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# Raz Reading

Justin Nightingale

## Where I Am Now

After 11 years of teaching at Seigakuin Primary School I'll admit that the experimental nature of trying to make lessons a little better is (usually) just plain fun; I can never get things just right which drives me to find something new and so the cycle continues.

Beyond the textbooks and worksheets, iPad apps in conjunction with the large projection screens in each classroom have proved successful in grabbing their interest and promoting English production through visual cues in the various apps I use <sup>1)</sup>. Up until recently all iPad activity in the lesson has been focussed around me. Now that grades 4 to 6 have their own iPads (stored at school) which are slowly being introduced as a component of the curriculum, it has opened up a tempting opportunity.

## Where I Want To Be

L1 children have the formidable advantage of being submerged in English throughout their day. It's not possible to emulate this immersion but what if we had a means of giving our kids a virtual English pseudo-environment outside the 45 minute lesson? With the possibility of the iPads going home with the students everyday in the future it becomes a natural avenue to explore.

As a child at primary school I remember clearly sitting in my class watching educational programs on a wheeled in TV (one TV per school..) and watching a red dot bounce over the subtitles of songs and conversations of the presenters. Fast forward 30 years, bring in the iPads, headphones,

add 100's of picture books with audio and reward points and you have some idea what the "Raz Kids" reading system is like <sup>2)</sup>. In short, it's a personal, virtual library with remote teacher monitoring of students' progress.

A part of a larger collection of web resources under the umbrella of a company called 'A-Z Learning', Raz Kids has proved to be one of the highest quality and most reliable web based resource of primary/secondary school learning materials that I have come across.

800+ virtual books along with audio in a well structured, easy to follow flow of progression is proving formidable. The books are actually fun to read, too.

## iPad Trial

I've enthused and bemoaned my on/off relationship with the iPad over the years but when your school decides it would like to place an iPad in the hands of every child in the upper grades, you start to sit up and and take notice. My main bone of contention has always been the worry that technology will overpower the lesson flow to the extent that English becomes secondary. As an occasional tool in a teacher's hands it's unbeatable but the thought of 40 heads looking down at 40 screens while I'm sitting at the front twiddling my thumbs makes me think long and hard about whether it's a direction I want to go.

5 years ago when we had one of those mythical caves called a 'Computer Room' that you read about in history books, we experimented quite extensively with Raz Kids always having in the back of our

minds the thought that if this were to become a habit they were doing at home on a regular basis, we could be on to something. But, the internet has a (sometimes unjustified) bad reputation in the context of children and the dark, digital corners of the web – not something you’d want a young child to use freely without supervision. Whether these fears are founded or not is irrelevant, the parent’s have the final say. The iPad could change this.

Firstly, iOS (iPad’s operating system) is highly secure due to Linux roots and strictly segregated user space. There are no viruses and it has so far proved to be (almost) unhackable; as a rule of thumb, if your iPad is not physically connected to someone else’s computer, you’re safe from nefarious activities. Why is this important? It means as a teacher, I can confidently lock down the device and choose what a student can and can’t see – even if the browser is enabled. This important fact will set parents’ heart at ease and give me a little more leeway (unfortunately, while this may be true there is currently one major caveat to this: the current iOS has a glaring backdoor that needs to be dealt with in a future update <sup>3)</sup>).

Secondly, high accessibility. iPads are always on, always ready and maybe in the near future, always with them.

## The App

Raz Kids was created almost completely with Flash based animations – beautiful on a PC but unusable on an iPad (Incidentally, Flash’s current demise can undoubtedly be attributed to Steve Jobs’ open letter to Adobe that was shown on the front page of apple.com for some time; worth a read <sup>4)</sup>). Flash enabled browsers can be downloaded from the App

Store but they are clunky, slow and shameful battery hogs. 2 years ago the Raz kids dedicated (non-Flash) app appeared and, now, the iPad experience using it is superb <sup>5)</sup>.

The two core elements of the app are a reading room and a ‘reward room’:

The reading room has 26+ levels labelled A–Z with some extra advanced levels. Each level contains around 16 books using recycled vocabulary from previous levels. Under the icon of each book are three icons: read with audio (auto page turning), read alone (no sound, swipe to turn the page) and quiz (multiple choice questions based on the story).

When all three of these sections have been completed (i.e. the book has been read twice and the quiz questions answered correctly), three check marks appear indicating that the book has been completed. When all books in that level have been completed you will automatically move to the next level (or, I can limit this progression until I test them on their reading).

Level A contains a single line per page (“This is a dog”) with a large picture. Level Z has 6 + lines with a half page picture. Level F was a realistic maximum for our students.

When any activity (reading or quiz) is completed, points are earned and ‘spent’ in a virtual shop where you can buy various furniture, robots, gadgets, animals, toys, etc to decorate your empty room. It’s all very cleverly done but In all honesty I still find it hard to imagine why this is such a motivating factor.. but it is. They will re-read books just to get that extra point to buy that oh so cute goldfish to

decorate their room. It's a sight to behold watching them walk around the classroom showing off and comparing rooms with each other.

