Newsela: A Level-Adaptive App to Improve Reading Ability

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Second or foreign language learners and teachers are all eternal learners of their second language, and some of them keep their eyes wide open for novel ways and creative channels of learning languages, be it English or any other. Needless to say, technology and language learning applications have become part of learning a new language, so it is no more a matter of whether to use technology and applications or not to use them, but which one to use and how to use them effectively (Chapelle & Sauro, 2017). Technology helps students in a variety of ways: it helps them visualize concepts better, communicate with each other and with the teacher more effectively, become more motivated, and also helps them learn a lot on their own (Baleghizadeh, 2015). As a receptive skill which exposes us to authentic and coherent language, reading stands out; one might learn too little about a language, if any, without ample amount of time devoted to reading. The undeniable role of reading in learning a second language has been empirically supported by the existing research on reading; first, as Krashen (2004) highlighted, reading is a rich source of comprehensible input. Second, Cummins (2003) argued that improvement in reading skill will lead to improvement in the very skills of writing, speaking, and listening. Therefore in this review, the focus is on an application called Newsela, which, as its name reveals, uses news and interesting articles to help learners improve their reading ability in a second language.

Description

"We are educators, parents, siblings, and friends who aren't satisfied with the quality of the content our students are exposed to. We know they deserve better, and are committed to bringing authentic, engaging, diverse and accessible content to all learners" (Newsela website, 2020). Newsela is available in two formats; smart-phone device application and a web page, so it can be downloaded either from Google play store or Apple store and installed both on Android and iOS devices, and also it can be reached through its website on PC. There are two sign-in options for Newsela, first, through the Newsela account that can be created for free, second, via a Gmail account (see Figure 1). Newsela is a database of current events stories tailor-made for classroom use. Indexed by broad themes e.g., War and Peace, Arts, Science, Health, Law, Money. Stories are both student-friendly and can be accessed in different formats by reading level. Newspaper writers rewrite a story four times for a total of five Lexile levels per story (Teachersfirst, n.d.).
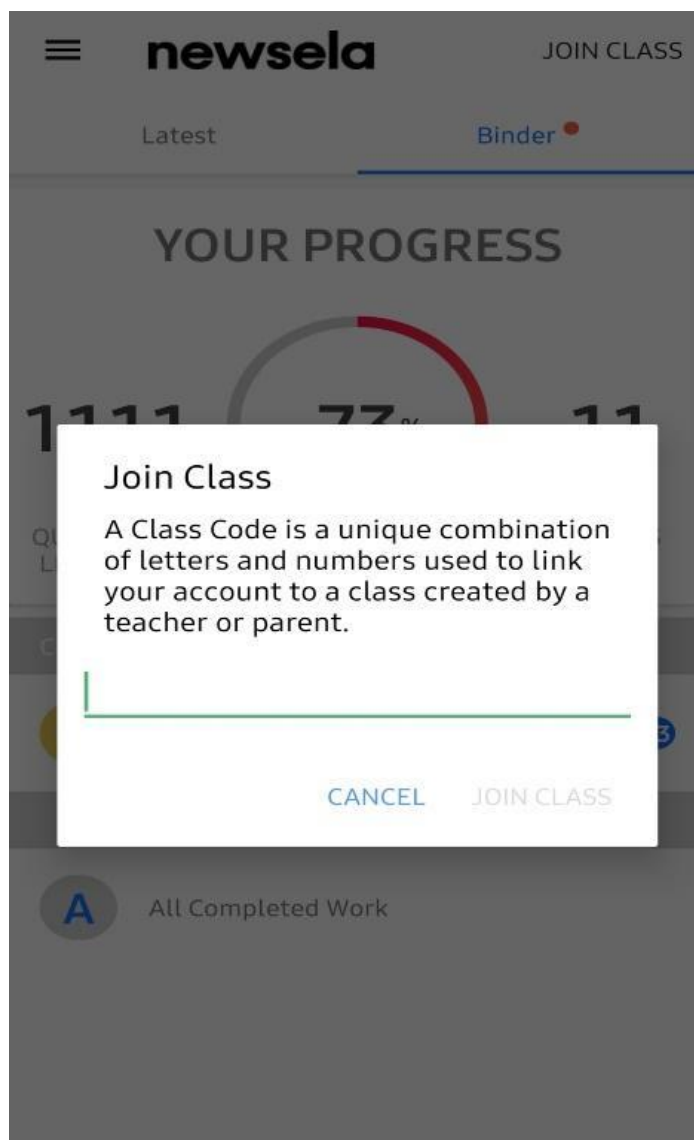
Figure 1

