Digital Storytelling as an Integrated Approach to Second Language Learning and Teaching

JungKang Miller*
Mercy College, United States

Soonhyang Kim
University of North Florida, United States

Storytelling and learning are inextricably intertwined because the process of composing a story is also a process of making meaning. Integrating opportunities for “storytelling” into academic content knowledge development strengthens student learning (Matthews-DeNatale, 2008). In this paper, the authors explore the power of digital storytelling in second language learning and teaching through the implementation of digital storytelling as an innovative pedagogical practice for advancing the preparation of teacher candidates in ESOL teacher training courses, and how this has been successfully translated into best practices in an ESL classroom. In K-12 classroom practice, digital storytelling was implemented in an ESL classroom as an integrated approach to second language learning and academic knowledge development. The authors discuss the implications of digital storytelling as a powerful pedagogical tool to become reflective, engaging, collaborative, and competent users of their knowledge of content and technology for both TESOL teacher candidates and English language learners.

*Correspondence should be sent to: JungKang Miller, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Literacy and Multilingual Studies, School of Education, Mercy College, New York. Email: jkmiller@mercy.edu
“Stories are everywhere. We tell them, we live in them, our views of reality, of life itself, are shaped by them in ways beyond our awareness. We make sense of our experience, day by day and across the life span, by putting it into story form. We are stories” (Rossiter & Clark, 2007, p. 3).

INTRODUCTION

A digital storytelling project offers numerous instructional benefits in the classroom for enhancing teaching and student learning (Alexander, 2011, pp. 214-216). A digital story is a short, personal narrative that is told through multimedia, such as images, audio, and sound effects. Digital storytelling involves a process of developing a short 3-5 minute video in which a story is narrated combined with photos, images, music, and video. The stories can vary from personal experiences to academic content, and a short story can be produced digitally using various video editing software (e.g., iMovie for the Mac, Movie Maker for Windows, and Photo Story). Digital storytelling can be an effective educational tool in the classroom, as it engages students in the creative process of integrating technology to generate and express meaning. Digital storytelling is particularly beneficial to language learners, as it is a task-based project using multimodal and multiliteracy skills.

Storytelling and learning are inextricably intertwined because the process of composing a story is also a process of creating and conveying meaning. Therefore, integrating opportunities for “storytelling” into second language and academic knowledge development strengthens student learning and participation (Matthews-DeNatale, 2008). In this paper, the authors present the power of digital storytelling as innovative pedagogical practices in a TESOL graduate course and as best practices in an ESL classroom with ELLs. First, we describe the process of implementing digital storytelling in a TESOL graduate course. The goal of digital storytelling in a TESOL graduate course was to provide teacher candidates with the opportunity to become reflective, engaging, collaborative, and competent users of their knowledge of content and technology (Dogan & Robin, 2008). We highlight how one of the students in the course incorporated digital storytelling in a classroom of students with diverse language, academic, and cognitive needs during her student teaching upon the completion of the class to showcase an example of digital storytelling implementation in a K-12 classroom.

Next, we introduced another a teacher candidate who became an ESL teacher implemented digital storytelling in her own classroom where her English language learners (ELLs) produced powerful digital stories about their own families and cultures as an integrated approach to second language learning and academic knowledge development. By presenting a case of implementing digital storytelling into an ESL classroom after the teacher education training, we intend to show how this innovative pedagogical practice for advancing the preparation of teacher candidates in a TESOL graduate program can be successfully translated into best practices by our teacher candidates in their own classrooms. We also discuss the implications of digital storytelling as a powerful pedagogical tool for reflection and collaboration to enhance teaching and learning opportunities for ESOL teacher candidates and English language learners.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital storytelling is a recommended instructional and multimedia tool for all teachers working with second language learners at all levels. Teacher education faculty are encouraged to participate in their professional development with digital storytelling as a vehicle for reflection and collaboration as users of technology to enhance teaching and learning opportunities for themselves, their teacher candidates, and English language learners (Ferrer & Miller, 2013).

