



Creating Motivating Homework for Young Learners Through Khan Academy Kids

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Developing motivating homework for young learners (YLS) that is suitable for both face-to-face and online/hybrid teaching contexts in the EFL continues to be challenging. In this paper, I will discuss using the self-study app for children, Khan Academy Kids (KAK), to create engaging homework assignments while fostering positive self-study habits. First, I will outline the role of homework in developing self-regulation skills and autonomy in YLS. Next, I will introduce the KAK app and its qualities as a potential solution. Then, I will propose possible ways to incorporate the app in the EFL classroom for both assigning homework and in-lesson use. Finally, the alternatives for face-to-face and online/hybrid teaching scenarios will also be covered.

EFLの教室において対面式とオンライン・ハイブリット授業の両方に適し、若い学習者のやる気を引き出す宿題を開発することは、難しい状況が続いている。本稿では自主的な学習の習慣をほぐし、魅力的な宿題を作成するための子供向け学習アプリ「カーンアカデミーキッズ」(KAK) の使用について説明する。まず、若い学習者の自己抑制と自律性を発達させる宿題の役割を大まかに述べる。次に、KAKの使用法と、アプリの使用によって可能になる解決策を紹介する。さらに、当該アプリを、宿題と教室での使用の両方に取り入れる方法を提案する。最後に、対面式とオンライン・ハイブリット授業の代替案を提供する。

Homework can be defined as “school-oriented work to be performed by students outside the classroom” (Goodall, 2021, p. 672), and is widely accepted to play a significant role in consolidating and extending learning (Smith et al., 2021). However, despite the apparent positive perceptions towards it, homework remains a cumbersome aspect of primary school life (Medwell & Wray, 2018; Smith et al., 2021). For families

and learners, homework means home-based work that must be inserted into the family routine and can often be disruptive. For teachers, it means extra work in terms of planning, checking and follow-up (Smith et al., 2021).

Overall, the actual benefits of homework for young learners (YLS) continue to cause much debate among researchers and practitioners (Fan et al., 2017; Goodall, 2021; Medwell & Wray, 2018). Some argue that the academic benefits are almost non-existent (e.g., Medwell & Wray, 2018; Murillo & Martinez-Garrido, 2014), while others maintain that although the benefits are mainly non-academic, they are nonetheless worthwhile (e.g., Fan et al., 2017; Goodall & Johnstone-Wilder, 2015). The non-academic benefits of homework so far reported include developing self-discipline and responsibility, fostering time organisation and attention, as well as gaining independence and problem-solving skills (Goodall, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Therefore, homework is often considered a powerful tool in steering YLS towards self-regulation and autonomy (Fan et al., 2017; Goodall, 2021).

The current shift towards online/hybrid teaching scenarios has also added new challenges to homework completion. Worldwide, teachers struggle with designing more engaging materials, getting the homework to students, and managing to check and provide helpful feedback within the new teaching contexts (Cheung, 2021; Moser et al., 2021). These issues are of particular interest in the EFL classroom, where homework is expected to compensate for the insufficient language exposure available within the lesson (Smith et al., 2021). In this paper, I will discuss the use of the self-study app for children, Khan Academy Kids (KAK), to create engaging homework assignments while fostering positive self-study habits in YLS.

Homework and Learner Autonomy

Despite being a contested issue, research regarding the non-academic benefits of homework continues to support its ability to foster healthy self-study habits and develop self-regulation skills (Fan et al., 2017; Goodall, 2021; Goodall & Johnstone-Wilder, 2015;



Smith et al., 2021). However, for homework to effectively develop autonomy in YLs, it must first foster intrinsic motivation (Goodall, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Fan et al. (2012) defined intrinsic motivation as “the willingness of individuals to engage in and complete academic tasks for their own sake” (p. 232). Similarly, Goodall (2021) noted that its development is “best supported through role construction and self-belief, rather than external rewards” (p. 678). Therefore, a balanced combination of engaging activities at an adequate difficulty level is fundamental in creating effective homework for YLs.

Parents’ involvement in homework completion also plays an essential role in learners’ autonomy development. Although it is widely accepted that parental support is crucial (Urauchi & Tanno, 2022), too much involvement can prove detrimental (Goodall, 2021). For example, by making parents accountable for homework completion (e.g., signing a card or sheet), teachers inadvertently prevent learners from taking responsibility for their own work. Similarly, setting up a monitoring culture in families has been repeatedly found to be far less effective than encouraging a supporting interaction between parents and children (Goodall, 2021; Patall et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2021). Therefore, for YLs to take full advantage of their homework, assignments must remain learner-centred while allowing supportive parental interaction.