sign-up options

The first impression of the app is a page with several sets of news articles, each with a title of one or two lines (see Figure 2). After registering on the app via Newsela account or Gmail, learners are provided with a number of new articles (Newsela has not announced any plan on how often it releases or updates articles). The topics of articles vary so that learners have the opportunity to choose from and go through ones that seem interesting to them. There are two general ways that learners can use Newsela. First, they can randomly browse the application and pick those articles that they think are worthy of reading. Second, they can join a teacher's class on the application and only read the articles assigned to them by their teachers. Pro version of Newsela gives teachers this opportunity to create a class and give their learners the class code to join (see Figure 3).

Figure 2

Newsela interface

What is special about these classes is that teachers select and gather those articles that are relevant to their class syllabus so that students get to know more about content covered in the classroom. When learners open an article on the Newsela app, users have several options to proceed.

Figure 3

To join a class

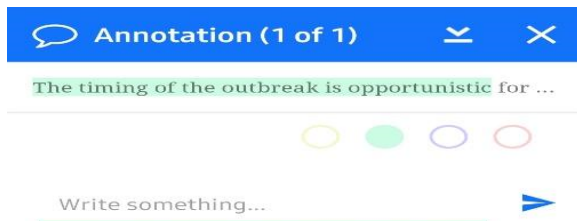In general, three main features of Newsela can be categorized into the following:
▪   Annotation
▪   Reading comprehension Questions
▪   Level-adaptation

In the following paragraphs, the above mentioned and other minor features of Newsela are discussed in detail.

First, users can save an article to read later. Second, they can adjust the font size of the text so that it can be easier to read. Third, learners can highlight words and sentences that are new to them and they would like to learn them in four different colors (see Figures 4 and 5). Fourth, learners

have the chance to add additional notes like synonyms, antonyms and pronunciation to the highlighted words. Fifth, level-adjustment option; once learners open an article, they have this option to find the level-appropriate version of the text, namely, there are five levels for each text in Newsela, which are adapted by Newsela staff. The levels are described by Newsela as lower-elementary school, upper-elementary school, middle school, high school and authentic-level text. However, these levels have been designed for native English speakers and the question that rises is how will the native speakers' levels (i.e., grade 2-12) match with those of language learners? The authors of this review article asked Newsela's Customer Success Representative this question who explained the situation as follows:

> When you [the teacher] identify the class grade level, Newsela delivers articles to students in that class at that grade level. As they start reading and taking quizzes, students provide Newsela data on how well they understand what they read. Based upon this information, Newsela adjusts the reading level up and down for individual students. …. The basic idea is that we think there are three participants in the task of finding the right level for each student with each article: teacher, Newsela, and student. Newsela will nudge a student up and down, you as the teacher can direct a student to choose one or another level, and the student can click to change the level themselves. (R. James, personal communication, May 4, 2020)

