpful for EFL teachers since they don't have to keep bulky stocks of cards and manage hundreds of cards for each lesson. The iPad can store all the flash cards even with pictures and their sound files. Teachers no longer need to use a CD player for pronunciation practice. Tada shows the Flash card creator by NAHLA VS LITTLEDEE PTY. LTD. This application is the only versatile flash card making application right now from the App store, though there are single topic content specified flash card makers such as Baby Flash Cards Free – Animals in Japanese and English and Fantastic Animal Facts Flashcards Lite.

Tada suggested Gogaku player by NHK publishing as a speed changeable sound player to make English learning easier, but this application is not meant for iPad, but iPhone only. Other than Gogaku player, I recommend Audipo by Lapis Apps. Audipo is also able to change the playing speed and, using a seeker bar, teachers can go back to the specific points they want to repeat again for students. As long as the teacher has all the listening materials stored on the tablets, they can easily be played. The tablet can substitute as a CD player.

To use authentic materials like movies and videos for lessons, not only TubePlayer by the Apple channel but also many other YouTube players are available free such as YouTube by Google, Inc., TubePlayer Free by Jian DONG, and YouTube Capture by Google, Inc. and so on.

Tada (2013) suggested using Dropbox to pass out class materials and AudioMemos to record

shadowing or dictation or even speaking.

2. Concerns about choosing applications

Applications for tablets are still a new approach for EFL learners. Teachers are also learning how to use tablets and applications effectively. Teachers have to know what applications can facilitate students' learning. As well, tablet applications give greater freedom and creativity to teachers by downloading them onto the tablets they use in class. The estimated number of applications is said to be 20,000 and this large number can often intimidate teachers from choosing or finding proper ones for classroom tasks. When teachers must choose proper applications for his/ her class, Kelly (2014) gives six criteria as follows:

- Price: Depending on each school's funding condition, the price of apps is one of the key factors when it comes to deciding which to choose.
- Independent Usability: Apps which have independency help teachers save their extra teaching time. Once students are instructed how to use apps on their own, teachers are free to give individual encouragement and help.
- Educational Accuracy: Apps information should give precisely what teachers have in mind and to teach.
- Increasing Challenges: Good Apps have its activities planned from easy to more difficult thus attracting students' attention and motivating their mind.
- Entertainment Value: An app should have some entertainment value. The app constructed with this feature in mind will help students understand concepts in a fun way.
- Graphics: An app with quality graphics increases its value and improves students' learning capability to understand the content.

Kelly's six criteria are rather practical in terms of students' preference and learning. On the other hand, Puentedura (2009) introduced the Substitution Augmentation Modification Redefinition (SAMR) model for technology integration. In Puentedura's model, there are four levels of technological use:

Substitution – Tech acts as direct tool substitute with no functional change.

- A. Word processor used like typewriter
- B. Shakespeare texts read in online versions.

Augmentation – Tech acts as direct tool substitute.

- A. Basic functions as cut/ paste, spell check
- B. Dictionaries, study guides, history sites linked to online text.

Modification – Tech allows for task redesign.

- A. Integrated with email, graphing and spreadsheets packages.
- B. Textual, visual, audio tools for construction of shared knowledge.

Redefinition – Tech allows for creation of new tasks.

- A. Integrated with workgroup and content management software.
 - B. Tools for visualization of narratives and structural aspects of text.
- (‘A’ shows technological examples. ‘B’ shows classroom examples.)

Judging from Puente’s model, tasks done on tablets can be functionally classified so teachers will know what applications will be beneficial for which learning purpose.

(3) Mingoville and its applicability to Grade 4-5 EFL class

1. Background of Mingoville and pilot study done in China

Integrating communicative gaming and simulation into language learning goes back to the 1970s. It underlines the importance of the social aspects of language. Crookall (2007) claims that the use of simulation and games is widespread and encouraged in language learning and it can provide contextualized input in language learning and provide a challenge and competition to engage young learners in self-directed learning.

Mingoville is marketed and licensed as a global educational resource, but also is free in a number of countries across the world. Mingoville School, which originally started as an online site, has been targeted at individual users and contains more than 150 interactive lessons, creative lessons and teacher tools, with a focus on listening to, speaking, writing and reading English. (Meyer 2013) Since Mingoville Preschool was launched in 2012, the company SAVIVO increasingly focused on adapting Mingoville to the variety of platforms that are used in school and at home, including smartboards, smartphones and iPads as well as books. The icon below shows Mingoville School platform for iPad.



2. A Pilot study in China using Mingoville

The Basic Requirement for Primary School English in China was designed and issued in 2001. It states that the beginning level is grade 3 (age 8) and the time allocation recommended is 4 times a week, with a minimum of 80 minutes, based on the principle of shorter periods and higher frequency. Coupled with the establishment of the open door policy, the 2008 Beijing 29th Olympics Games, the People’s Republic of China’s admission to World Trade Organization and World Expo in Shanghai, the Chinese people’s increased interest in learning English indicates how much they are interested in understanding

the West. Although much effort has been made to boost the teaching and learning of ESL in China, there are still many complaints, ranging from lack of interest and motivation to learn English, lack of a suitable English environment, lack of interactive teaching methodology to attract the digital natives, lack of confidence, lack of interest to master and remember English words as well as bored teaching and learning attitude (Ruphina & Liu, 2011).

In September 2009, a pilot study was done with two primary schools with 229 students in grade 4 and 5. With the help of technology teachers and English teachers, Mingoville for PC was installed in 88 computers for pupils to play Mingoville once a week for 45 minutes for five weeks.

