Using iPads to help teens design their own activities

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Abstract. This paper reports on action research aimed at helping teenage English language learners become more aware of ways they might use technology to support their learning. Over nine-months we used iPads to support a wide variety of teacher-designed learning activities and then used design thinking to help students co-design their own activities. Students' design ideas were iteratively refined in collaboration with the teacher over several weeks. Finally, groups tried out each other's activities. Evidence suggests students did reflect on their English learning practices and ways technology could support these. However, there is no indication that students adopted new practices outside class. Nevertheless, students did produce useful designs for classroom activities. This paper describes the activities we developed and indicates how the co-design process will be modified in future iterations in ways that might better promote uptake of technology-enhanced learning practices outside class.

Keywords: learner-centred approaches, learning design, MALL, iPads.

1. Introduction

iPads can alter the dynamics of classrooms: enabling routine engagement in a wider range of learning activities; encouraging exploration of alternative forms of homework, assessment and feedback; and increasing opportunities for collaboration and creative expression (Burden, Hopkins, Male, Martin, & Trala, 2012). However, while students often feel iPads enhance the learning experience, using iPads does not necessarily lead to better learning outcomes (Nguyen, Barton, & Nguyen, 2014). Indeed, one similar study for mobile devices suggests students felt having iPhones had been detrimental to their educational goals (Tossell, Kortum, Shepard, Rahmati, & Zhong, 2014). Nevertheless, there is widespread belief that iPads do

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have potential, particularly when teachers and learners are given time and support to develop effective practices (Kaganer, Giordano, Brion, & Tortoriello, 2013). This paper is about developing such practices.

A key challenge in our teaching centre, particularly with teenagers, is to engage and sustain student interest. We also aim to help learners become more self-regulated. Many of our students find using new technology motivating. Yet, despite being digital natives, they rarely use technology to effectively support their own learning. We recently acquired a class set of iPads. As well as enabling a wider variety of classroom activities, iPads offer opportunities to help students better understand how they might use their own devices to support their learning. One way to help students become more reflective about how they learn is to involve them in designing learning activities. The objectives of this action research were:

- To develop engaging and effective activities through co-designing with students.
- To prompt learners to reflect on their learning practices and how they use technology.

2. Method

2.1. Educational settings

A class of thirteen teenage Spanish and Basque speaking English language learners (2 boys, 11 girls, aged 13 to 14) participated in the research. All had mobile phones, mainly low-end Androids. All had access to computers and/or tablets and the Internet at home. At the beginning of the course none had iPads.

As Cuban (cited in Hu, 2011) notes: "iPads are marvellous tools to engage kids, but then the novelty wears off and you get into hard-core issues of teaching and learning" (para 9). To counteract this effect, we followed our centre's normal B2 CEFR level course but integrated activities using iPads throughout. The class ran for seventy-five minutes twice a week after school over nine-months. On average, we used iPads in approximately one session per week. We had access to a class set of fifteen, 4th generation iPads and intermittent Internet access. Most often pairs or groups of three students shared one or two iPads. Occasionally, students worked individually. Students did not take the iPads home.

Following Chen (2013), we first aimed to give students some experience in ways they might use iPads to support learning. To this end we used iPads and a range of

apps in various teacher-designed activities for over five months before initiating the co-design process. For example:

- Reading and listening to an interactive story, noticing, noting down, and researching new words and phrases, and then recording their own versions.
- Creating and recording animated dialogues.
- Making a digital class magazine.
- Collaborative writing and dictation using voice recognition.
- Online research for projects.
- Video and audio-recording paper slide presentations, role-plays, and assessed tasks.
- Preparing presentations.

After activities, students discussed whether they enjoyed the activities, whether activities were useful, and how they might be improved.

2.2. Design phase

For the design phase, we adapted design thinking, "a structured approach to generating and developing ideas" (IDEO, 2012, p. 14). We set the challenge: *Design a learning activity that you will enjoy*. Groups of three or four students shared their initial ideas in class. Then, for written homework, students used the class blog to review what we had done throughout the course and identify two activities they had enjoyed and two they had found particularly useful. They shared their thoughts in class. Some weeks later, following warm-up exercises (see IDEO, 2012, pp. 50-53), small groups brainstormed ideas for their own learning activities and presented these to the rest of the class. Then, for homework, students answered questions derived from the Ecology of Resources Design Framework (Luckin, 2010):

- What is your activity going to help people learn? Why?
- Why will people want to do your activity?
- What materials and technology will people use?
- Who will people work with? Who will help them?
- Where and when will people do your activity?
- How will your activity work? What will the sequence of events be?

