16 Young English Learners in the Digital Age

16.1 Introduction

As Michael Fullan (2013: 23) well points out, students are increasingly bored in school and the only thing worse than being bored is ‘having to teach the bored’. Therefore, he underlines the need to develop innovative solutions for the increasingly challenging educational landscape. According to him, three teaching directions could be the answer to reforming teaching in order to meet the needs of the 21st century learners: ‘deep learning goals, new pedagogies and technology’ (Fullan, 2013: 23). It is precisely this last element that represents the focus of the present paper in an attempt to address the importance as well as the teachers’ main challenges of employing modern technologies to support English language learning of young pupils because ‘Teachers are central to what happens in the classroom, because they have the knowledge and skills to find creative ways to support learners’ language development’ (Motteram, 2013: 178).

As most teachers would probably agree, great transformations in the educational landscape are about to occur because society is changing at a rapid pace, and this is mainly caused by the advent and increasingly wide-spread use of technology in our everyday lives. Consequently, as Pim (2013: 18) emphasises ‘learners are being exposed to a range of technologies from a very early age in the home and by the time they reach nursery age many have developed at least some of the digital skills that enable them to participate in technology-driven activities as soon as they start school’. Never before has learners’ childhood been so intertwined with the use of technology. Adults are often startled at the children’s capacity and adaptability to use the forever advancing technology. Hence, children’s way of understanding and interacting with the world around them is directly influenced or sometimes even ‘filtered’ by technology.

Though many people frown upon this tendency, I firmly believe that teachers cannot turn a blind eye to the immense effect that technology has and will continue to have on our students, no matter we like it or not. Consequently, as many researchers (Wong L., 2013; Pim, 2013; Fullan 2007, 2013) have also pointed out, 21st century teaching should incorporate technology in the classroom and technology-based or technology-aided classes should represent pedagogical tools in order to enhance learners’ motivation.

Within this context, the Romanian Ministry of Education is trying to keep up with the latest trends by trying to connect itself to the new educational methods of improving the educational process and adapting to the needs of the 21st century learners by bringing technology closer to school, informs Mediafax, one of the leading
Among the steps that have been made towards this end, the introduction of digital books for the 1st and 2nd grades starting from 2014 has probably been the most important as well as the most controversial one. Remus Pricopie — the former Romanian Minister of Education, who was in service until December 2014 — argues that Romania is one of the first countries that are reforming and adjusting their educational systems to the worldwide tendency of bringing technology into the classroom. According to him, this tendency is confirmed by the new The Horizon Report Europe, a publication of European Commission, which emphasizes the need for improvement of digital skills and of access to digital resources in order to enhance teaching and calls for urgent actions in order to promote innovation within the classroom.

However, as it has been widely noticed, in an attempt to reform the educational system, Romania has been undertaking a great variety of changes over the past 25 years, many of which have been heavily criticized as being chaotic and disorganised. The introduction of digital books was no exception and it has brought about as much praise as criticism. Although digital books were initially meant to be a great innovation for the Romanian educational system, there are voices who argue that they were introduced with insufficient consideration and prior planning. Therefore, the introduction of digital books presented teachers with both great benefits and multiple challenges because as Fullan (2007: 8) also emphasizes,

“neglect of phenomenology of change - that is, how people actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended – is at the heart of the spectacular lack of success of most social reforms. It is also necessary to build and understand the big picture, because educational change after all is a sociopolitical process [...] in the process of examining the individual and collective settings, it is necessary to contend with both the “what” of change and the “how” of change”.

The present paper, thus, focusses on teachers’ perceptions of the way in which digital books were introduced, emphasizing the problems that teachers have to deal with in order to be able to use them in the classroom and the causes that might lie behind them because just as Wong outlines, ‘Teachers are not only expected to keep up with new technologies but also to integrate IT into their curricula and classroom practices to equip students with the skills of the information age’ (Wong L., 2013: 248). Moreover, the present paper represents an attempt to report on the needs of children learning a foreign language and on children's attitudes towards the English classes that incorporate digital books in the teaching and learning process.
16.2 Digital Books

The newly introduced books for the 1st and 2nd graders have both a digital version and a print one. Besides the images and the short written texts that are to be found in the print version, a digitized version integrates audio-visual media (an interactive book employing colourful visuals, animations, videos, short stories and songs). It is to be mentioned here that the digital version is not supposed to entirely replace the print version, but to complement it, the two being meant to function in parallel.

The purpose of digital books is obviously twofold: to support language learning both in the classroom and beyond it. They are expected to provide teachers with lively and interactive teaching materials meant to make the English class a fun and joyful experience.

