Enhancing English Language Writing and Speaking through Digital Storytelling

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Abstract

Storytelling has represented a powerful knowledge-sharing and learning instrument in society and organizations alike. The current paper will showcase several tools that have proved instrumental in facilitating digital story-telling for English language learning/teaching in higher education. Such tools, besides involving students in writing and speaking activities are conducive to enhanced language competence and are likely to stimulate their creativity, production, digital literacy, soft skills and interactivity in a real open-space networked classroom. Moreover, digital storytelling can be adapted to different content and proficiency levels and represents a tangible record of student progress and basis for evaluation.

Keywords: digital storytelling, English language learning, speaking tools, writing tools.

1 Storytelling – Educational Multifaces

All day long we tell others a story in words, in the attitude we have, the way we do our job etc., a story which the others read, listen to and interpret continuously according to their own life experience and knowledge. We call it a “story” because facts are enhanced by conjecture, assumptions, anticipations, imagination and hopes. These stories define us as humans and help us relate to one another. It is in this broad sense that we have applied the concept of “storytelling” in English language learning/teaching.

Due to its emotional impact, descriptive character, teller and listener involvement as well as memorability, storytelling has addressed educational objectives across subjects at various learner ages (Rossiter, 2002).

In the workplace, stories have been successfully employed in conflict management (Jameson, 2001) for their ability to influence people, to convince people in meetings, to inspire collaboration, to discover knowledge, or in other complex situations where the narrative context could facilitate dealing more easily with difficult issues. In advertising, to give a further example, stories build relationship and enhance customer loyalty.

Unlike their traditional counterpart, digitales combine narration with images, colour and music in order to support and enhance the message. Researchers (Hibbing and Rankin-Erikson, 2003; and Boster et al, 2002) have demonstrated that digitally-enhanced stories are excellent mnemonic devices, helping students retain new information and comprehend difficult material more easily.

The next section will present the rationale for choosing digital storytelling as an EFL learning tool with our students, the way in which several speaking and writing storytelling software have been successfully employed in both General English and Business English (BE) learning, as well as the outcomes and benefits that resulted from this enterprise.
Premises
Motivation of higher education students is often underestimated as they are supposed to be self-motivated. However, motivation and involvement are likely to increase if students find the activities interesting, novel, meaningful, and engaging. This was the starting premise for embarking on language-learning digital stories.

Moreover, it is common knowledge that images and music are an important part of our students’ informal learning processes. Nowadays students are used to listening and telling stories digitally as they get involved in a continuous process of sharing information about themselves on social networking sites, through images and sound besides words, with peers and the world. Through comparison, class activities may appear boring and less engaging.

Therefore, different asynchronous speaking and writing tools have been selected for students to practice and enhance their EFL speaking and writing skills in order to bring the formal learning closer to their everyday learning processes, to enhance their motivation and language production and to make them more active learners involved in their own process of language acquisition.

Our Experience
Starting from the above-mentioned premise that it is much more important what the students do than what the teacher does, students in economic sciences applied asynchronous writing and speaking tools for their English language course, on basis of teacher-modelled tasks. These were hosted on a Wiki (http://www.English4usdc1.wikispaces.com), where instructions, as well as tutorials were also posted.

All activities were optional and students carried them out outside the seminar hours but they contributed towards the final evaluation according to the degree of task completion. Most student productions were hosted on the students’ individual blogs, while the collaborative tasks were collected on specially-designed sites.

Actually any storytelling activity that is performed in class can be transposed in the digital environment and thus language production and exposure can be extended. From the almost endless choice of digital story telling tools, we have chosen several that met our instructional goals, students’ interests and proficiency levels, also considering the tool’s ease of use and availability.

3.1 Writing Tools
This section will showcase four TEFL story-writing activities based on Flickr and Storybird images, Dvolver, and Photopeach, which teachers can customize and apply from elementary to advanced level, in order to spice their teaching/learning with more engaging asynchronous tasks.

3.1.1 Stories around images
The Six Word Story – is an activity that exploits Flickr images (http://digistorytelling.pbworks.com English Village Online Digistorytelling Session 2011). Flickr is a storage space where people tell their “stories” through images. Students chose CCA Flickr (i.e. Creative Commons Attribution, meaning they could copy, distribute and display those photos if they gave them credit) or their own pictures (Fig. 1) and tell a story that expresses a view on life in no more than six words. Simple though it may seem, this is a challenging activity since students had to crystallize an idea that should represent them in relation to an image of their own choice in an exact number of words and at the same time be correct, creative, imaginative and original (e.g. Fig. 2 below generated the following six word stories: "Being a couch potato is fun", "I am sleepy when it rains", "It’s good to be home alone").
Images can be used to tell more complex stories, to exploit cooperation and competition. They have a hectic story and Something funny happened are examples of higher complexity storytelling with students "re-telling" and "re-inventing" the story (i.e. background, plot and characters) behind a real photo while engaging in a creative competition. By putting themselves in the shoes of the persons in the image (which could depict either something impressive and shocking or funny), students have to tell a first person story about how and why they came to experience that situation. Thirty such contributions were generated in this way for each photo.

