Edo Forsythe

In this column, we explore the issue of teachers and technology—not just as it relates to CALL solutions, but also to Internet, software, and hardware concerns that all teachers face. We invite readers to submit articles on their areas of interest. Please contact the editor before submitting.

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RazKids for mLearning in Japanese English Language Learning

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This review aims to provide insight into mLearning for EFL Extensive Reading and Extensive Listening using the Razkids interactive e-books from <http://LearningA-Z.com>. Senri International School had 350 students registered in 10 licenses for 20 EFL classes. EFL teachers were mentored on the use of the software by I.T. instructors, extending in-class eLearning into at-home mLearning. This article will cover issues discovered from the initial installation to the beginning of the second year of implementation. This large scale installation exposed numerous points of interest to anyone considering mLearning for EFL in Japan.

In distributed learning, the interaction of instructor, material, and learner must be squeezed through what can amount to a bottleneck in the form of a digital device. Effectively managing how different materials respond when filtered through different digital formats is the main challenge of distributed learning. The outcomes of the RazKids system of interactive e-books applied in Japan are discussed using Bozkurt and Bozkaya's (2015) Interactive e-Book Evaluation Criteria. The most recent distributed learning definition of mLearning no longer recognizes tablets or laptop PCs as mobile devices for mLearning, since very few people carry large devices everywhere. Effective solutions must work on devices of all sizes to truly be considered anytime, anywhere mLearning (Quinn, 2014). This was a major factor in the selection of RazKids for our mLearning program: Its mobile app is fully functional on many platforms.

Interactive e-Book Evaluation Criteria

There are four themes, 15 dimensions, and 37 criteria outlined by the Interactive e-Book Evaluation Criteria (Bozkurt & Bozkaya, 2015, pp. 72-73). Only pertinent criteria are included here; others are combined as applicable to this case study in an evaluation of RazKids.

Criteria Theme 1: Content

Content Presentation is clear, fluent, and effective as RazKids employs voice recordings of native English speakers reading at appropriate speeds and levels. Content is also prepared with a theoretical framework of focused and diffuse learning modes to support learning objectives. The Extensive Reading (ER) objectives of reading lots and reading for fun (Susser & Robb, 1990) most accurately fit the diffuse learning goals in the app's *Book Room* area; however, RazKids also provides focused learning in the *Reading Assignment* area (see Figure 1). This provides the teacher the opportunity to compel students to do chunked assignments—dividing lessons into small manageable units for mLearning (McGreal, D'Antoni, Mackintosh, & Green, 2013). This was found to be essential, as outlined below, in getting kids to read via distributed learning.

Figure 1. **Screen capture of student login.**

Assessment quizzes are minimal, non-threatening, and do not take away from the attractiveness of the content. However, the RazKids content is designed for native English speakers learning to read, not EFL students. The weakest students struggled with some of the questions. So this part of the content design was not so appropriate for the characteristics of the target audience. The integrity and coherence of the content are excellent: There is a clear hierarchy of content listed A-Z in the *Book Room* (Figure 2).

Due to the non-compulsory nature of our initial assignments, a gap grew between students who logged in at home regularly and those who did not. When the teacher added a new assignment the gap widened even further.
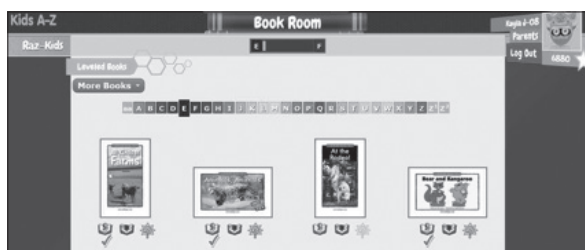

Figure 2. **Screen capture of the Book Room area showing levels.** This shows the levels of books available in RazKids A-Z with two new levels recently added, Z1 and Z2. The student is free to roam through the levels in the Book Room, consistent with diffuse learning.

Contrary to what Bozkurt & Bozkaya (2015) recommended, the content of RazKids may be somewhat limited since the number of books available is only about 500. When the theme of the class was animals, teachers had no trouble finding related books to create a reading assignment, but this was not the case with all themes. Teachers will need to thoroughly familiarize themselves with how RazKids's content aligns with their curriculum if they wish to integrate RazKids digital ER with classroom content.