It is also important to note that these issues can often be magnified when transitioning to online and hybrid teaching contexts. In addition, the particularities of these new teaching scenarios bring forth other challenges (Taghizadeh & Yourdshahi, 2020). For example, technical aspects such as how to get the homework to learners (e.g., emailing it to parents to be printed later or having students copy it by hand during the lesson) often add extra layers of complexity. Similarly, the new teaching context can sometimes limit teachers’ ability to check the homework and provide helpful feedback (e.g., parents need to email the completed homework back to teachers or upload the work to an online platform). Overall, finding viable options for effective homework suitable for online/hybrid and face-to-face teaching contexts is still a challenge.

The Khan Academy Kids Solution

Khan Academy Kids (KAK) is a free, self-study app for children aged two to eight, focusing on literacy and numeracy (Khan Academy, 2022). The app features a library of pre-made activities, which are organised into four main categories, namely *Letters*, *Reading*, *Math*, and *Logic*. There are also two supplementary sections, *Books* and *Videos*. These activities can be assigned as homework for self-study time or incorporated into a regular lesson. Figure 1 shows some screenshots of the app as an example.

Figure 1
Khan Academy Kids App Screenshots.



Khan Academy Kids and Homework

According to Fan et al. (2012), motivating homework refers to those homework assignments that foster intrinsic motivation in YLs. Children that are intrinsically motivated to complete their homework are more likely to engage in the learning taking place while completing a task (Goodall, 2021). Overall, researchers agree that setting an enjoyable environment through activities and materials that are meaningful and relevant to YLs, while developing positive self-beliefs, are crucial factors in developing intrinsic motivation (Fan et al., 2017; Goodall, 2021; Smith et al., 2021).



The KAK app's collection of assignments, with engaging animations and child-friendly topics and activities, could help make the self-study time at home a more attractive experience (Goodall, 2021). Similarly, current research in different teaching contexts on the gamification of homework has shown that gamified assignments can increase learners' task engagement (Goehle & Wagaman, 2016; Keller, 2022; Kulhanek et al., 2021). For example, Metwally et al. (2021) reported high levels of satisfaction and a deeper sense of achievement in YLs when completing gamified homework. These findings suggest that incorporating KAK's gamified assignments into YLs' EFL homework could make their self-study time more enjoyable, fostering intrinsic motivation.

Positive self-beliefs and a confident attitude towards learning are other essential factors in developing intrinsic motivation (Fan et al., 2012; Goodall, 2021). According to Goodall (2021), YLs' perceptions of their ability to succeed in learning are often shaped by parents' own beliefs. Goodall further noted that parents who are "involved in their children's learning out of a desire to be involved, rather than a sense of duty or obligation, are more likely to support autonomous attitudes in their children" (p. 679). Through KAK's interactive platform, parents can work along with children (e.g., reading a picture book together or playing one of the games) rather than merely monitoring homework completion, promoting non-adversarial parental involvement (Goodall, 2021; Patall et al., 2008; Urauchi & Tanno, 2022). Similarly, since parents are no longer required to send/upload homework, children are now encouraged to take responsibility for their own work, a necessary step towards positive self-regulated study and autonomy (Goodall, 2021).

In addition, completing the homework entirely on a mobile device allows children to complete their assignments anywhere, anytime. Such flexibility facilitates homework completion without interfering with the family routine (Goodall, 2021; Goodall & Johnstone-Wilder, 2015). This feature also means that there is no need for complicated logistics to get the homework to students in online/hybrid teaching. Also, because children are often quite comfortable with technology, and given the app's intuitive and child-friendly design, they are usually able to use it under minimum supervision, which provides a convenient platform for children to develop the digital competencies necessary for the 21st century (Kurt, 2021).

Another helpful feature of the app is the possibility of repeating the same activity as many times as needed. Once completed, children can play the same assignment to review complicated parts or just enjoy the game. Worldwide, research continues to support the benefits of task repetition in the development of meta-cognitive skills and overall English proficiency (Littlejohn, 2016; Pinter, 2017). The interactive, game-like design of the assignments makes it so that, although the content of the activity remains the same, the

items change. This feature allows for greater exposure to a broader range of vocabulary and more listening opportunities.

