

## Digital Storytelling: A Case Study of the Creation, and Narration of a Story by EFL Learners

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### **Abstract**

The use of technology to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has been greatly expanded in recent decades, and has also been construed by educators as a fresh alternative to traditional pedagogy. Digital Storytelling can offer this alternative as, without neglecting the target of improving teaching quality, it has been proved to be a successful instructional tool to teach EFL (Gregori-Signes, 2008a; 2012), since it can combine the advantages and success of traditional storytelling with the innovations of new technologies to teach a foreign language. The aim of this case-study is to foster students' writing and speaking skills (Reinders, 2011) by engaging them in a project in which traditional and digital narrative are combined, with the primary goal of reinforcing foreign language acquisition and development for students of EFL. First, I shall examine some of the distinctive features of the DST. Secondly, I shall describe the process students had followed in order to complete the task; and, finally, I shall discuss the results.

### **Keywords**

Digital storytelling, ICTs, English as a foreign language, higher education.

## **El relato digital: estudio de caso de la creación y narración de una historia por estudiantes de inglés como LE**

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### **Resumen**

El uso de las tecnologías para la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera (ILE) se ha ido extendiendo y constituyendo como una nueva alternativa a la pedagogía tradicional en las últimas décadas. El relato digital puede ofrecer esta alternativa y, sin olvidar que el objetivo del mismo es mejorar la calidad en la enseñanza, ha ido demostrando que puede ser una buena herramienta metodológica para enseñar ILE (Gregori-Signes, 2008a; 2012), ya que puede combinar las ventajas del relato tradicional con las innovaciones de las nuevas tecnologías para enseñar una lengua extranjera. El objetivo de este estudio de caso es fomentar la expresión oral y escrita comprometiendo a los estudiantes en un proyecto en el cual se combinan la narrativa tradicional y la digital con el principal objetivo de reforzar la adquisición y desarrollo de la lengua extranjera a estudiantes de ILE. En primer lugar, examinaremos algunas de las características del relato digital. En segundo lugar, describiremos el proceso que han seguido los alumnos para completar la tarea. Finalmente, discutiremos los resultados.

### **Palabras clave**

Relato digital, TIC, inglés como lengua extranjera, educación superior

## I. Introduction

The emergence and dissemination of new technologies (ICTs) has had a considerable impact on the way teachers now instruct and the ways in which students process information; the result has been an improvement in educational quality. The appliance of Digital Storytelling (henceforth DST) in education subsequently became a central issue in the field of language teaching and learning research since it proved to be a very useful and helpful tool to employ in the classroom (Barret, 2005; Bordine-Fitzgibbon and Hughes-Wilhelm, 1998; Gregori-Signes, 2008a, 2008b). In the words of Bernard Robin (2006, p. 1), DST can be defined as follows

[digital storytellings] revolve around the idea of combining the art of telling stories with a variety of digital multimedia, such as images, audio, and video. Just about all digital stories bring together some mixture of digital graphics, text, recorded audio narration, video and music to present information on a specific topic.

Thus, by introducing the technology factor, DST can combine the advantages and success of traditional storytelling with the innovations of new technologies to teach English to non-native students (Lowenthal, 2009). In addition, multimedia methods not only facilitate and promote the dissemination of information, but also encourage teamwork (Alcantud-Díaz, 2010). Therefore, both the content and the technology are present in a DST; and, although it was not originally designed to be used as a pedagogical technique, we should not ignore the didactic possibilities this tool affords in the process of acquiring a foreign language.

The aim of this case-study is to foster students' writing and oral skills (Reinders, 2011) by engaging them in a digital project in which traditional and digital narrative are combined, with the primary goal of reinforcing foreign language acquisition and development for students of English as a Foreign Language. First, I shall examine some of the distinctive features of the DST focusing on its didactic advantages. Secondly, I shall describe the process of elaboration students had to follow in order to create the digital story; and, finally, I shall discuss the results obtained after having carried out the assessment task conducted by students and teacher alike.

