Review of en.news app and One-on-One with Mike Elchik

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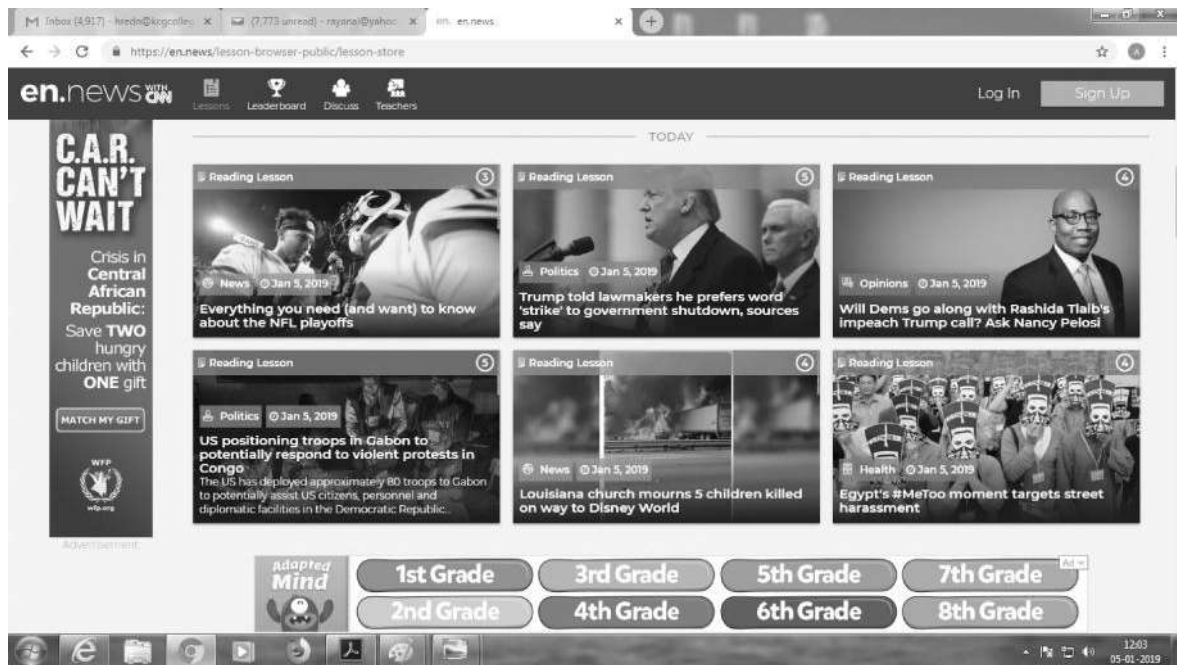
Part 1: Review of en.news

(NB: In the first part, extracts of the article "Lessons that Engage" that appeared in various editions of *The Hindu Edge* dated 26 November 2018 have been reproduced.)

Ever since access to high-speed Internet has become easier and the cost of it has become cheaper, the number of number of English language learners learning the English language online has been on the rise. As smartphones are ubiquitous these days, online learning has become more popular than ever before. A great demand for learning English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) among non-native speakers of English across the globe has resulted in experts and edupreneurs creating English learning apps. Though there are several advantages of learning English online, there are a range of challenges too. The need to choose the right app is a huge challenge. Learners are not in a position to choose the right app that motivates them, sustains their motivation and enables them to make steady progress.

Recently, I came across an app called **en.news**. The app, available on both web and mobile, is unique in many ways. The users of the app are provided with authentic materials pulled from CNN's latest news and articles on various topics including entertainment, sports, news, politics, travel and technology. The materials are so appealing and compelling that users enjoy reading them. As Dr Stephen Krashen, a well-known expert in second language acquisition, says the input (reading material / audio / video) must be comprehensible and compelling to have an effect on language acquisition and literacy development. According to Krashen, the input needs to be not just interesting but compelling and when it is compelling learners forget that it is in another language and are motivated automatically.

How innovative is the en.news application? The lessons are complete. Each lesson helps learners to develop their reading and listening skills, acquire vocabulary in context, learn pronunciation of correct words, know the definitions of key concepts and practice the language in an engaging way. The tool enables learners to learn authentic pronunciation and also recognizes their pronunciation. The application supports full audio playback of articles. A range of dialects and voices facilities, using the same voice technology as Amazon Alexa, are available to read the selected article out loud to the learner.

A typical lesson has an interesting reading text or video and based on that there are many useful reading, writing and listening activities. Each lesson is characterized by type (news, sports, entertainment,...), difficulty level (1 to 5 or CEFR A1 to C1), number of words, videos, meanings of words and phrases, interesting activities, etc. As the learner completes each part of a task, they score points and are thus motivated to do more exercises.

Skills focused are listening, reading, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Flash cards enable learners to learn the meanings of words and phrases in context. Learners can regulate the speed while listening to the reading of any text or watching any video.

en.news (https://www.en.news) is managed by Mike Elchik, the founder and president of WeSpeke, a global language technology company based in the USA and affiliated with the Language Technologies Institute at Carnegie Mellon University. WeSpeke has partnerships with CNN and The Wall Street Journal and together they use artificial intelligence technology to repurpose media content for English education for free.

Part 2: One-on-One with Mike Elchik

Can you please share with me why the app en.news was launched? Who is your target group?

en.news was launched as an innovative partnership between WeSpeke, a leading, global language technology company, and CNN. The intent of en.news is to provide a structured, fun and engaging way to use CNN content for English language learning. en.news is designed to automatically repurpose CNN news stories into English lessons that are pedagogically structured for

learning, levelled for proficiency and gamified to make English learning fun and personalized.