The KAK app also provides teachers with a *Student Progress Report*. This report shows teachers their students' progress through the assignments. This feature can be very convenient in online/hybrid teaching contexts, allowing teachers to check the homework almost instantly and provide feedback accordingly. However, it is important to note that the app is not originally intended for EFL teaching contexts, which means that teachers will need to carefully select the appropriate activities while scaffolding the linguistic demands.

Khan Academy Kids in the EFL Classroom

In this section, I will discuss possible ways of inserting this app into the Japanese EFL classroom. First, I will present a selection of elemental activities for literacy practice, the *Basic Package*. Then, I will discuss how to include more complex assignments in YLs' self-study time by introducing them first as in-lesson activities in both face-to-face and online scenarios. Finally, I will show some ideas for incorporating the *Drawing Tool*, a supplementary tool available in the *Create* section on the student's end of the app.

The Basic Package

Due to the size of the library, finding suitable materials for EFL YLs might become time consuming, especially when considering that some materials might not be appropriate for the EFL teaching context. Next, I will share the activities that best worked for my students while aligning with the curriculum at my school. These activities can all be found within the *Letters* section of the app.

The *Letters* section covers the foundations of literacy practice with activities focused on letter recognition, tracing and identifying phonics. Overall, the activities in this section are very intuitive and have the shortest oral instructions, reducing the linguistic demands on learners (Littlejohn, 2016; Pinter, 2017). The visual aids and game-like design of the activities compensate for the linguistic demands already present (Goodall, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). Therefore, children can complete the assignments independently at home, with minimum explanation during the lesson.

The main activities I use with the different age groups I teach are outlined in the following list. I usually assign these activities weekly to keep my students engaged and motivated. Figure 2 shows a screenshot example of each case.

Gonzalez Curiel: *Creating Motivating Homework for Young Learners Through Khan Academy Kids*

Kindergarten Classes, with a curriculum focus on ABC practice. In this case, I use the activities in the app's first two blocks of the *Letters* section. These activities focus on recognising the letters and tracing them over.

Primary school first and second graders, with a curriculum focus on phonics. Here, I assign those activities below the ABC practice blocks within the *Letters* section. These activities target the beginning and ending sounds of words.

Primary school third and fourth graders, with a curriculum focus on three-letter words and short-long vowels distinction. In this case, activities that target these elements can be found in the same *Letters* section at the bottom of the list.

Figure 2
KAK Basic Package Screenshot Examples for Different Grades.



These activities are used to cover the main aspects of the literacy focus area of the curriculum, while keeping learners engaged outside of classroom hours. They also maximise learners' exposure to authentic English listening input, which is crucial in the EFL teaching situation, where such opportunities are considerably limited (Pinter, 2017). These gamified assignments can make YLs homework experience more enjoyable, while fostering positive attitudes towards English learning. This further develops the necessary intrinsic motivation needed for future self-regulated study (Goodall, 2021; Smith et al., 2021).

Beyond the 'Basic Package'

The *Basic Package* activities cover the fundamental aspects of literacy practice required by the curriculum. That said, the *Letters* section constitutes but a small fragment of all the resources available in the app. The remaining sections of the app all feature activities with different difficulty levels in their linguistic demands. For example, some activities differ in pattern from those available in the *Letters* section and are unfamiliar to learners. Also, fast-paced English instructions now feature longer sentences. Finally, there are no options to add any form of subtitles or translations or reduce the speech's speed.

For these reasons, it is necessary to provide plenty of practice during class to help learners cope with the assignments' linguistic demands (Littlejohn, 2016; Pinter, 2017). Previous research on task repetition has shown that this practice can also help develop critical meta-cognitive skills to support self-regulated study time later (e.g., Lázaro-Ibarrola & Hidalgo, 2021; Pinter, 2015, 2017). During my lessons, I found that this kind of scaffolding allowed learners to become familiar with the assignments' specific patterns and requirements, even if they did not fully understand the English instructions.

In-Lesson Use Example (Face-to-Face): This – That Lesson

The primary purpose of including KAK activities during a face-to-face lesson is to provide students with the necessary practice opportunities they will need to try these assignments later on by themselves. It is important to note that I would not otherwise include these activities during a face-to-face lesson, because the curriculum I work with already offers many activities that work very well in this teaching scenario. Therefore, including KAK activities in the classroom as another regular lesson activity in a face-to-face lesson would be too time-consuming and not very practical.