The pedagogy behind this activity is that our brain likes images, therefore, we learn more easily and faster if we associate new learning with images. Moreover, competition is stimulating for the students and effective for the teacher’s learning purposes since students have to read all previous productions in order to be original and at the same time to be able to rate the best story. Storybird is a very simple and fascinating storytelling tool that offers ready-made high-quality digital visualisation. It “provides whole collections of artwork around a theme or topic. The artwork is by amazing artists and the collections are linked. So all the pictures have the same ‘look and feel’ and can be easily fitted together to create a very professional-looking story” (Stannard, 2010).

Students created a Storybird “story book” to introduce themselves, socialize, and establish bonds with the rest of the group (Who am I activity Fig. 3 below).

On a more complex line, Storybird can be used with advanced students to articulate their dreams and views indirectly and metaphorically through a fairy-tale character, the activity being also ideal for Past Tense and Direct/Indirect speech consolidation. (e.g. Matilda in “Looking for a friend” story by O.C. (http://storybird.com/books/looking-for-a-friend/).

**Fig. 1** Tunde: Passing time can be sometimes beautiful

**Fig. 2** Six word story – http://www.flickr.com/photos/elisharene/7975438591/

**Fig. 3** My first storybird by T.S
It turned out that pictures not only illustrate ideas but facilitate expression, language production and comprehension: most students revealed interesting things about their likes and dislikes, and commented on their colleagues’ stories. When it came to revealing more sensitive content, students preferred the indirect tales, demonstrating they can be both factual and highly imaginative.

3.1.2 Movie stories

Movie stories with Photopeach was exploited for the narration of a recent movie that students had seen in order to practise summarizing and grammar and to exploit critical thinking (Fig.5). In no more than 150 words, students had to summarize a film that had an impact on them, then to create a Photopeach quiz by referring to characters, actors and plot. Photopeach movie-based quizzes with accompanying images and music generated a lot of interest and enthusiasm as well as higher rate of page views (reading) and comments (feed-back) from their peers (Fig. 6).

Advising movie story with Dvolver recycled basic BE advertising language (superlatives, dangling comparisons, invitations) as well as exploitation of dialogue, questions and conversation turn-taking (Fig.7. below).
3.2 Speaking Tools

The current section of the paper will showcase speaking activities we have employed using Voxopop and Audioboo with pre-service undergraduate and in-service MA students for GE as well as Business English tasks. MA students participated in an asynchronous interview as part of the job application process task (e.g. The digital interview, Fig. 8), where each student played the role of both an employer selecting from a list of peer-candidates, motivating his/her choice, and an employee, competing with the others for the job of his/her choice. The only drawback of this speaking activity is the linear character of Voxopop discussions, students either responding to the teacher’s original post, or if they want to comment on another student’s post instead of the previous’s, they need to mention to whom they are responding.

Fig. 8 Get my job – digital interview

Audioboo, which allows recording and sharing audio, was employed for job-specific vocabulary with Business English topics such as Why do you like living and working in your town, My first day at work etc., for elementary level students, the students’ audio boos being collected as individual story contributions.

In digital storytelling with speaking tools the teacher’s strategy was to have students do things in English so that they do not think about the language and, therefore, be more fluent and confident in their oral communication on a topic related to their daily professional vocabulary

4 Conclusion

Digital storytelling raised the students’ interest, engagement and productivity in English. Students produced a lot of extra spoken and written English, which they would have not been able to produce, otherwise.

Asynchronous digital storytelling with selected writing and speaking tools has made the class a more democratic environment, offering equal chances of expression to students with mixed
abilities while making all of them published authors. Quieter students, afraid to speak in class for fear of face loss, became confident to speak asynchronously, since asynchrony enabled rehearsing and re-recording until they were satisfied with the quality of their productions.

Students developed their digital skills as there was extensive, informal peer-learning and feedback in the process of tool application. Moreover, by working in the public space, feedback came not only from peers, but from the world. In the process of story creation students reinforced other soft skills, critical thinking and creativity, which are life-long learning skills.

To conclude, besides being captivating, the digital story telling engages mnemonic devices that speed up language acquisition. Through engagement, motivation, visualisation, extensive production and contact with the target language, digital storytelling tools represent remarkable added value for the 21st century EFL teacher.

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