The predominant demographic for English language learners globally is 18 – 36 year olds. These are individuals that are required to have English skills to be admitted to a university, individuals that are required to have a baseline English proficiency for a first job, and individuals that are required to have a specified level of English to get a job promotion.

The target group for the initial launch was individuals with a baseline proficiency in English, the equivalent of B1 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). en.news now supports beginner (or CEFR A1 equivalent) lessons for native Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Chinese learners of English. en.news supports English learners at all levels of proficiency, from beginner to fluent, with any native language.

How many language learners across the globe use the app en.news?

en.news was launched in late January 2018 and has quickly grown to 1.3 million users worldwide.

On what basis do you select the text for each lesson?

The en.news application generates 30 – 40 lessons per day. A patented algorithm is used to sort and filter every CNN article and video to select those best suited for en.news lessons, based on linguistic complexity, relevancy, trending interest and topics followed by en.news users. en.news turns today's news stories into today's English lessons.

How is your app different from other English learning apps?

The app is different from other English learning apps in the following areas:

• **Relevant real-world content**

Each lesson is based in authentic content—the world-class news and information on CNN—and organized in sections that match the needs and interests of learners. This makes the learning experience personalized and relevant. No nonsensical sentences or made-up stories.

• **New lessons every day**

Today's news becomes today's lessons on en.news, with new lessons published on a daily basis. That's like giving the world a new English textbook every day. For free.

• **Unlimited learning for free**

Learning a language is a lifelong journey and on en.news, learners can return as often as they want to take as many lessons as they want. There's no "end of a book" or "end of a course" which means the learning never ends.

• **Part of a daily routine**

en.news combines the habit of consuming news, checking sports scores and staying on top of the world of entertainment with the utility of learning English.

How do teachers use this app to help their learners learn English?

en.news has a Learning Management System (LMS) for English teachers available at: https:// teachers.en.news/ This LMS allows English teachers to build a roster of their classes, assign English lessons based on news stories, and track student progress (e.g. lessons taken, average score, time on task, questions missed, etc.). We are continuing to build out our suite of features for English teachers, based on feedback from the teachers who are successfully using en.news to support their teaching.

How positive is the feedback from users?

en.news has an app rating of 4.7/5 at both Google Play and the Apple App Store. Attached are reviews of the en.news application from Google Play and the Apple App Store. You are welcome to consider this feedback in your coverage of en.news.

Recently, seeing my review of the en.news app in *The Hindu*, a leading newspaper in India, a reader sent this email: "I did not find the app very exciting. When you look from the perspective of a beginner, the contextual meaning in English is the biggest barrier. The solution could be a pictionary with AI based which should read the sentence and give the picture (wherever possible/applicable) and the context meaning/translation. This app (en.news) like all others gives just a dump of all meanings for the said word. I work in the field of skilling for hearing impaired community and the above limitation of our English apps put a big barrier to the

learning. Have you come across any better app which is truly AI based?

What is your response to the query?

We are not primarily targeting "beginners". When you consider the innovation of our AI technology combined with the partnerships we have established with CNN and Dow Jones / The Wall Street Journal, there is a baseline assumption of English skills, typically learned through formal education.

The scenario painted by your reader is an appropriate pedagogical approach and one that is typically applied towards English teaching to children. The Pictionary approach is used extensively in products, apps, games, etc. but it does not give real world context. By definition, our vocabulary is derived from news which provides the context. For level 1 beginner lessons on en.news, we limit the pedagogy to the words that comprise the title of the article or video. Each word that is relevant is then put into a series of exercises that give both meaning and context. Content from both CNN and Dow Jones / The Wall Street Journal, even at the most basic level, is not designed for children. We do not expect that 100% of English learners will embrace our approach, but the results (metrics data from the users) and feedback are that this is the world's premier application for online English language learning. Our challenge is to now scale this application and I am working with my team, my investors and our users to increase the global footprint.

I should also point out that the AI we are applying is in the automatic creation /

generation of the lessons. Our goal is to create the ultimate user experience for learning English and if AI can be used in support of this goal, then we will consider it as a feature.

Some learners say that the listening part is not natural. Will such artificial/ mechanical way of listening (text read by the machine) not put them off?

Text-to-speech technology has come a long way in recent years and will continue to improve on the axis of natural speech and dialect. While state-of-the-art is not perfect, it is regarded as "good enough" for learning activities.

Will app-based learning be successful in the future? Will it promote learner autonomy?

App-based learning is good and getting better every day. However, there will always be a need for teachers. We view our applications as an effective learning platform but also as an effective resource for teachers to integrate into their English curriculum. Motivation is a big part of learning effectiveness. We align the English learning with topics and content that is of interest to the learner, thus they are more likely to interact and engage leading to more effective results.

What are your plans to improve the effectiveness of the en.news app?

We break down our plans to improve the effectiveness of en.news in several categories: pedagogy, content and gamification are a few. There are many ways in which pedagogy can be improved but we have to balance each new method or feature with the user experience. Our English lessons for beginners typically take 5 – 10 minutes and the intermediate and advanced lessons can take 10 – 15 minutes. If you design a user experience that is longer than 15 minutes, you will likely lose their attention to other social apps, games, etc.

In terms of content, we see innovative partnerships that bring habits of consuming news, information and entertainment together with English learning. For example, what if we could turn every cricket match into an English lesson. Do you think users in Asia in general and India specifically would be interested? We think so.

In terms of gamification, there is an endless list of ideas to make users more engaged. On the example above, we could let users earn badges and points that are aligned with global tournaments such as the ICC Cricket World Cup.

References:

P'Rayan, A. (2018, November 26). Lessons that engage. *The Hindu Edge*, p. 04. https://www.en.news