Digital Storytelling in the Foreign Language Classroom

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Abstract

Digital storytelling is a compelling activity for the language classroom. Easy to use for both writing and speaking practice, digital storytelling can be a good way to motivate students to use the language both inside and outside the classroom. Many teachers report high motivation levels, and not only for their students! In this practical article I will briefly outline what digital storytelling is and give some tips on how to get started.

The power of storytelling

The power of stories has been well-documented. Most societies have culturally unique stories that have been passed down through the generations, in some cases going back thousands of years. The power of stories is such that many anthropologists, psychologists, and other scientists see it as being at the core of what makes us human. Perhaps not surprisingly, stories are also the oldest form of education.

Most of us will remember our teachers reading to us in kindergarten and primary school and have probably written stories ourselves in class. Stories help us remember things better, a finding backed up by research done at the US Department of Education (Annual, 1986). Another important reason for the use of stories is that they put learners at the centre of the learning process and are a clear sign that their experiences are valued; stories give learners a chance for their voices to be heard. Barrett (2006) argues that stories combine different aspects of learning pedagogy, including: student engagement, reflection for deep learning, technology integration, and project-based learning; clearly all areas that many teachers are interested in promoting.

A survey conducted last year by the University of Houston (Yuksel, Robin & McNeil 2010) investigated the different uses and benefits of digital storytelling. 154 responses from around the world showed general agreement in the areas of subject skills, reflection skills, language

skills, higher thinking skills, social skills and artistic skills. There was a wide range of uses of digital storytelling in a wide range of settings.

In the language classroom, storytelling has also found its place. The different experiences students bring to the class are a great source for discussion and a good starting point for students to write about. Especially with lower-level learners, the language of pictures and music helps students to communicate when they do not yet have the necessary language to communicate exclusively in writing. It is therefore important to fully understand what digital storytelling entails and how to use it in practice.

What is digital storytelling?

Digital storytelling is simply the telling of stories in electronic form. This means your students can combine two or more of the following, either produced by themselves or by others:

Text
Audio
Music
Video
Photos
Screenshots, for example from computer games and websites
Other images
And other digital media

They can produce a video with voice-over, a website, an audio interview, or simply a written text with an added 'twist' such as a scrolling text or changing colours to reflect different moods. Students could write an autobiography, or a narrative, and could use any genre that you set.

Perhaps the quickest way to understand what a digital story looks like is to see an example. This website has a short video clip by a student in a storytelling workshop.

Why digital storytelling?

Traditional storytelling is a powerful means of education. By integrating different media, students can be encouraged to tell even richer stories. Perhaps more importantly, by doing so they learn how to deal with information from different sources; in other words, they develop their information literacy along with their communicative abilities. Also, as most digital storytelling (at least at the creation stage) is done by students in pairs or small groups, students learn 'teaming and collaboration' and other interpersonal skills deemed by the 21st Century Literacy Summit to be key elements in developing essential literacy skills. Once a story is 'finished', it is usually made available, either on an intranet or on the Internet, for others to see. Many publishing tools allow people to post comments, which provide useful feedback; students get a different perspective on their stories, in addition to their own and yours. Some teachers have used the commenting function in a different way: by asking students to post their drafts, the comments were used as sources of ideas and helped shape the final product. Of course, there is also the satisfaction of publishing something that can potentially be read by others. Although these features are not impossible to emulate on paper, they certainly are easier to accomplish online.

By asking students to collect information from different sources you have opportunities to get them to reflect on and explain why they made their selections, encouraging them to become more critically aware of the learning process and their own choices therein. Also, in groups where there is high anxiety about writing (perhaps with younger learners or beginners), starting from the materials students collect rather than expecting students to start writing straight away can certainly lower the affective barrier.

Last but not least, digital storytelling is an activity that values students for the activities they engage in outside of the school. It signals to them that their skills are important and can be used in school, thus bridging the gap that often exists. Digital storytelling can be, in my own experience, a fun, rewarding and motivating activity for students and teachers alike.

How to start

For digital storytelling, you will need some tools to capture your students' stories and a way of making them available to others. Typically, your students will use their cell phones to take pictures and (where possible) record audio and video. Alternatively, a voice recorder or a

video recorder can be shared among students. Many students have an IPod or other types of Mp3 player that can be used to record speech, which are ideal for interviews or self-recordings. By making use of the devices students already have, you minimise the need for the school to provide them.

Once the information has been sourced or created, it is time to transfer it to a computer so it can be turned into a digital story. There are many different tools for creating digital stories; good old PowerPoint and even Word will get you a long way. There are, however, many easy programmes that will let you include pictures, audio and video, and then share the result online. I will briefly discuss a few examples here. More programmes are included in the reference list. It is outside the scope of this article to discuss these in detail, but most are designed for general users and are easy to use.

Microsoft's Movie Maker (or Apple's iMovie for Mac users) is a free and easy-to-use program that lets students combine audio, video and still images.

Slidestory lets students share PowerPoint-like presentations online and others comment on it. A great feature is that it makes it very easy to record narration for each slide.

Similar, but more centred on discussions, is VoiceThread. In the words of the makers: 'A VoiceThread is a collaborative, multimedia slide show that holds images, documents, and videos and allows people to navigate slides and leave comments in 5 ways – using voice (with a mic or telephone), text, audio file, or video (via a webcam). Share a VoiceThread with friends, students, and colleagues for them to record comments too.' This is a great way to build a collaborative story.

