

Learning Technologies Research Young Learners

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Abstract: In this article, looked at some of the broader concepts surrounding the role of educational technology in education and seen that it is not a simple matter. We have looked at key issues such as supporting students with special educational needs and e-safety – electronic or online safety. We have critically examined the successes and failures highlighted in the research and what this could mean for efforts to introduce technology in primary schools around the world.

Keywords: Technology, EFL learner, foreign language, online, computer programs, young children, developing.

Introduction: We reviewed some of the wider concepts related to the role of learning technologies in education, and saw that this is not a straightforward matter. It is often an arena for highly charged debates that mix politics, economic interests, and beliefs about teaching and learning. In the first part of this chapter, we continue to examine wider concepts relevant to the role of technology in primary education. We consider key issues such as support for learners with special educational needs and e-safety-electronic or online safety, in each case referring to relevant research. We also examine the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) initiative, which is frequently aimed at primary school students and has been implemented in several countries. We take a critical look at the successes and failures of this initiative as reflected in the research, and consider what this might mean for the drive towards technology adoption in primary schools around the world.

In the second half of this chapter, we look more specifically at research studies examining the extent to which learning technologies can support second and foreign language learning in primary school classrooms.

Activity 1

- Drawing on your experience and that of others, answer these questions.
- Are issues such as children spending too much time in front of screens relevant to teachers?
- Can technology support language learners with special educational needs?

- Can technology increase students' motivation and engagement with learning materials?
- Can technology help students develop individual language skills, for example reading, writing, speaking, and listening?
- Can technologies designed for older users, such as social networking sites and virtual worlds, have a place in the primary classroom?

Keep your answers in mind as you read this chapter.

Young Learners and Technology

Children of different ages are at very different stages of physical, conceptual, emotional and cognitive development. Even within the same age group they are at different stages. When we talk about using learning technologies with primary school children, we need to keep in mind the widely varying needs, abilities, and experiences between age groups and between individuals. When working with technology in the classroom, young children with developing cognitive and motor skills need to use simple computer programs that are suited to their stage of development. For example, a kindergarten-aged child can easily tap on a mobile device screen in response to an audio prompt, so a suitable activity for a kindergarten-aged EFL learner might involve listening to a vocabulary word and tapping on the corresponding picture from a selection on the screen. Older primary school children who are able to read and write can be expected to use programs that are more demanding both linguistically

and conceptually-for example, a story-telling app that requires them to interact with a text not only by tapping on the screen but also by responding verbally to prompts written in the story. Clearly, choosing computer programs or mobile apps that match the stage of development of a child is important. However, there are also wider social issues at play in the use of technology with primary school students, and we discuss some of these below.

Screen Time

Some of the fears about technology in wider society that we identified at the beginning take on a particular sense of urgency when considering children. Concerns about children spending too much time on digital devices-screen time'-and becoming overdependent on these devices are very real for many teachers and parents. In developed countries such as the USA, where access to cell phones, tablets, and laptops is fairly ubiquitous, even very young children can spend several hours a day looking at electronic screens. However, because parents are usually in control of the content on digital devices, younger children are frequently viewing what their parents consider to be educational content. As children get older, though, the amount of educational content they view decreases. A US-based study by the Joan Ganz Cooney Center, a non-profit research institute, interviewed 1,577 parents online and found that two- to four-year-olds spent just over two hours a day on screen time-including watching television-with one hour and 16 minutes of this spent on educational content (Rideout, 2014). The ratio of educational content was different for older children: the study found that eight- to ten-year-olds spent more than two and a half hours a day on screen time but that only 42 minutes of this was considered educational (Rich, 2014). Nevertheless, as psychologist Aric Sigman points out:

irrespective of the content or educational value of what is being viewed, the sheer amount of average daily screen time during discretionary hours after school is increasingly being considered an independent risk factor for disease, and is recognized as such by other governments and medical bodies.

In some Asia-Pacific countries-for example, Singapore, China, and South Korea-concerns over children's dependency on digital devices has led to the establishment of internet addiction treatment centers. The extent to which 'internet addiction' is a medical disorder is contentious, but there is no doubt that pediatricians, such as those of the American Academy of Pediatrics, and advocacy groups, such as the Alliance for Childhood, urge caution over exposing very young

children to an excessive use of digital media. Research has shown that screen time has no real benefits for children under two years old; for children over three, some well-designed educational content can contribute to learning, especially when an adult is actively involved in mediating that content. However, some digital content can have very negative effects on children. For example, media violence, such as that found in some video games, has been linked to aggression, desensitization to violence, and a lack of empathy, as well as to poor school performance (Linn, 2012). A report by the Alliance for Childhood summarizes this research and adds that:

extensive screen time is linked to a host of problems for children including childhood obesity, sleep disturbance, and learning, attention, and social problems. And time with screens takes away from other activities known to be more beneficial to their growth and development.

Despite concerns over screen time and its effect on early childhood, parents tend to feel that their own children are not at risk or that these risks apply to other people's children rather than their own (Plowman & McPake, 2013; Takeuchi, 2011). As Funk, Brouwer, Curtiss, and McBroom (2009) point out, media researchers seem to be more concerned about technology dominating children's lives than their parents are.

Nevertheless, faced with the research discussed above, the extent to which kindergarten and primary school children are exposed to use of devices in the classroom-for example, how many school hours are spent on devices and what educational content is included on these devices-is clearly an important issue. As any educator working with young children knows, exploring and learning via touch, sound, smell, and taste is vitally important for children's development, so replacing kinesthetic and experiential learning activities with computer software is clearly not an advisable way forward for teaching young children.

E-safety

Another area of concern for parents and teachers of young children is that of e-safety-that is, how to keep children safe online. The most common risks to children online are perceived to be cyberbullying; accessing inappropriate materials, such as violent content; the invasion of privacy and oversharing of personal information; and communicating with strangers online, also referred to as 'stranger danger'. Media hype does nothing to quell these fears.

Children in many countries have increasing access to devices and the internet, so attention in education has shifted to how to empower children to deal with online

risks and to ensure that their uses of technology take place in safe environments as far as possible. Along with a focus on ICT skills, computer skills and/or digital literacies in the curriculum, many nationwide educational policies require primary-and secondary-schools to have a safety policies and strategies in place. For example, since 2009, Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, the regulatory body in the UK that inspects school), has required schools to demonstrate robust e-safety practices, including training in safe and responsible online behavior for students, and training for teachers in how best to support this (Shipton, 2011). Rather than banning access to the internet within schools or severely restricting access, there has been a gradual move towards the promotion of safe online practices, starting at primary level. This approach is seen as more realistic and, indeed, useful, in the words of Byron:

simply blocking children and young people's access to the internet in schools ... meant that they weren't able to access a range of sites that were beneficial for learning, and that they were less likely to develop the understanding of digital safety that they needed to be digitally safe outside of school.

Whether a country has national e-safety policy guidelines, or whether individual states, districts, or schools are encouraged to develop their own

e-safety policies, one thing is clear: children are using technology from ever younger ages, and schools increasingly feel the need to cater for this ensuring that children learn about safe online practices.

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