

# iPad Reading: An Innovative Approach to New Literacies

Hsin-chou Huang

National Taiwan Ocean University/2, Pei-ning Road, Keelung202, Taiwan

joehuang@ntou.edu.tw

## Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the use of iPads as a learning tool for college-level EFL students and to explore these language learners' perceptions of iPad reading. Drawn from an intermediate EFL reading class, three students with limited experiences of iPad reading participated in this study. Data from weekly journals and interviews showed that the iPads' palm size, light weight, and accessibility to the Internet through wireless connections not only promoted mobile learning outside the classroom but also achieved learning goals inside the classroom. The various iPad applications enabled students to learn English through games and easy access to helpful resources and thereby increased their motivation to learn. Students also improved their communication skills by using iPads to create videos. iPads have provided useful opportunities for new literacy instruction.

## 1 Introduction

New technologies provide new ways to read, and how readers interact with electronic texts—through such new devices as iPads, Tablet PCs, Amazon Kindle, and Sony's Reader Digital Book—is worthy of further exploration (Larson, 2010). The emergence of these mobile devices intensifies the need to integrate digital technologies and equip learners with new literacy skills that are different from traditional printed reading and writing skills (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshire, and Leu, 2008). Among these new devices, iPads—equipped with LCDs, Internet surfing functions, e-books, and application (app) downloading capabilities—are the most popular medium of screen-based reading (Connell, Bayliss, and Famer, 2012) and can facilitate new literacy practices (Coiro, et al., 2008). Godwin-Jones (2010) pointed out that

iPads have contributed to the rise of e-books because they are portable, have off-line reading functions, and provide a huge storage capacity within a small device. Apple applications, such as games and incorporating audio functions into e-books, have also created learning opportunities (Godwin-Jones, 2011). The personal profiles archived in iPads, including the history of browsing pages and look-up behaviors in online dictionaries, can create a personal learning history. Moreover, the iPad's built-in camera enables users to capture pictures or videos to use in creating responses to readings (Hutchison, Beschoner, and Schmade-Crawford, 2012). The convenience of such mobile devices as iPads has the potential to encourage learner autonomy and combine formal and informal learning (Godwin-Jones, 2011).

Studies of iPad reading mostly focus on how iPads support L1 readers in primary literacy programs (Ellis, 2011); relatively few examine how iPads can assist L2 learners' language learning in tertiary education (Sekiguchi, 2011). One exception is Sekiguchi (2011), who experimented with the use of iPads as a learning resource outside the classroom with 20 EFL undergraduate students in Japan. The results showed that students improved their self-regulated learning by using iPads to tweet about their learning experiences.

The general trend has been to use iPads to replace textbooks or to provide supplementary reading material outside classrooms. Few studies have examined the use of iPads as a major learning instrument or as part of the curriculum to facilitate learning (Hutchison, et al., 2012). Hutchison et al. (2012) reported on the exploratory use of iPads among fourth graders for literacy instruction. Students read a story and used graphic organizer apps to create a visual diagram to describe it, which led to the creative presentation of ideas. Students also drew illustrations using the Doodle Buddy app to show their understanding, which provided opportunities to reread materials and thereby promoted better reading comprehension. These

activities, which successfully met multi-literacy goals and helped learners convey meaning digitally, inspired this researcher to design iPad reading activities to promote literacy instruction. Because the integration of iPads into language education is relatively new and still underexplored, this iPad project aimed to investigate the use of iPads as a learning tool in a college EFL reading class and to explore these language learners' perceptions of iPad reading. The researcher posed two questions:

1. How can iPads be integrated into EFL reading instruction?
2. What characterized students' iPad learning experiences?

## 2. Methodology

Three Taiwanese EFL learners with intermediate English proficiency and limited experiences with iPad reading participated in this study. Prior to this project, they had learned English for at least 6 years; they volunteered to participate in this after-class iPad reading activity within the regular freshman English curriculum. During this semester-long project, the researcher first investigated students' impressions of iPads through a background questionnaire that elicited their preliminary views on the usefulness and usability of iPads. After the students were familiar with this new medium, the researcher investigated students' actual use of iPads as a learning tool by inviting them to surf and read online materials, to experiment with language learning app resources, and finally to create a video that integrated the information they had collected during the semester. In each two-hour iPad session, students completed a reflective journal on how they used iPads to locate information, integrate resources, and make videos. Students also wrote about the problems they encountered and what they most enjoyed about iPad reading. At the end of the semester, the students attended a semi-structured interview that elicited comments about iPads' specific features, the advantages and disadvantages of using iPads to read, how iPad reading could enhance the acquisition of language skills, and overall suggestions for this project. This case study adopted a qualitative approach in which qualitative data from reflection journals and interviews were transcribed, coded, and sorted into categorized segments (Guba and Lincoln,

1981). The qualitative data gathered from this in-depth investigation of three participants' iPad usage suggested effective ways to integrate mobile technology into language instruction.

