

Critical Reflections on the Use of Digital Storytelling In Chinese Context

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Abstract: With the rapid development of multimodal literacy, digital stories are widely used in EFL classrooms in China. This paper will provide a critical analysis of the use of digital stories from the perspective of language learners and language teachers in the authentic context of language education in China.

Keywords: Multimodal Literacy; Second Language Acquisition; Chinese Language Education

Introduction

Technology has facilitated the rapid development of multimodal literacies, of which digital stories have been widely used in language classrooms. Whether this practice is worthwhile is currently a matter of some debates in the field of teaching and learning. This paper analyses this issue from both the perspective of language learners and the language teachers through a critical analysis of the literature and my own experience of making digital story. The paper will be divided into three sections, firstly discussing the benefits of digital story in terms of attitude, integration of context and critical thinking, followed by the challenges evaluated around technology and topic selection. The final section is an overall evaluation that not only expresses my views on attitudes towards digital storytelling in the existing literature, but also explains why I would not use digital story in my future teaching from the perspective of student expectations and my own confidence in teaching digital stories.

1. Benefits

Firstly, the benefits of the digital story are reflected in the positive attitudes and affections of learners, specifically in the higher level of engagement, autonomy and motivation. When I was creating my own story, I had the freedom to choose my preferred writing style, to pace my writing and to express the voice and ideas that I really wanted to express. In addition, I was willing to spend a great deal of after-school time to continue this English activity. Purcell-Gates (2013) ^[13] explains that students gain a sense of ownership of the text and learning activities and a higher sense of agency through the expression of their voice, which increases engagement in literacy practice and the likelihood of achieving learning outcomes. Pintrich and Schunk (2002) ^[12] also suggest that the creation and presentation of digital stories is a dynamic process that inevitably involves interaction, which also encourages active participation. In addition, when learners create digital stories in English, they realize the value of learning English ^[14] (Sadik, 2008), which improve their intrinsic motivation. Moreover, unlike ordinary language teaching methods, in this activity. The teacher acts as a facilitator who provides opportunities for students to actively construct their own knowledge, taking responsibility for their own learning rather than being spoon-fed knowledge. Such autonomy, high levels of engagement and motivation are important factors for successful language learning, which is also required of the pedagogical aspects of the teacher.

Secondly, it is also beneficial because students are provided with opportunities to develop language skills in an authentic context. In order to make my stories clearer and easier to understand, I spent a significant amount of time in choosing the words or expressions that best describe each scenario and acquire many vocabularies on the life-related topic. Anderson and Chua (2010) ^[1] argues that literacy teaching cannot be considered as the acquisition of coding and decoding skills in English. They believe it also involves the development of students' ability to produce and interpret texts in specific contexts, which

makes literacy inseparable from context ^[4] (Brown, 2001). McGeoch (2012) ^[10] similarly believes that students do not understand meaning through individual words without specific contexts. Thus, at the macro level, digital stories allow students to learn English in authentic and meaningful contexts; at the micro level, learners' vocabulary and grammar are acquired in concrete contexts. However, in the context of my personal experience of learning English in China, exam-oriented perceptions have led to the teaching of English in China separating language learning from context and placing too much emphasis on grammar and words. Therefore, it is worthwhile for these English language teachers to think about reconnecting teaching with context by digital stories, and giving students opportunities to learn in concrete contexts.

Additionally and importantly, digital story could develop learners' critical thinking. When creating stories, I naturally used many critical thinking techniques, such as interpretation and comparison, to make my stories more persuasive. Critical thinking was also utilized to design plots and characters to resonate my audience with my ideas and to integrate content and multimedia effects for the best possible viewing. Malita and Martin (2010) ^[8] maintain that digital stories do have a role in developing learners' critical thinking, especially in activities that evaluate arguments and resolve conflicts. Benmayor (2008) ^[2] also claims that students go through a process of critical reflection and theorizing. The development of such skill is always neglected in classrooms that generally focus on explaining language knowledge. However, developing critical thinking of learners is one of the responsibilities of language teachers, as it is not only a fundamental skill for reading and writing, but also an important skill for students' future enduring learning power and thinking ability.