## II. Digital Storytelling: An Instructional Method for Learners of EFL

### a. DST as a Didactic Tool

Many definitions have been employed to describe digital storytelling, yet they all converge around Robin's (2006) idea that digital storytelling combines old (oral tradition) with new (new technologies) or, as Gregori-Signes (2008a, p. 1) poses it, a way to combine 'traditional means of telling a story with different types of digital multimedia'. Additionally, Yuksel et al. (2011, p. 2) describe it as 'a relatively new educational approach that integrates the use of digital devices with traditional storytelling methods'.

The topics students normally explore in DST revolve around the following three types proposed by Robin (2006, p. 2): (1) personal narratives –stories of events based on the digital storyteller's own experiences; (2) those which narrate historical events; and (3) narratives that have the purpose of informing and/or instructing.

### b. Software: Photostory3

For the elaboration of the DST, Photostory3 is highly recommended given that it is a user-friendly software and, it requires no more than basic computer skills in order to complete the exercise

achieving extraordinary results in some cases: '[DST] requiere muy poca instrucción en el aspecto tecnológico y permite la participación de un público muy amplio y con resultados casi profesionales en muchos casos' (Alcantud 2010, p. 1)<sup>1</sup>. Photostory3 is a Microsoft tool, which permits the uploading of images onto a window, and the customised arrangement of these images. It also allows us to record our own voice, and add music to the pictures in order to create a whole story. Recording students' voices is one of the prime advantages of a DST for an EFL learner since pupils are obliged to incorporate their own voices and re-read their texts to their peers (Kajder, 2006, p.18), all of which implies practising listening skills. Scholars such as Verdugo and Belmonte (2007), and Ramírez-Verdugo and Belmonte (2007) have already researched the efficiency of DST in the language classroom and demonstrated that students significantly improved their listening comprehension. Let us highlight some of the advantages of using this software for EFL students:

- (1) The exercise can be recorded and modified by the students as many times as they wish;
- (2) Students will not find themselves in a predicament regarding space and time since they can calculate how long they want the image to be on the screen; and finally,
- (3) Visual phonetics (Fodor, 1976) could potentially present an additional complication since it deals with the problematic of the adjustment of the movements of the actors' mouth on screen in order to avoid discrepancy and a subsequent loss of verisimilitude; however, Photostory3 does not allow lip movement –because it is based on fixed images– hence, this obstacle disappears.

### **c. Didactic possibilities of DST in an EFL Classroom**

Some of the skills English language learners may develop when working on this project are: (1) research skills –they learn how to seek for information; (2) communication skills–students learn to arrange their ideas, give opinions and build up a story; (3) technological skills –students learn to use a multiplicity of tools; (4) presentation skills, since they have to present it in front of an audience; (5) it also offers students the possibility of working as part of a team; (6) and of helping each other giving advice based on their own experiences –the latter is what Robin calls 'assessment skills' (Robin 2006, p. 5).

An additional advantage, specific to DST, proposed by Handler-Miller (2008) and Rodríguez (2009) is interactivity. These scholars point out that this characteristic differs completely from traditional storytelling –which lacks the multi-media factor, maintains a linear plot, and cannot be altered– since it allows us to change the chronological order of the story and modify any feature of the DST as many times as needed (ibidem).

Besides, the tools utilized for the creation of the DST, following Cotic (2009, p. 28) are: (1) updated; (2) relevant; (3) motivating; (4) interactive; (5) instructive; (6) attractive; and (7) easy-to-use which, generally speaking, guaranteed part of its success.

### **d. Simple Steps to Create a DST Project**

Following Gregori-Signes's (2008a, pp. 5-6) approach itself based on 'The Center for Digital Storytelling' (CDS) at Berkeley, the process of creating a digital story undergoes different phases prior to achieving a satisfactory result:

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<sup>1</sup> [DST] requires very little instruction on the technological side and facilitates the participation of a wide range of people with results that, in many cases, are close to those of a professional [My translation].

Writing the script: students will have to write a story, which will become 'the script' as in a film. They will help each other writing the story and will contribute with new ideas. As mentioned above, working as part of a team is indispensable for they will have to be collaborative if they want to succeed in composing the story. Students are also aware of the fact that an average script will lead to an unsuccessful final product.

