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MOBILE APP REVIEW

English File Pronunciation App
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INTRODUCTION

English File Pronunciation (EFP) is a software application (app) (2012) published by Oxford University Press. The EFP app is intended for use on mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets via Apple's iOS or Google's Android operating systems. The app will cost consumers USD \$5.99 on both Apple's app store and Google Play for the Android version. For this review, the iPad version of the EFP app was used. The EFP app is marketed as supplementary content to Oxford's *English File Student's Book 3rd edition* (Oxemdem & Latham-Koenig, 2015), and content from the app should be familiar to those who use the textbooks. The app is designed to give users a method to "Practise sounds, words and sentences" as the app's tagline declares: "The app that gets you talking". Oxford attempts to entice consumers by claiming that users will "see your communication and pronunciation improve with the unique English File Sounds Chart."

OVERVIEW OF APP

When you first open the app you are prompted to select "American English" or "British English" as shown below in Figure 1. This setting can be changed at any time from the home screen by clicking the gear in the upper right-hand corner.



Figure 1. Initial screen of EFP app offering choice of American or British English.

The main component of the app is the “English File Sound Chart”. Your first encounter with the chart will feature instructions that explain the interface and how to use it. The interface itself is quite intuitive and frankly could be figured out with a few minutes of experimentation by anyone familiar with the ubiquitous touchscreen interfaces of most modern smartphones. The sound chart that makes up the backbone of the EFP app is depicted below in Figure 2.

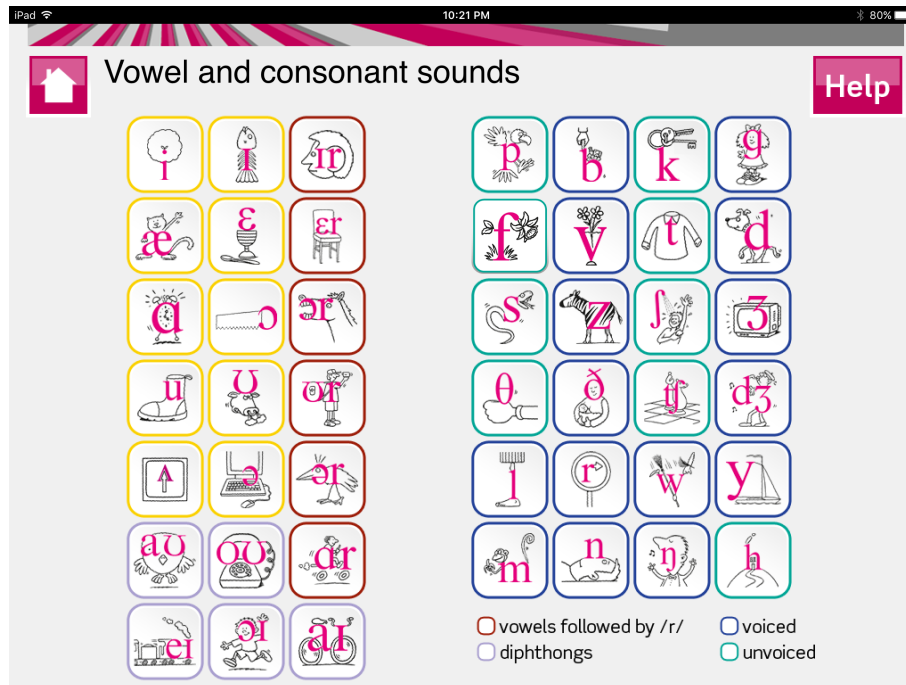


Figure 2. Sound chart

As can be seen in Figure 2, the chart uses characters from the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to label the individual tiles that represent phonemes. Each tile for the various phonemes is surrounded by a red, light purple, blue, or aqua-colored border. The colors represent “vowels followed by /r/”, “diphthongs”, “voiced”, and “unvoiced”, respectively. Tapping a tile foregrounds it and allows the user to hear the phoneme pronounced in isolation, and is followed by an example word featuring the target phoneme. So, for example, after pressing the /s/, the tile will enlarge and the user will hear “S. Snake.” (see Figure 3).

