Evaluating Potential Effects of Digital Storytelling Websites for Promoting EFL Young Learners' Writing Skills

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Abstract: In this paper, based on the evaluation criteria proposed by Chapelle (2001) the five researchers evaluated three digital storytelling websites for promoting writing skills for EFL young learners. Among the evaluated websites of *StoryJumper*, *Tikatok*, and *Storybird*, *Storybird* was found to be the most appropriate website due to better learner fit, better teacher fit, and the extra provided functions of "Class Library" and "Discussion".

Keywords: Digital storytelling, writing skills, EFL young learners, *Storybird*

1. Introduction

Recent CALL research has suggested that digital storytelling may facilitate language learning (Mead, 2010; Oakley, 2011; Yuksel, Robin & McNeil, 2010). According to Barrett (2006), digital storytelling can be described as the convergence of four student-centered learning strategies including student engagement, reflection for deep learning, project-based learning, and the effective integration of technology into instruction. These student-centered learning strategies may bring the outcomes of enhancing student learning, student motivation, student engagement, building technology skills, and is more effective than paper-based reflection. As an innovative pedagogical approach and a helpful educational tool, digital storytelling can further encourage peer collaboration and peer communication, and foster learners' higher order thinking and deep learning (Smeda, Dakich & Sharda, 2010). Digital storytelling can also foster a sense of ownership in learners, let learners have a deeper understanding of the text, and facilitate learners to have a longer retention rate of the text (Mead, 2010). Yuksel, Robin and McNeil (2010) showed that most of their respondents indicated that it was useful to teach language arts by using digital storytelling. Digital storytelling can be used to improve learners' writing skills with modeled writing of digital texts (Oakley, 2011). When teaching young learners, it is important to engage the learners during the story writing process to facilitate sight words learning and text comprehension. Furthermore, digital storytelling writing instructions share some similar features of blogs. For instance, they provide more writing opportunities for learners, foster a sense of audience, gain feedback during writing (Liou & Peng, 2009), and have interaction between teacher-student and peer-to-peer. Another benefit of digital storytelling is that it can construct the learners' experience in the content, facilitate collaborative activities, promote in-class discussion, motivate learners to learn critical thinking skills, and foster

understanding of complex ideas. During the process of making a short story in small groups, learners can learn problem-solving skills, enhance their information gathering, learn to work collaboratively, engage community, and interact with others. However, though digital storytelling has great promise nowadays, many digital storytelling websites are set up with uneven quality. Thus, appropriate evaluations of related digital storytelling websites are needed. To evaluate and choose the more appropriate digital storytelling websites for particular group of learners, teachers should pay attention to different website evaluation criteria and use the more appropriate ones based on their objectives and focus. Since the present study focuses on language learning, the five researchers thus implemented Chapelle's 2001 CALL criteria to evaluate three popular digital storytelling websites and choose the most appropriate digital storytelling website among the three which can potentially promote writing skills for EFL young learners.

2. Evaluation of the Websites

This section presents the evaluation of the three websites by the five researchers. Following Chapelle's 2001 evaluation criteria, each website was analyzed according to: language learning potential, learner fit, meaning focus, authenticity, positive impact, and practicality.

2.1 Evaluation of StoryJumper (http://www.storyjumper.com/)

The tasks provided in *StoryJumper* present sufficient opportunity for beneficial focus on learners' writing skills. Learners can do the writing practices without restrictions of time and space. Nevertheless, there is no comments function. Neither teachers nor learners have chances to give feedback. Furthermore, learners cannot see their classmates' work in the classroom environment. There is no interactional modification or modification of output.