Picture and music selection: Images are selected by the students to illustrate the story. They can either choose pictures from the internet or take new ones. In this manner, students will be able to improve their technological literacy since they will have to be able to engage with videos, music, etc., which will help them develop their media skills.

Recording the script: students record the story with their own voices focusing on the possible pronunciation or intonation mistakes they might have as learners of EFL. This exercise thus reinforces learner's oral skills by encouraging them to make every effort.

Display of the DST: While displaying the completed story, students will not only have to worry about their finished work, but they will also have to practice and refine their skills as public speakers. For that reason, students will rehearse alongside their classmates, and will try to improve their presentation skills, which encompasses not only the grammatical points but also intonation and pronunciation so as to gradually develop full communicative competence, since, as explained above, one of the main advantages is that the DST can be modified as many times as necessary.

In addition, prior to starting the project, it is important that teachers provide students with, at least, one practical session in which students receive clear instructions about the technology they are about to use, and also that they have technical support available during the creation of their digital story for it is essential that students find the task they are going to undertake not only attractive but also easy and viable.

### **III. Elaborating a Digital Storytelling: A Case Study**

This study was carried out during the second term of the academic year 2011-2012 during regular lecturers. Participants in this study consisted of one group of third year undergraduate students of EFL who were studying the subject 'Lengua Inglesa I', at the Faculty of Education of the Universitat de València, and were being trained to become primary school teachers in English. This group involved 21 students between 18 and 35 years old who had previously achieved a level between B2- and B2+ of the 'Common European Framework of Reference for Languages' (CEFR); all had had English as a compulsory subject in the syllabus during their secondary education.

#### ***Aims and Procedure***

Before carrying out the procedure, and in view of the fact that some students had never heard about DST and Photostory3, I considered it fundamental that they had one practical session on how to use the software before elaborating the story. Thus, a two-hour class where I showed them some examples of other DST created by other students, and some other basic instructions on how to use this software were arranged so as to ensure students understood the task at hand.

Next, I pointed out a few elements to pay full attention in order to achieve good outcome. These seven-step elements were first propounded by 'The Center for Digital Storytelling' (CDS) at Berkeley so as to obtain better results in the elaboration of a DST: (1) point of view; (2) a

dramatic question; (3) emotional content; (4) the gift of your voice; (5) appropriate soundtrack; (6) economy of words; and (7) pacing.

Having received and understood these points, undergraduates were prepared to begin their projects. The process they subsequently followed consisted of the following steps: (1) students were divided into groups of two or three people and were asked to brainstorm, as suggested by Robin (2006) and Sadik (2008); (2) participants elaborated seven stories: 4 were based on personal narratives or personal journeys –the latter being the preferred topic for overseas students; 1 original and love story invented by them; 1 story adapted from a children’s tale; and 1 story that narrates a historical event; (3) this text or script was marked by the lecturer and returned with feedback; then (4) students searched for some illustrations and pictures to accompany their story; next, (5) students recorded their voices in the DST; and, (6) as a final point, all DST were projected in class, so students could learn from each other, contribute with new ideas, and discuss possible problems in order to improve their work. The following table illustrates the steps that undergraduates –guided and supervised by the teacher at all times– followed in order to carry out this task:

Course Content	Activities	Aims	Resources	Duration
English as a Second Language I (level B2 of the CEFR)	Brainstorming	To foster both writing and speaking skills in English	Computer facilities: Photostory3	1 session (2 hours)
	Creation of a story			2 weeks- homework
	Picture selection			2 weeks - homework
	Voice recording: narration			1 session (2 hours)
	DST Projection			

Table 1. Class Programme: Practical Development

In addition, students completed a questionnaire with open-ended questions –which were designed following that of McGill posted on line at (<http://edpt200.mcgill.ca/assignments/ppassign.htm>)– to be answered individually and to be returned to me; by examining the undergraduates’ responses I was able to determine whether they had found the task rewarding and productive. In terms of time, around twenty minutes were necessary to complete all of the questions. The questionnaire addressed nine items related to the content; objectives, reasons for choosing their topic; description of pictures selected; how they would employ the DST; depiction of the phases they went through for the creation of the project; problems encountered; things they learnt; and other relevant information:

1. What was the main topic of your project?
2. What were the major objectives of the project?
3. Why did you select this topic and who do you think would be interested in viewing it?
4. Please include a description of the images you took with a digital camera and the images that you modified with image editing software that were included in the final project.
5. Describe if and how this project might be used in a formal or an informal educational setting.
6. Describe the process you went through in completing the final project. This should include a list of all of the software programs you used, where the content for the project came from, what items in the project changed from the early stages of selecting the topic through completion, plus any other information that describes your work on the project.
7. Describe the major challenges you faced in creating this project and if and how you overcame them.
8. Discuss the most significant things you learned from completing the final project.