However, in order for this to be possible, several conditions must be met: on one hand, in order for the teacher to be able to use the e-books in class, the classroom needs to have at least the basic educational technology, i.e., it should be equipped with a computer/laptop and ideally a projector and a screen to enlarge the image so that all the children may be able to watch the short videos, and thus, participate in the lesson. Moreover, the teachers should have at least basic knowledge of how to use this type of technology. On the other hand, in order for children to take advantage of digital books beyond classroom, they also need to have access to a computer at home.

16.3 Study

But what is the impact of using digital books within the Romanian educational system? In an attempt to identify the benefits as well as the challenges that digital books have brought about in the short period of time since their introduction at the end of the autumn of 2014, a both qualitative and quantitative survey was conducted at the end of January 2015, in a number of Romanian public schools. The findings are as much as surprising as revealing and call for immediate action in order to suit their initial purpose, i.e., supporting learning enhancement and student motivation.

16.3.1 Methodology and sample profile

In order to meet the above stated objectives, a paper-based survey was designed and administered to a number of 14 first- and second-grade English teachers working in the public sector. All responses were anonymous and the survey took no more than 15 minutes to complete. However, it is to be mentioned that the present study is limited to the Fairyland series as the Romanian Ministry of Education provided the English teachers with three options to choose from at the beginning of the first
semester: *Magic English, Comunicare in limba engleza* (*Communication in English* – my translation) and *Fairyland*.

Teachers’ profile:
- Gender: 93% females; 7% males
- Age: 35% aged 25–35; 50% aged 35–45, 15% above 45
- Years of experience: 14%: 1–3 years; 22%: 4–10 years, 64% more than 10 years

Pupils’ profile:
As far as the pupil sample is concerned, an informal interview was conducted over a number of 22 first-grade learners of English and 16 second-grade learners of English regarding their opinions on the use of digital books.

### 16.3.2 Questions for teachers and analysis

1. How would you rate your overall skill in using educational technology?
   - Beginner
   - Basic
   - Advanced
   - Proficient

Results

![Figure 16.1](image)

Figure 16.1: Overall skill using educational technology.

It is notable that an overwhelming percentage of teachers seem to be lacking the skills to use educational technology: 64% rated themselves as beginners, 7% basic, while only under 30% (22% advanced and 7% proficient) seem to be equipped with the skills that allow them to use digital books in the classroom.
2. When was the last time you participated in a formal training organised by your school board/board of education in order to improve your information technology skills?
- Less than 1 year ago
- 1–3 years ago
- More than 3 years ago
- Never

Results:

![Figure 16.2: Last time I attended a training in IT.](image)

It is noteworthy that almost 60% answered that they had never participated in an IT training. Unfortunately, only 7% of the teachers declared to have attended a training in IT skills within the last year. Analysing this in relation to the previous question, one could speculate that the teachers’ poor command of educational technologies may be a direct cause of lack of training

3. Is your school equipped with one of the following educational technologies? Mark all that apply.
- computer/laptop
- projector
- smart board
- CD /DVD player
- none

Results:

![Figure 16.3: Educational technologies available.](image)
Fortunately, it results that most schools are equipped with a CD/DVD player. However, having a CD/DVD player at one’s disposal is unhelpful when dealing with digital books. In addition, it results that only about 36% of the respondents seem to have the necessary technology (a computer/laptop and a projector) to use digital books in the classroom. Regrettably, 14% of the respondents admitted not having any educational technology at their disposal.

4. How often do you integrate educational technology into your classroom instruction?
   - Daily
   - A few times per week
   - Rarely. Please give reasons...
   - Never. Please give reasons...

Results:

![Figure 16.4: How often do teachers integrate educational technologies?](image)

Unfortunately, only 21% of the teachers seem to integrate educational technologies on a regular basis (7% daily, 14% a few times per week), while 79% either do it rarely or never (29% rarely and 50% never). Three possible reasons were given by those in these two last categories: no or less availability of computers or laptops (they have to share them with other colleagues) and lack of knowledge on how to use them. So, it is not that they do not want to use them, but they either have no resources or no knowledge.

5. How often do you use the newly introduced digital books?
   - Daily
   - A few times per week
   - Rarely
   - Never
Results:

It results that most teachers either use digital books rarely (36%) or never (50%). Only 14% seem to use them a few times per week. What is particularly interesting when analyzing the answers to this question in relation to the answers to the previous one is the fact that none of those who do integrate educational technology on a daily basis (7%) also integrate digital books in their classroom instruction on a daily basis (0%). In other words, teachers who fall into this category seem to also use other digital resources apart from those provided by the Ministry of Education.