Regarding the learner fit feature, there is no suggested level according to the users' age or language proficiency, thus teachers cannot choose appropriate tasks for the students according to their individual differences in linguistic ability level or non-linguistic characteristics. In contrast, users can upload their own pictures to make their storybooks. As a result, the learner fit feature is limited. Regarding meaning focus, the researchers considered that learners' primary attention is directed toward the language meaning by using *StoryJumper*. To make their own storybooks, the students need to learn more vocabulary items and sentence patterns to accomplish the task. Since the students can use the vocabulary items and sentence patterns to communicate with others outside the classroom, so the feature, authenticity, is taken into consideration. However, since there are not many different topics included in the practices, the connection between the CALL task and tasks outside the classroom is also limited. Concerning the positive impact, learners will potentially learn more about the target language and about strategies for language learning through the use of the task. To accomplish the tasks, the students need to learn more vocabulary items and sentence patterns and even some strategies. Since the storybook-making process is fun, both learners and teachers can have a positive learning/teaching experience with technology through the use of the task. Finally, since the hardware, software, and personnel resources are sufficient to allow the CALL task to succeed, *StoryJumper* thus has the feature of practicality.

2.2 Evaluation of Tikatok (http://www.tikatok.com/)

To evaluate the language learning potential feature, activities of *Tikatok* provide learners great chances to receive language learning. Focusing on writing skills, *Tikatok* helps

learners focus on form when making their storybooks. While students create their own stories with various expressions, the teacher has opportunities to choose appropriate activities and to monitor students' works to help them focus on form. However, the peer-correction function on *Tikatok* is limited, so students didn't have chances to share their works with peers. Therefore, only teachers are able to monitor learners' works, but peers cannot share their works in the classroom environment.

Toward learner fit, *Tikatok* is suitable for learners of every age level. There are three entries for different-age users, so learners can choose the appropriate entry for creating stories. Moreover, the "Teachers" function allows teachers to give instruction or writing assistance to every student individually indicating that *Tikatok* is designed to fit the individual differences in linguistic ability level and non-linguistic characteristics. Regarding the meaning focus of *Tikatok*, learners' primary attention is directed toward the language meaning--to accomplish their storybooks. To complete a storybook, learners need to output the target language. Furthermore, learners can write different content by following different tips provided on the website, which allows learners to have more opportunities to write various works. Therefore, the element of meaning focus is taken into consideration. Concerning authenticity, the writing task in *Tikatok* is relevant to learners' language use beyond the classroom. They can create personalized books with different purposes. Therefore, learners can use the target language for specific purposes. Additionally, positive impact is guaranteed in using *Tikatok* as teachers' supplementary material. *Tikatok* not only provides colorful and vivid pictures for learners to create stories, but gives learners chances to upload their personal pictures to do storybook making. This function improves learners' learning interest in writing because they can share their imaginary thoughts with others. Students may also feel free to make notes according to their imagination. Finally, for the practicality of *Tikatok*, it is easy for learners and teachers to integrate this website into a class or language program. Only when teachers set up the classroom environment do they need to read the guidance and detailed information about the online classroom environment. For students, the creating storybooks operation interface is easy to learn and use.

2.3 Evaluation of Storybird (http://www.storybird.com/)

As for the language learning potential feature, the task conditions in *Storybird* present sufficient opportunity for beneficial focus on form. The language learning activities mainly consist of creating storybooks. Young learners can write along with their caretakers at home or with their teachers at school. Furthermore, students can interact with others through the use of written language in *Storybird*. There are "comment parts" in every storybook, and readers can give comments after they read the story. The caretakers or teachers can also monitor students' output. There is no time pressure, so the writing activities could be kept going until the teacher and students feel satisfied.

To evaluate learner fit, the *Storybird* tasks provide learners opportunities to work with a range of target structures appropriate to their level, and it depends on whom the teacher teaches in the classroom. Beginning learners can use *Storybird* to improve spelling skills, whereas the advanced learners can practice writing by group works or as individuals. Learners with different characteristics can use this website. Creative learners have enough opportunities to create their own stories during the writing process, while shy learners not brave enough to communicate with others face to face can use the "comment parts" to share their opinions with other users. Regarding meaning focus, since the website provides vivid pictures for users to create storybooks and share their own works with others, the learners' attention can be directed toward language meaning--writing a meaningful story. Moreover, to create the story lines and write the appropriate description about each picture, learners can communicate and work together to accomplish the task. They use language

