Academic Exchange Quarterly

- **ISSN:** 1096-1453
- **Inicio:** 2004
- **Periodicidad:** Trimestral
- **País:** Estados Unidos
- **Idioma:** inglés
- Índice de autores

Editores

- Chattanooga State Technical Community College

Clasificación

- Psicología y educación: Educación
- **CIRC:** **Clasificación Integrada de Revistas Científicas**
  - D Grupo D

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- Red de Bibliotecas Universitarias (REBIUN)

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2013Vol. 171

Spring 2013 ISSN 1096-1453 Volume 17, Issue 1

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- **Localización:** Academic Exchange Quarterly, ISSN 1096-1453, Vol. 17, Nº. 1, 2013 , pág. 151

Digital storytelling for ESP in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores a project related to digital storytelling carried out at the Universitat Politècnica de València, in Spain, with the students of an English for Specific Purposes course devoted to the development of oral and written English skills. Several activities were designed for the project: surveys, a WebQuest, an online discussion

forum, a log, oral presentations and peer assessment activities. The overall results were very positive for both teachers and students.

Introduction

This paper gives account of a project related to digital storytelling which was carried out at the Universitat Politècnica de València (UPV), in Spain, in the year 2011-12, in an ESP context, with students of different engineering studies who registered in a course devoted to the development of oral and written English skills. The project comprised several stages, such as doing a WebQuest; writing, correcting and rewriting a script for their digital story; creating a digital story upon the choice of a topic related to their degrees; sharing and watching the digital stories through the UPV's Learning Management System (LMS); using an online forum of discussion to talk about the stories and to reply to the comments; writing a reflective journal; presenting the creative process orally and assessing their mates' digital stories and presentations.

Digital storytelling as a pedagogical tool

Digital storytelling, the "practice of combining multiple modes of technology, such as photographs, text, music, audio narration and video clips, to produce a compelling, emotional, and in-depth story" (Castañeda, 2013) is a powerful pedagogical tool for both students and educators. It involves the creation of a simple short video –lasting no more than 10 minutes- which allows ordinary people to share part of their lives or any topic of their interest in audiovisual format. It is the result of combining the art of telling stories with a variety of digital multimedia, such as images, audio and video (Robin, 2012). Thus, a digital story can be defined as a short movie resulting from the combination of narration and digital content like images, video, voice and music, emotional content being its characteristic feature.

As a pedagogical tool, digital stories can be used for any field of knowledge and to promote a variety of competences, including creativity and critical thinking. Furthermore, when created by a group of people rather than by an individual, digital stories can be very powerful tools for the promotion of collaborative work, due to the fact that the final success of the group will result from the individual efforts made by every member of the group.

Lambert (2002) identifies seven basic elements in designing a consistent digital story: point of view, dramatic question, emotional content, voice, soundtrack, economy of words and narrative pace.

a) The point of view is determined by the reasons to tell our story, the objective we seek when telling it, the target audience and the message conveyed.
b) At the beginning of the story, the narrator poses a dramatic question in order to create tension as well as to draw the audience's attention.
c) The emotional content keeps the audience interested in the story and makes them empathise with it.
d) The voice of the narrator helps the narrator(s) reach the audience with their message.

e) The soundtrack can complement and even reinforce the overall message. For that reason, it must be carefully selected in order to prevent lyrics from interfering with the narrator's voice and volume must be appropriate.
f) Economy of words prevents the narration from containing too much information, thus allowing the listener to focus on the central message.
g) Pacing concerns not only the narration but also the images. The right pacing will make the story comprehensible but not boring.

Digital storytelling merges cutting-edge technology and ancient tradition. It is an heir to traditional oral narrative as a knowledge transmission and communication tool as well as a product of today's knowledge-based society, as it makes use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and electronic devices which provide a variety of types of communication, access and dissemination of information. Stories have traditionally had and still do have an important role for humanity not only as key elements in the transmission and dissemination of knowledge, but also because stories help make meaning out of experience (Bruner, 1996, 2003; Shank, 1990). Those experiences and the stories created to make them meaningful are essential to learning (Shank, 1990; Zull, 2002). Moreover, in educational contexts, stories help build connections with the students' prior knowledge (Shank, 1990). All these features make stories an easier and more enjoyable way to learn and remember (Shank, 1990; Rex, Murnen, Hobbs and McEache, 2002) and to comprehend the content and the message transmitted by the story. Storytelling also helps students connect to other students (Lowenthal, 2008) by disclosing relevant or personal information and relating to each other's common experiences (Lowenthal and Dunlap, 2010). Moreover, language learning by means of digital storytelling becomes a reflective activity which will allow students to develop and express their own ideas and perceptions with regards to the way they present their digital story.

