

# **ESSENTIAL DIGITAL SKILLS ACTION RESEARCH PROJECTS**

**FINAL REPORT ON THE EDS ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT –  
"BEGINNER EDS? THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT!"**

**Manchester Adult Education Service**

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on the EDS Action Research Project – "Beginner EDS?  
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For further information regarding the EDS Action Research programme and this project go to <https://ccpathways.co.uk/essential-digital-skills/>.

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# Final report - "Beginner EDS? There's an app for that!"

## Manchester Adult Education Service

This project explored to what extent our Learning Community app could support low level English learners to develop their Foundation Essential Digital Skills (EDS) in a blended learning environment. Learners have responded positively to the app content and the project has inspired more of our colleagues to use it too.

### Summary

Manchester Adult Education provides Entry Level to Level 2 courses/activities to improve the lives and skills of adults in Manchester. Our learners are from diverse backgrounds with varying motives for developing their Essential Digital Skills.

This project looked at our Learning Community app, which had originally been designed for the delivery of Pre-Entry ESOL content to low level learners enrolled on the 'Talk English' Project programme. This app, which is actually a website, has useful features for beginner learners of digital. For example, clear and easy to navigate colour coded sections for 'classroom' and 'targets', and settings to prevent learners from leaving the app when clicking, so reducing the number of browsers open at any one time.

Teachers can direct learners to the app to complete modules and set targets. Learners can complete activities in the app and evidence completion through 'ticking,' adding photographs and using voice recordings. Teachers can give feedback to learners on their progress within the app.

We wanted to know to what extent this app could be used to develop EDS with foundation level learners with low English and Entry Level 1 to Entry Level 3 ESOL learners, and if it could prepare learners for developing their EDS in a blended learning environment. The app wasn't used on an accredited EDS course; it was used on non-accredited courses with the aim to better prepare learners for an eventual EDS qualification (EDSQ).

### Rationale

Our Digital Skills for Beginners courses attract significant numbers of low-level English and ESOL learners. Digital Inclusion and progression into positive destinations is a priority for MAES.

We noticed that many learners progressing through the Digital Skills for Beginners courses either did not want to progress to the next level course or they were not yet ready to progress. There were anxieties and confidence issues around moving to a blended learning environment (our Entry Level 3 EDSQ is a blended model delivery). It was also evident that, for some learners with low level language/basic skills, the acquisition of foundation skills could take longer.

We wanted to increase accessibility and progression amongst this particular group of learners and felt that the app could be used to facilitate these areas by providing a

safe and supportive space for learners to develop their digital skills. The app can be thought of as a simplified Google Classroom, and it was hoped that use of the app would develop learners' essential digital skills through a blended learning model.