Since the stories are drawn from students’ personal experiences with considerable emotional investment, one of the benefits of digital storytelling for language learning is that it links into students’ real lives, an important element of effective task-based language learning (Godwin-Jones, 2012, p. 3). As a group project, the learning environment is flexible as students choose to take on different tasks based on their abilities and preferences. There are multiple means of engagement as some choose to write, others illustrate, and others select music, record narration, or scan images. Collaborative skills and social language are also practiced. Students can express their ideas through pictures, written or spoken words, music, even pacing can change the overall effect. Students with varying interests and abilities can each find a place to have a significant impact on the outcome, be appropriately challenged, and be exposed to and learn from the work of the others in their group.

Digital storytelling is a useful teaching tool for not only second language learning but also for facilitating academic knowledge development of ELLs. Digital stories are not limited to the personal narrative genre and may be designed to tie into students’ academic skills, fostering the development of critical thinking and media literacy (Ohler, 2008).

Frazel (2010) suggests short periods of reflective journaling during the preparation process to assist students in focusing and narrowing the subject of the digital story project. Digital storytelling can be produced individually, in small groups, and as the whole class, as described in the cases by the ESL teacher and student teacher. Personal stories, for example, personal and autobiographical stories are good for individual digital storytelling projects, whereas documentary reports and problem-based learning projects, such as community service projects can be done as the whole class (Frazel, 2010).

For English language learners, producing a digital story engages them in using all four language skills in a cooperative and collaborative learning environment. As a student-centered project that combines traditional literacies (writing, narrating) with new literacies (online search, video editing) (Hafner & Miller, 2011), digital storytelling provides strong language and academic support for English language learners:

- ELLs build upon their linguistic, cultural and lived experiences as content for text (developing voice through the second language and their culture).
- ELLs build academic language in a meaningful context (English language arts and content mastery).
- ELLs take on an active/critical (problem solving) role in reading and evaluating text.
- ELLs engage in meaningful communication situations.
• ELLs own both their learning and creation (linguistic and cultural empowerment). (Ferrer & Miller, 2013).

Digital storytelling holds for second language learning and for critical thinking skills. In the development of personal digital stories, teachers invite students to create a movie of their own cultural or family story employing multimedia text and the writing process (Sylvester & Greenridge, 2009, pp. 287-290). Students become entranced by the power of their own voices and their own images (Rance-Roney, 2008) and each student’s personal experience becomes the central context and content for the digital storytelling projects. Students’ new learning occurs rooted in their individual knowledge and experiences, and is negotiated in the project that requires cross-cultural collaboration as well as fluency with academic and social discourses. Hence, digital story projects allow students to deeply explore the academic content while using language in focused and purposeful ways, with the specific goal of developing fluency in the written and oral language (Vinogradova, Linville, & Bickel, 2011).

Digital storytelling as an authentic means of expression promotes learner autonomy, as students reflect on their developing identities and their sense of who they are and how they relate to the world (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Such projects would provide a social context or learning environment in which learners are able to interact with one another as well as experiment with a range of technology in order to create personally meaningful multimodal artifacts (Hafner & Miller, 2011, p. 72). Digital storytelling as a student-centered approach that validates learner autonomy can develop within learners the ability and desire to take initiative both in the classroom and outside. When students are aware that they are at the center of learning, they become more actively involved in the process of exploring knowledge; and are able to make this learned knowledge more relevant to their life in the social and academic context. Digital storytelling as a reflective and engaging educational tool can make a considerable contribution to the multimodal literacy needed in today’s culture (Godwin-Jones, 2012, p. 6).

The use of technology in the production and the creation of a digital story are inherently interesting and engaging to most students. Digital storytelling allows students with different abilities, including but not limited to ELLs, an opportunity to participate in a meaningful way in real-world learning with their peers to create a multi-dimensional language-based project.

