

# Outstanding Teaching, Learning and Assessment (OTLA) Action Research Project

Using digital readers to engage and build confidence in reading

Blackburn College - June 2022

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# Using digital readers to engage and build confidence in reading

## **Blackburn College**

## **SUMMARY**

This project wanted to investigate how Microsoft Immersive Reader (IR) could be used to build reading confidence and help learners access more difficult texts. We began by exploring possibilities for classroom use and then moved on to explore its use with the help of Additional Learning Support (ALS) staff.

## **RATIONALE**

At Blackburn College many learners who begin study programmes have not yet achieved the required grade 9 – 4 in English language and must resit their GCSE English. In 2021-22 learners retaking English numbered 620 and of those learners 22% were identified as having additional learning support needs. Key to helping our learners obtain this qualification and move on to successful further study is the building of confidence in reading and improved comprehension skills.

Many of our learners are reluctant readers, easily put off by the length of texts and the sheer amount of new vocabulary that some GCSE as well as vocational reading requires. To aid with this, we spend a lot of time helping learners to break texts up, explore context to help understanding, and demonstrate how it isn't necessary to understand every word. However, we felt that by exploring the use of IR with its built-in dictionary, translator and chunking function we might also make the task of reading more interesting.







Figure 1. Using MS Immersive Reader to support students with reading activities.

Following the written text as it is read aloud can aid comprehension, as well as helping with the pronunciation of unknown words, the spelling of words which they recognise or use in speech and in doing so build fluency. Alongside these functions the tool also allows learners to customise their reading experience by speeding up or slowing it down, limiting the amount of text seen at one time, changing letter size and font, as well as background colour.



Figure 2. A screenshot of the IR in use.

We felt these features not only stimulate engagement with the text but encourage learners to reflect on the strategies that work best for them and to take responsibility for these when reading.

Ultimately, our aim was to get learners reading, to encourage them to read more extensively to build up their confidence, and to support them to manage the more challenging 19th century texts in their GCSE as well as to prepare them for the different text types on their vocational programmes. Several empirical studies have shown that extensive reading, i.e. reading large quantities of varied text types purely for reading fluency rather than to complete a task, has positive effects on language acquisition and understanding (Mart, 2015) and is an effective way to enhance language proficiency (Maley, 2005). Although there has not been a great deal of research into the use of IR, one American study reported that teachers had found that the tool did facilitate access to a wider range of materials which in turn, 'helped teachers find content aligned with their learners' interests, at comprehension levels that were challenging and previously inaccessible.' (McKnight, 2018, p.6).

#### **Other Contextual Information**

Blackburn College is a large General Further Education College (FE) and Higher Education (HE) provider based in the Northwest of England. The two biggest departments that meet with the most learners across college are Additional Learning Support (ALS) and English and Maths. Both departments we felt were uniquely positioned to explore the use of the tool and would be in the ideal position to share what was learned across the college.

For the purposes of this project, we worked with four English GCSE resit classes; two classes of 14 learners, with grade 3 teacher assessed grades (TAG) and two classes of 12 learners who had achieved a grade 2 TAG. Across these classes, 14 learners had been identified as having additional learning support needs. All classes were working on the Pearson Edexcel 2.0 lift curriculum with the target of moving up by a minimum of one grade and were from a variety of vocational backgrounds including Hairdressing, Motor Vehicle, Construction, Business, Art, Childcare and Health and Social Care. We then worked with 11 Additional Learning Support Assistants (ALSAs) who supported learners across the college.

## **APPROACH**

The research was a mixed method, learner and teacher focused plan that investigated how training, awareness and use of IR in the classrooms could impact on the learner learning experience both in the English classroom and, as the research progressed, across the wider college as learners transferred their usage of IR to vocational lessons. The intention was to evaluate how easily IR could be introduced in classrooms, how user friendly and portable it was and if it encouraged learners to read with more confidence.

# Setting up the project

- Initial assessment of what the tool could do, what learners would need to access it (Appendix 3).
- •Created a project description to explain to staff and learners what we were aiming to do.
- Identified how the tool could be used in different ways, both in and out of lessons.
- Set up a Padlet to collate materials at the end of the project.

