

# Using Tablets in the ESL Classroom to Engage Learners in Reading Books

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No, tablets are not detrimental to reading. It's just the opposite, despite what many teachers claim. In fact, this device, which is steadily gaining ground in our schools, has a significant positive effect on reading, at least, according to the preliminary results of a study we conducted in Québec schools last spring. Similar results were found in a study by the Pew Research Center (2014), the nonpartisan think tank that runs surveys on social science issues, among others. At a time when students are losing interest in reading, not only is the tablet—of which the iPad is the leading model—*not* detrimental to reading skills, it actually encourages students to read more and better. A list of recommended digital books for elementary school students is provided at the end of this article.

### **Elementary school children are losing interest in reading**

Boredom and lack of interest in reading: this is what many studies over the last three years have observed (e.g. Manuel, 2012; Merga, 2014; OECD, 2010; Rennie & Patterson, 2008; Rideout, 2014). The results also show a direct link between reading skills, which are introduced in elementary school, and high school graduation rates (Hernandez, 2011). Furthermore, a study conducted by Clark for the National Literacy Trust (2012) in 21,000 students found that 40% of those who lived in disadvantaged neighborhoods graduated from elementary school without adequate reading skills, and some could not even be categorized as “confirmed readers” (Giasson, 2011). It has also been reported that elementary students read much less today than they did ten years ago (Clark, 2012; Save the Children, 2014).

Not only do they read fewer paper books, but when they do so, they enjoy it less, and they read them mainly because their teacher obliges them to (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012; Common Sense Media, 2014; Dickenson, 2014). Yet reading enjoyment is associated with a number of positive educational impacts, such as academic success, social engagement, and personal development (Vivian, 2011). Although some say that youth are actually reading more today than ever before (Octobre, 2014), we should be aware that the kind of reading that goes on is often superficial. In no way can the over 4,200 text messages that young people send each month (see Karsenti & Collin, 2013) and the Facebook pages that they peruse represent the same educational value as books do.

## **Should schools embrace the digital book in a reflective manner to give children a taste for reading?**

Even as schools are being decried as obsolete, given the digital gap between schools and the knowledge society, we must ask ourselves whether digital books can really add value to the education experience. Whether we like it or not, the digital book seems to be here to stay, and for the foreseeable future. The compelling question now is: how can teachers prepare to deal with this new reality, and not to the detriment of paper books, but instead to instill a love of reading in their charges? This is the most important message, not the medium used to convey it.

We should act in the full awareness of the fact that elementary school students are rapidly becoming “Tom Thumbs,” or adepts in the arts of touch screening and smart phoning, as so aptly argued by Michel Serres (Petite Poucette, 2012). Accordingly, we believe that schools must learn to accept their students’ day-to-day reality, which is experienced largely through technological media, and hence embrace the touch-screen tablet. At the same time, we should emphasize that the objective is not to blindly follow digital fads and fashions. Instead, the idea is to prepare students by providing them with good reading abilities, so they can fulfill their roles as citizens of the world and make thoughtful contributions to societal growth and well-being.

## **Preliminary results of the study conducted in spring 2014**

In the spring of 2014, we conducted a study of about 100 students who routinely used an iPad in class (Karsenti & Bruchesi, in press). The students stated frankly that they read almost no paper books, “except when it’s for marks,” “or only when we have to,” “and then, even less.” It appears that fewer than 5% of these students had read a book just for fun, and not because they had to. Some said that they had never even opened a book: “I’ve never read a [real] book in my life, I think!” When asked if they read on their iPad for fun, the proportion leapt to almost 30%. “I love reading e-books,” they reported enthusiastically. In addition, they felt that the digital book was practically magic, because “everything is there: the dictionary, the dictionary of synonyms, the search function [...]. You don’t have to look anywhere else. It’s all there in the iPad.” We should not be surprised that young people enjoy reading on a tablet. For them, it’s like “a library that contains the entire world,” as one teacher put it.

Students especially appreciate the interactivity that digital books provide, not only with the text, but also with the illustrations, photos, videos, and other features. You just click on an unfamiliar word

to get the definition: “[...] for finding information in the text, the iPad is great.” This gives students access to multimodal literacy materials, which enables them to develop into good “contemporary communicators” who possess the keys to other semiotic functions and technological supports, which continuously advance in terms of interactivity and complexity (Stafford, 2010, in Lebrun, Lacelle & Boutin, 2013).

To sum up, in the opinions of the students we met with, there are at least 12 advantages to reading a digital book over a paper book, as follows:

- 1) It’s more interesting.
- 2) It encourages students to read more often.
- 3) It encourages students to read for longer times.
- 4) It gets students to read a wider variety of texts.
- 5) Overall, it’s more enjoyable.
- 6) It makes it easier to share what you’ve read with others.
- 7) It makes it easier to understand unfamiliar words (click on the word and get the definition).
- 8) It makes it easier and faster to find additional information about what you’re reading.
- 9) It makes it easy to collaborate on assignments with classmates in real time.
- 10) The multimedia content stimulates and inspires students to complete all the reading steps (Lacelle, 2012).
- 11) It helps students organize their books and other texts.
- 12) It’s more motivating than reading paper materials.

