Using iPad applications to teach ESL

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Abstract

iPad applications are a newly developed wealth of resources that can be instrumental in second language teaching and learning. This article reports on a material development project for teaching English (e.g. reading and writing) with iPad applications. By incorporating applications into ESL instruction and materials development, students are motivated to learn through animation, visuals, sound, and many more functions provided by new technology.

Introduction

Over the past several years, the mobile computing industry has made vigorous technological advances that have dramatically change the way people communicate. According to the market research firm ComScore, the number of teens with smart phones in the U.S. nearly tripled to 4.8 million (Luna, 2011). Young people today are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach (Prensky, 2001). This results in an increasing demand on the part of teachers' education. In addition to integrating content knowledge and pedagogy, the notion that today's teacher education needs to include technology is made clear by current TESOL Technology Standards, which focus on how English language teachers, teacher educators, and administrators can and should use technology in and out of the classroom (Healey, Hanson-Smith, Hubbard, Ioannou-Georgiou, Kessler, & Ware, 2011).

While many technologies have found their way into ubiquitous use in our daily lives, they are often overlooked, or even avoided, in the classroom (Kessler, 2012). Educators and researchers have begun to contemplate ways the smaller portable technologies can facilitate English teaching and learning. Increasingly, developers are creating applications for language teaching and learning. There are various applications available for practicing pronunciation skills, developing listening and reading comprehension skills, improving oral and writing competence, and other language learning purposes. Considering the overwhelming amount of applications available, it is time for educators to consider the potential for applications to become an instrumental and integral part of language teaching and learning. By taking advantage of learners' knowledge and skills in applying new technology, teachers can integrate applications into classroom learning.

Criteria for Selecting iPad Applications

In choosing applications for intermediate and advanced ESL classes, the following criteria were utilized in assessing the quality and effectiveness of this material development project. An application should meet the following requirements:

1. Instructional Usability: The application should be pedagogically effective and viewed as an improvement to teaching.
Availability: The application loads quickly and does not crash.

Relevance: The use of a particular application coincides with the purpose of the teaching and content is appropriate for the students.

Engagement: The application highly engages students and motivates them to use it.

Individual Learner Differences: The application addresses visual, kinesthetic, intrapersonal, linguistic, interpersonal, musical, or spatial learners.

In developing these criteria, the author referenced an article evaluating applications for learning and teaching (Jonas-Dwyer et al. 2012). Specifically, instructional usability, availability and relevance are principles universal to any technological advancement and carry instrumental values to teaching. The last two criteria were considered in reflection to the theory of Multiple Intelligence (Gardner, 1996), which argues that teaching should tap into students’ different intelligences and interests.

Target iPad Applications
In response to the above criteria, eight applications were selected, in which four of the applications are addressed in this article (see Table 1). For a complete listing of the applications and their websites, please see Appendix A.

Table 1: iPad applications presented in this article

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Sample Instructional Activities
At the 2012 MITESOL Conference in Livonia, Michigan, the author shared the following four examples of activities that teachers can incorporate in different stages of the lesson to teach reading and writing using iPad applications.

Reading Activity 1
Once the instruction of a reading strategy (e.g. making inferences) is given in class, it is very difficult for students to duplicate the nuances of a teacher's instruction or for absent students to make up for the missed lesson. This might result in the loss of interest towards learning in general. By incorporating the iPad application Educreations, students can have easy access to recorded instruction that guides students through an example lesson.

iPad application Educreations
This application involves an interactive whiteboard. It allows the teacher to draw and write on the whiteboard while recording the instruction. Pictures can also be attached for clearer instruction and visual effect. During a pre-reading activity, teachers can introduce the topic by showing pictures and questions through the Educreations application to activate students’ prior knowledge. For example, given the topic is fads and trends in the 21st century, teachers can
attach pictures of different fads and trends in different countries and organize a lead-in discussion to distinguish the difference between fads and trends. Students are then recognized as the experts of their own culture, which helps motivate students to understand the content. To introduce reading strategies, teachers can apply an interactive and animated way by adding texts, pictures, handwritings and drawings via the recordable whiteboard Educreations. For example, if the target strategy is recognizing the structure of a paragraph, the teachers can start to explain the structure first by using a hamburger picture. Then the teacher can present the picture of the text, underline important sentences, write information down or draw pictures around it to provide additional explanation.

Benefits and Limitations
The whole teaching process would be recorded via this application. The recorded lesson can be exported as video clips. This enables students to watch lessons before and after class. Meanwhile, teachers can use this application to give audio feedback on students' homework. For instance, teachers may insert a photo of students' homework, comment or write on it, circle or explain the specific mistakes as well as providing suggestions for revision. If you record and then need to erase for some reason, it erases all audio and graphics. Meanwhile instead of using markers, teachers need to draw and write on the application using a finger, which might result in unclear drawing and writing.