purposefully for constructing and interpreting meaning. Concerning authenticity, storybooks provided in the website are one of the authentic reading materials. Learners can read storybooks in the classroom, and this reading experience could potentially improve their reading motivation not only in the classroom but also outside the classroom. Additionally, during the creating process, learners can practice their writing skills. Therefore, the writing task is a language task. As for positive impact, by using *Storybird*, learners' interest may be engaged in the target culture in a way that will help develop their willingness to seek out opportunities to use the target language. The vivid pictures and writing activities are more interesting than normal classroom tasks, so learners' learning motivation could be enhanced. Finally, regarding practicality, *Storybird* is easy for the learners and the teacher to implement the writing tasks. The fundamental functions in the website are free, so users only need to become their members and sign up onto the website.

2.4 Summary

Among the three evaluated digital storytelling websites, they shared the same functions that users can create their own stories with spelling check function, which can potentially increase the opportunities of English writing practice. They are equipped with many vivid pictures to provide writing clues, so learners can follow the images to write stories. The three websites provide teachers the classroom setting function, thus learners' writing processes could be monitored. In addition, website users have opportunities to share their works with other website users. Finally, the three digital storytelling websites provide a learning environment without restrictions of time and space, thus they are appropriate to be used as teaching activities either in the classroom or as students' homework.

In contrast, there are some differences. As for the creating function, *StoryJumper* has basic writing functions, including adding pictures, writing the content, checking the spelling and sharing the works; however, no age level function is provided. In addition to the above functions, *Tikatok* has three extra kinds of writing works for different age-level users to create stories, while *Storybird* has seven suggested age levels for story makers to set to fit different-age audiences. Secondly, both *Tikatok* and *Storybird* have the giving comments function, while *StoryJumper* doesn't. Thirdly, regarding the rights the teachers have in the classroom setting, teachers in *StoryJumper* can neither edit students' works nor give comments. *Tikatok* gives teachers the right of editing and commenting on students' works, while only the teachers can give feedbacks to their students. *Storybird* provides the teachers with the rights of not only editing and commenting on the story contents, but also provides the commenting function between the student peers. Therefore, the whole class can share and comment on every student's work in the classroom setting. In addition, *Storybird* has the "Class Library" and "Discussion" functions for teachers and students to share works and discuss related topics, which may potentially increase students' writing opportunities.

The five researchers thus determined the appropriateness of the aforementioned websites for promoting EFL young learners' writing skills based on the six criteria proposed by Chapelle (2001) using scales ranging from 1 point to 5 points. One point was assigned to signify very inappropriate, whereas five points were assigned to signify very appropriate feature. Table 1 shows the mean score and standard deviation of every characteristic of the evaluated websites. With the highest average mean score ranging from 4.60 to 5.00, the five researchers considered *Storybird* as the most appropriate and functional digital storytelling website among the three evaluated websites for promoting learners' writing skills.

Table 1 *Mean Scores of Each Criteria for the Three Websites*

Criteria	StoryJumper		Tikatok		Storybird	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Language Learning Potential	3.20	0.45	3.20	0.45	4.80	0.45
Learner Fit	3.00	0.00	4.20	0.45	4.80	0.45
Meaning Focus	4.20	0.45	4.40	0.55	4.80	0.45
Authenticity	3.60	0.55	3.80	0.45	4.60	0.55
Positive Impact	4.40	0.55	4.80	0.45	5.00	0.00
Practicality	3.40	0.55	4.00	0.00	4.80	0.45

3. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implication

Based on Chapelle's evaluation criteria, the five researchers considered the three websites, *StoryJumper, Tikatok* and *Storybird* to be appropriate in providing supplementary materials especially for promoting EFL young learners' writing skills. However, *Storybird* provides better and private classroom functions, including "Assignment", "Library" and "Discussions." Additionally, *Storybird* provides seven age levels to fit different learners' proficiency levels. Furthermore, *Storybird* has the functions of peer collaboration and peer correction which are crucial elements in language learning. As a result, among the three websites, the researchers consider *Storybird* as the most appropriate website for enhancing young EFL learners' writing skills.

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