

Young Children's
Reading on Screen:
What can be done to
Promote the Availability
and Quality of Digital
Books/Book Apps for
Young Children?



Across Europe, the number of children who have access to and ownership of a tablet is steadily increasing. Therefore, the content offered for young children on tablets needs our attention.

It is worrisome that most content is in English and few sources are available in local languages.

What can be done to promote the availability and quality of digital books/ book apps for young children?

On the 25th of January 2018, a group of European researchers, children's publishers, designers and users met in Amsterdam to discuss valuable qualities of digital books/ book apps, among which:

- Interactive digital books are as much enhancing children's curiosity and involvement as games, competing for their attention when they use a tablet.
- Successful design principles mediate between child and book in similar ways as an adult does when he/she shares a story with a child.
- Well-designed digital books are particularly beneficial for children at risk for language and literacy problems.
- They may serve as a good guide for low SES parents on how to support their children's language and story comprehension.

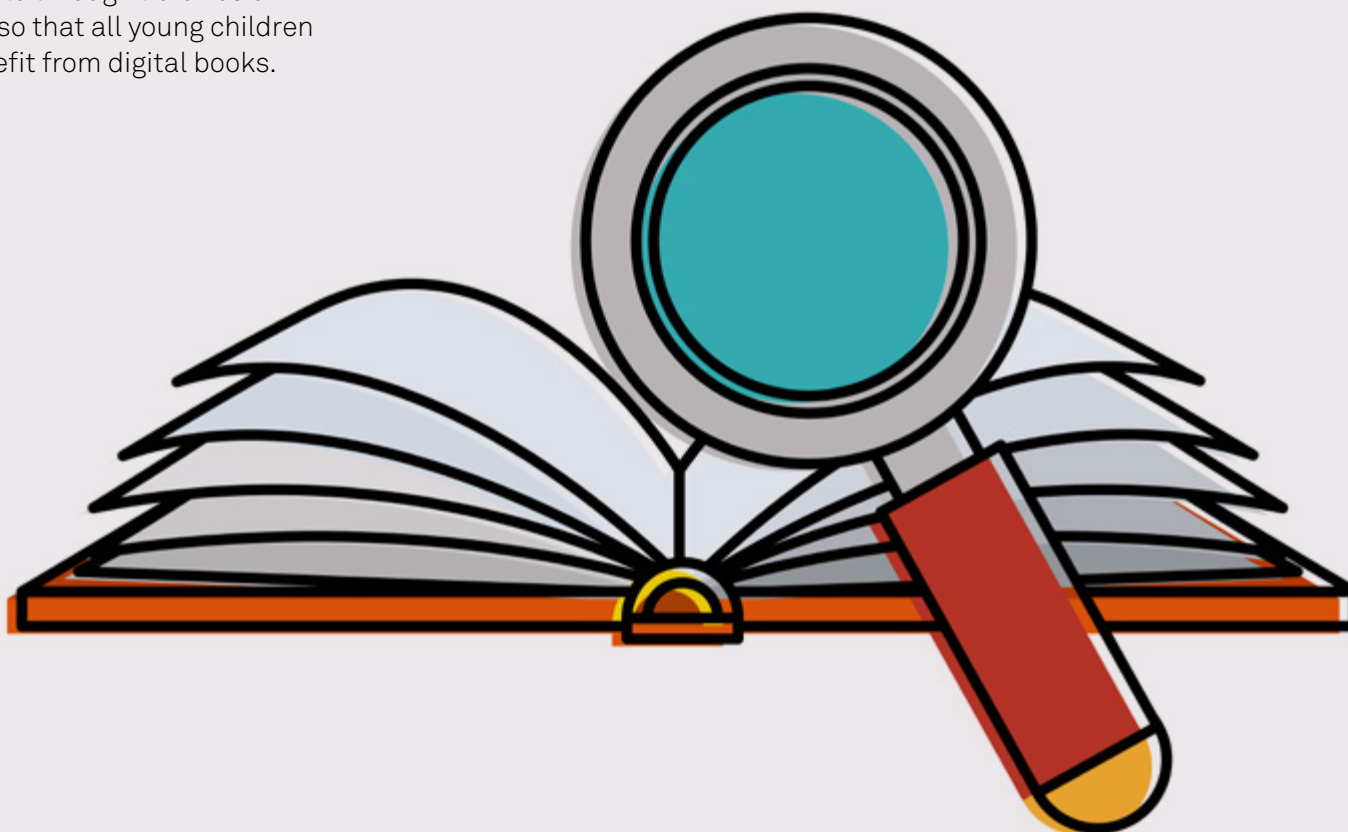


Good practice design of digital books:

- does not distract attention from the storyline by including games and gimmicks even when those are related to the story;
- uses interactivity in a well-designed, thoughtful way that complements the storyline and enhances the reading and learning experience; it is for instance helpful to add buttons that help the child to control the pace at which new information comes available;
- uses camera movements like zooming in on details of the illustration and motion to focus the child's attention on what is important in the illustrations.

Other important issues:

- digital content is available in local languages, which is crucial for young children in the process of learning the mother tongue and for immigrant families, who could benefit from digital books for learning second languages;
- translations from one language to another should preserve the literary qualities of the text;
- digital books should be accessible through libraries or schools so that all young children can benefit from digital books.





Children's publishers and designers struggle with numerous problems leading to growth/ stagnation in digital books' market share, among which:

- There are serious copyright problems; these are sometimes solved by focussing on stories without copyrights like fairy tales but there are many other interesting stories that are not considered to be turned into a digital story.
- Releasing well designed digital books for young children is hard. The App store is not the best option because App Store is a marketplace for interactive software, not digital books.
- Animating books requires a new kind of expertise that is often not available due to lack of training/ professional development possibilities for designers of digital books.

