



A Digital Storytelling Laboratory to Foster Second Language Acquisition in Higher Education: Students' Perspectives and Reflections

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Abstract

Today's technology-suffused society is inevitably changing and transforming the learning process as the role of technology in our lives is progressively increasing, thus making 21st Century teachers and educators face the challenge of both learning and understanding how to best integrate technology into the classroom and equipping students with the skills necessary to live and work in our digitized world. These skills, described by the Framework for 21st Century Learning are especially critical thinking, learning motivation, information literacy, media literacy, and language competence, considered as key competences for lifelong learning.

In particular, as "The Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages" has recently stated, nowadays the lack of language competences represents a barrier in increasing productivity and collaboration across borders.

As a consequence, to attain contemporary educational objectives, second language pedagogy needs to be integrated by the use of today's digital tools that should not be considered as replacement of the traditional teaching method but as powerful, active support in fostering Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Specifically, Digital Storytelling (DST) is progressively emerging as an innovative instructional tool to enhance SLA together with students' motivation, collaboration, reflection, and academic achievement. In fact, by combining traditional storytelling with digital multimedia, DST perfectly embodies the constructionist idea of learning by making, thus making students active participants in their learning process instead of passive agents as in face-to-face learning.

Although various researches describe the use of DST in primary and secondary language education, to the best of our knowledge, very few studies have been conducted on the use of Digital Storytelling in Higher Education, especially in Italy where DST is a major innovation.

As a consequence, a Digital Storytelling Laboratory has been enacted at "L'Orientale" University of Naples starting March 2019. It was addressed to 24 Bachelor's students in the second year of their course in English Language and Linguistics. Firstly the students have been introduced in the field – almost completely new to them – and then involved in a Digital Storytelling Process that required the assimilation and completion of goal-oriented tasks, finally resulting in the production of a series of Digital Stories.

This paper aims at exploring the impact of DST on academic development, learning motivation and collaboration of University students learning English as a second language. To that end, quantitative data were collected describing students' perspectives and reflections about the effectiveness of DST in learning.

Keywords: *Digital Storytelling, Second Language Acquisition, English as a Second Language, Multi-Word Expressions, Innovative Learning Environments, Higher Education.*

1. Introduction

In May 2019 "The Council Recommendation on a comprehensive approach to the teaching and learning of languages" was adopted by European Education Ministers stating the importance of acquiring language skills not only to study abroad but to enable exchanges between foreign cultures, so to make people broaden their perspectives and be able to live and work in today's world[1].

As a consequence, by considering the never-ending developments in technology, there is a need to ensure today's students the actual possibility to develop their language proficiency through innovative and inclusive ways.

To that end, the practice of Digital Storytelling seems to respond to these needs as, by combining traditional storytelling with new media technologies, it offers today's students a tool able to both engage and motivate them with their studies and also foster their cooperation and social skills.



Nevertheless, even if some studies addressing the potential of DST in enhancing student learning already exist, to the best of our knowledge, little research has been conducted on the use of DST at the university level with Italian learners of English.

Accordingly, this paper aims at presenting the results of three-months research involving DST and conducted at “L’Orientale” University of Naples where a Digital Storytelling Laboratory was purposefully enacted in March 2019 to evaluate the effects produced on students’ motivation with their studies and acquisition of digital skills.

2. Digital Storytelling: main features, theoretical framework and relation to language learning

Storytelling is present in every aspect of human life and it is what helps us give sense to and better comprehend complex ideas, concepts and information. Due to today’s media, both interaction and assimilation of different types of content are empowered as the digital medium offers diverse codes of communication and can reach larger audiences.

This is the idea upon which is based the CALL approach (Computer-assisted Language Learning) usually characterized by task-based activities in which the goal is something completely different from language learning but where the L2 is essential to complete the task. In this way, DST seems to perfectly embody the CALL approach as educational DST does not simply consist in representing a story via digital multimedia but it is a complex process of task-based activities relying on the constructionist idea of *learning by making* according to which by constructing personal artifacts students learn more quickly and better retain knowledge as they feel engaged by the fact that they are not completing a traditional scholastic task but they are utilizing their digital language for something educational.

As a consequence, DST allows to encompass the limitations imposed by *face-to-face* teaching where the learning process is guided by the teacher, students act like passive agents, and advice and feedback are not enhanced as well as collaborative learning.

