

Using electronic books to engage young readers

Electronic books offer a fun, interactive, multimedia rich approach to sharing stories with children. Although teaching reading has traditionally focused on using conventional printed books, there is a growing shift towards interactive reading approaches, some of which may incorporate digital media. Accompanied by a variety of interactive features such as animation, sound effects, hyperlinked vocabulary, hidden hotspots and gradual revelation of text – e-books have the potential to further involve young learners in the reading process. While some studies highlight the impact of using electronic storybooks for independent learning purposes (e.g. Moody, 2010), this article explores ideas on how teachers can create and use electronic books with a whole class using the shared reading approach. E-books have the potential to be motivating, challenging and a colourful visual resource in the primary school classroom – use them to increase children’s interest, involvement and understanding of stories.

What is an electronic book?

In addition to the written text and drawings that can be found in a conventional printed book, a digital media equivalent, often referred to as a talking book, CD ROM storybook, interactive book or e-book employs multimedia effects. Accompanied by written text and sometimes audio, background music, sound effects, animations, hyperlinks, related activities and games, stories become more lifelike and appealing. As such, they represent a reading format that combines video, sound and motions with exposure to written text and the option to act on these possibilities (Shamir & Korat, 2006). The lively and attractive features of e-books are also a possible medium for supporting young children’s literacy and language development (de Jong & Bus, 2003; Lefever-Davis & Pearman, 2005). By catching and holding sustained interest, e-books are a visually attractive resource, providing children with concrete reinforcement of the storyline and key vocabulary. This has the potential to motivate and excite children about reading.

Why use electronic books in the primary school classroom?

Traditional simplistic notions of literacy as involving only the reading (decoding and comprehending) and writing (encoding and communicating) of print based texts are no longer adequate (Moody, 2010). There is a growing sense that reading teaching can be more interactive, supported by multimedia modes that provide visual and sound representations (Grimshaw, 2007, Moody, 2010). In order to take advantage of the interactive features of electronic books and their ability to establish a context or promote a mood, the teacher can engage young students in shared reading of the story with an entire class (Labbo & Kuhn, 2000). A projector can be used to enlarge the image onto a screen while the teacher reads the story aloud. This digitized book can provide the teacher with dynamic visuals to represent parts of the story, highlighting text or vocabulary while the story is initially being read aloud by the teacher or narrator (Lefever-Davis & Pearman, 2005). By pointing using a laser pen, the teacher can track each word/sentence and encourage children to join in where possible, while gradually revealing the text. Unlike a conventional shared reading experience with a big book, the teacher’s arm is not blocking illustrations or additional text. Optional hotspots can be activated which elaborate on the illustrations, characters, setting or vocabulary. For example, when the teacher clicks on a character, the figure may start to talk or clicking on a glowing word might give the children an explanation of the word. More advanced learners might discuss which story elements the reader can infer from electronic features and which are stated in the text itself. This sharing of an electronic book with an entire class has the potential to foster children’s understanding of the story events, increase their vocabulary knowledge, phonological awareness and story recall abilities (Chera & Wood, 2003). Subsequent re-readings can occur with individual students in the class library, using the class PC to display the story or a hard copy of the e-book itself.

How to use and incorporate electronic features into a shared reading lesson

The same interactive elements of e-books that support children’s literacy (e.g.

animation or sound effects) may also potentially become distractions and as such you may decide not to engage with these advanced features. As you initially evaluate e-books, look for quality illustrations and storyline, appropriate for the chosen class level; easy-to-read fonts; easy-to-use navigation; good quality sound; accompanying extension activities and games or the online version of a class favourite story. Whether you use the internet, Microsoft PowerPoint or interactive whiteboard (with note maker, magnifier to enlarge text, recorder and spotlight), pick and choose the electronic features that most suit your class and context. In the absence of high-speed internet or smart boards, an electronic book could either be pre-downloaded or composed by the teacher and/or pupils in Microsoft PowerPoint. The table (right) gives optional ideas on how to incorporate electronic features into a Shared Reading lesson.