Users' struggles:

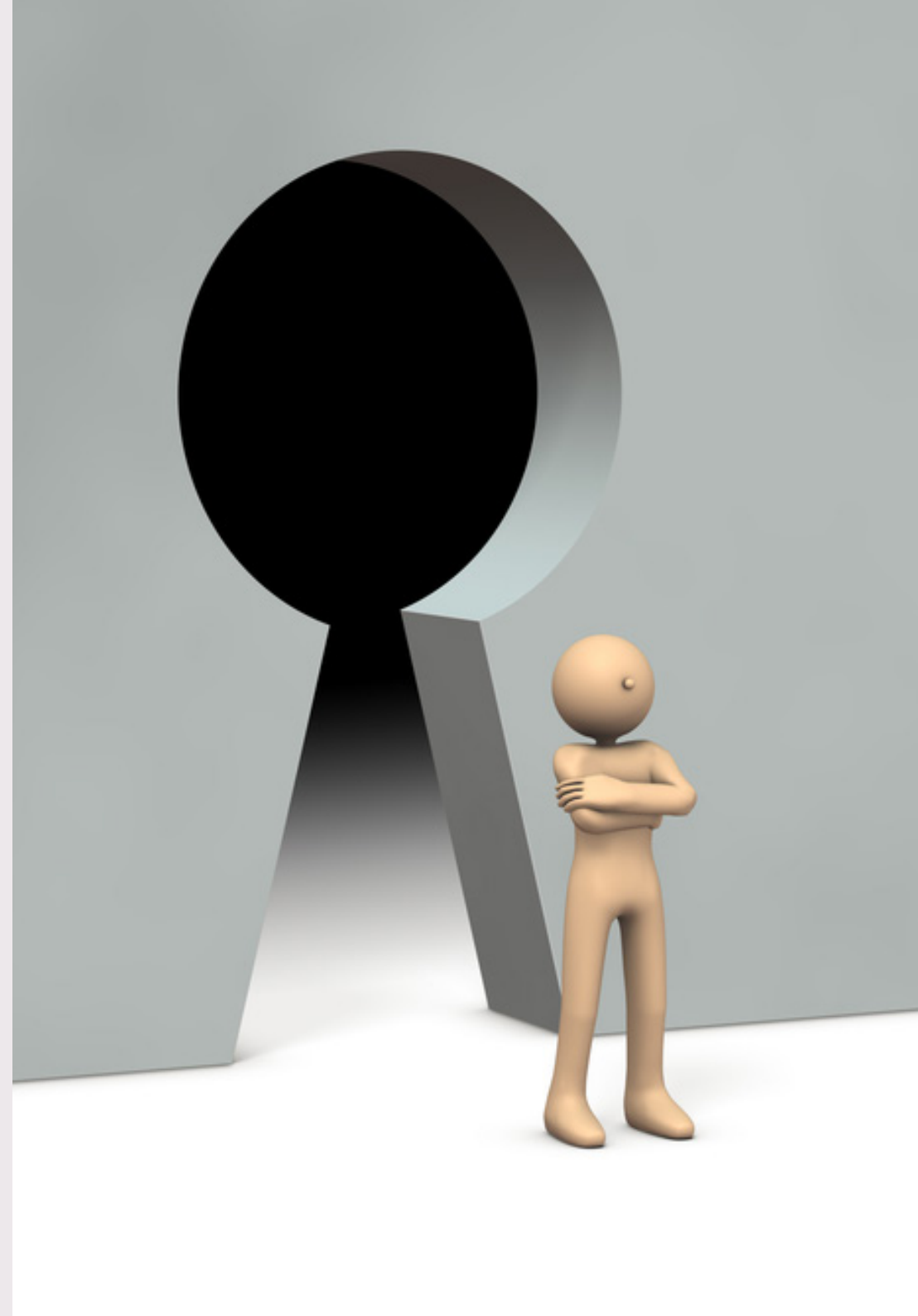
- Parents and teachers have to find their way in a confusing landscape of apps and miss an authoritative, evidence-based guide to select useful digital books/ story apps.
- It seems therefore a good idea to create platforms that offer a set of high-quality educational digital books. However, distribution appears to be an issue: Schools prefer print books even though the platform has the option to make materials available at home through schools.
- Teachers and trainee teachers need guidelines on how to read and integrate digital books in classroom praxis across the curriculum.

Urgent problems to be solved by policy/funding:

- International media companies that operate in the small countries need to be instructed to give content in local languages a prominent and visible position on the interface.
- Government funding could help increase the number of local languages a product is available in.
- There is an urgent need for funding to increase the number of high-quality digital books that are freely available to children at risk for language and literacy problems.
- There should be more options for professional development training for designers/developers of digital books.
- There is an urgent need for international research in several language areas to test digital books as a useful tool to stimulate language development of second language learners.
- Communication between researchers and developers/publishers needs improvement in order to stimulate exchange of ideas and insights about what valuable qualities of digital books are, for instance by creating a site to share ideas/insights or organizing regular meetings for app developers, publishers, users and researchers.

Urgent practical actions

- Enter in conversation with the gatekeepers (such as the App store) to promote higher quality book apps.
- Develop an evidence-based quality mark that developers can apply for.
- Use libraries to bring digital books/ book apps to all sections of the population.
- Educate parents and teachers on how to select high-quality digital books and developmentally and educationally appropriate literacy apps.





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