



WORLD OF FUN



Using apps in the Primary Classroom

Apps such as Cambridge Exam Publishing's *Word Fun World* which is specially designed to help children understand and use vocabulary for the Cambridge Starters, Movers and Flyers YL tests reflect these pedagogical principles:

What makes a good app for the primary classroom?

» Children have freedom to navigate

Based on the principle of individualising learning by enabling children to work at their own pace, a good app provides children the ability to navigate freely. They choose what they want to do first, for example on *Word Fun World*, children can choose to do the spelling game first or the matching game to check their understanding of the key words needed for the YLE tests.

The app gives the child useful feedback

Word Fun World gives the learner a child-friendly visual record of which words they have learned by changing icons and colours. It also informs the child as to whether a particular activity has been completed. This aligns with the pedagogical principle of giving the learner a clear sense of progress in an age-accessible manner. It is done via pop ups with motivating praise to encourage and positively reinforce.

Teachers and parents / caregivers are informed of progress

Good apps also have a function where teachers, parents / caregivers can clearly and easily chart the child's vocabulary learning progress. These are usually paid apps as there are very few good free apps on the market as app development needs to be sustainable. Paid apps also help ensure that there are no adverts which push products on to children.

How can you use an app in the classroom context?

Just as with other learning tools, we need to ensure our use of apps is purposeful and productive. It can be challenging to use class sets of tablets in the classroom because they are not set up to be used in this context. You should adopt the same principles to using apps as when using a coursebook in the primary English classroom to craft ways to enable the children to collaborate meaningfully.

A good idea is to have children share a device and understand they need to take turns (teach them functional language in English for this). Monitor to check they are on-task and helping each other. Review question formation and allow them to ask and answer questions about the games in the app as well as about the meaning, spelling and pronunciation of the target vocabulary.

When teaching lower primary children who are preparing for the Starters exam, pre-teach app related vocabulary such as *tablet*, *screen*, *click on*, *go back*, *scroll up/down*, *swipe*, etc. See Lane Smith's picturebook, *It's a Book* as an engaging and child-friendly context to introduce this kind of high-frequency lexis.

Integrate use of the app into your lesson plan, so it is not seen as a filler or optional extra for the children. For example, use the videos accompanying the app to set the context for presenting the target vocabulary perhaps with sub titles or even with the sound off for the initial viewing.

What do you need to know before choosing an app?

Know your device

Go to settings and see the list of features such as location / photos / camera / location – ensure these are turned off for children's apps for safety.

Use restrictions

If you are managing a class set of tablets in your classroom, make sure children do not have the option to add new apps or delete the apps you have chosen!

Settings → General → Restrictions

Select guided access

Guided access is very useful for a classroom context when using apps. Search on 'my tablet' and lock the device on to a single app using a pass code.

Know the market place

Both iOS and Google Play enable you to view permissions via a pop up. This means teachers can check which permissions the app will ask the child for. Try to really explore the app and do your homework before you use it in class. In this way, you can ensure the apps are safe for classroom use.

Understand app habits / app addiction

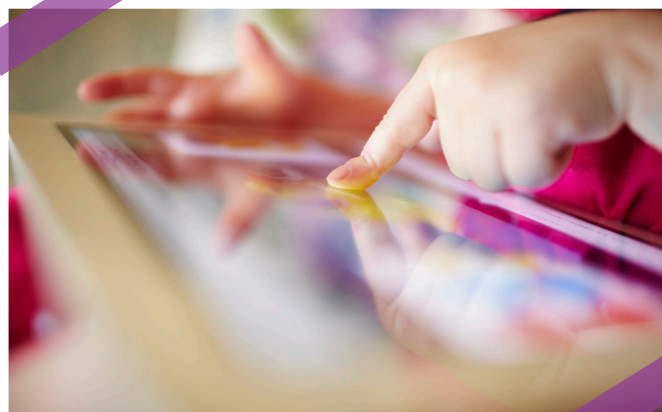
How many of you teach primary children who seem addicted to apps such as Candy Crush Saga? Most apps which have gamification features can be very addictive with children spending long periods of time using them. It helps for us as primary teachers to understand the cue → routine → reward cycle. For example, if the teacher rewards good behaviour with tablet use, then it becomes compromised when trying to use apps as a pedagogical tool. Once we become aware of this process, we can be more principled in the way we present apps to children. Educating them about responsible screen-time is also part of our remit in developing good digital citizenship skills.

Protect children's privacy

Many apps (including high quality ones) ask for access to certain types of data, which can be for a valid reason, such as to help the provider to make the games and educational activities as relevant and useful as possible. This includes information about how much time children spend using the app, what their favourite songs and videos on the app are, how quickly they lose interest and so on. This anonymous user-data is important in order to enhance the quality of apps. However, compare this type of data with personal information such as asking for a child's phone number or age – remember that no children's app should ever ask for this kind of information!

Age-appropriate apps

Apps are fast becoming a common tool in primary English teachers' repertoires globally. But do you know how to choose an app appropriately for primary English language learners? Do you know when and how to use apps in a principled way to develop children's language? Another key consideration is which apps to choose as well as on what basis we should reject an app for our classrooms.



Concerns for educators and parents / caregivers

During a focus group with Primary ELT practitioners, many concerns with using apps in the classroom were highlighted, including exposure to violence in apps which use gamification features, age-inappropriate content such as sex and stereotypical images of gender and body image, excessive screen-time, risks of cyberbullying in the case of interactive apps, internet safety when using web-based apps that attempt to access children's data as well as links to social media platforms. In addition to these issues, a particular concern for educators is how to evaluate whether an app is actually providing children a real learning experience.

During an online CUP focus group with primary English teachers from around the world, teachers also expressed valid fears around inappropriate content including advertising, paid for content pushed to the children in their classes, apps with non-graded and/or inaccurate language, low quality and low engagement content, dubious external links such as to social media and mysterious downloads. Again, the key concern was limited pedagogy and unclear educational value.

By being aware of the considerations involved in using apps in the primary classroom, you can adopt a principled view and select and use apps meaningfully for your learners' language development. ■

Acknowledgements

Page 1 photo credit: Emma Innocenti

Page 2 photo credit: Richard Drury

David Valente is IATEFL YLTSIG Joint Coordinator and has 20 years' YL ELT experience. This has included authoring teachers' handbooks and courses for primary and secondary curriculum development as well as YL methodology training in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Australasia.