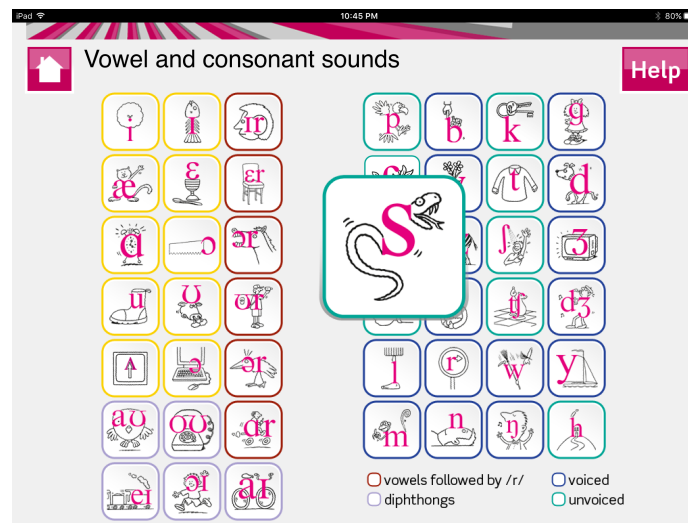


Figure 3. Tapping a tile enlarges it and plays a sample recording

Tapping on a tile a second time takes the user to a new screen that features more sample words that contain the phoneme. Users can play a recording to hear the phoneme in the context of each of the words. The user can also choose to view a set of three sentences containing the target phoneme. In addition to being able to listen to the words or sentences, users can record their own voice and play it back to compare with the example pronunciation provided by the app (see Figures 4 and 5).

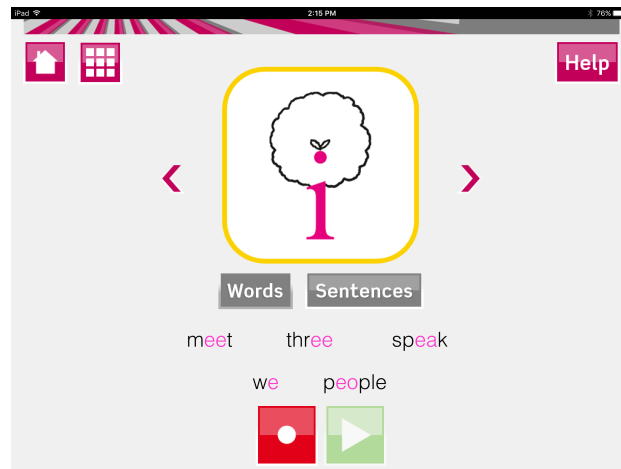


Figure 4. Words for /i/ and record and playback buttons

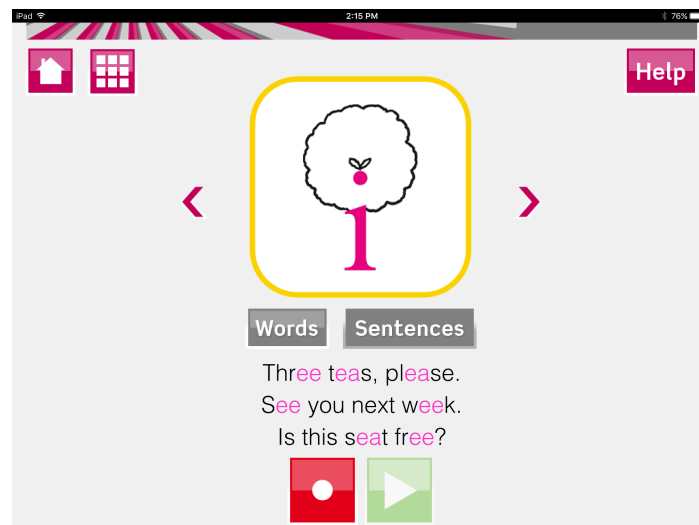


Figure 5. Sentences for /i/ and record and playback buttons

The second major component of the app is a matching game that can be played with or without audio. Without audio, the user is instructed to match one of two phoneme options to a given word (see Figure 6). Users can also play the game with audio, in which case a word containing the target phoneme is uttered and the user has to choose the tile that contains the matching phoneme (see Figure 7). Users can listen to the audio as many times as they like.