## Initial Strategy

- Principal researchers implemented the integration of IR activities into English classes.
- Verbal feedback from staff and learners on how easy the tool was to use as a classroom learning tool/ learners' reactions/any impact on reading confidence and comprehension.
- Analysis of findings led to a new approach which then focused on individual learners and widening participation into other departments supported by ALSAs.

## Revised Strategy

- Training in the use of IR for English teachers and Additional Learning Support Assistants (ALSAs) to facilitate the roll out of the trial (Appendix 3e).
- •MS Teams page set up to support roll out and provide technical support (Appendix 3f).
- English teachers and ALSAs asked to identify which learners might be interested in or benefit from using this technology.
- Referrals identified and researchers attended learners' English classes to help them adapt and include IR technology through use of their mobile phones during regular classroom time.

## Evaluating Impact

- •We collected feedback from group tasks on flipchart paper (reading task and evaluation of the IR too)
- •We spoke with the individual learners we worked with and collected verbal feedback.
- •2 case studies were identified (Appendix 2).
- •We collected feedback from ALSA sthrough Microsoft Forms and a Padlet (Appendix 3g and 3d).

## Sharing & Next steps

- Continue to work with the ALSAs to reflect on IRs usefulness in different learning situations and how the tool responds to their learners' specific needs.
- Share findings with quality leads and amplify English reading skills through cross college training.
- Expand and reinforce the use of the tool by training up personal tutors and appointing IR champions to support the sustainablity of the approach.
- Review impact of IR on individual learner's confidence and reading comprehension.

## **OUTCOMES AND IMPACT**

#### **Teaching, Learning and Assessment**

We began to explore the IR tool as part of whole class activities encouraging learners to experiment with the tool and tell us whether they thought that it helped them to understand the texts more easily. They were shown a short video explaining how to use the tool and we highlighted functions which we thought might interest them and be of use in practising for their GCSE English exam, e.g. identifying word class which is now a requirement on the language question on both GCSE English papers.

Feedback from learners on first being introduced to the tool was mixed. In some sessions learners said that they found listening to the software through headphones difficult and it limited their participation in the wider classroom. Similarly, some found the voice "really irritating", and asked if it could be changed, while another noted that the reading aloud of text line numbers and punctuation was also annoying and interrupted the flow of the text.

"It is quite good but the line numbers are really irritating, can you take them out before the next lesson?"

We were pleased to find that learners were interested and quite happy to tell us whether they found the tool useful. In one class learners were asked to use IR to read a 19th century non-fiction text, a text type which had proved extremely challenging in a previous class. Learners were introduced to IR and shown how to access it through Microsoft Teams but they also had paper copies in their GCSE booklets. They were asked to work in groups to identify the main themes and ideas from the text and record their answers on flipchart paper (Appendix 3d). The tutor noted that the learners approached the reading with more enthusiasm and were far more animated in the group task than they had been in the previous session. They completed the task more swiftly and were keen to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using the tool:

"It was really useful to know about this. It would have helped during lockdown when we working from home".

Reflecting on how the session went and on the feedback from learners, tutors said that they were surprised to find out that learners who struggled more with reading found the tool distracting and "too simple" while stronger readers recognised that reading and listening aided their understanding as it was "helpfull (sic) to understand the situation". Tutors thought that having a paper copy might have been more of a distraction which resulted in some less confident readers not really following the electronic version or engaging with the different functions. We now feel a more scaffolded approach which allows these learners to explore the functions in stages might make the process less confusing. We did find out however, that 3 learners from the class have gone on to use it in their vocational classes.

Other tutors have reflected on the difficulty of preparing resources for using the IR, e.g. having to extract line numbers, uploading texts to Teams, preparing learners to use the resource.

To address some of these barriers, we adapted our research strategy to implement the use of IR for use with individuals in lessons. Training in the use of the tool for both English teachers and ALSAs was then provided.

The feedback we have received from ALSAs who have been using IR with their learners has been

very useful. The vast majority have found the tool easy to use, having had the training, and said that learners have been engaged. The different functions of the tool have been used in far more targeted ways by the ALSAs. Here are some of the comments fed back so far:

Working with one second language learner:

"I showed him how to translate task instructions using it to aid understanding".