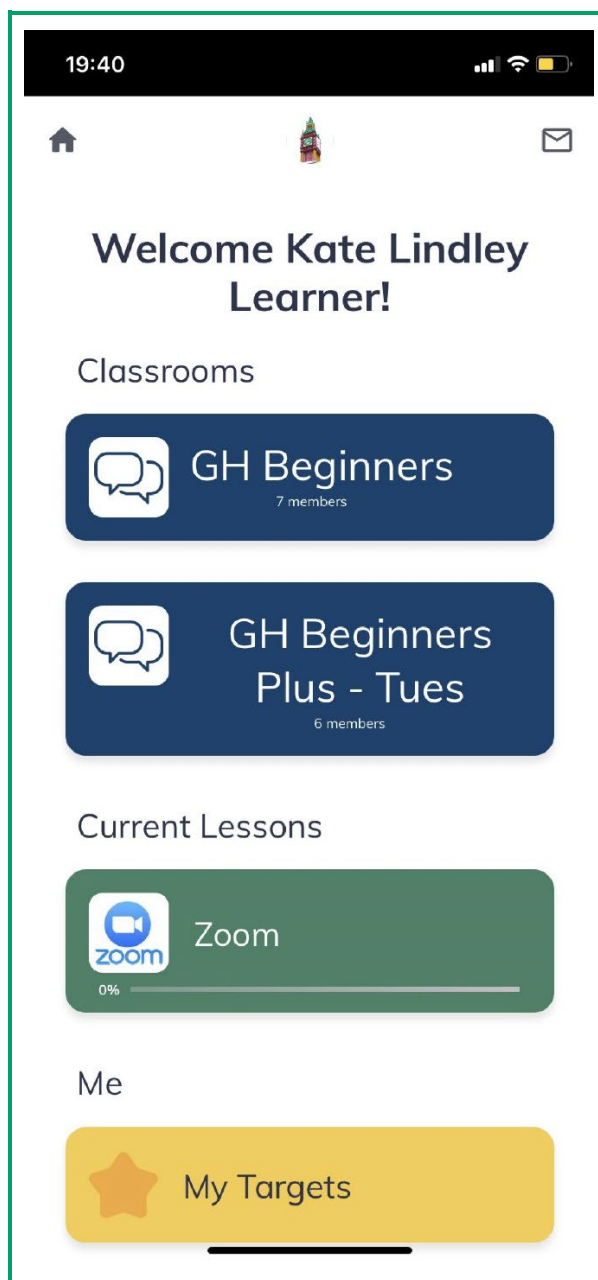


Figure 1: Learner view on the app

Learners who had already completed a 6-week face-to-face Beginner course (or had slightly higher skills) would be invited to a 6-week blended course: "Beginner Plus". The plan was that learners would have one session in the classroom and complete one task asynchronously at home, via the app.

The app tracks learner progress and helps provide an evidence base, so it is clear to see any progression through activities attempted and/or completed, recordings, feedback and to get a sense of the development of softer skills, e.g. digital confidence and resilience.

## Approach

In terms of app content, we wanted to prepare learners for potential future EDSQs and so we identified areas which we felt Beginner Digital Skills learners would need to practise (namely email and video conferencing). However, we did not want to impose the curriculum from the top down and so we worked with the learners to create a digital skills clock. This approach helped both them and us to see how and when they used digital skills.