## 3. Results and Discussion

A description of the sequence of iPad literacy activities by each participant is followed by an analysis of the themes that emerged from the three participants' feedback and reflections on their iPad reading experiences. Pseudonyms are used for the student's names.

### 3.1 Andy: An enthusiastic iPad reader

The first stage of this iPad project was e-book reading. Andy selected several favorite books to read from iBooks. He read stories from *Aesop's Fables*, including *The Bat and the Weasels*, *The Ass and the Grasshopper*, *The Hare and the Tortoise*, and *The Boy Hunting Locusts*. To understand the story quickly, Andy also downloaded several English-Chinese and English-English dictionaries and used them to find the meanings of idioms and new vocabulary. He highlighted and color-coded these items and the sentences worthy of re-reading or for taking notes. During the process of reading, he searched online and watched videos of *The Fisherman Piping* and *Hercules and the Wagoner* on Youtube, which provided the context of these stories. He also searched Google for illustrations of *The Hare and the Tortoise* as a way to preview its storyline.

In his reflection journal, Andy wrote that he enjoyed reading and being able to check unfamiliar words easily with the help of dictionary apps or online dictionaries and noted that paper-based reading does not provide such ready accessibility to these resources. In his interview, he also praised the convenience of being able to access more information and background knowledge about these stories through the iPad's wireless connection.

During the second stage of this project, Andy used the iPad to explore apps for English word learning games. He accessed *Word Balls*, which asks learners to assemble letters into the correct spelling of words. When learners get the correct answer, they score and are allowed to move to the next game. In the interview, Andy said he enjoyed this game because getting a high score in a short time challenged his familiarity

with the words and with English spelling rules.

The final stage was to make a video using the iPad to integrate the information gathered online and then to record their own voices and present their understanding of a given topic in a video format. It took Andy 11 days, averaging an hour each day, to use an iPad to complete this video project. His video focused on three tourist spots: London, the host city of the 2012 Olympics; Taiwan, his home country; and China, which he was going to visit the following summer. He began by downloading an app that displayed the scenery of famous tour spots. Then he found an ebook, *Footprints of Travel: Journeying in Many Lands*, by Maturin Murray Ballou, which presented a lot of travel information about famous scenic spots. When Andy clicked on the picture of a scenic spot, he was led to more detailed information. In his interview, Andy described how accessing these multi-links helped him learn to quickly scan for major information, grasp the main ideas, and increase the efficiency of his learning process. By using the Google search engine to access online information about London, he found useful information about Heathrow airport, the history of England, and England's food culture. The many hyperlinks allowed Andy to develop a well-rounded understanding of London. To get information about tour spots in China and Taiwan, Andy discovered the webpages of the *Lonely Planet* ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)), and Wikitravel also offered useful travel information. He digested a huge amount of information by reading the table of contents on the left side to gain an overview of the text and to decide whether he would read entire texts or jump to the parts that interested him. The next step was to organize the information he found. He used the Idea Sketch app to outline his ideas and then wrote a draft for his narration of the video. The final stage involved using Blurb, a video-making app, to integrate the pictures, videos, and his voiceover.

In the interview, Andy stated that this video project enabled him to read extensively to gather information, to organize details, and to make decisions on what pictures and images to include in his video to best illustrate his ideas. This involved creativity and critically evaluating the information he read. He felt that the project involved a lot of effort, but he had a sense of achievement when he completed it. He appreciated the portability of the iPad. The only inconvenience was that the dorm he lived in did

not have a stable wireless connection. He also suggested that the workload might have been lighter if he had been able to work with a partner. Overall, he felt that this iPad project provided extensive reading benefits through videos, texts, and hyperlinks and promoted his independent learning, which was a new experience for him compared with his experience in traditional language classes.