9. Please add any other information you feel should be included in the report.

#### IV. Results

The answers students gave in their questionnaires helped me understand if they considered that the use of a DST for improving their linguistic abilities had been effective or, on the contrary, if they thought the exercise had not helped them as expected.

Consequently, after viewing and assessing the students' projects, and reading their responses to the questionnaires, a series of conclusions could be drawn:

1. Fewer grammatical mistakes were committed as a consequence of a more accurate writing in the second version after having received the teacher's feedback.
2. Students had edited the pictures and adapted them according to their needs in a skilful manner.
3. Respondents explicitly expressed in the questionnaire that the oral component proved to have been the biggest challenge for them. Doubts and hesitation as well as pronunciation problems could be detected in their final project. Although sometimes the sound was unclear –too loud or too low– in conjunction, all of the narrations were perfectly understandable.
4. It can be observed a general success in the accomplishment of the construction of a story due to the fact that they found the exercises innovative, and so they expressed it during the making of the DST and also in their individual questionnaires;
5. 90% of students expressed their contentment at having had the opportunity to explore different and innovative materials in the classroom as opposed to the traditional power point presentations they are accustomed to;
6. In the questionnaire, students presented different ways of using DST as a pedagogical tool in their primary school lessons for the future, which seemed highly encouraging and promising.
7. In terms of technical issues, the design of the stories produced by the students show they have used the software ingeniously and skilfully in all projects.

Below, I shall present a table, which gathers the results aforementioned:

Grammar	Picture Editing	Pronunciation & Intonation	Creation of a Story	Use of ICT	Subsequent Application of DST
Fewer grammatical mistakes were committed	Pictures were edited skillfully	They still have pronunciation and intonation problems	Full accomplishment in constructing a story	Students proved to have used the software ingeniously	Students expressed their interest in applying DST in the future

Table 2. Digital Storytelling: Project Results

On the whole, the students' tasks encompassed five aims: (1) reinforce language acquisition and language development; (2) promote digital literacy; (3) increase their motivation by using the ICTs so as to obtain better results; (4) be able to be critical with other students' work, and receive

constructive criticism from their peers; and (5) evaluate the effectiveness of DST taking the learners' projects as a reference point.

In general, the creation of a DST for students attending 'Lengua Inglesa I' has proven to be useful for improving not only their linguistic abilities but also the artistic, technical and creativity skills since they have been able to express themselves through writing (Reinders, 2011). As regard pronunciation, they have admitted having practiced several times until they found their pronunciation suitable for the DST in order to make a positive impression since all their peers would have been listening to them (ibidem), however, they still have difficulties in this respect. In addition, and as anticipated, undergraduates shared ideas with the other students in their class, a practice that helped them make some important decisions when carrying out the task.

### Assessment

The Digital Storytelling Project was worth a maximum of 3 points of the final class mark, with the peculiarity that undergraduates were given the opportunity to evaluate each other's projects. Their assessment counted 30% of the project mark and the lecturers' percentage the other remaining 70% (out of 100).

In order to assess their peers' work, students were given a grading rubric with instructions on how to evaluate the work based on the nine grading categories listed (see Appendix 1). To complete the evaluation process, they had to tick the boxes on the sheet presented in Appendix 2. Next, the lecturer added the points up for all the categories and multiplied by 2.5 so as to obtain a figure out of 100. Both students and lecturer have followed the same grading rubric and the same assessment criteria so as to encourage consistency. The purpose of subjecting students to peer assessment was to give them the chance to act as qualified teachers and also to bestow a major responsibility upon them. Students commented that they had taken this responsibility seriously, and had seen it as constructive practice for the future. In addition, as they worked in groups, they had the opportunity to comment and discuss different viewpoints and gain a mutual understanding, as suggested by Gregori-Signes (2008a, p. 7) and Robin (2006, p. 24). In sum, this exercise helped them in 'gaining expertise critiquing their own and others' work' (Gregori-Signes 2012, p. 4). The following tables show the figures obtained from the assessment carried out by the students and the lecturer (table 2), and the final marks (table 3).