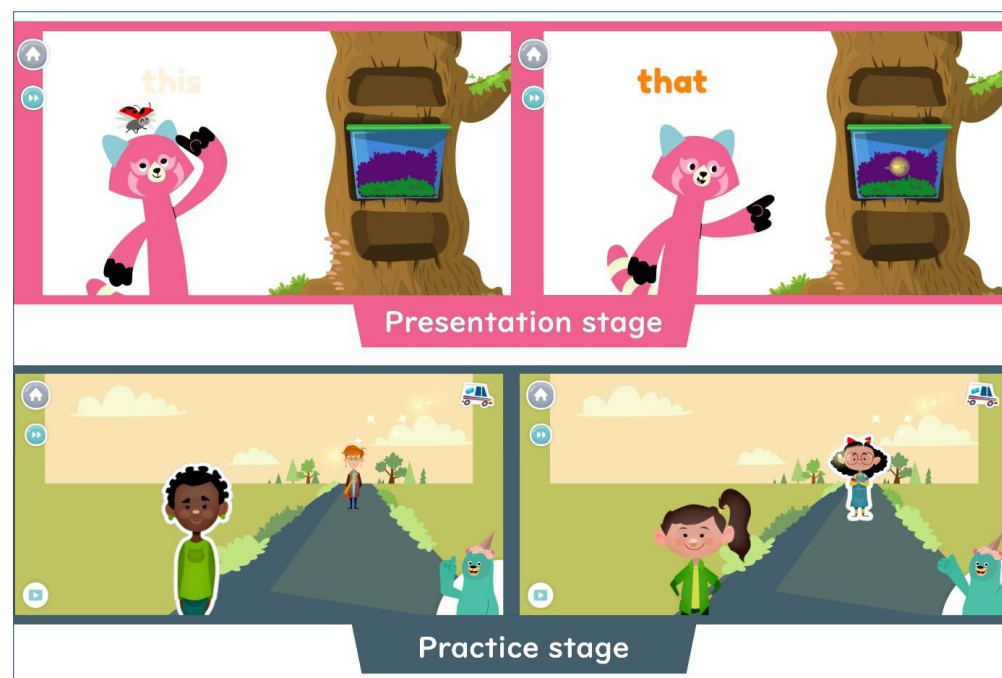
Figure 3 shows some screenshots of a KAK activity focused on the determiners *this* and *that*. Like all other KAK activities, it starts with a brief presentation video introducing the main content in less than a minute (see Figure 3, Presentation Stage). Because the



language used in the video would probably be above the students' level, it is important to present the content of the in-lesson activity beforehand. This would ensure that YLs understand the new ideas. However, because the videos are usually short and engaging, children enjoy watching them and interacting with the characters on the screen.

After watching the video, YLs move to the practice stage of the activity (see Figure 3, Practice Stage), where they interact with the screen and experiment with the concepts introduced earlier. The task involves tapping the correct character based on the listening prompt. For instance, YLs may be asked to “tap *this* woman” or “tap *that* girl”. Here, learners need to differentiate between the character that is closer to them (*this*) and the one that is further away from them (*that*).

Figure 3
KAK Face-to-Face In-Lesson Use Example. Presentation and Practice Stages of an Activity.



For small classes of no more than eight YLs, passing around a tablet for each child to have a chance to tap on the screen could be a viable option. However, taking turns will probably not be an option for larger groups. In that case, a wider screen or a projector might be necessary. However, the app is designed for mobile-device use only, so a smartphone simulator would be necessary to use the app on a computer. I currently use the Bluestacks free smartphone simulator (www.bluestacks.com), but any other simulator will do. The teaching techniques will be slightly different from those used when working with smaller groups because children will no longer be able to interact with the screen.

One possible solution would be playing in teams and guiding the teacher. For example, the teacher points to one of the characters on the screen (see Figure 4, Practice Stage: *this* woman or *that* girl) and each team says “Stop!” when they think the teacher is pointing to the correct answer. Teachers can use a point system so the team with more points wins the game. Another non-competitive option could be having all students work together and repeat aloud the app’s prompt (e.g., “tap *this* woman”) while the teacher pretends not to understand. Students must keep repeating the phrase and pointing to the answer until the teacher finds it. For an extra challenge, they could play against a timer or take turns in pairs to come to the screen and show the teacher the right answer.