Criteria Theme 2: Interface

Ease of use, customization, User Interface (UI) design, layout, and support are all elements of interface evaluation (Bozkurt & Bozkaya, 2015). It is in the teacher interface that there are customization and support issues. The RazKids Learning Management System (LMS) only allows for managing 36 students at a time (Figure 3).
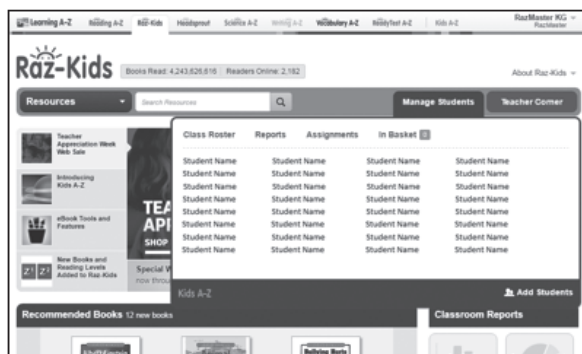

Figure 3. **Teacher interface.**

RazKids is intended for sale to individual teachers rather than to an entire school. To the company's credit, they have created a simple interface almost anyone can use. Enrollment and assignment creation is self-evident and takes little time to master. However, simplification means that advanced options are lost. A typical LMS allows hierarchical management to support teachers who are less familiar with online learning. Unfortunately, there is no overall administrator account to access all students. The administrator must log out of the master account and log into another to enroll, delete, or edit student information. This becomes problematic when changing from one year to the next, or if teachers change student information without telling the administrator. We soon found that it would be easier to create group names and leave the kids in those groups while in the program rather than move them year to year (Figure 4). It is understandable that a simpler interface will help many teachers/users, but having the option of a simple or advanced mode would have allowed us to modify user layout to better reflect the organization of our program.
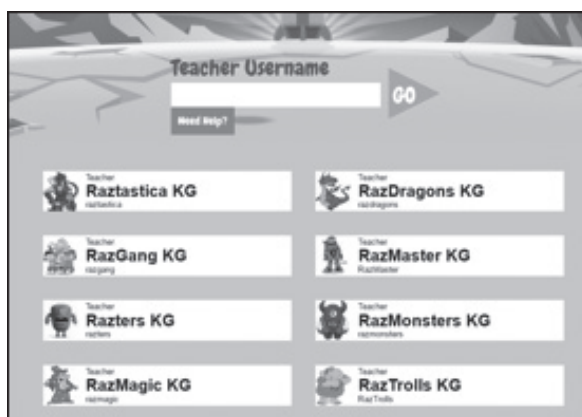

Figure 4. **Login Screen with eight groups.**

Criteria Theme 3: Interactivity

Bozkurt and Bozkaya (2015), stated that interactivity includes elements that provide higher interaction level to the environment, the user, data feedback, and social networking. RazKids is somewhat limited in this aspect, but it does provide suitable interactivity for basic distributed ER at this level. In fact, the existing features were underutilized by students. In our program, few parents joined to see the progress of their children—less than 10 overall. It is interesting to note that this was also the case in previous deployments of eLearning programs at the school.

RazKids offers interactivity that allows a student to record their voice and send it to the teacher, but this was not attempted by our teachers because it may have been difficult to find time to listen to numerous audio files. To establish a baseline for the level of student interest in the first months, no active promotion or homework reading assignments were given to students beyond the basic informative release letter and the exposure provided in eLearning classes. Only two or three of the 15 to 20 students in each class accessed RazKids on their own at home. This may seem low, but again, it was not unexpected considering past levels of interest in home-based eLearning among the students.

To gain a deeper understanding of the effect of teacher intervention, an initial case study was completed with one class. Step one was to create a reading assignment based on a theme parallel to readings done in class. Students were explicitly requested to access RazKids at home, and results were observed. Instead of the usual two or three students accessing RazKids, about six of the students logged in for varying lengths of time. The second step was to recognize and praise those students for doing the readings at home in front of their peers the following week to see what effect that would have on the rest of the students. Interestingly, only the students who had previously logged in at home, logged in again within one week of being praised. This suggests that not only must the application be a compelling activity, but that students need to be compelled to do the online exercises through some sort of required activity attached to the reading assignment. Without that, even a fun and attractive mLearning app will fail to fulfill its potential. After adding a specific reading assignment as a class-based activity, the number of students participating increased to nine students.

