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IMPROVING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY WITH DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Research Article

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether students of English as a foreign language (EFL) at the Lebanese University (LU) can effectively improve their language proficiency by creating digital stories. To do so, the researcher introduced digital storytelling (DST) as an optional assignment in an EFL communication course offered at LU in the fall of 2017-2018. Participants were 20 second-year student-teachers majoring in EFL education. After the completion of their individual or group digital storytelling projects, all the 16 videos were uploaded on the researcher's YouTube channel and shared on Facebook and WhatsApp. Participants then answered open-ended survey questions about their experience working on DST. Results show that most participants found the activity enjoyable and educational and were eager to repeat their experience, in spite of the technical difficulties they faced. Many participants also reported having gained more self-confidence and improved their Pronunciation, organizational, technical and research skills, as well as their ability to deliver presentations. The majority of participants found the social aspect of DST highly rewarding and enjoyed sharing their work online with their friends and other English-speakers globally. The positive outcomes of this study suggest that DST should be included in the curriculum of university-EFL communication courses.

Keywords: digital storytelling, college-level EFL instruction, English proficiency, pronunciation, oral communication skills, social media

1. Introduction

Since the 1990's when Joe Lambert founded the Center for Digital Storytelling, a community arts organization in Berkeley, California, instructors have been helping young and adult students to create and share personal narratives by combining writing and digital media tools. With the rapid evolution of digital media, digital storytelling (DST), the modern version of traditional storytelling that relies on multimedia tools (Balaman, 2017), has been adopted by educators in various fields such as the sciences and the humanities who soon acknowledged that DST was an effective teaching and learning tool.

Today, several available gadgets and software are available to create digital stories such as smartphones for taking pictures and recording oral stories, and programs such as Windows Movie Maker or iMovie, and PowerPoint (Bandi-Rao & Sepp, 2014).

1.1. Origin and Types of Digital Stories

After founding the Center for Digital Storytelling in 1993, Lambert trained more than 15,000 people around the world in the art and craft of digital storytelling, which he sees as a journey of self-discovery using personal narratives. Lambert conceived of seven steps to create digital stories using mobile technologies and social media. Initially, he used two main simple plots, one about a stranger arriving in town, and the other about the storyteller is going



on vacation. For Lambert, these plots highlighted the fact that “at some moment in your life, change came to you or you went towards change” (Lambert, 2013).

In addition, DST is used in various educational fields as a teaching and learning tool because it includes three main elements that can convey different types of information: personal narratives, stories examining historical events, and stories intending to inform or instruct (Robin, 2008).

1.2. Digital Storytelling as an Educational Tool

Over the last two decades, DST has become a powerful teaching and learning tool and has attracted the interest of teachers and learners alike (Robin, 2008).

Thus, various educational institutions worldwide began to use digital storytelling activities in the classroom as a means to motivate students to develop their digital literacy skills (Chan, Churchill, & Chiu, 2017). In addition, DST has been widely used in second language acquisition (L2) classrooms.

However, educators noted that DST should be integrated into the curriculum to help learners develop not only media literacy skills but also critical thinking skills (Kim & Lee, 2017). For example, Rubino, Barberis, and Malnati (2018) used digital storytelling to explore the values of writing collaboratively and various universities are using digital storytelling in courses related to different but related areas such as history and journalism (McLellan, 2006). DST has also been introduced in the second language (L2) writing practice to enhance L2 learners' narrative skills (Kim & Lee, 2017).

In the sciences, DST was used in medical education to encourage students' reflection (Jamissen, Hardy, Nordkvelle, & Pleasants, 2017), and was included in the teaching of mathematics to increase academic achievement (Özpinar, Gökçe, & Yenmez, 2017). It was also used as an instructional strategy for improving online collaborative learning (Nam, 2017). However, although digital storytelling has proved popular as a powerful teaching tool in secondary education, it is still relatively new and less commonly utilized in higher education (Balaman, 2017).

1.3. Developing Digital Literacy Skills

Students should develop their digital literacy skills to be able to communicate and express their ideas through digital media (Chan, Churchill, & Chiu, 2017). Nowadays, digital technologies have become increasingly necessary to motivate students struggling with their writing, to help them develop their literacy, and to fulfill the needs of students living and learning in a digital world (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2010).