With another learner who needs to be more independent in his learning the ALSA said: "I used it to help increase font size and also to block out text helping to chunk the reading".

Another ALSA working with a learner with Autism reported:

"Helping a learner with their IT work, they were using Word and struggled with recalling information. So I typed the information within Immersive Reader and they used it that way. We would talk about what it was that they wanted to write about and then they could put it into their own words on the computer".

We will be continuing to monitor how useful the IR is with our case study learners and are planning to continue this research until the end of the next term, when we are likely to have more specific data.

#### **Professional Development**

The project has provided us with a wonderful opportunity to build positive and collaborative relationships with colleagues who support our learners both in English classes and across the whole provision. We approached the manager of the ALS team and they were keen to accept training and explore the use of the Immersive Reader with us and have since suggested collaboration on other pilot projects. Reciprocal relationships are being developed on this to work more closely for the benefit of learners.

The training was well received. The 2nd group of ALSAs told us that they were really looking forward to their session as following the first session they said that there had been a real 'buzz around the office' with colleagues saying that the training was 'really good' and 'CPD worth doing'. One of the ALSAs said:

"The immersive reader training was very insightful. It proves to be a useful tool for everyday use because it is simple to use. The additional tools such as translating, pace of reader and adjustable font size makes it even more helpful."

All in all, the ALSAs were keen to explore the use of the tool as there were so many functions that could be of use to learners with specific learning difficulties and second language learners:

"I used immersive reader to translate a document for a student as English wasn't their first language. A very useful tool."

And another staff member said:

"It works well with Visually Impaired students as it allows them to highlight only relevant text."

This project also provided the opportunity and impetus to explore research into the latest digital reading technology and build on the practices that had been forced through due to online learning in the COVID-19 lockdowns. This project also provided the opportunity and impetus to explore

research into the latest digital reading technology and build on the practices that had been forced through due to online learning in the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Although many teachers could appreciate the possible uses of the tool within their classes, especially to inspire and motivate learners, who tend to switch off when tackling archaic text types, we took their feedback regarding time constraints on board. In the summer we will be preparing off the shelf whole class sessions to help engage learners with 19th century texts as well as more scaffolded introductory sessions.

#### **Organisational Development**

The project has allowed us to work in collaboration with colleagues who support learners across all of our provision as well as vocational staff. The further involvement of the ALSAs has the potential to carry the use of digital reading technologies across all areas of the college. Its integration into classes could not only be a very useful aid for those with learning difficulties but also help reluctant readers access high level and varied content, 'creating equity through access to learning materials.' (McKnight, 2018, p.17). We believe the tool would be useful in theory lessons across the curriculum to support learners in Hairdressing, Plumbing, Motor Vehicle, Catering, to name but a few, to facilitate their understanding and interpretation of subject specific terminology to match their practical skills.

## LEARNING FROM THIS PROJECT

The project has afforded the opportunity for English and Learning Support staff to work together more closely and provided us both with more time to reflect on how we can best support our learners and ensure that they get the most out of their classes. We will be collating further feedback on the impact of the tool from ALSAs later in the year and look forward to working together on other projects, inspired by this work, which are now in the pipeline.

The project has taught us that technology in classrooms can only be used productively once fully researched and with full support and training of those both using and facilitating access to the tools. At the beginning of the project, the use of IR proved problematic as there are several conditions that needed to be met for the software to be used effectively. Additional research and training were undertaken to prepare smart boards and computers to avoid problems when rolled out for use with other staff and learners.

Reactions from learners have also highlighted the significance of training at the right time of year. For example, Learner MP struggled to engage with a new tool midway through his programme and Learner FS seemed reluctant to engage in something that not everyone was using. Scaffolded sessions in which all learners are encouraged to explore the usefulness of the tool and share their experiences with each other should not only encourage confident use of the tool but reduce any sense of embarrassment in class.

We have taken feedback on board from teachers regarding the time implications of using the tool and we believe that by developing ready-to-go materials for English teachers to use in the summer we can encourage them to explore the use of the tool more thoroughly in whole class contexts. We also believe that a more scaffolded approach in which teachers and ALSAs gradually introduce the functions of the tool would encourage less confident readers to reassess its usefulness.