### 3.2 Sharon: A meticulous iPad user

Sharon carried out e-book reading for seven sessions, each of which lasted for 50 minutes. She read such fairy tales as *The Golden Bird*, *Hans in Luck*, and *Jorinda and Jorindel*. She summarized these e-book stories in English. For *The Golden Bird*, she wrote, "There were 3 brothers looking for a golden bird, but only the youngest one found it." For *Hans in Luck*, she wrote, "Hans left his lord, who gave him a stump of silver. During his journey, Hans kept exchanging what he had to get something else. However, all the things that he got did not work as he wished." For *Jorinda and Jorindel*, Sharon wrote, "Two lovers wandered into a forest. The girl was captured and turned into a bird locked in a cage, and the boy was forced to do some boring chores. One day he dreamed about a purple flower with a costly pearl inside which could rescue his girlfriend from the cage. Then he found it indeed when he woke up. He walked into the castle with the pearl, and his girlfriend was released, and so were the other birds which all turned back to humans."

In her e-book reading reflection, she mentioned that initially she was not quite sure how to use all the functions on the iPad, but she picked them up quickly after 2 days of practice and started to make a word list for memorizing vocabulary. To check unfamiliar words, she used online English-English and English-Chinese dictionaries and Google translator. The ease and convenience of checking unfamiliar words online enabled Sharon to finish reading her first four-page fairytale on the second day of the project, which gave her a sense of accomplishment and increased her confidence about reading English materials.

Sharon's e-book reading summaries got longer, and her writing skills matured as she read more stories on the iPad. In her comments on iPad's grammar and dictionary tools, she felt that the availability of checking the meaning of

unfamiliar words immediately enabled her to increase her English reading speed and facilitated her reading comprehension. As she gradually adapted to iPad reading and its functions, she was willing to spend more time on iPad reading, and she improved her reading speed. She was full of hope that she could improve her English reading, and her motivation to read English materials increased day by day during the e-book reading project period. She wrote, “I feel happy when reading e-books on the iPad because I can read 9 pages in 100 minutes... I never knew there are so many details in the story of *The Golden Bird*. That’s terrific! I have a sense of achievement.” On the final day of the project, Sharon actually critiqued the story she had read. She wrote, “At the end, the plot of *Jorinda and Jorindel* was not described in detail. How his girlfriend was released was still not mentioned in detail. In contrast, how they entered the forest and met the nightingale has more detailed description. I still think it is an interesting story.” It appears that Sharon had entered the world of English reading and that this reading experience had fostered critical thinking in making judgments about how the story was told.

As for using learning resources during the second stage of the project, Sharon tried an app called Free Grammar. This app provides brief explanations of such grammar issues as verb tenses, causative verbs, and conjunctions, and conditionals. She chose a tutorial on prepositions listed in the left column in the app’s screenshot, and then took a grammar test. It was an interactive game-like tutorial.

For her video production, Sharon spent 4 hours each day for 5 days to complete her video on the iPad. She chose to introduce the *Hunger Games* movie because she had read the novel before and felt it was a sensational topic. She began by using the Yahoo search engine to explore information related to this movie, a process that she considered the most difficult part of the project. She looked at the overview of the plot and the characters on Wikipedia and then watched the movie’s trailer on Youtube to understand more about the story. On the second day, she started to collect pictures for each character because she planned to describe them in her digital storytelling. She placed the characters’ pictures and brief character descriptions on PowerPoint (PPT).

On the following day, she began writing her storytelling script. She said she spent lots of

time brainstorming how to organize it. To include more information about the movie, she read many online articles, such as a movie review from IMDB, (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1392170/>), articles from Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Hunger\\_Games](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hunger_Games)), and the movie’s official website (<http://www.thehungergames.co.uk/>). Her final product was a 451-word script that she typed and saved either on a PC or the iPad. On the fourth day, she used the Blurb app to combine all of the data she had collected, including the story’s plot from Wikipedia, the online trailer, and the recording of her own narration.

In her reflection sheet, she mentioned some difficulties she encountered during the video-making process. The first problem was insufficient access to Wi-Fi in her dorm. She needed to complete her project in the library. In addition, she needed a quiet place to record her narration, which was inconvenient because she was concerned about possible interruptions in the recording. The third problem was the capacity of the video-making app, Blurb. This software was easy to use, but because it was free, users could not upload more than 8 pictures at a time. Sharon separated the entire video into 4 segments, uploaded them separately, and then combined them at the end. It took the subject quite a long time to complete this procedure.

Overall, Sharon recognized the advantages of using iPads for completing this reading and video project because iPads are very light and can be carried anywhere. She appreciated the apps for playing games, which increased her motivation to use the iPad. Despite the limitations of the Blurb software, Sharon felt the video project enabled her to read more fluently during the process of searching information online to enrich her video content, improved her writing and reading skills as she sought more background information for her script, and enhanced her aesthetic sense as she combined her images and narration to report on this movie in a coherent and organized way.