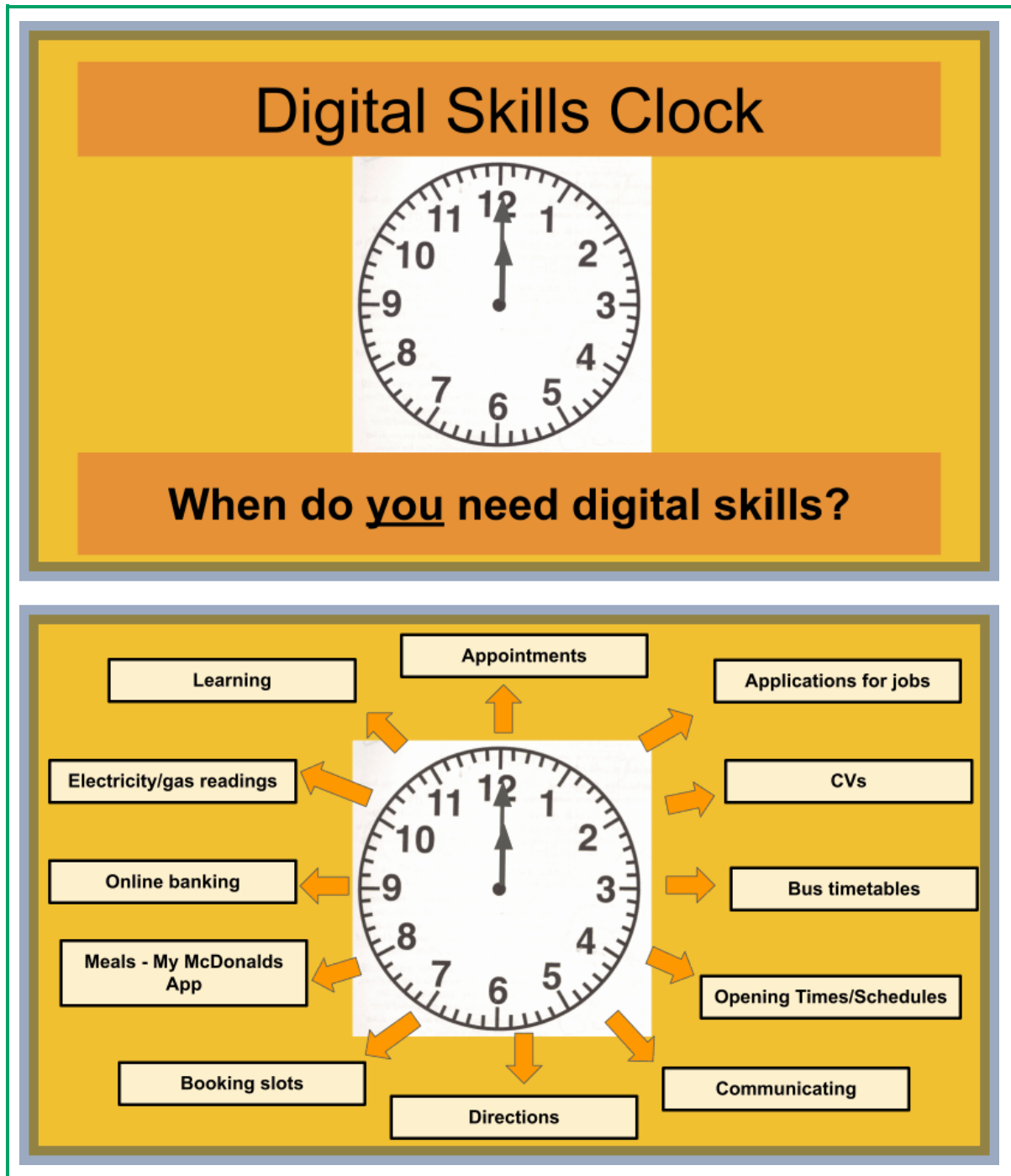


Figure 2: Digital Skills Clock

From this approach, it became clear in all our classes that learners wanted to develop email and video conferencing skills. It was great that the areas of the EDS standards which we felt they needed to practise actually aligned with the skills the

learners themselves identified as being most relevant to their lives. The EDSQs definitely seem much more reflective of how people use tech nowadays (than previous IT qualifications).

We decided to introduce the app in the face-to-face Beginner classes that were running at 3 centres during Lockdown 3 (Jan-Mar 2021). We had envisaged it as a simple blended learning approach that we could use with our Beginner Plus classes but we asked all the Beginner classes if they would be interested in using it too.

Different teachers had different approaches: some left it to individual students to decide if they wanted to use the app and some made it integral to their lessons. Modules on topics such as, email, video calling, copy and pasting were added to virtual classrooms and individual work was sent in the private chat as a link.

All teachers involved recorded their reflections on a shared Padlet (see Appendix 2). Here is a reflection from one teacher from the session where she first introduced the app to the group:

*I like how they are very vocal about what they need and would find useful. A lot of discussion on 'IT frustrations' and I wonder if we could have something on the app around 'reframing feelings' when something goes wrong e.g - "it's another opportunity to practise those steps" instead of "oh now what have I done" - I heard a lot of that today and I think they put too much pressure on themselves.*

## Professional learning: Evidence of changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices

Although some learners were really excited about it and seemed keen to use it; others were less enthused by it. This appeared to be for several reasons: some learners had come on the course to learn PC skills and did not want to practise on a phone app; some did not want to study at home; ESOL learners found it quite hard to get on the app on their phone, as well as trying to learn how to use a PC.

We felt that with more time to explore and practise the app (for both teachers and learners), more of us would come to see the value of it; that is, it is a *relatively* easy-to-use, self-contained VLE (virtual learning environment) and communication system. Instead of learners and teachers having to familiarise themselves with several different platforms, the app has lots of features and is self-contained. One teacher commented:

*I am looking forward to using the stream to communicate with my learners. It seems more efficient than emails and less invasive than texting them on their personal phones.*

Following discussions with the Talk English team (who have used the app extensively), we developed an approach to introducing the app that included breaking down the stages of using the app into microsteps, so as not to rush into getting learners on it and completing the lessons.

As a result of this useful feedback, a teacher on the Pre-Entry “Digital for ESOL” course (which we launched just recently) spent much longer on the lead-in to the app with these Pre-Entry learners than when she introduced it to the (mainly) native speakers on the Beginner Plus bridging course. She spent time pre-teaching lots of useful vocabulary before even mentioning the app; terms such as homescreen, click/tap, add, homework, app, PIN/password helped the learners to understand how and why they were using it. She also used lots of visuals to depict each step of searching for and logging on to the app website. This was a crucial stage that had been overlooked by some teachers when we used the app initially.