An additional positive aspect of digital stories is that the published product is eminently shareable. Teachers may choose to upload stories to a class or school webpage so that students can share their work with an audience larger than a hard copy might reach. Therefore, “deep language acquisition and meaningful practice” is embedded in the digital storytelling process (Rance-Roney, 2008, p. 29).

Digital storytelling is real-world learning. It can be a tool for deep learning and reflection for (Barret, 2006). It requires students to work collaboratively on a project over time, with multiple steps and using multiple disciplines. Students learn through doing.

Digital storytelling also incorporates the tenets of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). As part of a UDL approach (Proctor, Dalton, & Grisham, 2007), creating digital
stories as a means of students demonstrating knowledge is a valuable tool. Offering a menu of choices respects student differences and is more likely to engage students. Individually, as a team, or as a group, students can demonstrate knowledge by putting the content into a digital story in the same way that the teacher used it to deliver instruction. Students can create nonfiction stories or write and digitize original fictions. The result can be extremely simple or creatively complex. With scaffolding, even very young children can create a digital story. Thus, digital storytelling is an appropriate teaching tool for students at almost all grade levels. Because there is such a variety of means of participating, it is also appropriate for students with special needs and English language learners.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN PRACTICE

A Case of Digital Storytelling: In ESOL Teacher Training

Background

Since digital storytelling was first introduced to the teacher candidates in a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) graduate course, a number of faculty and teacher candidates have been involved in this multimedia narrative project. The project’s main goal is to provide the graduate students with an opportunity to become a reflective, engaging, collaborative, and competent user of their content and technology knowledge. This multimedia narrative is a semester-long project in which graduates students in an introductory TESOL course develop a narrative of their learning experience about English language learners (ELLs) both in class and in the field. The graduate students develop a digital story using video editing software, such as iMovie, Movie Maker, and Photo Story and document the process in their electronic portfolios.

Steps Taken

Two orientation sessions of Digital Storytelling for the students were conducted by the College’s instructional designers. Each session was one hour long and was given in a computer lab. These orientation sessions were helpful in equipping the students with the knowledge, skills, and resources necessary in order to carry out the project. During the 40 minute weekly lab session at the end of each class, the students went through the following steps:

Brainstorming: The students shared their ideas with the classmates (sometimes called a “story circle”). Peers and professor asked questions and helped each other refine their ideas. One of the ways to develop an idea was by reflecting on the weekly reflection journal and finding an important theme/topic.

Scripting: The students wrote a 200-300 word script that will become the narrative for their stories. The instructional designer and the professor provided feedback.(See Appendix A).
Storyboarding: Using templates, the students showed how the words in their scripts would synch up with the images they planned to use in the stories.

Recording and Editing: They recorded audio, add images, and edit their work in Photo Story 3.

Sharing: This is the final screening for students to present and discussed their work. This was where some of the most important reflective learning takes place.

Outcomes

The students presented their final digital story projects to the College’s faculty and students at a college-wide symposium. They presented the efficacy of using digital stories with ELLs and students with special needs. One student connected with Spanish-speaking ELLs with whom she worked in schools in Texas. Another student shared her story about the challenges she faced in communicating with her great-grandmother who spoke only Spanish. Among many of the personal stories, one student recounted how her awareness of doing what was best for her six-year-old autistic son won over her desire to shelter and protect him by locking him away from youngsters in public schools.

A Case of Digital Storytelling: During Student Teaching

Background

In this section, we introduce a case of the teacher candidate who immediately implemented the digital storytelling in her student teaching upon her completion of the TESOL course. During her student teaching experience, she met a class of fourth graders which included three students growing up with an autistic sibling. The students were divided into heterogeneous groups based on their diverse language, academic, and cognitive needs. As a performing arts instructor prior to entering the teacher education program, she incorporated music, images, and language using technology in the digital storytelling program as a way to create a learning environment where children collaborated in creative ways to solve problems and explore their talents.