## Digital books and second language reading skills

Since Kenneth Goodman’s (1967) seminal article, “Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game” second language specialists began to tackle the unique issues and questions facing second language reading pedagogy. A glance through what is now more than four decades of research reveals some significant findings that can be related to the use of digital books as means to teach reading skills.

**Top-down and bottom-up processing:** Top-down processing of language happens when someone uses background information to predict the meaning of language they are going to read. Rather than relying first on the actual words (bottom-up), they develop expectations about what they will read, and confirm or reject these as they read. Recent research on teaching reading has shown that a combination of both types of processing, known as “interactive reading” is important.

**Schema theory and background knowledge:** The schema theory states that a text does not by itself carry meaning (Anderson, 2004; Eskey, 2005; Grabe, 2004); it is the reader who brings information, knowledge, emotion, experience, and culture – that is, schemata (plural) to the printed word. Nassaji (2002) challenges this theory and proposes that the background knowledge is not “pre-stored” but “rather emerges in the context of the task” Digital books have the potential to contribute with the process of constructing the meaning while reading because of their digital features.

**Teaching strategic reading:** A healthy dose of strategy-based instruction, including metacognitive strategies or self-planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's reading processes will lead to a better development of reading skills (Anderson 2004). Digital books allow the use of pre-reading, while reading, post-reading, and follow-up strategies for reading (Grabe, 2004).

**Extensive reading:** Extensive reading -Free voluntary reading (Krashen (1993) as calls it) - component in conjunction with other focused reading instruction is highly warranted. As the preliminary findings of the study conducted in spring 2014 show, students find more enjoyable reading digital books.

**Focus on vocabulary:** The interest in the role of vocabulary knowledge on the acquisition of reading skills has revived during the last years (Nation, 2003, 2005; Read, 2004), with findings that support a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and later reading ability. Because of their technical characteristics, digital books have the potential to facilitate vocabulary knowledge.

**The role of affect and culture:** Research on second language acquisition has shown that affective factors play major roles in ultimate success (Brown, 2007). The "love" of reading has propelled many a learner to successful acquisition of reading skills (Dole, Brown, & Thrathen, 1996), which is precisely one of the main advantages that digital books have.

Of course, the digital book is not a panacea or a silver bullet that will solve the main problem, which is students' disinterest in reading. And its entry into the classroom comes with some challenges, starting with a considerable distraction factor. The teacher's role remains fundamental, a point that we want to emphasize. Simply introducing digital books will not make a significant difference in students' reading skills, and it remains up to the teachers to use digital books in ways that help their students improve their reading skills.

Why would we want to prevent schools from enjoying the benefits of tablet computers? Why do so many teachers try to block them, or go so far as to suggest banning all technologies from schools? Providing access to digital reading and a learning climate that is not too estranged from their daily reality would surely motivate students to read more. This would be a winning scenario for the school, and more importantly, for the students.

Although we advocate a reflective use of the digital book for educational purposes, we stand with those who are uneasy when some teachers who introduce innovative practices—like getting their students to read e-books—are subjected to "results-oriented" investigations (see Merrieu, 2014), while at the same time the lack of interest in reading paper books is noted with complacency. The solution—and this is not always easy for teachers to apply—could be to find a way to bridge the gap between the paper book, which is still within the reach of almost all students and their parents, and the digital book. At the end of the day, the lesson to take away is that students should be inspired to read. Only in this way can schools fulfill their mission, which is to prepare young people for full participation in a technology-driven knowledge society. Overall, a child who loves to read will grow up to be an adult who can make a thoughtful contribution to our world.

## 10 recommended digital books that will captivate elementary school students (English):

1. The Day the Crayons Quit by Drew Daywalt, Oliver Jeffers:  
<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/book/the-day-the-crayons-quit/id578772370?mt=11>
2. Pete the Cat: I love my white shoes by Eric Litwin:  
<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/book/pete-cat-i-love-my-white-shoes/id404284954?mt=11>
3. Lunch Lady and the Cyborg Substitute Lunch Lady #1 by Jarrett J. Krosoczka:  
<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/book/lunch-lady-cyborg-substitute/id432951791?mt=11>
4. Llama Llama: time to share by Anna Dewdney:  
<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/book/llama-llama-time-to-share/id531451919?mt=11>
5. Arnie, the Doughnut by Laurie Keller:  
<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/book/arnie-the-doughnut/id531458357?mt=11>
6. The Nuts: Bedtime at the Nut House by Eric Litwin & Scott Magoon:  
<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/book/nuts-bedtime-at-nut-house/id887493747?mt=11>
7. Peanut Butter and Jellyfish by Jarrett J. Krosoczka:  
<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/book/peanut-butter-and-jellyfish/id725450420?mt=11>
8. Groovy Joe: Ice Cream & Dinosaurs (Groovy Joe #1) by Eric Litwin:  
<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/book/groovy-joe-ice-cream-dinosaurs/id1106155159?mt=11>
9. Good Night, Monkey Boy by Jarrett J. Krosoczka:  
<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/book/good-night-monkey-boy/id579949504?mt=11>
10. A New Class (Star Wars: Jedi Academy #4) Book 4, Star Wars: Jedi Academy by Jarrett J. Krosoczka:  
<https://itunes.apple.com/ca/book/new-class-star-wars-jedi-academy/id1067480699?mt=11>

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