By combining technology and storytelling, digital stories allow authors to design and produce personal narratives by using images, written text and spoken language (Dunford & Jenkins, 2017). For example, to create their short personal narratives, EFL students can take advantage of various available digital media such as photos, graphics, video clips, written text, oral narration, animation, music, and sound effects, and the DSTs they produce can be readily viewed on a computer screen or a smaller digital device (Prins, 2017).

1.4. Digital Storytelling and Social Media

Since it was introduced in 1993, the technological resources to create and publicize DST have increased enormously thanks in large part to the development and popularity of social media. In the twentieth-first century, social media has become widespread, and billions of people worldwide communicate and share ideas, photos, and comments on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and so on (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Adolescents form one of the largest groups of social media users who consume, create and share digital content online. Many of them develop their social skills by connecting with a large number of people with whom they might share similar concerns and interests (Walrave, Ponnet, Vanderhove, Haers, & Segaert, 2016), in other words, they have been informally creating their own DST. More than one billion people use Facebook for news and social interaction. YouTube, in addition to delivering music and film, has been successfully used as an informal environment for learning (Tan, 2013). All the resources and media mentioned help not only to produce DST but show how they have become a part of the modern communication culture.

1.5. Benefits of Using Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling benefits learners in a variety of ways. Bandi-Rao and Sepp (2014) give the example of a group of ESL who worked on their digital storytelling projects by recording and listening to their personal narratives. This process enabled them to think critically and make meaningful edits to their narratives. Moreover, when students are learning how to make a video from scratch, they may experience a transformative lesson and improve their literacy practices and interactions (Jamissen et al., 2017). Another study conducted by Rahim and Yadollahi (2017) showed that English language learners (ESL) who produced their stories using digital tools considerably improved their literacy skills. Besides improving reading and writing, students also developed their oral skills during their DST activities (Prins, 2017). Another clear benefit of DST is that students can perform them in small groups and hence develop their communication skills by organizing ideas, expressing opinions, analyzing and synthesizing content. Digital storytellers can also share their work with classmates and learn how to criticize their own and their fellow students' work (Robin, 2006).

1.6. Some Disadvantages of Digital Storytelling

According to Sadik (2008), although it is essential that technology is integrated into the curriculum, teachers should have the required technical expertise to ensure that technology is effectively and meaningfully used in the classroom.

In the specific case of DST, since educators make different decisions about which resources are better adequate to their contexts, some prefer not to use the activity because they consider DST time consuming, in addition to the ethical issues of using copyrighted images DST involves.

Other example of additional effort DST requires from teachers is the large amount of time they need to spend checking students' recordings in order to coach them on how to use the right intonation and pronunciation (Bandi-Rao & Sepp, 2014). Despite these drawbacks, many teachers believe that digital storytelling can increase students' understanding of content, and are willing to include digital storytelling into the curriculum (Sadik, 2008).

2. Study Objectives and Research Questions

The student-teachers enrolled in the EFL education course taught by the researcher are training to become primary school teachers of English in Lebanon's public and private schools. As such, they will help to educate a new generation of citizens who will contribute to the society. Despite their future responsibility, most of the student-teachers who participated in this study still lacked essential skills required from an EFL instructor. Some examples include, improving their pronunciation, learning to organize ideas and information (to create posters or PowerPoint slides, among other tasks), and developing better presentation skills.

1.7. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate whether DST can be an effective means to improve the teaching skills and language proficiency of the teacher-students who attend my

course in English language education at university. To conduct this study, DST was introduced as an optional assignment in an English language communication course in the fall of 2017-2018. Only 20 out of the 30 student-teachers taking this communication course elected to work on a digital story project, an activity that was worth 2% of their course grade.

1.8. Research Questions

This study will address the following research questions:

- (1)- What perceived challenges do second-year student-teachers face during the process of creating and recording their digital stories?
- (2)- What are the possible benefits of their experience working on DST?