Steps Taken

Each group was given the assignment to write a book sharing the experience of having an autistic sibling. With guidance from the teacher, they collaborated on the project, each using his strengths and talents to improve the products. The results were outstanding, and the authors toured the school during Autism Awareness Week, reading their books in other classrooms to both older and younger students. When the students read their stories in her second grade class, it struck her how what she had learned in her graduate course on TESOL about digital story-telling could make this project even more meaningful.
Outcomes

The students were very excited at the prospect of creating digital copies of their books. The students regarded it as a reward for their efforts. They helped to scan the images, and recorded their narration and added a musical soundtrack. With parental consent, the digital books were uploaded to YouTube. Digitizing the books served several purposes: it created a durable, permanent record for the children and their families, created an easy-to-share version, and most importantly, validated their feelings and empowered them to make a difference for a cause they care about. Now, unlike with the original hard copies, all of the students who worked on the books could share their work with friends and family members. The school put a link to the stories on its homepage under their Autism Awareness banner, and links to the books were sent to groups across the country that specialize in issues surrounding children with ASD. To date, the books have received thousands of hits, and the students who created them can take pride in having created something with the potential to affect real positive social change.

A Case of Digital Storytelling: In an ESL Classroom

Background

One of the teacher candidates from the TESOL graduate course who became an ESL teacher implemented digital storytelling in her own classroom as an integrated approach to second language and academic learning for her ESL students. As an ESL teacher in a NYC school that serves 5th through 12th grades, she developed a digital storytelling project assignment for her 5th grade ESL class.

The 5th grade ESL students had been reading different stories about families and children’s culture, customs and beliefs from people of Vietnam, Alaska, Puerto Rico, Russia, and China. The students were learning the importance of preserving their heritage which includes language, culture, customs, holidays, beliefs, food, traditions and music. In the digital storytelling project the students were creating their own story similar to the stories that they had read in the unit.

Steps Taken

The first task was to develop a written narrative script. The students conducted an interview with a family member in order to gather information on family tradition and custom. Since the interviews were conducted in their home languages, the information had to be translated into English. The students’ narrative included the following information:

- First paragraph: Students introduced themselves including name, nationality, length of living in the USA, spoken languages, and people they live with.
- Second paragraph: Students introduced their families and talked about the person they interviewed. They shared traditions from their parents’ country, food, language, any dialect, holidays or interesting information about their heritage.
Third paragraph: Students expressed their thoughts and feelings about their families’ culture and traditions and their interest in preserving their heritage. Students also explained the importance of being different and what makes us unique.

The next task was to create a storyboard. After the students drafted, reviewed (individually and in pairs), and edited their writing, they selected images to illustrate their work in a storyboard. The students used a self-checklist to evaluate their work and identify mistakes. The students used a color-coding system to help them transfer their stories into a storyboard. The final task was to record the script. The students practiced reading their script in pairs, and the recording began once they felt comfortable with the script.

Outcomes

The project and class environment provided the students with the feeling that their cultures and languages were of value. The students also felt reassured that there was no right or wrong answer to hinder their writing. In addition to the positive outcomes of their individual projects, each student was given a chance to learn from one another and grade each other’s work. Peer-evaluation and self-evaluation were an essential part of this project, as the students had the opportunity to practice giving each other feedback and using it to improve their work. All students, including ELLs, need to be self-responsible learners, and this project was a good way to plant the seeds that would inform their future learning styles.

The students participated in “The 5th Grade Digital Storytelling Awards 2012.” All students evaluated each other’s work by using a digital storytelling rubric (See Appendix B). Some guest teachers observed the students’ presentations and selected the best one. They all received some presents. All students decided to use their digital stories to participate in a state contest. Their stories helped them win the contest. Their pride in their work was evident, and the class even received funds for their school to buy more books for the school library and resources for the ESL classroom.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DIGITAL STORYTELLING IMPLEMENTATION

Student storytellers can also learn to incorporate feedback from within their group and from the class. In the editing phase, both spoken and written language skills are practiced.