During and after the study, students were interviewed as follows (Ruphina, Wei & YI, 2012):












- 1 Do you think that Mingoville motivate you to learn English?
- 2 In what ways did Mingoville motivate you to learn English?
- 3 Would you prefer your teacher to use serious games to teach or do you prefer a traditional teaching method?
- 4 What challenge did you encounter that affected your full participation in the Mingoville classroom?
- 5 What do your parents think about the integration of Mingoville game in an EFL classroom?



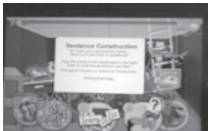







As a conclusion, Ruphina, Wei & YI state as follows:

Mingoville or any serious games, if properly integrated in learning EFL in primary schools in China, will highly motivate, engage and arouse the interest of Chinese digital natives to learn English. Teachers must finish teaching the text books assigned for the term. Therefore, no teacher would be expected to use serious games in class unless they are part of the curriculum. From the study, it is clear that even those few students who did not like Mingoville would still prefer learning EFL with computer games. It was observed in this study that the integration of Mingoville or any other computer games to supplement traditional teaching of ESL was better strategy to reach the digital natives in China.

3. Mingoville for iPads and its content

Issued in 2012, Mingoville for iPads includes ten categories as in its PC version, including Animals, The Family, Colours and Clothes, Food and Shop, Time and Travel, The Body, House and Furniture, Numbers and Letters, Nature and Seasons, and Sport and Media. Each category has eleven activities. Those activities are shown in the table below with their initial views and starting formats, spoken and written instruction script, and their activities.

initial view	starting format	instruction	activity
		Hello again sailor and welcome to my home. I hope you like animals. Click on all the animals and listen to what they are called. Please repeat the words.	Rich Picture (Vocabulary exercise) In this game the student will be introduced to new words.
		Hello young sailor! Why not play a game of memory and match my animals using pictures, sounds and their spellings.	Memory (Vocabulary exercise) The student will learn the names of different items by matching words and images.
		(There is no specific instruction for this section.)	Fish Spelling (Spelling exercise) Catch letters and spell the words.
		Ahoy sailor! I have a problem. Yesterday I washed all the animals in my washing machine. And now some of them have lost all the colour. Help me give the animals their colours back.	Colour this (Listening exercise) The student is practicing listening comprehension skills.
		(There is no specific instruction for this section.)	Drag and Spell (Spelling exercise) The student will practice his or her spelling skills.
		It's music time! Press 'next.' Do you want to see Candy or me dance?	Sing Along (Speaking exercise) The student is encouraged to practice listening, comprehension and pronunciation by singing along.

		(There is no specific instruction for this section.)	Word Search (Word Recognition exercise) In this game the student will search for familiar words.
		Write what Liz tells you to write. Drag the words onto the blackboard. Example: Write "Monkeys have tails."	Sentence Construction (Writing exercise) Drag the words to the blackboard in the right order to write the sentences students hear.
		Uncle Jon must tell stories about his animals. Here is a story about some of the animals that live in his house.	Give us a clue (Word Recognition exercise) The student expands his or her vocabulary while listening a story.
		Hello sailor! Are you willing to try how many words you can remember?	Point it out (Listening exercise) Listening, comprehension and vocabulary are practiced in this game.
		Hi again! In this interview, I would like to talk to you about animals. My favorite animal is a lion. What is your favorite animal? Hi again! In this interview, I would like to talk to you about animals. My favorite animal is a lion. What is your favorite animal?	Interview (Writing and speaking exercise) The student will practice spelling skills and speaking in this game.

These games and activities from Animals are based on Cambridge English Young Learners as shown below.

Grammar and Structures Map aligned with Cambridge English Young Learners (YLE)

YLE Grammar and Structure List	Mingoville Examples
Nouns	My favourite animal is ... I do not have a favourite animal . A tiger is a predator.
Pronouns	Are you afraid of animals? I am afraid of Do you like...?
Verbs (Present Simple)	An (animal) is... Birds can fly . Cows live on a farm.
Can for ability	Can you ride a horse? Yes, I can . An (animal) can ...
Have (got) for possession	Do you have any pets? I have a... I do not have a...
Prepositions of place on/ on	What kind of animals live on a farm? Whales live in the ocean.
Question words	What kind of pet do you have? Where do mice live?

4. Assessing Applicability of Mingoville to Japanese grade 4-5

English is not yet an official subject at primary school level yet in Japan, but it has been introduced as one of the foreign languages to promote cultural awareness. The Japanese government is planning for English be taught to grade 5-6 three classes a week and grade 3-4 once to twice by 2020. If this should happen, there would be much difficulty trying to integrate Mingoville into the English learning classes because (1) once or twice of English classes a week will not be enough for students to practice English, (2) the primary school teachers are not ready to teach communicative English usage. Wakimoto (2013) points out that since primary schools are meant to give students all-round education in Japan, it would be inadequate to teach English communication techniques at a superficial language skill level.

Despite the inadequate preparation and support of English teaching and learning in Japan, young learners nevertheless most certainly have the capabilities to learn English as a means of international communication. IEA (International Association for the evaluation of Educational Achievement) announced that Japanese students in grade 4 scored fifth among 50 countries worldwide in 2012.

It is strongly suggested that the Japanese government should prepare a full and complete English curriculum vitae for proper English teaching classes. To do this, it will be necessary to rethink the meaning of "all-round education" in the modern era. One suggestion is that IT technicians should help

more to contribute to teacher preparation time.

Footnote

- 1) Educational Reform in cooperative style using ICT is a translation of Japanese expression of 「ICTによる協働型教育改革」. ICT is abbreviation of Information and Communication Technology.
- 2) The name, Smartboard, is rather a brand name. Other names given to this tool with similar functions are Electricboard, Interactive Whiteboard also as a brand name. Some other smartboard is written SMART board to make the brand image clear. This study focused on a general Smartboard with basic common features.

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