We have also learned that whilst it can enhance both access to learning and the learner experience, even free technology has cost implications. Not only the necessary hardware requirements and

other software packages that are licensed and chargeable, but it needs to be run online to be most effective. Although this is covered in college, asking learners to use it outside of lessons will have an impact on more economically disadvantaged learners who do not have unrestricted access to the internet or have limited data allowances.

We have learned that no matter how exciting and shiny some digital tools may appear or how high your expectations are, both learner and facilitator have to find them engaging and worthwhile and the only way to really do this is to keep asking what's working and responding to their feedback. Rather than be daunted by initial criticisms, we took comments on board, adjusted training, and adapted our approach to make sure the full use of the tool will be evaluated for its usefulness.

## **REFERENCES**

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Mart, C.T. (2015). Combining extensive and intensive reading to reinforce language learning. *Journal of Educational and Instructional Studies in the World*, *5*(4), pp.85-90.

McKnight, K. (2018). Levelling the Playing Field with Microsoft Learning Tools. [online]. Available at: <a href="https://edudownloads.azureedge.net/msdownloads/Learning">https://edudownloads.azureedge.net/msdownloads/Learning</a> Tools research study BSD.pdf (Accessed: 23/03/2022).

## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix 1: The Project Team**

Project Role	Name	Job Role	Contact
Project Lead	Joanne Taylor	Curriculum Lead for 16-18 English study programmes	Joanne.taylor@blackburn.ac.uk
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Research Group Lead	Sue Lownsbrough	RGL	sue.lownsbrough@gmx.co.uk

#### **Appendix 2: Learner Case Studies**

#### Case Study: MP

MP is a student who has been with us for a number of years and has worked his way through our English Functional Skills offer and is now studying for GCSE. MP has an EHCP so is fully supported in his English lessons. I initially showed him how to access the Immersive Reader on his phone but when I went to check on his progress he stated, 'I am struggling to see the text – it is too small'.

I then arranged for him to borrow a laptop from ALS and provided headphones for the learner to use in class. The teacher began putting the work on Teams for him every lesson and MP had full access to the Immersive Reader and his ALSAs had also attended our training session on the Immersive Reader.

It was a mixed success; the student did say it helped him to understand the texts in more detail but he was struggling with starting a new process in the middle of the year. He did say he would be happy to try again in September whereupon he could have all the resources in place immediately and this would become his usual way of working.

## Case Study: FS

FS is studying GCSE English at the College after joining as a school leaver in September of 2021. Originally studying a vocational programme of study, FS moved to an introductory programme after finding the full study programme challenging to engage with. FS has not achieved any pass grade GCSEs in their Secondary education and is targeted to achieve one higher grade this year in English moving from a grade 2 through to a grade 3. The learner has struggled to engage with any written work in class although they actively take part in class discussions. FS believes this is due to dyslexia but has not engaged with offers of learning support referral and is self-diagnosed. FS engages with creative activities more strongly than with reading and writing and was offered IR support to help with accessing texts in class. The class teacher, working with FS for several months, judges some of the student's reluctance to engage with reading and writing to be avoidance and finds FS challenging regarding engagement in learning activities.

FS was given one to one support during class time with their teacher to support accessing IR and training on how to use it to aid reading and comprehension. The class teacher supported this additional learning support by ensuring that all class resources and texts, including class presentations on Power Point were made available on FS's Teams site. In class FS suggested there were several reasons that the use of IR would not be possible and suggested their phone was not compatible. Other reasons not to engage were lack of battery charge on mobile phone, not wanting to use the Teams app and not wanting to use headphones in the lesson. Other alternative strategies were suggested including the use of a college provided laptop or tablet, but these were rejected on the grounds that FS felt that they would visibly highlight their learning need.

Overall FS was reluctant to fully engage with IR in the classroom and would only use the software if it could be used on a mobile phone. FS made comments that suggested using IR was considered additional work in class rather than a way of accessing learning that would support development and was not keen on pursuing the study. FS agreed that now they knew how to use the technology they might use it outside of the classroom but did not want to engage with it in lessons.

