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Digital Storytelling in EFL Classroom (Oral Presentation of the Story): A Pathway to Improve Oral Production

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Abstract

In the present study, the results of an investigation of the use of Digital Storytelling in an Iranian undergraduate EFL classroom was explored among sixty learners to see whether using computer-based tools affect the improvement of learners’ narrative skills. Participants were divided into two groups and took part in an activity organized by researchers. One group created their digital stories of the given stories selected from Perrine’s literature course book to be presented in the classroom. Other group was asked to read the given stories and then present them. Both groups were tested for their oral production and competence. The results showed that by the use of Digital Storytelling techniques students develop better oral skills and this technique can be considered as an essential tool in foreign language learning and teaching.

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1. Introduction

All through the history, storytelling has been utilized to pass information, knowledge, culture, and etc. This is because the process of storytelling is also a process of meaning-making. Stories can be adapted to different mediums that emerge. Today they can be adapted to computer monitors as digital stories. According to Leslie Rule (2011),

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Digital Storytelling is the modern expression of the ancient art of storytelling. Digital stories derive their power by weaving images, music, narrative and voice together, thereby giving deep dimension and vivid colour to characters, situations, experiences, and insights.

As said by Robin (2008) the first application of multimedia technology in the classroom for educational purposes is introduced by Lambert and the Atchley who helped the advent of the digital storytelling movement in the late 1980s as cofounders of the Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) in Berkeley, California. The CDS developed the seven elements of Digital Storytelling. According to Robin “[This] combination of powerful, yet affordable, technology hardware and software meshes perfectly with the needs of many of today’s classrooms, where the focus is on providing students with the skills they will need to ‘thrive in increasingly media-varied environments’(Robin, 2008, p. 222).

Burmark (2004) introduced digital storytelling as a high-quality technology for gathering, creating, examining, and merging visual images with the texts. He believed integrating visual images with written texts both expand and accelerate student comprehension by boosting the students’ interest in discovering new ideas.

Robin (2008) compares two methods of digital storytelling: “Teacher-created digital stories” and “Student-based digital telling”. The result of his studies has indicated that the maximum improvement in the classroom could be gained when students are asked to create their own digital stories, either independently or as part of a small group.

According to Alexander (2011) Chico, a California State University, has formed a comprehensive five-part definition of digital stories, as indicated by which, for assessment use, they should

- Include a compelling narration of a story;
- Provide a meaningful context for understanding the story being told;
- Use images to capture and/or expand upon emotions found in the narrative;
- Employ music and other sound effects to reinforce ideas;
- Invite thoughtful reflection from their audience(s). (p. 27)

Digital storytelling technique can effectively assist learning process in EFL classrooms. It can assist EFL learners to develop multimodal communicative competence by promoting a learner-centred environment. In this way “learners have numerous opportunities to interact and use language in authentic and personally meaningful ways” (Rance-Roney, 2008, p. 30). Students narrate the scripts of their stories and record themselves. This material is next mixed with different types of multimedia, including computer-based graphics, computer-generated text, images, video clips, and music so that it can be played on a computer. Accordingly, students become the “storytellers” who present the stories they have created to audiences (Kajder, 2006).

To practice the student-based digital storytelling method, the present study intends to document learner’s improved development in communicative skills to support the aforementioned researches’ findings. The researchers of this study mostly aimed at seeing the effect of digital storytelling on students’ learning, motivation, and engagement through organizing ideas, expressing opinions, and constructing meaningful narratives.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Sixty (thirty female and thirty male) Iranian EFL learners studying at Azad University, Salmas branch participated in this study. They were both undergraduate and graduate students with intermediate level of proficiency. Their language proficiency was rated as intermediate through Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency. The mean age of participants was 22. Three female experienced English instructors with the mean age of 30 also participated in this study.
2.2 Instruments

In order to select the students with intermediate level of proficiency, Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP) was administered. To see the effect of treatment an interview was also conducted through which all the students were asked to retell the story.

2.3 Procedure

This study was conducted at Azad University Salmas branch, Iran. All the Forty undergraduate students studying at this university were asked to take part in this study, however for the purpose of reliability and generalization of the results, twenty graduate students were also invited to participate in the study.

In order to have the participants with the same level of proficiency, Michigan proficiency test was applied and 40 intermediate students out of 60 were selected and randomly divided into two groups, that is, twenty to control group and twenty to digital story telling (DST) group. Each student was asked to present two stories during the semester, so 40 intermediate graded short stories were selected from Perrine’s literature course book and randomly were divided between the students. DST group was trained to use Microsoft Power point software to present their stories while control group was given no treatment.

At the end of the semester all the students participated in an interview in which they were asked to read and present a selected short story. Their oral performance was evaluated using 4-scale list of criteria (vocabulary, grammar, fluency and pronunciation). In order to establish inter-rater reliability, the performances of the students were scored by three interviewers and the mean of three scores were calculated.

3. Results and Discussion

To investigate the effect of digital storytelling on learners’ oral performance the independent t-test has been used in this study. The results are presented in the following table.

|          | N  | Mean | Variance | df | t    | sig |
|----------|----|------|----------|----|------|-----|
| DST      | 20 | 16.12| 3.68     |    | 2.75 | .001|
| Control  | 20 | 13.75| 4.55     |    |      |     |

As it was shown in the above table there was a significant difference between the performances of DST and control groups in terms of digital storytelling technique’s effectiveness on improving intermediate EFL learners’ oral performance (t:2.71, p:.001).

Taking the findings of this study into account, it can be claimed that technology of digital story telling brings about new ways of thinking about and organizing materials and as a result increases students’ motivation. It can be considered as an effective tool for improving EFL learners’ oral performance as it involves students in learning process. Students not only become more interested in their learning but also take more responsibility for their learning.

Telling stories through power points may also be effective in teaching students the different ways of note-taking;
meantime, providing students with some key words about the gist of the story, PowerPoint helps students to tell the story very fluently in their own words which is also very helpful in the case of forgetting what to say, that is, instead of looking at the text, these key words help students to become able to remember and continue their speech without any interruption which in turn increase the self-confidence of students.

Through digital storytelling, EFL learners become creative storytellers through the traditional processes of selecting a topic, conducting some research, writing a script, and developing an interesting story. Digital storytelling also engages reluctant students and makes every learner do his/her best to present the story perfectly for an audience. They can be motivated and their oral abilities and competence can be developed.

However, digital storytelling methods have not been applied effectively in EFL classrooms in Iranian universities. This research topic is a promising line of inquiry in that it taps a very critical issue, i.e. improving EFL learners’ oral performance through digital storytelling techniques. As there is not a clear picture on its status in the literature, this study can illuminate our understanding of this under-research area a lot and entail certain practical implications in Iranian EFL setting.

4. Conclusion

Through the process of Digital Storytelling, EFL students can turn given narratives into multimedia productions to develop reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. The technique of digital storytelling can be used effectively in classroom setting to motivate oral production. As seen above, the computer-based class outperformed the other one both in motivation and presentation. They presented stories using digital images, photographs, video, animation, sound, music, text and a narrative voice boosted the positive motivating impression of storytelling and enabled students to construct compelling and creative personal narratives of the story. Simply put, by involving Digital Storytelling, not only learning becomes personal, enjoyable, attractive and creative but it helps students improve their writing, reading, listening and speaking skills by learning to express opinions and constructing digital narratives for an audience.

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