For learners in our pilot “Beginner Plus” classes, using the app seemed to help them achieve their stated aims. After watching tutorial videos on Google Meet and Zoom, and then testing their knowledge with Wordwall games, learners were able to access both Zoom and Meet and use some of the key features in these apps. By allowing them to see the interface in videos first and then reinforcing the video content by completing quizzes, it could be suggested that learners had a reduced cognitive load (Shibli and West, 2018) when coming to try the apps for the first time. They already knew what to expect and understood what each icon was for.

One learner noted that she and her classmates were making ‘small steps and big changes’. Learning how to cut and paste, for instance, made a big difference to their digital work. By studying tutorial videos on the app and then practising on their phones, they felt better able to cut and paste data to complete their Universal Credit journals.

In terms of teaching practice, we will continue to use tutorial videos, vocabulary pre-teaching, games and quizzes to introduce new software before learners access it for themselves.

## Evidence of improved collaboration and changes in organisational practices

The courses took place in different locations across the city and this resulted in different demographics according to the localities. One group consisted of predominantly white British job seekers, another group was mostly learners with an ESOL background, and a further group was much more mixed. Teachers adapted their approach based on the needs of the group and it was revealed (perhaps unsurprisingly) that the groups with an ESOL profile needed more induction time on the app than those who had English as a first language. It is easy to tailor content on the app to each learner, by sending links as direct messages.

Increasing motivation and maintaining engagement to use the app was key. Through initial assessment, teachers came together to discuss key course targets and how this blended course would differ from our purely face-to-face beginner course. We decided to focus on email and video calling (the communication aspect of the EDS framework).

Tutors who were using the app shared ideas and activities to support learners in achieving the KCTs (key course targets). The project lead and deputy developed these into modules on the app for all teachers to use in their classrooms (with the flexibility of using the app in different ways that suited learners’ contexts).



Teachers from different curriculum areas came together to discuss their experiences of the app and to direct our next steps with it. We learned from each other's experiences (see Figure 3: *Reflections from Teachers* Google Sheet, also on the Wakelet from Appendix 2) and now use a shared Google Drive of resources to better introduce the app to learners.

What feedback have you received from the learners re: their experiences of the app?	What advice would you give to teachers new to the app?
They have enjoyed using and it has helped them. This is because we have been able to create materials that support f2f / Zoom sessions	It depends how tutors want to use them. In TE the app is integral to our course and activities on the app support f2f sessions. I think you need to teach your learners how to use it and allow sufficient time for this in class. You also need to get learners to add it to their homescreen on their phones or devices so that it's easily accessible , then you need to make sure you put on good quality activities. Another tip is to ensure you give learners timely feedback when they do submit work.
I have had a couple of my more able learners say they really like it and find it very useful for practise. Difficult to get access. Easy to get access and use. Good for Learning	Give it a go! Embed in face-to-face sessions to support learners to use it and see the benefits. Practise and eventually it will become your friend. Excellent teaching and learning tool.
They liked the idea. I think they expected it to be a standalone app.	Please give it a go. Have a play with it first. You can't break it.
	Make sure you understand all the facilities on the App and are able to use them. Make sure you receive appropriate training and this should include, how to produce

**Figure 3: Reflections from Teachers Google Sheet**

Tutors added reflections to the collaborative Padlet (see Appendix 2) and caught up with each other in meetings, telephone calls and ad hoc conversations. Tutors could comment on reflections and concerns, and support with any trouble shooting. Participants in the project ranged from a student teacher to a curriculum manager; it was good to see collaboration happening amongst professionals of all levels and experiences.

We are now using the app as part of our “Digital for ESOL” short course, which is being co-created by teachers from Digital Skills and Talk English teams, and hope to use it as part of a new “Digital Nature” course, which will be informed by the work of a Family Learning tutor who delivered an “Outdoor Adventurers” course. There is great potential to roll-out the use of this app across all curriculum areas at MAES, both to capture learning on non-accredited courses and also to support the development of learners’ foundation digital skills, and we can share our learnings of what works (and what doesn’t) with our wider team colleagues.

## Evidence of improvement in learners' achievements, retention and progression

Learners had differing motivations for joining the course. These different motivations were targeted through the app content. Learners looking to secure work and referred by local DWP centres wanted to develop specific skills relating to job search etc as well as develop confidence in relation to specific aspects of digital technology. Other learners wanted to develop their laptop skills, and some wanted to better develop their essential digital skills for learning on other courses.