#### **Appendix 3: Project Resources**

Find resources, media and links from this section on this Padlet board: https://padlet.com/c\_collins2/OTLA8\_Blackburn

## Appendix 3a: All About Microsoft Immersive Reader



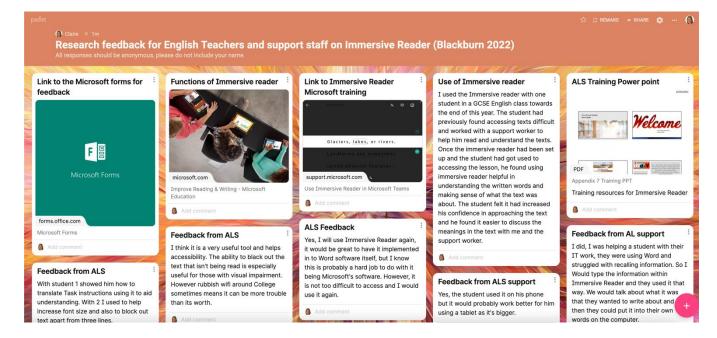
This 'All about Immersive Reader' page was created by Microsoft to show users what IR is capable of, which platforms allow access and how to get the most out of the Immersive Reader.

## **Appendix 3b: Brief Project Description**

We wanted to see if the Immersive Reader and other Read Along software would engage our Post 16 learners who struggle with reading and understanding complex texts (particularly from the 19th century). We worked with different groups of learners from the disengaged (Motor Vehicle) to the strugglers (Additional Learning Needs) to see if listening to a text assisted their comprehension skills and made them interested in the text.

## Appendix 3c: Staff and learner feedback Padlet pages

We created Padlet pages for both staff and learners to upload feedback quickly and easily.



## Appendix 3d: Lesson plans and learner feedback

The lesson plans show how we planned to use the IR for whole classes and the work and contains feedback from learners. The researcher also documented how useful IR was when covering a class for

times	Activity - teacher	Activity - student	Link to obj.
5 min	Recap last weeks learning and link to this	Students will identify their	
	week's session – advanced group are now	starting point in the new	
	moving to the new 2.0 lift qualification.	scheme of work and review	
		their curriculum on the	
	Give out new 2.0 resource books for	subject unit outline	
	students		
3 min	Introduce the aims and objectives of the	Note taking - listening	
	session to students		
5 min	Odd one out tasks on Power point – ask		3
	students to think about which picture	Students to write their	
	they feel is the odd one out and why.	answer in their books	
	Ask students to share their thoughts -	Students to share their	
	discussion – why is it the odd one out? –	answer	
	direct questioning		
	Stretch and challenge		
	What perspective would this be if it was		
	being described? Zoom in out? What		
	narrative perspective would be best to		
	suit this picture?		
15 min	Read the text by Henry Mayhew (19th	Demonstrate how to access	1, 2, 3
	century non-fiction) Students can now use	the IR in teams and	
	the text on Teams and implement the	encourage students to try	
	immersive reader alongside reading in	<mark>it.</mark>	
	their books (dual coding)	Students will write on flip	
	On flip charter paper on your tables	chart paper the main	
	write a list of the main themes and ideas	themes and ideas from the	
	you have identified from the text	text.	

a SEND learner.

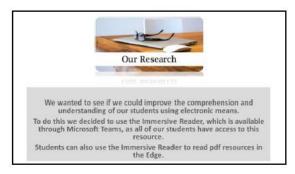
## **Appendix 3e: Training PowerPoint**

This was used to train both the English Team and the ALSAs – we went into great detail to make it as easy to follow as possible for staff and learners. We uploaded it to the Microsoft Teams page that we created so that it could be referred to if anyone was having difficulties trying to access IR in the classroom.