In an attempt to find out the reasons underlying this apparent lack of interest in digital books, I have analysed these results in respect to the following three questions: 6, 7 and 8.

6. How important do you think it is for children to have access to digital books?
   - Very important
   - Somewhat important
   - Not important

Results:
It is noteworthy that most teachers do consider it important for children to have access to digital books, while only 7% of teachers seem to disregard their use in the classroom.

7. What technical drawbacks have you encountered when using digital books in the classroom? (Open-Ended Question)

Results:

![Figure 16.7: Technical drawbacks encountered.](image)

Although teachers’ answers revolved around several issues, I have chosen to analyse the two most salient ones. On one hand, all surveyed teachers pointed out the fact that digital books do not work well on all the computers. This issue may point out to the fact that there must exist a certain type of compatibility between the digital books and the computer hardware or software so that they may run properly. On the other hand, a very high percentage (71%) mentioned that digital books are difficult to manage in the absence of a projector and a screen making it difficult for children to watch the animations.

8. What are the benefits of using digital books in the classroom? (Open-Ended Question)

Results:

![Figure 16.8: Benefits of using digital books in the classroom.](image)
There are numerous benefits mentioned by teachers when it comes to the use of the digital books in the classroom, but the most prevalent ones centred on: enhancing students’ attention (100%), being appealing (86%), and offering a great variety of activities (71%).

9. Name three features of digital books (Open Ended Question)

Results:

![Figure 16.9: Features of digital books.](image)

It is to be noted here that all teachers described digital books in positive terms. Digital books were valued for several aspects, but due to their relatively close percentage, I have chosen to present the first four ones: all the respondents described digital books as being interesting and fun (100%), but they also valued them for their interactivity (57%) and attractiveness (43%). All in all, they seem to be an effective way of enhancing students’ motivation for the English class.

10. List the things that you do not like about the digital books (Open-ended question)

Results:

![Figure 16.10: Aspects that teachers do not like about digital books.](image)
The most salient answer to this question was the fact that the printed books are not useful at all if one cannot use the digital part as well. They are almost totally dependent on the digital version because although they have a nice format with lots of colourful images, the paper books seem to have poor content. This probably comes as a consequence of the fact that, as mentioned previously, the print version and the digital one are meant to complement each other, not to be used independently.

Another salient aspect is the fact that some teachers are dissatisfied with the fact that digital books consist mainly of listening and speaking activities with a rather limited availability of writing and reading activities. This feature may come as a consequence of the learners’ early age ranging between 7-8 years old when their writing and reading skills are insufficiently developed in their own mother tongue.

### 16.3.3 Young learners of English and their opinions on digital books

#### 16.3.3.1 Describing young learners

As Harmer also points out (2009:83–84), ‘young learners especially those up to the age of 9 or 10, learn differently from older children, adolescents and adults’. So, what is different about teaching a foreign language to young children as opposed to teaching a language to adolescents or adult learners?

In the following lines, I will try to give an overview of the way young children learn a foreign language, what their learning needs are, and finally, I will try to answer the question whether the newly introduced digital books meet their needs or not by presenting the results of an interview carried out over 38 young learners of English.

When discussing young children's learning processes, one should take account of the specificities of their young age:

- ‘They respond to meaning even if they do not understand individual words
- They often learn indirectly rather than directly – that is they take in information from all sides, learning from everything around them rather than only focusing on the precise topic they are being taught
- Their understanding comes not just from explanation, but also from what they see and hear and, crucially, have a chance to touch and interact with
- They find abstract concepts such as grammar rules difficult to grasp
- They generally display an enthusiasm for learning and a curiosity about the world around them
- They have a need for individual attention and approval from the teacher
- They are keen to talk about themselves and respond well to learning that uses themselves and their own lives as main topic in the classroom
- They have a limited attention span; unless activities are extremely engaging, they can get easily bored, losing interest after ten minutes or so’ (Harmer, 2009: 82).
A good language teacher should, thus, consider all the aforementioned aspects when planning a lesson, and a good language book should enable the teacher to design age-appropriate activities and experiences by creating interest and making out of the learning experience a fun and enjoyable one because ‘successful lessons and activities are those that are tuned to the learning needs of pupils, rather than to the demands of the next text-book unit, or to the interests of the teacher’ (Cameron, 2002:1)