Reading Activity 2
Extensive reading projects are never easy to carry out and monitor. What might happen at the end of each extensive reading task is that students have not finished the reading, skipped a few chapters, or they simply chose not to read. The complexity of the book can be controlled to the appropriate level and worksheets can be developed to monitor reading. However, extensive reading is always a daunting task and students think they are evaluated through homework. In order to make extensive reading interesting, teachers should design structured activities to walk students through reading and allow them to see their progress over time. The iPad application Evernote is a good choice to meet such purposes.

iPad application: Evernote
Evernote lets teachers or students take notes, capture photos, record voice and then makes these notes completely searchable by simply typing in the tags. The idea of using Evernote as an electronic portfolio tool resulted from the limitations of the author's previous reading project which used only paper copy worksheets throughout the semester. The author asked students to read Black Like Me and fill out one comprehension worksheet each week. After reading, students had an in-class discussion and completed discussion and reflection worksheets. It was apparent that the students were largely motivated to read and they were making progress over time. However, documenting the paperwork of 13 students proved to be troublesome. To fix this problem, the Evernote application can be used creatively as a digital portfolio organizer to carry out extensive reading projects. First, teachers need to set up an Evernote account for each student. Then teachers introduce the concept of a portfolio to students, documenting their work and progress by developing comprehension worksheets to keep track of their reading and understanding of the target book. Students can add pictures of homework, text, sketches, doodles, brainstorming, etc. into their worksheets to enhance the interpretation of their work. In
the end, students would complete and keep an Evernote folder that includes a representative sampling of their homework, pictures and tests.

Benefits and Limitations
The structure of Evernote portfolios really fits into any educational, work or artistic endeavor. The reading portfolio activity helps students maintain digital portfolios to keep track of their progress over time. It is especially useful when it comes to parent/teacher conferences. Teachers can be constantly documenting what students are doing and sharing this feedback with parents or individual students. A well planned digital portfolio would serve as a showcase of students' "product". To see real growth needs time. It is likely that teachers might need to store multiple entries of students' work. For each student's account, Evernote allows 100 saved searches. This might not work well if the teacher plans to document students' work in more than one semester.

Writing Activity 1
For most students, the hardest part of writing is getting started. Staring at an empty piece of paper or a blank computer screen, they grow frustrated as it seems there is nothing to say. By integrating iPad applications iThoughtsHD and Write or Die, teachers can provide students with visual mind-map support to facilitate brainstorming process and make use of negative reinforcement to encourage students writing first draft in a timely fashion.

iPad application iThoughtsHD
iThoughtsHD is a mind mapping tool which allows students to visually organize their thoughts, ideas and information. During the brainstorming stage, teachers can use the iThoughtsHD app to help students present their ideas through visual mind-mapping. For example, teachers can offer a topic and ask students to brainstorm using the app. Students would type in the topic and a bubble-shaped topic will pop up in the middle of the map. Students can continue to add multiple subtopics and all of those would spread out as a relationship of a sibling or child to the main topic. Then teachers can have students export their own mind-map. To make it fun, students can practice personalizing their map by fixing the setup to their preferred color, shape, background, shadow and font before the class period.

Benefits and Limitations
It is a nice tool for organizing all the scattered thoughts and ideas visually. Every 30 seconds the map is automatically saved and every 5 minutes a complete 'snapshot copy' of the map is made. This application only allows students to brainstorm and sketch the general ideas using words or phrases. It would be less useful for writing longer stretches of sentences.

iPad application: Write or Die
Write or Die is a new kind of writing productivity application that forces students to write by providing consequences for distraction and procrastination. In order to prepare for the lesson, students play with Write or Die by choosing its consequences to Kamikaze mode: setting the word goal as 200 and the time goal as 30 minutes, and adjusting the grace period. Teachers then ask students to create a draft based on the outline created by using iThoughtsHD. Students can be divided into two competitive teams and each group nominates a team name. The students are then timed in an attempt to complete writing in 30 minutes. In Kamikaze mode, whenever
students stop for too long, the background color will keep changing into bright red and eventually if no words are typed soon after, the word will unwrite itself. Whoever stops too long will need to rewrite as words are eaten. At the end of the lesson, teachers count how many students survive the Kamikaze mode and the group with the most survivors wins.