During the first session, learners reported feelings of 'confusion' 'being overwhelmed' 'being lost' and 'lacking in confidence.' We wanted learners to experiment, take risks, make mistakes, use multiple digital skills and have fun. It seemed that the app would provide this safe 'self-contained' space for learners to have a positive experience and build their skills. It would also be a space where learning was manageable, and motivations could be met and/or extended.

Some learners returned to the app, others didn't engage with the app outside of the classroom and some didn't engage at all. This perhaps reflects the different motivations learners have or could be indicative of how much app "buy-in" the individual teachers developed with their classes.

As outlined earlier, learners in the "Beginner Plus" classes were able to achieve their targets by watching tutorial videos, playing games and then testing out the various platforms (e.g. Zoom, Meet, Gmail) for themselves.

Some learners really enjoyed getting the tailored work in the private chat and two "Beginner Plus" learners have just progressed onto a blended Entry Level 3 Essential Digital Skills course (see Appendix 2 for more positive feedback.)

## Learning from this project

Despite being a short project, many learners got value from taking part in it. Feedback included "really useful", "good for practice" and "excited" [to use it]. The fact that the app is simple and self-contained was really effective for lower-level learners and felt more effective than Google Classroom; we are now using it as the main learning management system for our Pre-Entry "Digital for ESOL" course. However, it was not wholly successful.

For some learners the size of the screen was too small on their phones. Most of the app's features were readable but when it came to doing Wordwall activities (see Figure 4), for example, the font size was just too small. Teachers must always check any content they add to the app on their own phones to ensure readability, ideally on different makes of phone where possible.

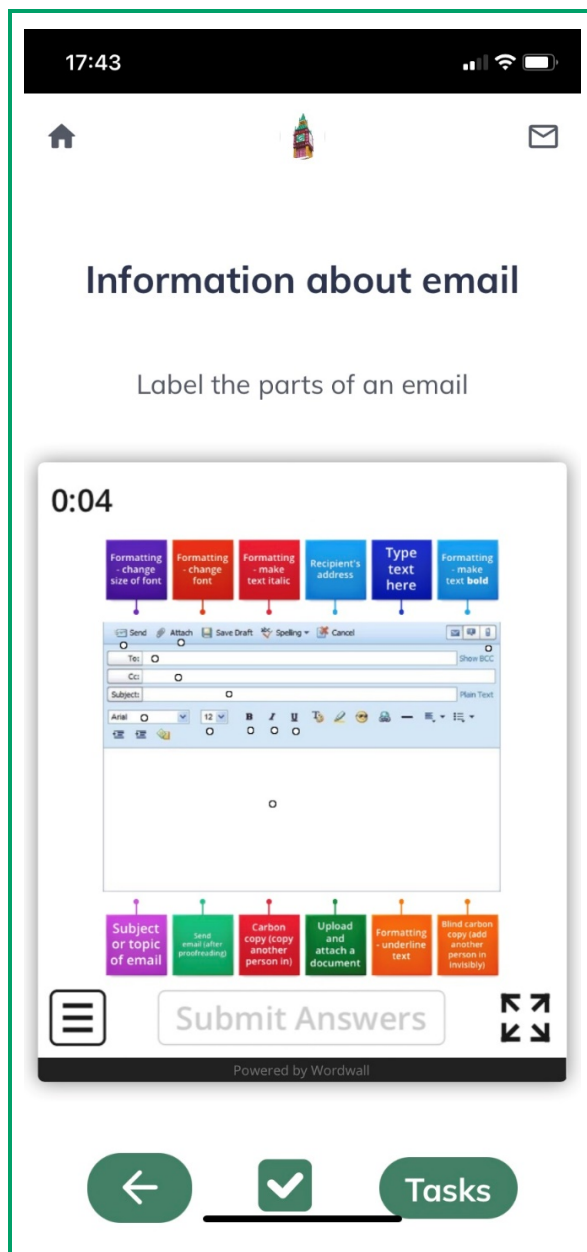


Figure 4: Wordwall activity

To make it easier to use (and to practise their PC skills), some learners added the website as a bookmark to their browser bar and they found that to be much more accessible.

We learned that if you want learners to start using the app regularly, you need to add content that is meaningful, relevant and useful to them and to provide timely feedback on any tasks you set. We needed to get into the habit of regularly checking the app from home to see who had been on it and responding to their input. We allocated time in our calendars for this task.