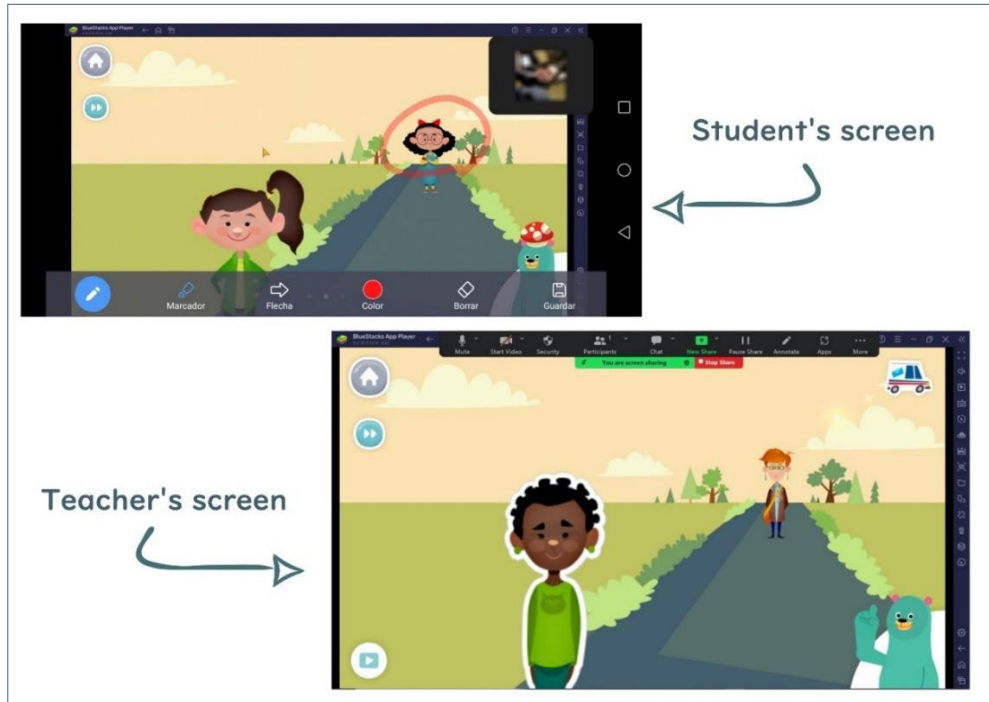
In-Lesson Use Example (Online/Hybrid): This – That Lesson

In a face-to-face lesson, the purpose of including KAK activities is mainly to provide sufficient practice for learners to ensure a productive self-study time later on. However, these activities can offer greater opportunities in online/hybrid teaching scenarios. Incorporating these activities into online or hybrid lessons can enhance the learning experience and make it more engaging due to the app’s many attractive features. For example, the game-like design promotes interaction among learners, which may not be possible otherwise during an online lesson. The availability of pre-made digital materials also saves teachers time and effort during lesson preparation.

Here is an example of how to modify a KAK activity for online/hybrid teaching. The activity used is the same as in the face-to-face example (see Figure 3). Figure 4 shows screenshots of the activity from the students’ and teachers’ devices, respectively.



Figure 4
KAK Online/Hybrid In-Lesson Use Example. Teacher's and Student's Screens.



Once the app is ready and the intended activity is set, teachers can share their screens and audio through any video conferencing software, such as Zoom. However, since learners cannot interact directly with the app on the teacher's computer, the activities' procedures are very similar to teaching large groups face-to-face. Some video conferencing software (e.g., Zoom) allows YLs to make annotations on their screens that are visible to all participants. This feature creates a more interactive experience, because students can mark the correct answer themselves.