22/03/2022



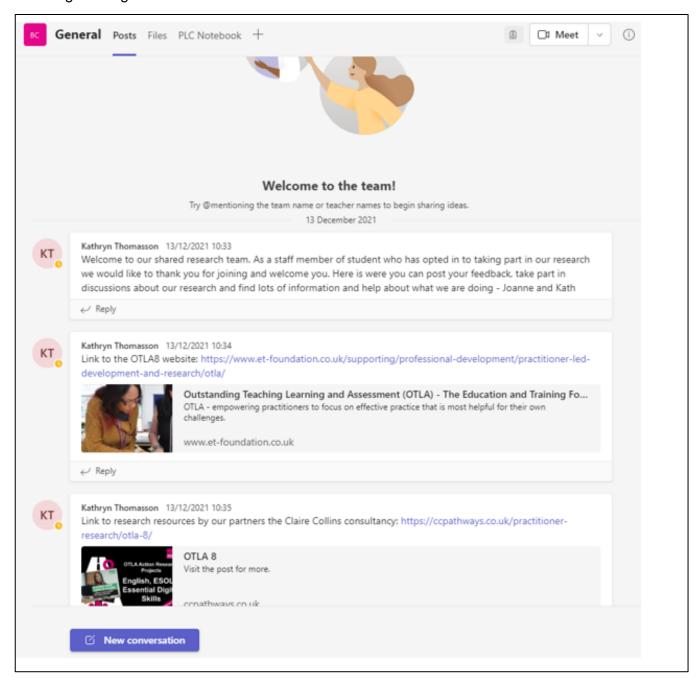






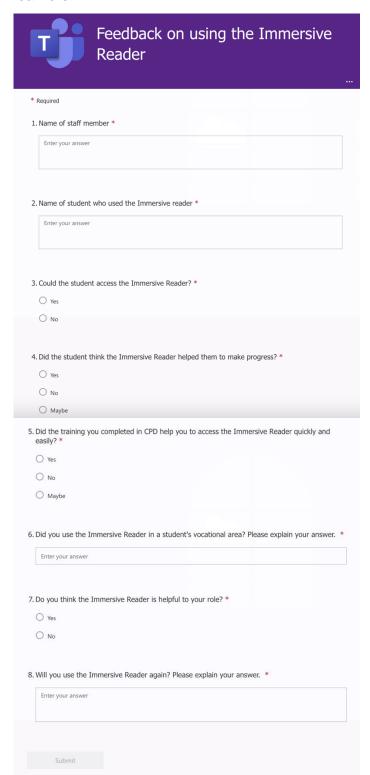
## Appendix 3f: Screen shot of our Teams page for Research

We used this to collate all the activities we created such as the Padlets and training PowerPoint as well as gathering information from staff and learners.



## Appendix 3g: Microsoft Form for feedback

We created this form to receive focused feedback from ALSAs who had used IR when working with learners.



# Appendix 3h: Extract from Excel spreadsheet of the responses we received in Microsoft Forms.

Action taken	Reflections
I helped the student use it as she struggles to write and this way she could dictate exactly what she wanted to say.	I would use it again with a student who isn't as confident with writing.
Used in the English class	Yes, the student used it on his phone but it would probably work better for him using a tablet as it's bigger.
With student Z I showed him how to translate Task instructions using it to aid understanding. With BM I used to help increase font size and also to block out text apart from three lines.	I think it is a very useful tool and helps accessibility. The ability to black out the text that isn't being read is especially useful for those with visual impairment. However rubbish wifi around College sometimes means it can be more trouble than its worth.
I did, I was helping a student with their IT work, they were using Word and struggled with recalling information. So I Would type the information within Immersive Reader and they used it that way. We would talk about what it was that they wanted to write about and then they could put it into their own words on the computer.	Yes, I will use Immersive Reader again, it would be great to have it implemented into Word software itself, but I know this is probably a hard job to do with it being Microsoft's software. However, it is not too difficult to access and I would use it again.

## Appendix 4: Participants and Stakeholders

No of learners?	57	No of staff?	9
No of organisations?	1	No of employers/ stakeholders?	1

## Appendix 5: Research/ Evaluation Approach

Participant/observer (e.g. practitioner reflective accounts, logs)	X	Interview/survey (e.g. polls, questionnaires, learner interviews)	Х
Observation of practice (in person, video, observation notes)	X	Document analysis (e.g. learner work, session plans, annotated resources, policies)	
Custom test/assessment (of knowledge, skill, attitude, participation) for your 'intervention'		High-stakes learner assessment (e.g. A Level results, End Point Assessment, BTECs	
Before/after assessment (e.g. measures of progress or change in attainment, participation)		Comparative trial (e.g. comparing participants' outcomes against a 'control' group	
Other (specify):	Action Res	search.	

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