

Chapter 97

English–Language Learning at Their Fingertips: How Can Teachers Use Tablets to Teach EFL Children?

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of multi-touch screen tablets has increased the opportunities for mobile learning, as the unique capabilities and affordances of these devices give them an educational advantage over other mobile technologies. Tablets are progressively finding their way into classrooms and transforming modes of learning and teaching. However, research on educational applications of this digital tool, particularly with reference to foreign-/second-language acquisition by young beginner learners, is still limited. In this paper, the use of various tablet applications (apps) to support mobile English-language learning by children as beginners is discussed. The apps are classified into five main categories: communication, content-access, productivity, interactive and storage. The educational affordances of each category are presented and explained, with examples. This typology provides insight into the educational uses of tablet apps for English language learning, and has implications for research in the field of classroom practices and beyond.

INTRODUCTION

Language learning via mobile devices is receiving increasingly widespread use in both formal and informal settings. Much of the existing literature has drawn attention to the learning opportunities that may be afforded by the integration of mobile devices with language learning (Ballance, 2012; Gromik, 2012; Godwin-Jones, 2011; Stockwell,

2013; Stockwell & Hubbard, 2013). Research on mobile learning has indicated its potential to enrich and support various other kinds of learning, such as contingent learning, situated learning, authentic learning, context-aware learning, augmented reality mobile learning, personalized learning, collaborative learning, and game-based learning (Traxler, 2013). With constraints such as limited class time and thus limited exposure to the target

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language, learners in formal classroom settings often struggle to master their desired language. However, integrating mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) with language-learning curricula has been reported to enable enhanced, continuous, and flexible exposure to language resources, as mobile technologies allow learners to carry their personal learning on the move (Beatty, 2013; Kukulska-Hulme, 2012; Elias, 2011; Naismith et al., 2004; Roschelle, Sharples & Chan 2005; Traxler, 2013). According to Kukulska-Hulme (2012), “language learning can escape the traditional constraints of time and place that partly determine existing curricula, which focus largely on what can be achieved and tested at home or in the classroom” (p. 7). This is confirmed by Beatty (2013, p. 2): “audio translation apps, augmented reality, and just-in-time learning approaches are providing alternatives to those with neither access nor time to learn a language.” As a result, “learners are turning to new mobile learning opportunities to supplant traditional teaching as virtual extensions of earlier self-help books, phrase books, and audio-based language learning programs.”

Interaction is also crucial to the language-learning process, as it has the potential to combine the requirements of effective language learning: high-quality content, feedback, and utilisation (Gass & Mackey, 2007). Mobile devices, with such advanced features as online connectivity and multimedia applications (apps), may encourage interactive learning by offering access to language-learning content via e-books, the Internet, audio and video recordings, and online dictionaries (Patten, Arnedillo-Sánchez & Tangney, 2006). They also allow students to perform interactive learning activities such as games (Homer et al., 2014; Sykes & Reinhardt, 2013; Wong et al., 2013). The advantages of MALL in the above respects indicate its potential as an effective educational platform that facilitates language learners’ access to and practice of the target language.

As MALL is a relatively new field, it is extremely important to design appropriate environments for its application (Laurillard, 2012). As Chinnery (2006) claimed, “the effective use of any tool in language learning requires the thoughtful application of second language pedagogy” (p. 9). It is thus crucial to explore the educational applications of a given mobile device before that device is fully adopted in a language-learning environment. Therefore, the next section of this paper provides an overview of multi-touch tablets, with reference to their key features, design characteristics, and limitations. Familiarity with the design and applications of tablets is crucial to understanding how best to use them for educational purposes. In this study, specific reference is made to the use of multi-touch tablets to teach English to children learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at beginner level.

TABLETS IN EDUCATION

Features and Design Characteristics of Tablets

Since their first appearance on the technology market, multi-touch tablets such as the iPad followed by Android, Windows and other touch tablet style technologies have enjoyed considerable popularity. Their large multi-touch screens, mobility, accessibility, powerful functionality, expansive, secure and organized ecosystem of applications, long battery life and wireless connectivity have often been described as the most significant features capable of supporting learning (Butcher, 2014; Fisher, Lucas & Galstyan, 2013; Linder et al., 2013; Pellerin, 2014). The adoption of multi-touch tablets in education is not limited to a specific brand of tablet technology. The educational use of tablets with various operating systems (e.g., IOS and Android) has been reported. However, most studies to date have focused on the Apple iPad,

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