The case above documents the impact that digital storytelling has on student learning, motivation, and engagement, and on teaching practices and strategies with technology integration (Barret, 2006).

As a group project, collaborative skills and social language can be practiced. The group can then draft a storyboard and divide the project into “jobs.” Some students may choose to work on the pictures while others write the script. Still others may choose to work on selecting appropriate music to set the tone, or provide the voice-over. In digital storytelling, students can express their ideas through pictures, written or spoken words, and music—even pacing can change the overall effect. Students with varying interests and
abilities can each find a place to have a significant impact on the outcome, be appropriately challenged, and be exposed to and learn from the work of the others in their group. The software, Photo Story 3, provides immediate feedback and reinforcement as the pieces are layered to create the product. In the revising stage, students again learn to view their work with a critical eye. Digital stories, like poetry, should include only what is essential—so creating a story is useful in teaching critical thinking.

Digital storytelling projects promote real world applicability including connections between the students’ lives and academic content and language, as well as the world beyond the classroom. Digital storytelling would really benefit ESL students with diverse learning needs, because it can be adapted to address all students of different needs and English proficiency levels. The timeframe can be modified depending on the students’ performance and the challenges that they face. The teacher can make appropriate modifications to the digital storytelling project, such as the length of the narrative, in order to make the project suitable for students with different language and academic needs. An extended time can be allowed for a group of students with diverse learning needs and ESL proficiencies.

Digital storytelling can be done in groups or as an individual project. The following strategies were used in order to facilitate students’ participation, collaboration, and learning during the process:

- Mixed ability grouping
- Hands-on skills activity (kinesthetic access)
- Support for students with weak computer skills
- Real world applicability—connection to their own lives
- Collaborative learning, mixed pacing
- Visuals, verbal and written directions and cues.
- Diagrams to assist with the instructions and the written directions.
- Modeling before recording students’ final work

Digital storytelling can be used as an alternative method for students to demonstrate learning. When a student is offered a menu of choices, they will choose the method which most closely matches their learning style. An ESL student might choose to work with a small group doing digital story-telling rather than writing an essay or doing an oral report because there are jobs in the production of a digital story which are not totally language based. However, these students are still being exposed to academic and social language during the making of the digital story. For example, in Social Studies, a group of students might make a digital story about the first Thanksgiving while others are making a travel brochure about Plymouth and still others are writing a theme.

In a primary classroom, the digital story can be the culmination of a unit of study. If they are studying the life cycle of a butterfly, students can do artwork and writing to describe the steps in the life cycle and then digitize and narrate it chorally. When completed, the digital story can be further published on the class or school’s website where it can be shared with other classrooms as well as friends and family.

English language learners are encouraged to achieve high expectations and progress at their own rate to reach personal goals in both the language and cognitive skills. Digital
storytelling can be also used to help students build an awareness of cultural diversity and a desire of integrating family, community, and school members in their learning process.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
Sample Script

One afternoon each fall, well over 100 10 year-olds gather in the A Elementary school cafeteria after the rest of the students have headed home. It’s a day that strikes both fear and excitement into the hearts of fifth graders here.

Some giggle, others are strangely quiet. It’s casting call for the annual fifth grade musical – something of a rite of passage for A students. They have been members of the audience since kindergarten, and now it is their turn to take the stage.

Everyone who wishes to participate can be a part of the show, and there is a part that suits each child’s comfort level and experience.

but those who would like to be considered for a solo must walk out onto the stage, all alone for the very first time and sing in front of all of their classmates.

For many, it requires summoning more courage than they have ever had to muster, but if they want the part, and most of them do, they must cross this threshold.

All efforts receive applause, and the young performers exit the stage with the thrill of having faced their fears.

So much is learned on the very first day – that this is a safe place, that we are a team, that trying something new can be exciting. My hope is that the next time these students need to do something which frightens them,

be it giving an oral report, trying out for a team, or applying for a job, they will remember this experience positively and forge ahead with confidence.