In addition, as Harmer (2009: 83) puts it, ‘good teachers at this level need to provide a rich diet of learning experiences which encourage their students to get information from a variety of sources’. Among the most successful activities he mentions, one may mention puzzle-like activities, drawing, games, physical movement, songs mixing ‘play and learning in an atmosphere of cheerful and supportive harmony’ (Harmer, 2009:83)

Are the digital books under discussion designed to meet our young learners’ needs? According to the introduction to the Fairyland series, it is ‘a course specially designed to introduce young pupils to the English language. Young learners will be captivated by the adventures of Woody and Frosty as they enter the Magic Forest and meet Erlina, Willow and Alvin. Through an array of activities such as stories, songs, games and craftwork, the pupils will be introduced to the English alphabet, theme-oriented vocabulary and some simple structures. In this way, the pupils will find the learning process enjoyable as they embark on their journey to discover the English language’ (Dooley, 2014: 6).

In other words, the digital books under discussion seem to offer a variety of theme-based engaging lessons focussing on age-specific activities meant to create and maintain children’s interest in the English class. But, do they reach their purpose? Do children enjoy them? The following section is meant to shed some light on their effect on children.

16.3.3.2 Young learners’ opinions on digital books

As mentioned previously, an informal interview was conducted with 38 first- and second-graders in schools that do have the resources and do use the newly introduced digital books. Due to the pupils’ very young age, children were asked general open-ended questions, such as ‘Do you like English classes? What do you like about them? What activities do you like most?’ etc. The pupils’ answers were, thus, analysed mainly using qualitative methods.

Students’ comments on the activities in the digital books were highly positive. All learners loved classes involving activities from the digital books and valued them as being much more fun than those classes not involving them.

An overwhelming majority of pupils said that the most interesting lessons were the ones when the teacher projected short videos on a screen or when they were able to watch them on a laptop.
Concerning the stories in the Fairyland series, most children mentioned they had lots of fun watching and listening to them and seemed very motivated and engaged.

Regarding the characters in the stories, most children said they were nice and amusing and seemed to be absolutely captivated by the adventures of the magic characters: Willow ‘a beautiful, talking tree that stands proudly in the Magic Forest’, Erlina who ‘flies around the Magic Forest, helping all the flowers and animals there’, Alvin ‘a friendly, funny leprechaun from Ireland’, Frosty ‘a funny little snowman, brought to life by magic’ and Woody ‘a clever little wooden puppet’ who ‘lives in a tree house in the Magic Forest’ (http://www.expresspublishing.co.uk/elt/fairyland/meet_the_characters.html).

Children were also highly enthusiastic about the songs and chants, especially those that also involved some kind of movement accompanying the lyrics (dancing, clapping hands, waving hands in the air, etc). Some of them even unsolicitedly started singing some of the songs learnt during the English class, which only proved once again how much they enjoyed them.

In addition, most pupils mentioned they absolutely loved the games, especially those that involved miming and crafting. What was particularly interesting about children’s comments was the fact that most children happily, but innocently thought that the English class was only about playing:

   e.g., 1) ‘We only play games during the English class’
       2) ‘Our teacher is the best because she allows us to play games’ (my translations)

It, therefore, results that the digital books under discussion focus on the interactive activities that promote learning through play, making out of the English class a pleasant and memorable experience.

### 16.4 Conclusions

These results raise a number of significant issues concerning the use of digital books in the context of English language teaching and learning.

Children absolutely love classes in which teachers integrate the activities from the digital books. However, the digital version is used rather rarely. This does not come as a consequence of the fact that teachers do not find it appropriate or useful for the young learners, but either as a consequence of teachers’ lack of resources (educational technology) or of knowledge on how to use it.

Moreover, if not used together with the digital version, the print version seems to be unusable and useless. And, since 36% of teachers say that they rarely use the digital version and 50% admit not having used it all, one may draw the conclusion that for an overwhelming number of pupils, digital books do not achieve their end, i.e., supporting learning by increasing children’s interest and understanding through
powerful media resources. Moreover, the teachers’ impossibility to use the digital version may even make it more difficult for them to prepare, plan and deliver the lessons since they cannot truly rely on the paper book.

All in all, although digital books have a great potential to be motivating and immensely useful for the young learners, their introduction has not led to much improvement in our educational system so far. On the contrary, if measures, such as equipping all schools with the necessary educational technologies and organising training sessions for teachers to improve their digital skills are not taken in the near future, the whole national programme of introducing digital books in the classroom instruction will run the risk of becoming obsolete.

References

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http://www.expresspublishing.co.uk/elt/fairyland/meet_the_characters.html [accessed April 2015]