2. Methodology

To answer the research questions related to the perceived challenges participants face and the benefits they may derive from working with DST, this study adopted an exploratory, qualitative approach by using descriptive and analytical research methods.

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 20 female student-teachers between 19 and 28 years old majoring in English language education in the Faculty of Pedagogy/Education at the Lebanese University. They attended an oral/written English communication course in the fall of 2017-2018 designed to teach students how to develop and do effective presentations using professional PowerPoint slides. Digital storytelling was introduced to the course as an optional assignment that would help to further integrate technology into English-language teaching.

Prior to starting the work on their DST projects, participants agreed on a topic with their instructor. During their work, they received her feedback on the slides and audios they were using to create their stories. After they completed their assignments, their instructor uploaded their DST projects on her YouTube channel. All of the 16 videos produced by the participants were created with PowerPoint slides.

2.2. Data Collection Methods and Analysis

Data were collected at the end of the semester using open-ended survey questions about the participants' choice of topic and the challenges they had faced while developing their digital stories and recording their videos. Additional questions included items such as the perceived benefits of their experience working on DST, their interest in working on a second digital story, and their willingness to recommend DST to their friends.

The data collected from the survey questions were then coded and analyzed. The coding process was guided by the answers to the questions, so theoretical sampling was used to place data collected in themes or concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

3. Results

Twenty student-teachers worked on individual and group digital stories (DST). The total number of digital stories was 16, whereby 11 stories were created by 9 individual students and 5 stories were produced by 4 groups (see Table 1).

3.1. Digital Stories Categories and Themes

The themes of the 16 videos can be divided in the following categories:

a-English Language Learning

b-School and Teaching

c-Parent-Child Relationship

d- Healthy Living

Details about the 16 digital stories are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Digital Stories Themes

Category	No. of Themes	Students
a-English Learning	2	DST1) Mother teaching her child English sentences DST2) Three ways to learn English;
b-School and Teaching	7	DST3) Drama in the classroom, DST4) Punishment DST5) School bullying DST6) Tips for studying effectively DST7) School phobia DST8) Teaching model;
c-Parent-child Relationship	8	DST9) helping parents encourage their kids to read, DST10) strengthening parent-child bonds DST11) jealousy between sisters DST12) kids' lies
d-Healthy Living	5	DS13) Laughter yoga DST14) Tips for a healthy life DST15) Yoga DST16) Quitting smoking.

It is worth mentioning that DST4, DST11, and DST12 were group work whereas, DST15 and DST16 were done by the same group. One participant worked on DST5 and DST9 while DST6 and DST14 were produced by another participant. The remaining 7 videos were individual digital stories.

The answers to the various survey questions are detailed below.

3.2. Choice of Digital Story Themes

Participants working on digital stories related to English Language Learning and School and Teaching explained that they chose their topic because it had educational benefits such as offering practical teaching/studying tips, "I wanted to speak about something educational and creative at the same time like a mother teaching her son English sentences." Another participant said that she "wanted to offer students tips on how to learn English effectively." Other digital storytellers intended to advise parents such as "to encourage their children to read," and "to have a good relationship [with their children]".

One of the participants explained that she wanted her digital story to relate her own personal experience with bullying, "I wanted to show everyone that I solved this problem, became strong and have higher self-esteem." Another participant chose to do her work on health simply because she had done a PowerPoint presentation on the subject for a previous course. The topics of the remaining digital stories were chosen because they were either "trendy" or unusual and interesting, "We thought of a topic that usually no one talks about."

3.3. Challenges Faced while Developing and Recording the Digital Story

All of the participants shared several problems they faced while working on their digital storytelling projects:

3.3.1.Challenges Faced While Producing the Digital Story Video

Those who were working on 6 of the 20 digital stories reported difficulties "finding an interesting idea," and "choosing the characters of the story". In 8 digital stories, participants said that they found searching for copyright-free images somewhat challenging. Other common obstacles mentioned by the participants included selecting PowerPoint slides, summarizing ideas, keeping their sentences short while speaking, and editing the script several times to make it "suitable to be published." One participant claimed that she did not face any challenge while developing her digital story.