For instance, when using DST in class and the teacher asks the students to create their digital stories by working in groups, even collaborative learning is fostered as, from one side, they find themselves using DST as tool to both construct and reinforce their identity by confronting themselves with others’ ideas and perspectives while, from another side, they learn how to act as a team as they need to reach the same goal (the completion of a task), thus limiting competition and experiencing sense of responsibility as each student plays a special role in the DST process.

Many researchers have stated the potential of DST in actively involve students in their language learning process as by narrating their stories they enhanced their speaking skills[2], improved their digital literacy (i.e. the ability to communicate in an ever-changing society by gathering information, discussing issues and seeking help)[3], fostered their writing skills[4][5] and information literacy (i.e. the ability to find, evaluate and synthesize information)[6].

3. The Digital Storytelling Laboratory

This study mainly aimed at exploring the effects DST has on fostering ESL learners’ motivation in the English classroom and the development of traditional and digital literacies.

The DST Laboratory has been purposefully enacted at “L’Orientale” University of Naples to conduct this research as part of an Innovative Industrial Ph.D. Research Project.

The Lab lasted three months and addressed 24 Bachelor’s students in their second year of the course English Language and Linguistics of the Undergraduate’s Degree in Comparative Languages and Literature.

The “Aula Informatica” of the same University was chosen for the research as it is equipped with computers, a projector, amplifiers, and a Wi-Fi connection. Nevertheless, students also used their laptops, especially during the steps of the creation of the digital story.

To investigate the effects of DST on EFL students an online survey was conducted before and after the course.

3.1 Implementation

At the beginning of the course, none of the 24 students involved in the research knew the actual meaning of the term “Digital Storytelling”, its implications and possible effects. As a consequence, the instructor slowly involved them in the process by carefully explaining to them what they needed to do to create their digital stories while, at the same time, taking the role of the *facilitator*. In fact, DST allows students to be the co-constructors of their knowledge, in the sense that



the instructor gives them the tools to carry out the learning process and helps them when needed but students have to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills to complete the tasks.

Since the beginning of the course, all of the students showed great participation and enthusiasm as they are not accustomed to this kind of learning process. Moreover, everything was realized in English, so that students had the opportunity to experience continuously with spoken and written language.

Also, they were shown some existing digital stories so to make them familiarize themselves with the product and then they were asked to work in groups. Groups were self-selected, even though the instructor supervised this activity so to make students form heterogeneous teams as each student had specific personal attitudes (e.g. artistic, literary, linguistic, etc.).

The Laboratory was organized by paying attention to all of the steps needed to complete the digital story, in this way students had the time to choose the topic (at this point discussion and feedback both between the students and the instructor was enhanced), select digital and non-digital material (i.e. appropriate images, video and music for the story), write the script, mix the material and develop the final product.

At the end of the course, each group showed their digital story to the whole class and the instructor promoted feedback and comments. Moreover, a YouTube Channel¹ of the Lab was created by the instructor so to make students able to share their stories on the web and receive feedback from a wider audience which gave them a sense of satisfaction after their hard work.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 A look at MWEs

The DST Lab was born to analyze the effects that DST - and so the combination of traditional teaching methods (e.g. storytelling) with new technologies - has on ESL Italian students' motivation and engagement.

However, a particular look at Multi-Word Expressions (MWEs) was given during the lessons as the ability to convey our thoughts by using a variety of linguistic expressions is what determines our language proficiency.

Although there is no universal definition of MWEs, they are generally regarded as lexical units derived from the combination of two or more words whose meaning is different from the meaning of its constituent parts.

Moreover, there exist different types of MWEs, such as idioms, phrasal verbs, light-verb constructions, routine formulas, etc. that form part of everyday spoken and written English.

At the beginning of the course, the students were asked if they knew something about "Multi-Word Expressions" and the result was that 70,8% of the students did while 29,2% did not. This result was quite surprising as students in their second year of their Bachelor's degree in English Language and Linguistics should be at least at a B2 Level (according to CEFR). Nevertheless, when the instructor asked them to give a particular example of each category of MWEs they were not able to categorize them.

As a consequence, one of the lessons was dedicated to the use of MWEs in English and the instructor asked the students to try to use them "in context", that is to develop their stories so that they would be written according to the appropriate register for the chosen topic and the MWEs that could better fit it.