Currently, Raz Kids on a school network using Macs has one supreme advantage over iPads: I can see their 40 screens at the same on a single master monitor so I know exactly what they're doing. As it stands now I can only monitor them passively on their iPads by checking their points, progress, readings, quiz mistakes, total time spent reading, etc, but in the next iteration of iOS 9 this Mac functionality will come to the iPad <sup>6)</sup>.

## Observations

Thanks to Apple's en masse one-click install function (any volunteers to install 80 apps on 80 iPads?) getting up and running was fuss free. Registration with Raz Kids was also similarly speedy <sup>17)</sup>. The only issue was setting up and communicating their numeric passwords which took a lesson or two. This wasn't a security issue but more a way of preventing them from using the wrong account by mistake and spending someone else's points and causing a commotion – quite a common occurrence before the passwords were set. Lesson learnt.

The almost overwhelming desire to close the textbook and use the iPads during the lesson was predictable and helpful as it allowed me to stand back, let them delve into the app under their own steam (which required very little explanation – welcome to the young generation) without any encouragement so I could see from afar their interactions with the books. Some brief observations:

- 1 ) They really did make an effort to follow the audio hints and read the books. There was a definite sense of fun and satisfaction that they were reading English and earning points. I was concerned that they would skim through the books just to accumulate points but this proved to be rare.
- 2 ) 20–30 minutes seemed to be the ideal usage time. Any longer and the 'skimming' started.
- 3 ) Kids forget passwords. Even if they write it down on their head, they will forget.. where they wrote it.
- 4 ) Initially, we kept things open style without any goals as such just to see how things would go. It took about 3, 4 lessons before the energy to read (but not to garner points and decorate their room) started to wane. They, naturally, needed a goal.
- 5 ) Everyone brought in their own earphones and were surprisingly reliable in doing so. It seems having the earphones proved useful using other apps outside the lesson.
- 6 ) Those who were obviously already very able in English relished the chance to read real books and speed through the levels.
- 7 ) It was generally popular.

As the weeks rolled by various logging activities were encouraged to give them a sense of progression such as writing the title of each read book, etc, but I personally found the most beneficial way of motivating them was to ask them to read for me any 3 books from a completed level in order for them to move to the next level.

It would be tempting to ask them to do more after reading each book such as logging, copying, worksheets, etc, but I want to preserve the pleasure

they have of just reading and collecting points without watering the fun down and loading them down with bureaucracy.

## Final Thoughts

A three minute video of the app being used by a few coerced-volunteers:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/lld38d1v6evpvn/razkids.mov>

(Click “No thanks, continue to view” if you don’t have a Dropbox account).

The app and the iPad are what our English classes have been waiting for. The learning curve between the computer, keyboard and mouse combo and the iPad is stark – even some of my kindergarten kids have unlocked my iPad and found the camera app thanks to mum and dad’s smartphone habits. More than anything, reading in this way is just so natural for children nowadays.

Our trial lasted from December to February – priming us for the new year in April building on the mistakes we made and learned from. I don’t see the iPad becoming part of the lesson per se as it does indeed take too much focus away from the teacher trying to direct the lesson. So, without trying to battle this inevitable turn of attention I feel it’s better to embrace it and relinquish the teacher’s control by giving the students a dedicated iPad lesson instead – for example every second Tuesday.

With the iPad at my disposal and their disposal I’m keeping my ears and eyes open of ways I can develop this further while still keeping English the central focus which is easier said than done when

you have such fun gadgets in their hands capable of video and audio wonders.

## Links

- 1) “Sago Mini” have a range of apps for Android and iOS that when used by the teacher while coaxing English have proved very successful. <http://www.sagosago.com>
- 2) The main page of Raz Kids: <https://www.raz-kids.com>
- 3) Steve Jobs’ amusing tirade at Adobe that was posted on the front page of the Apple’s website: <http://www.apple.com/hotnews/thoughts-on-flash/>
- 4) iPad’s formidable security has one glaring loophole that until closed, prevents the iPad from freely being distributed to children without supervision: although the Safari browser can be restricted, pop up browsers without 3rd party apps currently have no restriction setting. For example, the Amazon Kindle app has innocuous menu items called ‘Terms of use’ and ‘Legal notices’. Buried in these long texts are links that will eventually lead you into a pop up browser which, with persistence, will lead you to the Google home page.  
Due to the fact that this hidden ‘feature’ is widely known, I fear there is a very real possibility that Apple will never release a fix. Like Google, Apple relies on revenue from ads within free apps (iAd) that require pop up browser functionality. Restricting these windows (and therefore preventing deliberate and accidental clicks) will impact Apple’s income. Fingers crossed Apple will do the right thing.
- 5) An video overview of Raz Kids: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1gioIYERwo>
- 6) A preview of new iPad features aimed at the education sector: <http://www.apple.com/education/preview/>
- 7) Raz Kids registration for 35 students (an awkward number for classes with 40 students) is \$90 + tax for one year. <https://www.raz-kids.com>

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