

Digital Storytelling for EFL University Students

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Abstract: This study looks at how digital storytelling can be integrated to teach EFL English majors from a university in southern Taiwan. Drawing on the notions of *multimodal literacies*, activities and tasks were designed to guide students to accomplish a digital storytelling project. The purpose was to provide a context which offers students an opportunity to experience English learning and literacies through the use of multimodal resources such as texts, images, and sounds. Analyses of students' brainstorming notes, free writing drafts, narratives, videos, and written reflections revealed that such pedagogy helped to improve not only students' speaking and writing skills but also other abilities such as researching, critical thinking, and digital skills. These results indicate that digital storytelling can be a creative and insightful venue for understanding how multiliteracies can be developed in EFL university classrooms.

Keywords: Multiliteracies, EFL, university students, multimodal instruction

1. Introduction

With the advancement of technology, numerous communication channels and modes have been invented and used increasingly. In foreign language classrooms, in particular, printed textbooks are not the only dominant materials nowadays. To some extent, they have been replaced by multimodal displays such as YouTube videos, iPads, and Power Point slides. These changes are forcing language teacher educators to re-evaluate their course design and re-think how to incorporate these technologies for a more meaningful process of learning. Since the concepts of *multiliteracies* or *multimodal literacies* were introduced by the New London Group (NLG) in 1996, researchers have been interested in examining how L2/EFL students develop literacy skills through their engagement in tasks such as digital storytelling (Angay-Crowder, Choi, & Yi, 2013). To put theories into practice, I designed a digital storytelling course project to raise EFL university students' awareness and engage them in multiliteracies activities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 *Multiliteracies*

Ever since the New London Group (NLG) (1996) published a seminal article entitled, "A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Future," the notion of *multiliteracies* has aroused a widespread academic interest. Such concept merged language education agendas in L2/EFL teaching, involving language arts, media literacy, and cultural studies that can be applied to all classrooms and all learners (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011). The coined term, *multiliteracies*, (also called *multimodal literacies*) refers to "the multiplicity of communications channels and media, and the increasing saliency of cultural and linguistic diversity" (p. 63). The NLG scholars believe that communication channels and media resources provide opportunities for meaning-making and these can be combined with cultural and linguistic diversity. *Multimodal literacies* have been considered important skills in the 21st century. Such skills offer learners to experience language and culture through different

dimensions of communication. In a recent review written by Lotherington and Jenson (2011), several innovative multiliteracies pedagogies were introduced such as fan fiction community (Black, 2005) and digital storytelling (Vinogradova, Linville, & Bickel, 2011). These studies offer the potentials and values of integrating multiliteracies in L2 and EFL language education.

2.2 Digital Storytelling

I followed Lambert's (2009) approach to guide EFL university students to explore how multimodal tools can be used to tell stories that involve self-reflections on personal living experiences. Ten steps were included in Lambert's approach: 1) Imagining a story to tell in fewer than 5 minutes using words, pictures, and music; 2) Participating in the story circle in which everyone tells a story and receives feedback; 3) Writing a verbal narrative (150 to 250 words); 4) Reviewing each other's narratives; 5) Collecting still images and thinking about music; 6) Storyboarding in PowerPoint; 7) Recording the narrative; 8) Selecting music and sound effects; 9) Producing the digital story using video editing software; 10) Presenting digital stories in class. In order to apply such approach into a nine-week teaching practice, the ten steps were later adapted into a three-stage procedure.

3. Methods

3.1 Setting and Participants

This study was conducted in an English Microfilm Design and Production course offered in the English Department at a university in southern Taiwan. An intact class of 17 students were invited to participate in this study. Almost all the participants were English majors; only two majored in other fields (i.e., Communication, Political Science, respectively). Among the 17 students, three were males while the majority was females. When the participants were recruited, they were in different years of their studies: sophomores (N=8), juniors (N=8), and seniors (N=1). Most had experience in producing Chinese videos. However, few had experience in producing short films in English.

3.2 Data Sets and Procedure

Data sets included the following: 1) A post-production written reflection; 2) students' midterm homework assignments, Power Point slides, and final videos; 3) Field notes based on observation of class sessions. Adapted from Lambert's (2009) ten-step approach, the three-stage teaching design was used to guide students to create their digital stories.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 How can multiliteracies pedagogy be integrated effectively in EFL university classrooms?

The answer to this question can be explained with the three instructional phases: pre-, during-, and post-production. In the pre-production stage, the students were guided to understand the concept of "digital storytelling" through browsing related websites such as the Center for Digital Storytelling. Questions like "What happened to the storyteller?" "Why is the video close to what you want to create?" were used to prompt students to think and discuss in class. From the observation of students' topics, some explored topics such as sports (N=2) or overseas travelling experiences (N=6). Others explored personal realization and awareness-raising (N=9). Topics such as bullying, losing the beloved pet, being homesick, frustration in life, and near-death experience were included. These students developed interests in exploring the selves that were once ignored, confused, or not well treated in the past and thus used storytelling as a healing process or as a way to inspire others. In spite of those challenges, the students were delighted to present their work in class and at the same

time saw their classmates' products. The following screenshots (Figure 1 below) were from five of the students' PowerPoint slides and videos:

			
Trip as a Volunteer to Cambodia	Joining an English Conversation Club	Study and Travel in London	Bullying

Figure 1. Pictures, drawings, and images from students' PowerPoint slides and videos

4.2 What are the students' learning experiences in the digital storytelling project informed by the multiliteracies pedagogy?

The analyses of students' written reflections revealed that the majority felt positive about this learning experience and gained a sense of achievement when the project was completed. Although some stated that they encountered difficulties in script writing, many of them indicated that they were satisfied with their final products and felt inspired to produce storytelling videos in the future. In their written reflections, students also commented on how such project improved their language skills. A female student, Cindy stated: *"It is a nice project indeed. We can learn the way producing digital story! Moreover, it sharpens our **writing ability** as well as **pronunciation**. In addition, Photo Story is a convenient software to create a video; as long as we know the way to use, it won't be too hard for beginners"* (Written Reflection). Cindy noted that her writing and pronunciation improved through creating a digital story. Both Maddie and Cindy's statements aligned with previous findings (e.g., Alcantud-Díaz, Ricart Vayá, & Gregori-Signes, 2014) in terms of how digital storytelling can develop students' language skills, and also foster their digital skills.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Drawing on the concept of *multiliteracies*, the findings showed that EFL college students held positive views on the idea of digital storytelling and considered such course design informative and useful. Through telling their stories, students felt empowered and regarded storytelling as a mean to heal their wounded hearts and raise awareness of social issues such as bullying. To conclude, this study provides some suggestions for future research. First, the current study was considered small in scale (N=17). Future studies can expand the notion of multiliteracies in larger classroom settings. Second, this study focused on college English majors. However, it can be extended to courses such as General English or English as a Specific Purposes (ESP). The combination of multiliteracies pedagogy and digital storytelling can be implemented to motivate students in these classes.

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