At the end of the course, the survey showed that students improved their knowledge about MWEs and agreed in having learned how to appropriately research for and use them.

4.2 Development of Digital Skills

21st Century Learning demands, among others, for the development of *Digital Literacy*, which is defined as the ability to communicate in an ever-changing society by finding information, discussing different topics and seeking help when needed. *Digital Literacy* requires, at the same time, the development of *technology skills* that is the ability to appropriately use informatics tools such as audio, video, and photo-editing software.

At the beginning of the Laboratory, 39,3% of the students attested to be able to use *at elementary level* at least one of these tools: writing processors (e.g. word, excel), multimedia tools (e.g. iMovie),

¹ For more information, please visit: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNgmjdc_EPoGq8mIMdywFiw



audio, video and image editing software (e.g. video cameras, microphones, Photoshop), peaking at 60% for Power-Point presentations (PPT) and 12% for image-editing software such as Photoshop.

Indeed, they declared they never used these kinds of tools for academic purposes (apart from PPT) and participant observation also showed that students struggled in trying to individually learn the software after the explanation of the instructor.

On the contrary, at the end of the course, although 58,3% of the students declared that one of the difficulties encountered in creating their digital stories regarded the use of the software, 87,5% of them attested to have improved their digital, language, research, social, and organizing skills and that what they acquired could help them in the future:

Student A: I gained new skills both in using new computer programs, both in language and I think it would be helpful for me in the future.

Student B: I improved my digital and language skills and I used new software that I think could help me in my future career.

Student C: I've learned a new way of working step by step using the pattern taught for the creation of digital content that can be easily applied in other situations.

Student D: Thanks to DST I now know how to pass on a message in a different way, I know more about MWEs and I better work in a group.

In fact, 79,2 % of the students stated that DST could be an effective (language) learning strategy.

4.3 Cooperative Learning (CL) and development of Social Skills

Digital Storytelling also seems to enhance Cooperative Learning (CL) which, at the same time, could benefit from this kind of learning environment as, when working in groups, ESL students not only become more confident when speaking or writing in English but also they acquire new learning methods by looking at their peers solving language problems.

In effect, a task-based project like DST helps students develop a sense of responsibility because they are aware that each of them is fundamental for the completion of the assignment. This leads to better cooperation, as students know that they need to be able to manage time and material which forces them to reduce competition to reach the same goal.

Students in the Lab affirmed that they were not accustomed to this kind of collaborative projects and that DST gave them the opportunity to understand what it really means working in groups which, on one side, helped them improve self-confidence and awareness of their abilities, while on the other one, could be helpful for their future career.

Student E: DST represented a new way of learning for me since we had to prepare a project and we had to work and cooperate and it is not so common for my educational background to be able to use the things learned.

Student F: DST was a new way of learning not only from a cultural point of view but for everyday attitude because I could work in a team and we supported each other and compared multi-disciplinary connections.

Student G: DST was really helpful because it showed me how to better interact with others and it gave me a wider sense of responsibility.

Students' statements allow claiming that apart from the effects on the learning process, DST can foster social skills which are essential for students to acquire for their personal and professional lives.

Thanks to DST, students can learn more about themselves and the others, they learn how to manage discussions and arguments and how to give constructive feedback.

In this way, the *student-centered learning* provided by DST acquires a wider sense in which each student is the co-constructor of his/own knowledge but, at the same time, he/she takes something from the others and gives something to the others.

5. Conclusions

Today's learning processes are rapidly changing thanks to the development and spreading of new media technologies. E-learning and blended learning are becoming common practices in schools of different grades where games and fun activities help teachers motivate their students.

However, at University level it is sometimes difficult to engage students, above all when it comes to language learning. Moreover, today's students are different even from that of the '90s because, due to



the availability of new technologies, they easily get what they want thus requiring educators to make them constantly stimulated and involved.

Digital Storytelling seems to offer today's educators a great tool able to combine traditional teaching methods with contemporary needs.

This paper aimed at exploring the effects that DST has on ESL Italian students at the university level.

The results showed that students benefited from different points of view by developing their social, cultural, digital and language learning skills.

Nevertheless, future work intends to focus on the effects that DST could have on academic improvement.

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