Using technology in reading lessons

Technology has the potential to enhance interactive whole class reading teaching. It could be argued that e-books provide a lesser reading experience for children than physical books as many readers prefer ‘the real book’ to a computer screen. Despite an international move towards interactive reading methods that incorporate aspects of technology (Shamir and Korat, 2008), to date the use of e-books in Irish primary school classrooms is just emerging. However, if e-books are an additional, rather than an alternative means of providing a fun, interactive reading experience in the primary school classroom, then more possibilities exist for embracing their potential. Their lively and attractive features, including dynamic visuals, voice and sound are a powerful means of supporting children’s literacy development. What better way to enjoy reading with young primary school learners, than through sharing e-books?

Feature	Pre-Shared Reading	While Shared Reading	Post-Shared Reading
Electronic version of Fiction Book e.g. ‘The Hungry Caterpillar’ by Eric Carle http://www.scribd.com/doc/3855238/The-Very-Hungry-Caterpillar-book	Discuss the cover, title, author, illustrator and picture on the screen. Ask students to predict what the story will be about.	Demonstration The teacher reads the story aloud. The pace should be lively with few stops. Point to each line as you read to reinforce left-to-right orientation, using a laser pen. Participation Ask the children to join in when they can and to predict how the story will develop. Practice Read parts of the story and take turns reading. Allow the children to dominate.	Reread children’s favourite parts. Reread direct speech with expression. Highlight key words and children can invent suitable alternatives.
Gradual Revelation	Introduce key vocabulary, one by one	Reveal the text line by line/page by page.	Performance Encourage students to act out the story. Each line is revealed one by one, using the laser pen.
Design/ Use of colour	Introduce and describe the setting for the story.	Use different backgrounds when moving from scene to scene. During group reading, students read a particular line of text, depending on the colour.	Recall the different settings in the story. Create a new setting for the story.
Audio/C.D. ROM	Listen to the beginning of the story and predict the storyline.	As a whole class, listen to the story and read along.	Individual children can listen to/reread the story during extension time. Make your own audio recording of the children reading using your mobile phone.
Sound Effects	Introduce each character with a different sound effect e.g. using Microsoft PowerPoint.	Where appropriate, introduce sound effects throughout the story e.g. a bell to remind students of a key word.	Retell the story in sequence using sound effects to represent main characters.
Games	Complete an online jigsaw of the front cover of the story – then guess the title.	*The integration of online games may disrupt the storyline at this stage and could be done in the post-reading stage instead.	Some online stories have accompanying games e.g. reorder the story; bingo, word searches, information gaps.
Graphic Animation	Some online stories have graphic animation. Introduce and describe main characters by clicking on the animated icon.	When the teacher clicks on a character, it starts to talk.	Describe the character, based on the animated icon.
Hotspots	Some online stories have hidden hotspots which can be activated to introduce the setting or character.	Elaborate on the illustrations, setting or characters.	To recall parts of the story, text can be searched automatically.
Hyperlinks	Introduce key vocabulary or target language by clicking on hyperlinks.	Stop throughout the story and highlight/explain highlighted words.	Recall key vocabulary by clicking on highlighted words.
Extension Idea	Whole school e-book buddy reading project e.g. 6th class students compose their own stories using Microsoft PowerPoint or www.storybirds.com (adding audio, animation, sound effects and background design), targeting ICT and literacy skills. Present/read to a younger class.		

Example electronic book resources

- www.starfall.com
- A variety of well-illustrated online stories, using a phonics approach to reading.
- www.magickeys.com/books/
- Example children’s storybooks online
- storybird.com
- Create your own story using short, art-inspired stories to share, read, and print. By reversing the process of visual storytelling, start with the image/theme and write the story.
- learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org/en/make-your-own-story-maker
- Personalised story maker.
- www.readinga-z.com/
- An online reading scheme.

References available in the InTouch section of the INTO website

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Data projector + online story + animation activities = e-book!