Figure 4

Annotation

Figure 5

Annotation

For each level learners can clearly see that structures and vocabulary are tailor-made for that specific level. Sixth, at the end of each article, learners are introduced to related articles (see Figure 6). Last but not least, Newsela provides students at all levels with four comprehension questions, which are multiple-choice for each level of text. After answering the multiple-choice questions, learners receive feedback to check their comprehension. Questions target different aspects of reading comprehension, ranging from very general ones such as, main idea, the best title, to very specific ones such as, tone questions, implied questions, pronoun reference questions and so on (see Figure 7). It is worth mentioning that in the paid version there are more features such as teacher-made questions, writing prompts, and quizzes.
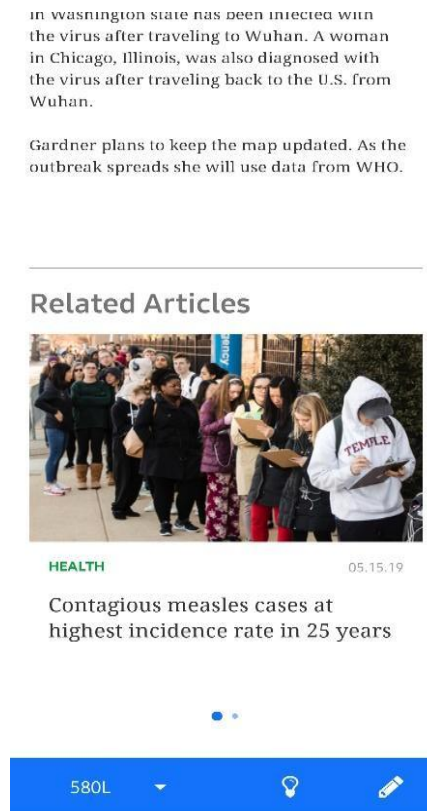
Figure 6   **Figure 7**

Level adaptation   *Related articles*

Evaluation

Teachers and educators who incorporate Newsela into their teaching have a motto which is "Every teacher is a reading teacher" (Neihouse, n.d.). This motto underlines the importance of reading in teaching, so when it comes to Newsela, we know that we should definitely benefit from it, but the question is how to use it effectively. Nevertheless, Newsela has its pros and cons.

First, it satiates different learners' passion to learn, since it has a variety of articles and interesting topics for all ages and tastes. Second, good annotation options make learners more interested and engaged in the app, because they feel that they are reading and doing something at the same time. Third, the level adaptation feature enables students of different levels to use the app and also helps learners to evaluate their level continuously to see if their language has improved or not. Fourth, Newsela is a great help to teachers. Teachers can easily create a virtual class and let their students join it, then teachers can assign reading materials and easily check out their students' activities. Fifth, learners learn languages. Moreover, they grasp new content and sets of information about various topics. That is, as Newsela encourages extensive reading, it helps learners to elevate their general knowledge and enjoy what they read. Last but not least, as well as for extensive reading, Newsela can be used for intensive reading in classrooms.

On the other hand, there are some weaknesses that are hoped to be taken care of in the coming updates and versions. Newsela does not keep track of learners' progress. Question types are limited to multiple-choice, thus they are not as engaging as possible. The authors realize that generating other types of reading questions is no easy task, but one way to get away from this problem can be to have its staff generate a variety of questions and then charge learners more to have access to this specific feature. The feedback that students receive on the reading comprehension questions they answer is not helpful enough since it only indicates which questions they have answered correctly and which wrong. But of course, those learners who join a teacher's class might receive extensive feedback from their teachers.

Figure 8

Questions

Conclusion

It is hoped that this app review has helped shed some light on the appropriate and efficient ways to use Newsela for different groups of learners with various ages and proficiency levels. Technology and education nowadays are growing really quickly, hence the future of language learning and teaching is absolutely promising. Newsela is a mobile application and a browser-based web page which is designed to improve reading ability of language learners; it is user-friendly and lots of its features are free. Furthermore, Newsela elevates learners' general knowledge in different fields of studies, since the articles it provides are updated and introduce the breakthroughs in science and education to the learners. The app's advantages outweigh its shortcomings and learners can make the best of it at all levels of language learning. Newsela's key features are: 1) annotation 2) level-adaptation, and 3) reading comprehension questions. Teachers can create virtual classes in the application and students may join classes by entering class codes given to them by their teachers. In these classes, teachers can put level appropriate and related reading materials for students. Newsela, with help of its staff and artificial intelligence, produces reading articles at different levels so that all learners can benefit from the application. While language learners are reading articles, Newsela let learners know about related articles they are currently reading. Providing learners with some facilitative options like highlighting words and phrases, adding notes to words and adjusting font size, Newsela is considered a popular and efficient language learning platform among learners (Bhagwat, 2018). Finally, users who find computers easier and more convenient for language learning can benefit from the web page of Newsela on their browsers of computers at www.Newsela.com

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