3.3.2.Video Recording Problems

The 16 videos produced were recorded several times. The minimum rehearsal time was 3 times/video, the average rehearsal time ranged between 5 and 15 times, 1 video was recorded 23 times, and another 45 times. The two major reasons for these multiple recordings were the background noise and the mispronunciation of words in the script. Technical problems included difficulty adding audios to each slide, finding a video application, and inserting music in the video. One participant related that she had repeated the recordings 10 times because she thought that her voice was too monotonous.

3.4. Benefits of Digital Storytelling

The participants mentioned several ways in which they benefited from their experience working on digital storytelling. Their views are summarized below.

3.4.1.Pronunciation

Eleven participants asserted that by repeatedly listening to their multiple recordings and "trying hard to make my pronunciation clear" they had significantly improved their pronunciation.

3.4.2.Technical Skills

Seventeen participants said that the experience clearly contributed to improve their technical skills. Some shared the following verbatim: "I learned how to make a video and upload it on YouTube," "now I am introduced to a new way of teaching which is considered to be more a 21st century-like way of teaching," "we have to be up-to-date with the new trends in social media because it is part of our daily lives."

3.4.3.Working within Time Limits

Fifteen students mentioned that they had learned how to communicate relevant information in a limited period of time, between 90-150 seconds, in addition to learning how to be clear and concise.

3.4.4. Authentic Activity

Ten participants enjoyed their experience with digital storytelling because they were able to “talk about a [specific] topic in an interesting way.” Four participants added that they had found DST an authentic activity that can both be used as a communication tool and done in class by simply following the instructions and selecting the visual materials needed to illustrate their ideas.

3.4.5. Personal Benefits

Seven participants shared how the experience had benefitted them at the personal level, “I expressed myself without being shy or anxious. I have done something I thought I was never capable of,” “I wanted to tell the world that I overcame bullying and that I am a high achiever at university.” Twelve participants offered that they had learned to be patient and perseverant, “I learned that it’s okay to redo my job several times to get it done,” “we recorded the video 15 times until we met the expectations of the [course] instructor.”

3.4.6. Enjoying the DST Experience

Fourteen participants said that they had enjoyed their experience working with DST very much and had had a lot of fun, “although we were tired by the end of the day, it was a new experience that we really enjoyed,” “we had a good time together recording our video. We laughed a lot.”

3.4.7. Social Skills

Eight participants mentioned that they enjoyed the interaction that was created between them and the people who were accessing their digital stories through social media, “I liked how the number of viewers on YouTube and Facebook was increasing.” They also said that the experience had enriched “this kind of interaction between the people and me.”

3.4.8. Willingness to Work on a New Video to Broadcast on YouTube

Most students (13/20) said they were ready to start working on a new video project, “I’m willing to work on a new video because [the experience] was really fun and beneficial.” Six participants felt that they need to improve their technical skills before starting developing a new DS, “I would work on a new video if I had more facility because it takes time and hard work to make a high-quality video.” One participant simply admitted that the experience had not been interesting to her, “it takes a lot of time and effort to make a good video. I have many things more important to do rather than recording a video and uploading it on YouTube.”

3.4.9. Recommending the Experience of Working on DST Projects to Friends

Fourteen participants said that they found their experience developing and broadcasting DST worthwhile and would recommend it friends without hesitation, “they will enjoy making the video especially if they make it as a group. They will enrich their background, widen their imagination, and open new doors on social media,” “they will benefit a lot because it gives you a sense of achievement,” “I think it is a way to express yourself,” “this experience develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills,” “it’s always good to try new things, especially since you get to hear your voice recorded hence improving your pronunciation,” “they will train more, and this will increase their self-confidence.” Some participants (5/20) would recommend working on digital storytelling to their friends although they knew that “they will have a lot of difficulties preparing a video for the first time,” some said that “I would recommend it if they have something interesting to tell or show”

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The main motivation of the 20 student-teachers who participated in this study was to create digital stories that informed or instructed their audience (Robin, 2008). Unlike other digital storytellers who use DST to develop their own personal narratives (Lambert, 2013), the participants of this study chose to work on 4 themes related to specific and broad aspects of education, such as: English Language Learning, School and Teaching, Parent-Child Relationship, and Healthy Living.