What we learned from implementing RazKids is that distributed learning is not unlike traditional learning: in the instructor-material-learner pathway, digital media can assist the instructor to communicate lesson content. However, for most students, the instructor is still the primary motivator to learning, not a digital app. With RazKids' distributed learning, parents need to participate as surrogate instructors to compel or motivate the child to utilize the application fully. In line with a common Japanese school practice, it is recommended that a homework log be used to encourage parents to participate. In our program, initial steps are being taken to incorporate a homework log for RazKids assignments for the future. The results are as of yet inconclusive.

Conclusion

RazKids does fit Quinn's (2014) definition of mobile learning, being truly capable of anytime and anywhere learning that would allow parents to take advantage of small chunks of time to support English reading. The Interactive e-Book Evaluation Criteria (Bozkurt & Bozkaya, 2015) elucidated well how the RazKids system fulfills critical aspects of effective instructional design. RazKids provides a quality academic experience, and the student interface is attractive, coherent, and there is a solid hierarchy of tasks with appropriate interactivity. The LMS is simple and effective for single classroom use. However, the LMS does not provide advanced features for the smooth deployment of a large number of classes with administrative oversight. The authors learned that the following questions must be considered when selecting an mLearning tool for a school environment: How many teachers will use it? Who will support the teachers? Will the school require advanced LMS capabilities?

Our experiences also showed that the assignments using an mLearning tool, no matter how compelling, must also be required by the teachers. It is not enough to be fun and engaging; without some way of enforcing compliance, busy students and parents are unlikely to take advantage of mLearning opportunities. The RazKids student interface is excellent with only minor confusion for very young users when sharing computers. With young EFL learners using RazKids, it may be best to do quizzes on mobile devices in the classroom initially before moving to extracurricular mLearning after students become confident with the system. One limitation that must be recognized is that this deployment was in a one-day-a-week program, so reading assignments and homework logs may work more effectively in encouraging regular use of the RazKids program.

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Editor's Note: As demonstrated above, educational technology can be appropriately used for teaching all ages. Consider how you can implement CALL methods in your classrooms as you return to school for the fall and make your colorful language lessons Wired!

[JALT PRAXIS] YOUNG LEARNERS

Mari Nakamura

The Young Learners column provides language teachers of children and teenagers with advice and guidance for making the most of their classes. Teachers with an interest in this field are also encouraged to submit articles and ideas to the editor at the address below. We also welcome questions about teaching, and will endeavour to answer them in this column.

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In this column, let me welcome Lesley Ito, an award-winning author and one of the most well-known teacher trainers based in Japan, as a contributor. She explains her reading programs at her English school, BIG BOW, that aim to foster her students' reading skills while developing their love of reading.

BIG BOW English Lab is an English school in Nagoya, mostly for children, that has a CLIL curriculum and a strong literacy program. The two goals of my school's literacy program are (1) for students to become strong readers who enjoy reading, and (2) for students to read books, not because it is required of them, but because they want to know how the story ends.

There are three kinds of students at my school: returnees, returnees who attended international school in a non-English speaking country or international pre-school graduates, and typical Japanese EFL students. Returnees usually have good reading skills, a love for reading stories, and are in the habit of reading for pleasure. These students only need to have high quality literature at the appropriate level introduced to them and assistance in selecting books they might enjoy.

On the other hand, returnees who attended international school in a non-English speaking country or international pre-school graduates usually have strong reading skills, but are often used to reading strictly for academic purposes. Many of them are reluctant readers and prefer non-fiction to fiction. In the past, teachers have always chosen their reading materials for them and they often do not see reading as an enjoyable activity.

Then, there are the more common EFL students who come to my school not knowing how to read. They need to be taught using phonics and sight word instruction. While these students may never develop comparable reading skills to their returnee peers, after a few years of effort they can learn enough to enjoy reading books of their own choosing without audio support.

Success with reading starts in the classroom. Ten minutes of every 90-minute class are devoted to phonics instruction for students who have not yet learned to read. Students take turns reading aloud from a graded reader or a novel as a class. Beginners can read basic graded readers after less than a year of phonics and sight word instruction. Reading aloud with guidance and feedback helps students build confidence, gives them a chance to practice their skills, and can be a way to introduce more advanced students to high quality children's literature. It can also lead to *narrow reading*. Narrow reading is when students read books in the same series or genre; once students have read one book in a series or genre as a class with support, it's easy for them to read more due to their familiarity with it. After finishing a book as a class, students are encouraged to check out another book in the same series or genre to read at home if they wish.