PROJECT	MARKS GIVEN BY PEERS							FINAL MARKS: PEERS	MARKS GIVEN BY THE LECTURER
P1	8.7	8.7	9	10	7.5	7.7	10	8.7	9
P2	7	8.7	8	7.2	7.2	7.5	7.7	7.6	8
P3	6.7	8.2	8	8	7.7	8.2	8.7	7.9	8
P4	8	8.2	6.5	7.5	7.5	7.5	8.2	7.8	6.5
P5	8	8	10	7.5	6.7	10	8	8.5	10
P6	8.5	7.2	9	8.8	8.8	8.2	7.2	8	9
P7	8.2	8.2	8	6	7.2	8.2	7.7	7.7	8

Table 3. Students' and Lecturer's Assessment

From the students' and lecturer's assessment in table 3, it can be inferred that pupils –as is customary with new teachers–gave lower marks to their peers compared to that of their lecturer. However, on the whole, the adding-up of all the marks given by the students to their peers does not differ greatly with the lecturer's final mark: there are only three cases (P4, P5 and P6) in which the former are significantly lower than the latter: in project number 4, the difference between the mark awarded by the students and that of the teacher is 0.7, the tutor's mark being lower in this case; the most significant difference happens in project number 5 in which the students' mark is 1.5 below that of the tutor's; and in the last case, project 6, the mark differs in 1

point with the students' mark being, once again, lower. In the remaining four projects (P1, P2, P3, P7), the differences are not so high: P1 and P7 differ from the mark given by the teacher in 0.3; P2 in 0.4; and P3 in 0.1 only and, as aforementioned, all marks proposed by the teacher are higher.

PROJECT	70% LECTURER	30% PEERS	FINAL MARK
P1	6.3	2.7	9
P2	5.6	2.3	7.9
P3	5.6	2.4	8
P4	4.5	2.4	6.9
P5	7	2.6	9.6
P6	6.3	2.5	8.8
P7	5.6	2.4	8

Table 4. Lecturer's and Students' Final Marks

In table 4 above I have gathered both the final marks of the lecturer, which constitutes 70% of the overall grade, and that of the students, which is worth 30%. This final percentage will then make the definite grade –both the marks given by the students and tutor– and it will count towards 30% of their final course mark. I have considered it essential to show the students the grades and the marks given by and to them by their peers so that they can learn from this experience as teachers –since they have contributed to their own final assessment– and reflect upon the results obtained.

## V. Conclusion

When the idea of using new technologies to create a story in the educational field emerges, the first thing to consider is the adequacy and specificity of the selected medium; the intensification of the quality of the teaching-learning process being the final objective pursued, as suggested (Roldán & Cárdenas 1994, p. 43). In addition, one must bear in mind that the incorporation of audiovisual techniques to the teaching and learning process does not imply the replacement of traditional grammatical and communicative exercises but rather the integration of new enhancement features.

In this case study, the use of audiovisual material in the classroom made the activity innovative and more attractive to students who, as a consequence, felt more motivated, and, thus, put more effort on the task, as predicted by Gregori-Signes (2008a, p. 6): 'Digital storytelling has the advantage of being a new genre for most students, it raises interest, and therefore it is probably a good way of promoting student effort'. Thereupon, in the pursuit of achieving an improvement in EFL learning focused on the writing and speaking competences, in this case study, digital storytelling has proved to be effective as a way to develop the aforementioned abilities since results showed that students improved their writing and speaking skills to certain extent through the construction of the DST.

In sum, and as predicted by Robin (2006, p. 24), students explored and improved their research, writing, organization, technology, presentation, interpersonal, problem solving, and assessment skills during the process of making their digital storytelling project.

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