Even though the body of research that evaluates digital storytelling for teaching and learning purposes in first language (L1) and second language (L2) settings is still small, it is rapidly growing. As for the use of digital storytelling in ESP settings, the studies describing its use in these kinds of settings are still rare. Among those, there is an account of an experience concerning the use of digital storytelling for ESP in a subject of English for Science and Technology (Hafner & Miller, 2011). In the case of the more numerous studies carried out in L1 classrooms, these include the experiences described by Lowenthal & Dunlap (2008; 2009; 2010), who looked at different ways to increase social presence while improving the quality of teaching by means of digital storytelling; Banaszewski (2002), Davis (2004) and Kajder (2004), who examined the use of digital storytelling in secondary education; and Duveskog et al. (2012), who studied the effectiveness of digital storytelling when used with kids in a primary school. As for the research on the use of digital storytelling in L2 settings, some very interesting experiences were described by authors such as Yang & Wu (2012), who examined digital storytelling for enhancing student academic achievement, critical thinking, and learning motivation in a high school in Taiwan, and Sadik (2008), who examined the extent to which students were engaged in authentic learning tasks using digital storytelling in various content areas including English as a foreign language (EFL).

As observed in the literature, so far there has been little discussion about the use of digital storytelling in scientific and technical contexts of ESP, such as the Universitat Politècnica de València, in Spain. Consequently, the project "Creating your own digital story" for future engineers described in this paper aims to fill the gap in the ESP literature.

The project "Creating your own digital story"

The project "Creating your own digital story" was carried out during the 2nd semester of the school year 2011-12, in the Department of Applied Linguistics at the Universitat Politècnica de València, in Spain, within an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course for engineers of 45 hours (4,5 ECTS credits). This course is an optional elective subject in the old curriculum prior to the Bologna Process, which is mainly taken by students who need to complete their credits to finish their degree, what causes the group to be very heterogeneous in terms of students' affiliation, age and level of English. In spite of advising a prior B2 level of the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001), the actual level of the students ranged from A2 to B2. As for their academic profile, students came from a variety of engineering studies – design, chemistry, mechanics, electricity, aerospace, etc.

The main goal of the course, as described in the teaching guide, is to help students improve their linguistic skills with regard to the field of the degrees offered at the UPV, by practising oral and written comprehension and expression in English. Linguistic skills are developed by means of interpretative and productive strategies in order to solve communicative situations such as stays in an English speaking country. This course is specially designed to help students join any academic exchange programme in which the UPV takes part. As for the linguistic competences, the course promotes oral and written expression and comprehension while reinforcing grammatical patterns and vocabulary. The students are advised to have previously acquired a B2 level of English, according to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001).

Moreover, the course aims at developing 3 basic types of non-linguistic skills: instrumental skills, including information management, decision making and knowledge of a foreign language; interpersonal skills -general interpersonal skills, diversity and multicultural awareness, skills to effectively manage in international contexts-; and systemic skills, including knowledge about other cultures and customs.

Regarding the teaching units, they revolve around the preparation and practice of real situations and needs the students will have to face when they travel abroad because of study, internship or professional reasons. These include making contacts, writing a curriculum vitae, attending a personal interview, seeking and gathering relevant information, explaining and defining information, choosing the most appropriate university, getting in touch with host universities, speaking on the telephone, preparing and enquiring about travel arrangements, organising a travel itinerary, becoming acquainted with cultural differences, presenting information in public, developing intercultural awareness and having a personal interview.