**Benefits and Limitations**

The level of punishment can be set according to different requirements. It works better for students who lack self-discipline to write consistently on their own and therefore need an outside force to keep them on task. After they finishing writing, the written product can be exported to Dropbox, Email, Clipboard or Text file. Teachers need to carefully choose the punish mode based on the complexity level of each task. As beginning level students are more likely to feel frustrated in timed writing, the teacher should adjust the time goal and word goal to fit students' levels and change the consequence of Write or Die. Additionally, in order to lower students' writing anxiety, modify the activity so that students can write about their hobby, dream, ambition, experience or any topic that excites them.

**Limitation and Suggestions for Further Research**

Although the author is pleased with the design of this material development project, she is well aware of its limitations. While reviewing different applications, it is very easy to lose track (focus?) and look for “fun” applications only. Teachers should be careful to weigh “fun” against productivity when choosing whether or not to use an application in their classroom. A significant amount of time was spent trying to knit the target knowledge well with the appropriate applications. Finding the applications that fit for all criteria and work well for the lesson objectives proved to be no easy task. With the rapid development of iPad-optimized applications, there is still plenty of room for further investigation and experimentation of different applications that target various lesson objectives. In addition to expanding the research base, the material presented here can be tested in various contexts both within and outside of the university setting. These applications can also be used in an EFL context with college and adult learners. As iPad applications are still relatively new products, this project possesses great potential to be used effectively in a wide variety of contexts to teach English language skills.

**Conclusion**

Even though people still question whether it is appropriate to use applications (which are considered to be games) to approach learners, the investigation on the effectiveness of using applications in teaching continues to grow. There is a wealth of app information to be discovered and effectively utilized to make learning an enjoyable process. The exploration of appropriate educational applications holds great potential for language instruction and materials development.

**Author Note**

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References


Appendix A: List of iPad Applications for Instruction

1) Writing
Chronicle for iPad - A personal journal [On-line]. Available at
iThoughts Mindmapping for the iPhone & iPad [On-line]. Available:
http://www.ithoughts.co.uk/iThoughtsHD/Welcome.html
Write or Die: putting the "prod" in productivity [On-line]. Available at:
http://writeordie.com/#iPad

2) Reading
Educreations Interactive Whiteboard [On-line]. Available at:
NPR News [On-line]. Available at:

3) Listening and Speaking
Johnny ESL [On-line]. Available at:

Note: The Listening and Speaking applications were not addressed in the MITESOL Conference presentation but were added later as valuable resources.
Appendix B: Sample Lesson Plan on Teaching Writing

I. Title

Last Survivors: Brainstorming and Drafting Along via iPad Apps

II. Levels

Intermediate and Advanced

III. Aims

For most students, the hardest part of writing is getting started. Staring at an empty piece of paper or a blank computer screen, they grow frustrated as it seems there is nothing to say. However, once students know how to start, it usually comes naturally and writing starts to flow. By integrating iPad apps, this lesson provides visual mind-map support to facilitate brainstorming process and make use of negative reinforcement to encourage students writing first draft in a timely fashion.

IV. Class Time (70 min)

V. Preparation Time (1 hour)

VI. Resources

Access to the Internet, iPad, iThoughtsHD app, Write or Die app.

VII. Procedure

Before class: Teachers show students how to use iThoughtsHD and Write or Die iPad apps before class. In order to facilitate clear instruction, teachers give students a handout that explains the feature, function and instruction on how to use these two iPad apps. For iThoughtsHD, students practice personalizing their map by editing color, shape, background, shadow and font before the class period. And in order to prepare for the next lesson, students play with Write or Die by choosing its consequences to Kamikaze mode, setting word goal as 200 and time goal as 30 min, and adjusting grace period.

In session 1, review how to use iThoughtsHD app and then give students a topic and ask them to brainstorm using the app.

I. Review

* Tap on the + symbol (top left toolbar button) and type in the topic. A bubble-shaped topic will pop up in the middle of the map.
* Tap on one of the two "topic creation" toolbar buttons (top right) to create three subtopics of the currently selected topic. Students can type in multiple branches which spread out as a relationship of a sibling or child to the main topic.

II. Apply

* Ask the students to log in to the iThoughtsHD (mind mapping) app.
* Have students work independently to come up with their own mind-map.
* Have students export their own mind-map from iPad to their email.

In session 2, ask students to write a draft based on the outline created in session 1.

* Divide students into two competitive teams and ask students to nominate a name for their team.
* Have students start drafting based on their own outline. The students are then timed in an attempt to complete writing in 30 minutes. In Kamikaze mode, whenever students stop too long, the background color will keep changing into bright red and eventually if no words are typed
afterwards, the word will unwrite itself. Whoever stops for too long will need to rewrite as the words are eaten.

* Count how many students survive the Kamikaze mode and the group that has the most survivors wins.
* Reward the winning team.