### 3.3 Jo: An ambivalent iPad user

Jo spent six iPad sessions reading a classic novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, from iBook. She read 65 minutes on average during each of the six sections. Because it is a classic novel with more than 1000 pages and lots of difficult

vocabulary and grammar, she did not finish reading it by the final day of the project. During her reading process, she annotated the book with the words she did not understand. She reflected in your journal that the words she looked up mostly occurred in literature--such as scrupulous, vexing, and caprice—and not as often in everyday language. She consulted Youtube to find videos to assist her comprehension. In her reflection journal, she indicated her frustration with trying to read a novel that was far beyond her current proficiency level and with the need to constantly look up new words in the iPad's English-English dictionary to help her comprehension. Her Youtube searches did support her reading and helped her gain an overview of the story.

As for learning game apps, Jo loves music, so she tried to find several songs from *Lingua Talk English Lite* from iTunes to improve her listening ability. This site turns the captions on and off to help train listening comprehension. In her reflection journal, Jo indicated that she felt she improved her listening ability by constantly turning off the captions and trying to guess the lyrics.

Her final video was about travel. As a keen traveler, Jo decided to introduce special scenic spots. To enrich her content, she read traveling articles on the *BBC News* website, chose those that interested her, and summarized the important parts of the articles she read. She introduced the catacombs in Paris, The Land of Nod's Toy Shop in New York, and Micronesia's ghost ship. She used pictures from Google and used Blurb to effectively integrate them with her narration. In her reflection, she indicated that her English language reading improved when using iPads to create her work because she read articles written in English once a week. She did feel, however, that the on-screen glare hurt her eyes. Generally, she quite enjoyed the "touching" function of iPad when creating her video, but this convenient function also created a major problem when the excellent quality of the touch screen accidentally deleted her first video and she had to redo her project. It seems that technology provides both convenience and some unpredictable pitfalls.

### **3.4 Emerging themes from iPad learning activities**

Three themes emerged from these iPad e-book

reading, language game apps, and video-making activities.

#### *3.4.1 iPads with new learning tools bring fresh and unprecedented learning experiences and motivate students to learn.*

These students regarded learning with iPads as new and fresh experiences that piqued their curiosity and desire to learn. With the flicks of their fingers, they entered a world of knowledge without boundaries. They could easily find definitions for unknown words and access ebooks from the iBook library. The learning software apps gave them tutorials that never tired of the teaching process. The easy image capturing of iPads enabled them to store their favorite images either by searching online or by taking their own pictures for later retrieval. They could also record their voices, assemble the images, and streamline the images and their narration into an interactive video. These new learning opportunities cannot be found in a traditional language classroom.

#### *3.4.2 iPads provided extensive reading opportunities without the limitations of time and space.*

As suggested by previous studies (Connell et al., 2012; Ellis, 2011), iPads with wireless connections can promote learning at any time and at any place. Reading e-books with iPads can also give students extensive reading opportunities, as evidenced by Sekiguchi (2011) and Larson (2010). From a wide selection of iBooks, students can read more easily using such multiple tools as dictionaries and highlighting functions. Students can also find additional information online. Because iPads are free of space and time boundaries, students are able to cultivate their reading habits and read whatever books interest them and whenever they want to read them. Reading becomes pleasurable rather than stressful.

#### *3.4.3 Producing videos with iPads helped students construct their own knowledge.*

This iPad video project provided useful opportunities for these students to construct their own knowledge. The video was a synthesized product that intertwined students' enthusiasm for the topics, their understanding of the online articles they read, their writing skills as they composed their scripts, and their critical judgments of the information they needed to combine their materials and create a coherent project. Activities like these go beyond traditional teacher-centered classrooms.

Students learn to express their ideas with digital artifacts. The iPad supports learning aligned with instructional goals when teachers select appropriate activities and assessment strategies (Hutchison, et al. 2012).

#### 4. Conclusion

This exploratory study provided empirical evidence of how iPads can be integrated into language instruction, with practical suggestions for designing instructional activities that meet curricular goals. Three case studies cannot represent the entire EFL population, but the hands-on learning experiences with these iPads, together with students' feedback, may provide clues for how EFL teachers can design similar activities that engage learners. iPads' flexibility of access and abundant applications for mobile learning constitute a catalyst for learning. With more advances in iPad applications, it will be exciting to witness more learners adapting to the use of iPads and interacting with texts in more creative ways.

#### Acknowledgments

This study was supported by the National Science Council, Taiwan, ROC, Project No. NSC 100-2410-H-019-012 and 101-2410-H-019-015.

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