They then wrote narrative descriptions of their activity ideas. In a subsequent session, groups discussed these ideas and decided which activity they would like to

try. From their ideas, we then developed activities based on their ideas. In the final session, each group tried and discussed all activities.

3. Designs and discussion

At first, students had ideas that were impractical to implement (e.g. a world-wide poetry writing competition using social-media). A universal theme was that activities should be 'fun' or 'not boring'. More than half the students suggested using songs. Gradually, ideas evolved into four activities.

3.1. Learners' learning designs

- Play Ludo. Take turns answering a question correctly from a Quizlet[2] keyword transformation set, displayed on an iPad. If you can't and someone else can, it's his or her turn.

- Pairs play Clash of Clans[3] in English for a set time. On another iPad look up and note down new vocabulary or expressions. After playing for a set time present what you have learnt.

- Use Lyrics Training[4] to get the lyrics to a song you like. Note words or phrases you don't know and look them up. Sketch ideas for a 'lyrics video[5]' or write an alternative verse.

- Find three or four 'Use of English' questions your group can't answer. Find out the answers. Create an amusing dialogue using vocabulary or structures from those questions. Make a photo-story of your dialogue. Present your photo-story.

3.2. Learners' reflections on the activities

Students noted that fifteen minutes was not long enough to complete any of the activities satisfactorily. However, they enjoyed all the activities and felt they were potentially useful. The song was the most popular activity. Students were very enthusiastic to produce a lyrics video, though there was only time to exchange

2. http://quizlet.com/
3. http://www.supercell.net/games/view/clash-of-clans
4. http://lyricstraining.com/
5. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyric_video#Lyric_videos

ideas for this. Students noted that, apart from the initial tutorial, exposure to new language in Clash of Clans was slow. Making a photo-story was felt to be creative and even students who did not initially want to appear in photos were happy with the comic like images produced by ComicBook Camera[6].

3.3. Teacher's reflections on the activities

All activities were satisfactory in that students appeared happily engaged in using English, practising language at an appropriate level, and sometimes starting to acquire new language. Both game activities felt like somewhat inefficient uses of class time but, as discussed later, they inspired other ideas that may be more productive. The song idea and the photo-story seemed particularly productive but would require much more time to enact and produce outputs students would be happy with. The photo-story idea was later used with another class in a two and a half hour session. These students worked enthusiastically in English throughout the session to produce amusing photo-stories with text and spoken dialogues, which they were proud of, using language they felt was new to them.

4. Conclusion

In summary, students produced ideas for promising activities. One of these has been used very effectively with another class. There was no apparent change in enthusiasm for using iPads over the nine months; in the end of year feedback, most students mentioned using iPads positively (e.g. "I love the iPads", "I love use of Internet and the iPads"). In designing activities, students' main concern was that they should be fun. However, students also showed awareness of the need for their activities to stretch their language. In class, students began to use iPads naturally to support their learning, sometimes suggesting appropriate uses that had not occurred to the teacher. Students also showed evidence of thinking about how they learnt (e.g. "Before, I thought the best way to improve […] was to just do my homework and study. But [now] I know more ways to improve and learn […]"). However, very few students installed apps used in class on their own devices (despite most apps being available for free for both iOS and Android) or reported using these out of class. Getting students of this age to be more pro-active about their English learning outside of class is a challenge. As one student noted, "The first thing is you have to want […]. If you want [to do something] then you can start doing things for it". In future iterations of the design thinking process, we intend to prompt learners to think specifically about the things they enjoy doing outside class

6. https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/comic-book-camera-free/id593817786?mt=8

and then consider how they could learn English through these. We will also try a homework idea inspired by the Clash of Clans activity; play one of your favourite games, make notes about it, and produce a presentation for class.

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