

The boundaries of reading apps for children

August 18 2014, by Natalia Kucirkova



Credit: Yan Krukau from Pexels

A series of binary discussions has been plaguing early reading instruction for quite some time now: phonics versus whole language, reading for pleasure versus reading for learning, digital versus paper books. And it seems that there is a new tug-of-war on the educational horizon: spritzing versus slow reading.

Spritz is a recently developed programme that brings speed-reading to the untrained eye. [Its makers](#) claim that users can ultimately read 1,000 words per minute. Their goal is to have 15% of the world's texts available in Spritz format [by 2016](#).

But a message is coming from the other direction too. Those [who revere](#) and often romanticise printed [books](#) argue that [we need to slow down](#). They warn that the [digital age](#) has made us shallow readers who flit from text to text without taking anything in.

We have a clear conflict here. On one hand, lots of people want to read faster, especially now that there is more to read out there [than at any other time in human history](#). On the other hand, we hear that children in the digital age do not read in depth and the often cited culprit is the device in their hand – the technology that distracts them from picking up a good book.

Is a middle ground possible?

Reading and writing always come [hand-in-hand](#). If readers whizz through rather than engage with texts, this will ultimately be reflected in the type of texts made available to them.

Spritz certainly responds to the zeitgeist to read fast in order to cope in a text-saturated era. You can also see this tendency in the proliferation of listicles on news websites and [contents pages](#) that tell you how long it will take you to read an article. Some say that the only way to cope with large email volumes, is to [binge-read our inboxes](#). Spritz could be thus seen as another invention that panders to our growing tendency to read more but in less depth.

At the same time, readers – be they young or old – need to be given time to pause and think with the author of a text. Slow reading is, for many,

synonymous with [deep reading](#) and reading for learning and there are in fact technological developments happening to help readers improve their deep reading – almost the antidote to Spritz.

There are [reading annotation systems](#) with built-in interactive discussion to help readers – students in particular – to better understand what they are reading. These slow them down in their reading by asking them questions or prompting them to pause and take notes. Similarly for younger readers, there are [read-to-learn apps](#) that explain vocabulary and thus help with reading comprehension.

So which approach is better for the contemporary reader? We can now whizz through every page on the internet by installing [Spritzlet](#) on our web browser. It may not be long until slow reading widgets will become available to help us highlight information in onscreen texts, underline unfamiliar words, unpick abstract metaphors and provide links to facts.

In thinking about [how to teach children to read effectively in digital age](#), we need to stop thinking in terms of slow and fast.

There is a difference between reading an email or a chemistry textbook or a novel. We use different reading formats for different contents, and different contents & formats for different purposes. These different purposes come with different personal investments and hence different reading techniques.

There is already a disturbing disconnect between the content and format of reading happening in schools and outside the classrooms. Let's not increase this gap with another fictitious dichotomy.

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