While working on their projects, participants focused on finding the right images online, creating scripts (written text) and recording their narratives (spoken language) (Dunford & Jenkins, 2017). They also utilized and tested different software programs such as Windows Movie Maker, iMovie, and PowerPoint (Bandi-Rao & Sepp, 2014). However, participants reported having had difficulties outlining their project and planning their work. They found it particularly difficult to decide on an interesting theme, find free copyrighted images to illustrate their stories, and organize their ideas, particularly in the process of assembling PowerPoint slides.

Other issues involved technical aspects. As mentioned previously, some were not fully-proficient and struggled with their English pronunciation, and many complained about background noise. Both issues caused them to re-record their videos several times. Other technical glitches included finding a user-friendly video application and inserting audios into each slide. Thus, most participants found the process of developing a video time consuming and tiring since to produce a "good" video they had to repeat their recordings 10-15 times on average (a few reported re-recording their work 45 times. The student-teachers' experience in video production described above addresses the research question (1) about the participants' perceived challenges during the process of working on their digital stories.

In academic terms, the decision to include DST as an optional assignment in the program of an ESL communication course taught by the researcher contributed to attract highly-motivated student-teachers. Their commitment to their work and the collaboration between student-teachers and researcher demonstrated that DST is a powerful teaching and learning tool that creates meaningful classroom interactions (Robin, 2008). While working on their DST, the participants clearly improved their digital literacy (Chan, Churchill, & Chiu, 2017), reading and writing literacies (Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2017), and their critical thinking skills (Kim & Lee, 2017). Moreover, the participants further developed their social skills and made new connections by sharing their digital stories with one another, and with other English speakers on social media (Walrave et al., 2016). For example, some participants reported having checked the researcher's YouTube channel and Facebook repeatedly and enjoyed seeing the number of views increase. This sharing of materials also helped to create meaningful interactions since the participants learned to critique each other's project and provide feedback on their classmates' digital stories, thus developing their critical thinking skills (Robin, 2006).

Bandi-Rao and Sepp (2014) have noticed that to make meaningful edits to their videos, creators of DST need essential language and technical skills. In the process of recording and editing their digital stories, the participants of this study significantly improved essential language skills, clear enunciation and accurate pronunciation. Recording also helped them develop abilities essential to teaching such as organizational, and presentation skills.

Developing DST projects, involved selecting a theme, drafting, writing and editing a script, and selecting the visual materials to illustrate the story. In this process, participants improved their oral and written language skills and their literacy practices (Prins, 2017). Additional

benefits included gaining more self-confidence and overcoming shyness, which are characteristics necessary for future educators.

Despite the many difficulties participants reported having while working on their digital stories, the majority of them express interested in start working immediately on another DST project, possibly in collaboration with a classmate or a friend so they can decide on a theme that is relevant to viewers and can inspire people to do something positive with their lives. Finally, the participants emphasized that developing DST was an enjoyable experience that also transformed the classroom environment making it a collaborative and creative space. The social and academic impact of DST discussed above addresses research question (2).

DST is essentially a creative practice, and one of its goals is to encourage communication and collaboration among individuals. In addition, digital and media literacy, which are the base of DST, are among the twelve essential 21st-century skills. Thus, by developing DST projects, EFL students can reach out to English-speakers in other parts of the world, and form meaningful interactions. In doing so, they will also enhance their language and literacy skills (Prins, 2017).

Although DST has been widely used as an activity in L2 classrooms and a few other disciplines, it has mainly been utilized as a means to help improve students' narrative writing. Research-based disciplines, such as sciences and mathematics, do not typically utilize DST as an educational tool, and teachers in these areas find DST effective as a language-learning tool that helps students improve their pronunciation and speaking skills.

In this study, I attempted to demonstrate the overall importance of integrating DST in the programs of both content courses and research-based courses by showing the various ways in which DST motivates learners to structure a narrative, do research, and work collaboratively to create their own projects. By introducing DST in the program of an EFL teacher training course in which the sciences (linguistics and technology) and communication are intrinsically related, this study shed light on the various skills university-level students can developed from their experience working on digital storytelling projects.

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