As a theater arts instructor, I have seen students transformed by their experience with the performing arts,

and as a graduate student in elementary education, I now understand why.

The performing arts reach children who learn kinesthetically, visually, and musically.

At rehearsal, instruction is differentiated, collaborative groups are formed fostering positive interdependence, ( instruction is scaffolded with movement and music as we work toward performing the material without the scripts,
and for English Language Learners, there is the opportunity to practice both productive and receptive language in a supportive environment with lots of practice and a huge payoff.

Singing, dancing, and acting together, the performers share an experience which builds class unity.

Performance time brings back students’ nerves; once again, they are challenged to face their fears. Every teacher they have ever had will be in the audience as well as every other student in the school, principals, siblings, neighbors, and relatives. The difference is that they are now a functioning unit

—each individual’s contribution vital and valued,

together creating a living work of art, greater than the sum of its parts, and their legacy at the school.)

They are the cast and crew of the fifth grade musical —prepared to perform and create a memory which I hope will last a lifetime.

APPENDIX B
Sample Rubric

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Satisfactory</th>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purposes/Point of view</td>
<td>Establishes a purpose early on and maintains a clear focus throughout.</td>
<td>Establishes a purpose early on and maintains focus for most of the presentation.</td>
<td>There are a few lapses in focus, but the purpose is fairly clear.</td>
<td>It is difficult to figure out the purpose of the presentation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy of Story Detail</td>
<td>The story is told with exactly the right amount of detail throughout. It does not seem too short nor does it seem too long</td>
<td>The story composition is typically good, though it seems to drag somewhat OR need slightly more detail in one or two sections.</td>
<td>The story seems to need more editing. It is noticeably too long or too short in more than one section.</td>
<td>The story needs extensive editing. It is too long or too short to be interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacing</td>
<td>The pace fits the story line</td>
<td>The pacing is relatively</td>
<td>The pacing does not fit the story</td>
<td>No attempt to match the pace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and helps the audience really "get into" the story. | engaging for the audience. | line. Audience is not consistently engaged. | of the storytelling to the story line or the audience.
---|---|---|---
**Images and Sound** | Images and sounds create an atmosphere or tone that matches different parts of the story. They may communicate symbolism and/or metaphors. | Images and sound create an atmosphere or tone that matches some parts of the story. They may communicate symbolism and/or metaphors. | An attempt was made to use images and sound to create an atmosphere/tone but it needed more work. |
| Little or no attempt to use images and sound to create an appropriate atmosphere/tone. | |
**Emotion** | Emotional dimension of the piece matches the story line well. Viewers are encouraged to care about the topic, person, organization, etc. | Emotional dimension of the piece somewhat matches the story line. | Emotional dimension of the piece is distracting (over the top) and/or does not add much to the story. |
| Emotional dimension of the piece is inappropriate OR absent. | |

Adapted from Joe Lambert’s (2009) *The Seven Elements of Digital Storytelling* from Center for Digital Storytelling: http://www.storycenter.org
APPENDIX C
Storyboard Templates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$</th>
<th>DATE:</th>
<th>PROJECT NAME:</th>
<th>AUTHOR:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>FRAME/EVENT DESCRIPTION</td>
<td>MEDIA LIST</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Here</strong> you do a quick sketch of what will appear at this point in your digital story… you can also paste a graphic or photo here… do whatever works to remind you of what ‘s going on …</td>
<td><strong>Here</strong> you list the specifics of every piece of media you will need; this will help you gather materials before beginning story construction; it also serves as a “works cited list” for copyright purposes… Music, songs, sounds, voice recordings, Pictures, graphics, diagrams, Video clip, Text, titles, transitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Here</strong> you describe: what will appear on the screen (picture, clip, graphic or other kind of visual) what listeners will hear (music, narrative, sounds) your director’s comments about what you are trying to achieve and communicate…</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NARRATION:

Here you write out or describe the narrative…
(Source: www.jasonohler.com/storytelling)