A fantastic option, and one that your students will love, is to let them create a 'Gamic'. A gamic is a combination of a Comic and a Game; students create a cartoon based on characters and stories from popular computer games. There are some great examples here. Another website that lets users create cartoons is this one.

From technology to pedagogy

Simply giving students access to the software and the instruction to 'create a digital story' is not going to be sufficient. As with any lesson you will need to plan ahead and think about:

- What the learning outcomes are
- What instructions and resources will be needed
- When and how you will give feedback

On the topic of feedback, it is important to think about your reasons for using storytelling. Is it to motivate students to speak or write freely? If so, will you reward fluency over accuracy? It is important not to give mixed signals, for example, by commenting only on punctuation or tenses in such cases. An important consideration, especially with *digital* storytelling, is how much language production you expect from students. It is easy for students to create a story with pictures or video only. Is it important for you that they learn how to build a story, or is it also important that they demonstrate command of the language? If so, do you want evidence of written or spoken language? Do you want to give guidelines on how much and what type (e.g. short commentary or in-depth analysis) of language you want them to include?

Perhaps the best way to illustrate how to implement digital storytelling is with a sample lesson plan. The text box below takes you through the different steps.

Planning a digital storytelling activity

Here are some options to consider when planning for the activity:

Preparing the students

1. Explain and give a rationale for the activity.
2. Make it clear what text type you are expecting your students to produce. Do you want a recount or a narrative? If a narrative, is it a biography or a romance?
3. Let's say you want students to produce a narrative. What do they already know about this and what needs to be pre-taught? Do you need to give them, for example, a framework to help them structure their story using an orientation, a

complication, a sequence of events, a resolution and (optionally) a coda (Anderson & Anderson 1997)?

4. Do your students need to only write out their stories or also talk about or present them? Will you favour fluency or accuracy in your marking?
5. Be specific in what final product you expect to see. Do you want a movie of 10 seconds or one of two minutes? A slideshow with three slides or 30? How much language should be included?
6. What level do you expect of your students? Clearly, beginner learners may not be able to produce more than a brief recording or story. Advanced learners may be asked to build a more complex narrative.
7. Do you have samples you can show students?

Technical preparation

1. Do you have the necessary computers and other hardware available? Ask your students to bring their cellphones and Mp3 players, if you will use them. How will students transfer their images and recordings onto a computer? Warn your IT support people for a barrage of help requests!
2. Do you have the necessary software installed and the appropriate licenses?

Conducting the activity

1. Pair or group students to work on their stories together. Bear in mind the total number of projects to ensure you can handle them! It may be better to have groups of, say, four students to minimise the number of individual projects.
2. How will the students get their ideas? Perhaps you can give them some tips or scenarios, or a checklist so they can interview each other. Or, of course, you can leave it up to them!
3. Have them create a *storyboard* first. A storyboard shows the different elements of the story they want to tell and when they appear. It can show each slide or each scene from a movie and describe what will happen there. You can see an example in the references.
4. Ask students to give feedback on each other's drafts. Hand out a peer-feedback

sheet for this.

Concluding the activity

1. Ask students to present their work. Make it clear what you expect from them. Do they simply show or play their story or do you want them to explain what they did and why?
2. Ask students to post their stories on a (school) website.
3. Ask students to post comments on each other's stories.
4. Give the students feedback.
5. As a follow-up you could focus on those areas where students had difficulties completing the activity.

Some limitations

Digital storytelling has a number of limitations. Obviously, you and your students will need access to computers and the necessary software. As mentioned above, it is often possible to use students' cellphones and Mp3 players. A related problem is the level of technical expertise, both your own and your students'. Many of the tools listed above have been designed with user-friendliness in mind but may take some getting used to nonetheless.

Perhaps more important is the potential for digital stories to be misused. Personal information could end up on the Internet and easily be copied and used for the wrong purposes. For security and privacy reasons, you should always explain to your students what will happen to the stories, how you will use them, and what you will do to avoid them ending up in the wrong place. You should get students' consent for use of any material outside the classroom.

Also, like with any new activity, the implementation of stories is not always without problems. Lannotti (2004, p. 11) reports on her first attempt at a storytelling project, when, despite some real successes, she realised that managing one project for each student in the class was very time-consuming and that some students had got "lost along the way." She writes, "With any technology project, in ESL and all other disciplines, the scope of the project should be ambitious, but not beyond the limits of practicality. I had gone so far

beyond the limits I could no longer see the barbed wire fence and warning signs at the border. There had simply been too many projects."

Clearly, each teacher will need to find a balance between the cost in terms of time and energy, and the expected benefits of using stories. One possibility is to ask students to give each other feedback; another is for students to combine their individual contribution into one or more bigger projects, so that the amount of monitoring expected of the teacher is reduced.

Finally, be aware that storytelling is highly personal and can trigger emotions. This is not necessarily a bad thing but it is important to be prepared. Taking these limitations into account, digital storytelling is a fascinating activity, and one that will enrich your classroom.

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Resources for creating and distributing digital stories

Here is a free book you can download from the Internet, on how to create digital stories.

Community Walk is a set of tools and tutorials to help you create community walks, museum visits, educational tours and more, using real maps. At the moment this website only works in the United States but it has many good ideas that could be used elsewhere.

Audacity is highly recommended as a free, open source tool to edit music and soundfiles.

To manipulate pictures, the GIMP is a good, free programme.

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