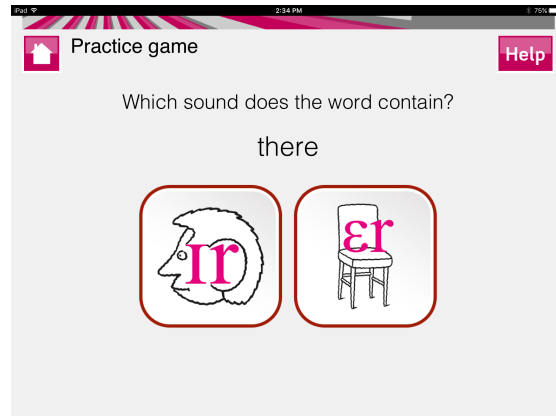


Figure 6. Matching game without audio

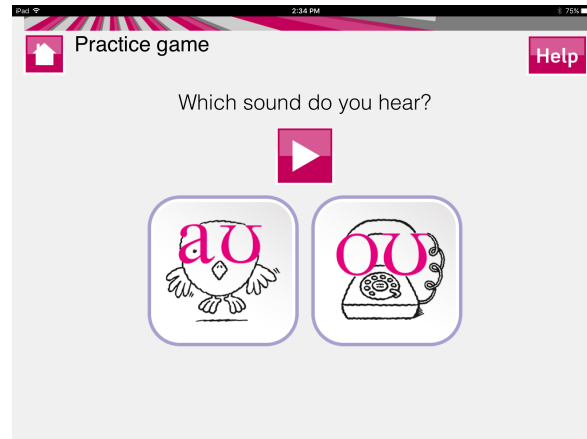


Figure 7. Matching game with audio

When completed, the app presents the user with his or her final score (see Figure 8).

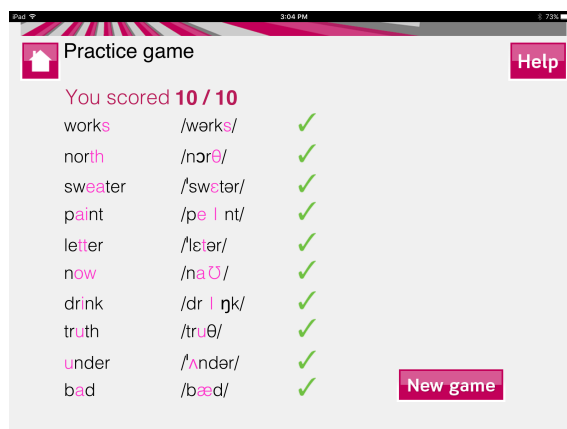


Figure 8. Feedback from matching game

EVALUATION

As is seen in the various screenshots throughout this review, the EFP app uses a variety of colors and pictures to make its interface visually stimulating and draw the user's attention to where target phonemes lie. This visually enhanced input is in line with Chapelle's (2003) suggestions to promote second language learning in CALL environments (p. 38). Beyond visual enhancement, the app also utilizes aural enhancement to highlight target phonemes. However, as Chapelle notes, the principle of enhancing input does not work as neatly with aural content as it does with written content (p. 41). Indeed, the in-app audio example words and sentences stress the target phonemes so much that it sometimes results in an overemphasis and unnatural distribution of stress in the word. This is especially true in the case of exercises targeting vowels.

Like Chapelle's (2003) call for grounding CALL in SLA theory, Levis (2007) argues for the same with respect to computer assisted pronunciation teaching (CAPT). This app does not always demonstrate a firm grounding in theory, and at times falls victim to the same trap that ensnares so many CALL and CAPT applications in that it "look[s] suspiciously like traditional, drill-oriented pedagogy in new clothing" (Levis, 2007, p. 185). To escape situations like this, Levis points to Pennington's (1999) CAPT design principles. Pennington maintains that CAPT should start from a theoretical position, and offers 10 suggestions for improving CAPT pedagogy. Among these are: *set an overall goal performance; build specific targets for performance; link pronunciation to other learning and communicative goals; design on a principled curriculum; and provide for exploration of database*. While the EFP app arguably meets the last two suggestions, it does nothing with respect to the first three. Additionally, as Levis points out, feedback is an area where CAPT systems routinely fall short as they are unable to perform an automatic and accurate diagnosis of pronunciation. In fact, for the purposes of this review I invited a number of users to play with the app for a short period of time and a weakness many of them pointed out was lack of feedback.

With respect to the matching game, while fun for a while, it fails to deliver elements associated with successful digital games-based learning. Elements such as competition with others and rewards for achievement (Intratat, 2011; Prensky, 2003) could be introduced by users who take it

upon themselves to enrich the experience, but they are not incorporated into the build of the app. In fact, Oxford (2015) has games such as *Stress Monsters* on its companion website to the English File textbooks that are more engaging and better adhere to Prensky and Intratat's elements of successful digital games for learning than the app in question does.

All said, the app is successful on a number of fronts. For example, the ability of the users to be able to record their own voices to compare to the sample pronunciation provided in the app is a nice feature. Casual users will likely be entertained by this feature and also by the short matching games in the app. As Levis (2007) notes, computer assisted pronunciation teaching (CAPT) seems to work well with children and this app would likely be enjoyed by a younger audience with its bright visuals and interactive features. Ultimately, however, I do not believe that the content justifies the \$5.99 price tag. The app in its current state would be better packaged as free downloadable content for those who bought the English File textbooks.

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