As far as the teaching methodology is concerned, the activities are organised according to the teaching units, which are frequently interconnected. First, the students choose the institution they would like to be accepted in, bearing in mind the agreement signed between the UPV and other foreign institutions. In order to carry out this task, the students must previously gather information about the host institution, make contact with it and ask for the information and documents required. Then, they have to practice the communicative skills that will allow them to efficiently face the stay not only in academic or professional terms but also regarding social relations, learning and adaptation to customs, cultural awareness, etc. Finally, a range of activities –including the digital storytelling project- and oral presentations are carried out in order to deeper explore the topic dealt with in the lessons, to strengthen the oral and written practice of the English language and to develop several competences, including digital competence, organizational skills, critical thinking, creativity and teamwork.

The project involved a number of activities around the creation of a digital story about one of the topics dealt with in the lessons regarding the preparation of a stay for an academic or professional exchange in an institution in an English speaking country. In order to carry out this project, the 26 students in the classroom split into 8 teams of 2 to 4 students. The steps followed for the completion of the project were:

1) Completing a pre-survey about the students' previous knowledge and experiences, as well as their expectations and their attitude towards the activity.
2) Doing a WebQuest introducing the concept and the methodology used to create digital stories. It included two Polimedia -UPV's pedagogic videos- recordings with information about digital stories and the steps to be followed and videos to be used as examples. This activity encouraged the students to work autonomously and collaboratively while fostering the creation of personal relations within the group.
3) Creating a digital story upon the choice of the topic; writing, correcting and rewriting the script; choosing the media resources and editing, recording and synchronising voices and images, among other activities.
4) Sharing and watching the digital stories through the *PoliformaT* platform –the UPV's Learning Management System (LMS).
5) Using the online forum to talk about the stories and to reply to the comments.
6) Writing a log.
7) Presenting of the creative process and the "making of" orally.
8) Assessing their mates' digital stories and presentations by means of 7-point Likert scale assessment sheets.
9) Completing a post-survey about the results, the competences developed, the students' degree of satisfaction and the fulfilment of their expectations with regard to the activity.

Skills developed

The project promoted the development of a number of both linguistic and non-linguistic skills. On the one hand, among the non-linguistic competences, we must point out digital skills, research and organization skills, collaborative work and interpersonal skills, public speaking, problem-solving and critical thinking. On the other

hand, the main linguistic skills developed are oral and written comprehension and expression, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Frequently, several skills were combined and interconnected to complete the activities. In order to assess the perception of the improvement and development of skills, the students filled in a final survey upon the completion of the activity regarding the skills promoted in every case. As inferred from the results, following a reflection on the learning process, the students felt the activities had helped them develop several linguistic competences and skills, grading all of them over 4 in a 7-point Likert scale. With regard to the reading and writing skills, they were mainly developed when doing the WebQuest and writing the script, when recording and synchronising the voice, writing the log, participating in the online forum, as well as when assessing both the digital stories and the oral presentations by means of assessment sheets and when completing the pre- and post- surveys. Regarding the oral comprehension and expression skills, they were developed through the WebQuest and collaborative team work, when recording the digital story and watching their classmates' digital stories, the Polimedia and example videos and the oral presentations. Moreover, the activities contributed to practice and acquisition of several grammatical patterns as well as general and technical vocabulary.

Conclusion

This paper describes the "Creating your own digital story" project, carried out during the second semester of the year 2011-12, within the course "English: oral and written comprehension and expression", with 26 students belonging to different scientific and technical degrees at the Universitat Politècnica de València, Spain.

The project promoted practicing and developing various competences and skills, both linguistic and non-linguistic. This paper is mainly focused on the linguistic skills. The overall results were positive, since the students invested a great amount of hours in the assignment and regarded it as a useful activity to develop and practice skills and abilities such as oral and written expression and comprehension, vocabulary and grammar acquisition, as well as pronunciation, as inferred from the students' responses in the final survey.

This project has been the first experience with digital storytelling carried out in a language course at the UPV. Due to the highly satisfactory results for both students and teachers, we hope to repeat and to expand the project. Moreover, due to the amount of interconnected competences and skills that the project allows to practice and develop, which cover the contents and objectives contained in the teaching guide, we hope digital storytelling will become an integral part of the curriculum in the near future.

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