2. Challenges

However, in the process of producing this digital story, I encountered some challenges in choosing a story to express. On the one hand, I was so used to writing academically on a given argument that when asked to create a completely new story, I seemed to have no clue. On the other hand, I rarely talked to people about my life experiences, so it did not seem easy to choose or find examples of people or things that changed my life in a very short period of time. Anderson and Chua (2010) ^[1] also found in their Singapore case that students encountered obstacles in choosing a topic and attributed this problem partly to a lack of experience in expressing their own voice. However, expressing one's own voice is an important marker of digital storytelling^[7] (Hull & Katz, 2006). This could be a challenge for Chinese language learners, who are encouraged to respect authority and are expected to express themselves implicitly under the influence of Confucianism^[9] (Mast, 2016). Although digital story does not expect teachers to guide students on how to think or provide them with ideas, teachers can help students meet this challenge by offering suggestions for possible solutions that they can provide. Specifically, teachers can stimulate students' own ideas by carefully explaining the key questions in the requirements before they begin to create their digital stories. In the preparation phase, it is necessary to help students generalize positions from their stories and to encourage them to express their own voices, especially for those students who are not experienced in telling stories from their own perspectives.

Technical issues were also another big challenge I encountered. As I was new to editing video, I had to spend more time on the picture track adjusting their order, size and orientation. During the process, I had to repeat the work as my unfamiliarity with the operation led to several recorded audio segments being deleted by mistake. Not only did this waste a lot of time getting used to the software but it also undermined my confidence and interest in producing digital stories. Predictably, very young learners or older learners are likely to encounter a higher level of barriers in this area. Therefore, in order to address this dilemma, language teachers need to consider the skill level of the learner and their confidence in creating digital stories when deciding whether to use digital stories. Besides, seeking collaboration with a professional technology teacher or immediate professional technical support is to be considered when adopting digital stories in language teaching.

3. Overall evaluation

In deciding whether to use digital stories in my future teaching, I have read a great deal of literature on the topic, most of which always describe the positive aspects of digital stories ^[1] (Anderson & Chua, 2010; Castaneda, 2013; Hafner & Miller, 2011). While I recognize that digital storytelling has many positive effects on language learning, such as the above-mentioned benefits on the engagement and motivation of learners, critical thinking, language learning. Also, it does increase the variety

of language learning activities as a language learning tool. However, I think there are some issues regarding digital story that language teachers should be concerned about.

Firstly, for an L2 learner, I have to worry about the language barrier and the additional burden of technical issues when creating digital stories. Although there is little literature on technology in digital story, the challenges exist. The instruction on technology and digitization of the story may squeeze limited time for language teaching in the classroom and can divert teaching away from the focus on language ^[11] (Okan, 2007), which contradicts the initial intention of teachers to use digital stories.

Secondly, in the long term, the integration of technology in reading may affect the thinking patterns of learners. Unlike traditional printed reading, readers of digital stories are more likely to be visually captivated and move from one image to another without purpose. As a result, learners tend to ignore the linearity between texts and remain in a shallow level of exploration and reflection ^[15] (Salomon, 1998). Therefore, the impact on the learner's knowledge construction is a cause for concern^[15] (Salomon, 1998). Furthermore, digital story exposes learners to less linguistic diversity. In producing this digital story, I found little difference between the language used in my written text and the language used in my final video. This means that the distinction between written and spoken language is disappearing ^[3] (Bloch, 2001). This is a warning for the teaching of writing skills as academic language such as academic vocabulary and linking symbol is being squeezed out by informal oral language.

After critically analyzing the advantages and disadvantages of digital story, I decided that I would not use digital story in my future teaching, which is considered from the needs of the students and my confidence in using digital story. Firstly, for Chinese language learners, whose primary need and expectation for language learning is to pass English exams ^[16] (Mast, 2016; Yang, 2012), it is not cost effective to teach language through digital story. English grades are important to their academic careers and, are used as an assessment factor for their access to university. English test scores are also an assessment component of their ability to graduate from universities. In addition, introducing digital story in the classroom forces learners to spend a certain amount of time looking for pictures and editing, which in turn increases the burden on learners' English learning. Therefore, teaching skills directly from the book or test content should be the most cost effective for my future students in the context, but this is not to deny the benefits of digital story for language learning.

Concerns about technology and the overload have also reduced my confidence in using digital story for teaching. Although I am familiar with the operation of several mainstream digital story softwares, the rapid pace of software updates and the variety of new programs could decrease my efficiency in using digital stories to teach my students. In addition, not every student has access to the technological resources needed to create digital stories, such as cameras, computers, and mobile phones. Sadik (2008) ^[14] cites technological devices and limited internet access as a reason for abandoning technology in teaching. Furthermore, the use of digital stories in the classroom undoubtedly increases the burden on the teacher. For example, the use of digital stories requires the language teacher to not only provide language instructions, but also offer timely responses about the technology ^[10] (McGeoch, 2012). As each student presents a unique digital story, feedbacks on content and format are expected to be personalized ^[5] (Castaneda, 2013). However, language classes in China are large, with 50-60 students in one class. It is therefore impractical to provide individual tutoring for a large number of students in a limited amount of time. In short, I would not use digital story in my teaching for these reasons, but I also feel pity for it because of the benefits it brings.

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