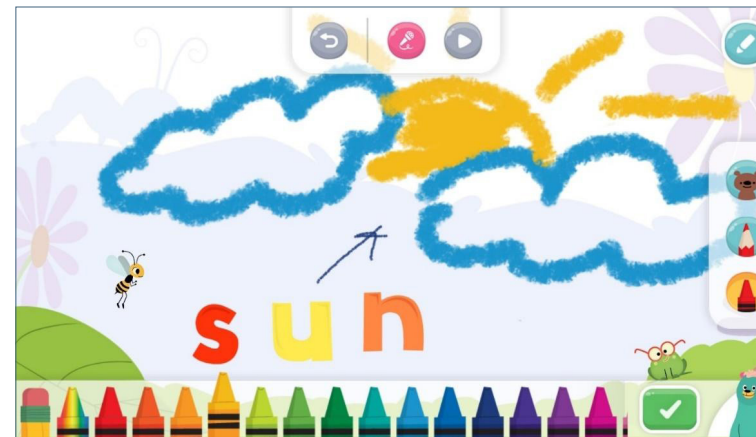
For example, students can take turns to circle the right answer after listening to the app's oral prompt. They can work together to complete the activity, or the teacher can keep track of their points individually, so the student with the most points wins. They can also circle their answers at the same time using different colours. Similarly, the

teacher can pretend not to know the answer and try to click on the wrong place, so students must draw (or orally repeat the app's prompt) on the correct place and guide the teacher.

The Drawing Tool

The *Drawing Tool*, available from the students' end in the *Create* section of the library, is another powerful resource in the app. So far, the role of the teachers has been limited to monitoring and censoring the pre-made activities to be assigned and compensating for the linguistic demands posed by said activities during the in-lesson practice. However, through the *Drawing Tool*, it is possible to achieve a higher degree of creativity and have the opportunity to design original assignments that are better suited to a specific set of YLs. This tool allows learners to draw, colour, write and record their voices.

Figure 5
The Drawing Tool, Screenshot Example of a YL's Screen.



The recording feature (see the mike icon on top, Figure 5) captures both their voices and screens, generating a short video. These videos present an excellent opportunity to reinforce speaking practice at home. They also allow YLs to listen to their oral production and self-assess their performance. Children can create these short videos by pressing the mike icon on the top of their screens (see Figure 5). The resulting video is



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automatically saved into their KAK profiles, where teachers can easily see them later by checking their accounts. These short videos can also be downloaded to the YLs' mobile devices directly from the app, but only if an adult has previously set this feature.

I often use this tool with younger learners (five to seven years old) to practice ABC and phonics. For ABC practice, children can write/draw the letters while saying the letter aloud or singing the ABC song (video example at <https://youtu.be/mCrB5-RpVcw>). In the case of phonics, children can write a letter and draw a picture of something that begins with that letter (e.g., Aa – apple; Cc – car) (video example at <https://youtu.be/dzeVGhLVRW0>). For older learners (eight to nine years old), I use it to practice small dialogues through chants and rhymes. Children can act out one of these dialogues using the characters from the sticker library in the drawing tool. Then, while recording their voices singing the chant, they can move the characters and role-play (video example at <https://youtu.be/XHFum86DhME>).

They can also share these short videos with their families or even showcase them during a lesson if they are not too shy, which can foster confidence and positive self-beliefs. The recording feature is embedded in the app, so parents do not need to record, upload or send any material to the teachers, which simplifies the process for families. There are no risks of privacy breaches, because the only people who can access the videos are the teacher, the student, and the student's parents/guardians. I would like to note that I have not included my students' videos in this article to protect their privacy. All video examples are recreations of the assignments.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have discussed the potential of the self-study app Khan Academy Kids as a creative solution for assigning motivating homework for YLs in both face-to-face and online/hybrid teaching scenarios. During my lessons, I found that the KAK app can provide useful pre-made digital materials, saving me time and effort during the lesson preparation stage, especially for the online/hybrid teaching context. Similarly, it can also facilitate listening and speaking practice at home that would not otherwise be available in the EFL setting. This app provides a friendly platform to introduce YLs and their families to authentic English materials. The app allows YLs and their families to interact with these materials, while fostering non-adversarial parental support during homework completion.

However, since the app is not designed for the EFL teaching context, it can stress the linguistic demands on learners, so teachers will need to monitor and scaffold their

progress by providing sufficient in-lesson practice opportunities. That said, in my experience working with this app, its engaging materials, child-friendly topics, and game-like design make it a powerful resource to create motivating homework for YLs while fostering healthy self-study habits and autonomy.

Bio Data

Ania Delia Gonzalez Curiel is currently an English teacher at a private language school for children in Japan. She is interested in developing teaching materials for young learners, arts and crafts, and music. She is currently studying an MA in TESOL at the University of Birmingham. <gonzalez.aniadelia@gmail.com>

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