We also needed to use the app at set times in the face-to-face classroom so that learners could get used to accessing it with teacher support, where necessary. Setting warm-up activities on the app worked well for this and soon learners in some classes were used to logging straight onto the app to find the activity.

We all agreed that the app needed to be introduced early on in the course and at the start of a lesson. It was hard to take learners off a task that they were really engaged

in order to get them using the app. It worked much better in the classes where teachers used the app for starter activities.

We also agreed that the app needed to be an integral part of the course teaching method, at least initially. If it was not wholly integrated, it risked being just another onerous bit of tech to learn.

A common reflection was that getting learners on the app initially was quite hard work and generally required one-to-one support. Where it was easy for learners, this tended to be in classes where English was a first language.

Perhaps learners needed much longer learning the skills of how to enter their username (i.e. phone number) and pin. I wonder if, in some cases, the teachers could be so invested in the content of the app, that the stage of actually getting on it in the first place gets a little rushed. The skill of accurately entering a username and password could easily be practised over an entire lesson or more.

Also, once on the app, many learners would forget their pin between sessions and found re-setting it hard work. A screencast showing learners exactly how to re-set their pin, would be really useful.

We need to be mindful of the potential frustrations some learners may face when having difficulties logging in. Teachers reminded them that it wasn't their problem; it is something we all struggle with at times.

We feel that a lot of pre-teaching of entering usernames and pins would be beneficial before introducing the app. This skill is essential for so many online services that it cannot be rushed or overlooked.

Now we have started using the app with Pre-Entry ESOL learners (who are learning Digital Skills), we have adapted our approach to spend much longer on the lead-in and pre-teaching important vocabulary. Getting learner "buy-in" to the app before trying to get them on it is so important too. If they know why they are doing it, and can see the value of the app, any potential frustrations during logging on may be mitigated by this desire to use it.

### **Update:**

Since writing this initial report, we have used the app as the main learning platform for several 4-week Digital for ESOL courses. Learners have used the app to complete their ILPs (individual learning plans), complete online lessons and communicate with teachers and classmates.

These courses were taught entirely via learners' smartphones and so the skills needed to use the app were relevant to the course content (namely, using phones to access online ESOL classes). Teachers spent time pre-teaching relevant vocabulary (e.g. app, log-in, PIN, add to homescreen) and focused on the micro-steps of getting on and using the app effectively.

Because the app was introduced as the main learning platform and all learners were eager to use it, there was no reluctance to it. Learners on these courses were not there to improve their desktop skills and so using the app on their phone didn't feel like a distraction to the main lesson, as it did in some of the earlier classes. Several

Beginner Plus learners said they were competent with smartphones and what they really wanted was the chance to develop their keyboard skills.

The absence of PCs in the Digital for ESOL classrooms also helped with learner buy-in. Whereas in the Beginner Plus courses learners were seated at and invested in using the PCs, in these Digital for ESOL classes the focus was on using the learner's own device and so it became a habit for learners to engage with the app both during and outside of lessons.

## Appendix 1 – The project team

Project Role	Name	Job Role
Project Lead	Kate Lindley	Digital Inclusion Programme Lead
Deputy Lead	Emma Langlois	Digital Skills Curriculum Manager
Project team	MAES staff	
	Rob Barclay	Digital Skills Teacher
	Sarah Tinsley	Student Teacher
	Gaynor Hudd	Digital Skills and ESOL teacher
	Nuala Trace	App project manager and Talk English Manager
	Kate Lloyd	Talk English Teacher
	Lisa Robinson	Talk English Lead
Project Mentor	Chloë Hynes (ccConsultancy)	
Research Group Lead	David Prinn (ccConsultancy)	

## Appendix 2 – Multi-modal report on Wakelet

Access here: <https://wke.lt/w/s/7J4bLH>

Contains:

- Reflections Padlet from the action research participants
- Digital literacy clock
- Google sheet of tutor reflections.

## References

Shibli, D. and West, R. (2018) Cognitive Load Theory and It's Application in the Classroom. *Impact: Journal of the Chartered College of Teaching* (2). Available at: <https://impact.chartered.college/article/shibli-cognitive-load-theory-classroom/> (accessed 4 May 2021).





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