Chapter 13

Using Tablet Applications as Assistive Tools in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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ABSTRACT

A case study examined the contribution of tablet applications for English language acquisition and improvement of reading and reading comprehension skills among pupils diagnosed with learning disabilities and those not diagnosed with learning disabilities. Participants were Grade 4 pupils from a public school in central Israel in two groups. Group 1 included two boys and two girls diagnosed with learning disabilities; Group 2 included two boys and two girls not diagnosed with learning disabilities. English learning applications were used with the intent of improving the abilities of letter recognition, reading, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and oral expression in English in a fun way relevant to the pupils’ lives. Findings indicated a more pronounced improvement in English reading and reading comprehension skills among pupils who were diagnosed with learning disabilities. The research also confirms that the use of tablet applications resulted in increased motivation for learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Those who teach English, often encounter pupils that find it difficult to cope with the acquisition of this language and with the development of English comprehension skills. This is especially evident in pupils diagnosed with learning disabilities. Because of the large number of these pupils, it is important to discover teaching means for this language that could assist their learning, create a successful experience for pupils, and improve their motivation for learning English. Research that examined the contribution of tablet-assisted interventions found that they were able to provide positive contributions (Seifert, 2015). However, comprehensive review in this field reveals that a large proportion of these studies lacked methodological rigor in group design studies (Kim, Park & Coleman, 2017).

The present study examined the contribution of tablet applications for the acquisition of the English language and improvement of reading and comprehension skills in two groups of Grade 4 pupils: a group diagnosed with learning disabilities in comparison with a group who were not diagnosed with such disabilities. In order to examine the effectiveness of the tablet applications, use was made of applications in the area of English language studies. These applications are intended to improve the level of pupils’ motivation for learning, and have been proven to influence the pupils’ decision-making processes and determine their level of progress, and the extent of guidance and effort that will be invested in the learning activities (Cole, Field & Harris, 2004).

In order to examine the effectiveness of tablet applications, lesson plans were prepared combining applications for recital, recording and listening in English, games to exercise vocabulary etc.

Assistive Technology

Assistive technology (hereinafter: AT) is defined as a wide range of strategies, technologies and equipment that enable pupils with special needs to work in the field of their challenge (Hopkins, 2004). The apparatus for AT includes any item, equipment or system that is purchased, prepared or improved in order to help to improve, enlarge or maintain the functional abilities of individuals with special needs (Bausch & Alt, 2008). AT has been supported by legislation and science and thus has become a firm foundation for the process of learning and education for pupils with disabilities and special needs so that they can take part in and complete tasks which are difficult to do by themselves (Lee & Vega, 2005).

Research has found that AT increases the independence and quality of life for people with disabilities and even contributes much to their inclusion in society since they acquire means for communication, mobility, creativity, self-confidence etc. (Yeunjoo & Vega, 2005). The use of AT enables those with special needs to function more effectively under various conditions, and can be adapted to assist various personal needs, helping people with hearing disorders and restricted mobility abilities. Additionally, the use of AT contributes to pupils since it provides access to information, develops skills and assists pupils’ progress, competitiveness and effectiveness, specialization, self-worth and self-reliance, peace of mind and social acceptance (Hopkins, 2004).

Tablets have even been found to assist pupils with sensory disorders and reading and writing difficulties and improve social skills, organizational and interpersonal communication skills among children (Suta & Hayhoe, 2013). Tablet-assisted learning is adapted to the characteristics of the younger generation or “digital natives”, who have grown up in a technological environment and they enable mobility and adaptation to the pupils’ life style (Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula & Sharples, 2006). The integration of this technology enables the education system to provide a relevant and authentic response to the world