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Computer-Aided Storytelling in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

People use stories to construct meaning and to communicate. The skills of storytelling are crucial for engaging in casual conversation and successful communication in general. In the 21st century children are faced with various modalities of representation, which require new ways of reading, listening, interpreting and thinking. Children are engaged in those different modes of interaction and the nonlinear and multimedia world. Along with the advance of technology, the classic storytelling has also seen some developments in EFL classrooms around the world. In a modern classroom it is necessary to address multiple literacies and digital storytelling combines the ancient art of telling stories with a variety of digital tools and multimedia. Computer-aided storytelling has become an important tool of instruction for students of English as a foreign language, as well as their educators. This article aims to present an overview of the practical uses of computer-aided storytelling in English language classrooms. Nevertheless, the implementation of the aforementioned instructional tools in EFL classrooms entails different challenges for both students and educators. The paper includes the discussion of the most important benefits and challenges of computer-aided storytelling.

Index terms— EFLclassroom, computer-aided storytelling, computer-assisted learning.

1 Introduction

torytelling has long been an integral part of the human experience and has played a significant role in the development of culture and beliefs. The technique of storytelling is something we start to master at the age of two, both as a teller and a listener of stories; it is something we have done for thousands of years. It may even be hard-wired in our brains as one of the things we have an innate capacity to do. The attractions of narratives are obvious: stories help us understand complexity, can enhance or change perceptions, they bypass normal defense mechanisms and engage our feelings. We use stories to construct meaning and communicate ourselves to another. That is why stories are an important part of our everyday life, self-expression and communication. Children learn by composing stories about their surroundings as they play. By constructing stories children construct knowledge of the world around them and about their part in it. The skills of storytelling and understanding basic story structures and meanings are essential to casual conversation, understanding of literature and successful communication in general.

In a world which encompasses different forms of communication, children are faced with various modalities of representation, which entail new ways of reading and listening, interpreting and, consequentially, thinking. Children are engaged in those different modes of interaction and the non-linear and multimedia world. Along with the advance of technology, the classic storytelling has also been rejuvenated in classrooms around the world.

New interactive and non-linear texts are emerging in order to extend the ways in which meaning can be communicated. In the following sections of the article we will present the technique of animated storytelling as a computer-aided form of storytelling, a method which takes into account the needs of 21st century students and the different types of literacy the modern environment requires. For example, Kress stresses that the 'visual may be more useful for transmitting large amounts of certain kinds of information' **??**Kress 1998: 55). This transition does not affect only written texts, but also the world of storytelling.

As Walter Ong maintains, 'the electronic transformation of verbal expression has brought consciousness to a new age of secondary orality' **??**Ong 2002: 132). It is possible to suggest that the concept of secondary orality, with its connection to the media, carries important implications for contemporary education. As different authors have suggested, in a modern classroom it is necessary to address multiple literacies such as technology literacy, visual literacy, media literacy and so many others originating from the mediated world we live in.

Digital storytelling also combines the ancient art of telling stories with a variety of digital tools and multimedia, such as images, audio and video. Digital stories revolve around a topic, and although there are many different types, Robin (2008) argues that it is possible to categorize the major types into three major groups: personal narratives, historical documentaries, and stories designed to inform or instruct the viewer on a particular concept or practice. Due to the fact that this method of storytelling requires more advanced computer skills, it is more suitable for older children and S animated storytelling can be viewed as an introduction into project based digital storytelling. In the following section we will analyze the role of stories in a foreign language classroom.

2 II.

3 Stories in a Foreign Language Classroom

Scholars have suggested and proved that storytelling is an effective instructional strategy for enhancing motivation and improving the learning performances of pupils. It can improve memory by allowing pupils to recall the prerequisite learning and help establish interaction among learners (Bruner 1996). Also, in the case of digital storytelling, Bran (2010) suggested that it could attract the students' interest and enhance their learning achievement.

Storytelling is a practical and powerful teaching tool, especially for early language learning. However, teachers in language classrooms may hesitate to incorporate storytelling into language instruction because of an already overloaded curriculum. English foreign language (EFL) teachers may find additional problems such as having little prior experience with integrating storytelling into language teaching, locating appropriate stories, and lacking the cultural and language abilities to handle storytelling in English.

Teaching English to young learners has become especially important in recent years, as the introduction of primary EFL teaching in a number of European countries suggests. Classrooms are places where people meet with the aim of learning. This kind of engagement is inevitably social and learning through stories in classrooms is not different. The social relationships involved in storytelling include establishing social groups and ways of interacting with others; gaining and maintaining status and social position and also acquiring appropriate ways of thinking, problemsolving, valuing and feeling.

Children enjoy listening to stories in their mother tongue and understand the conventions of narrative. For this reason stories can provide an ideal introduction to the foreign language presented in a context that is familiar to the child. Children's exposure to stories in the target language introduces them to a full range of language, which is absolutely central to success in the target language. Introducing stories successfully in the classroom needs careful planning. To understand a story in a foreign language, pupils must feel involved and relate it to the aspects of their own. This takes some gradual preparation, which could spread over several lessons. The overall aim of using stories is to encourage general comprehension and to trigger off a wealth of purposeful language learning activities.

Listening to stories should be a part of growingup process for every child. Educationalists and psychologists have shown that stories have a vital role in the child's development and in the development of language. We know that children are active participants in their acquisition of language. Their language patterns are learned in social contexts while they are interacting with other children and adults. Studies continue to confirm that the development of vocabulary and syntactic complexity in language are more advanced in children who are frequently exposed to a variety of stories.

The main reasons for using stories while teaching a foreign language to children are as follows:

1. Motivationchildren express a great desire for stories and they are always happy to listen or read; stories can help develop positive attitudes towards the foreign language and language learning and create a desire to continue learning 2. Imaginationchildren can become personally involved in a story as they identify with the characters and try to make their own interpretation of the narrative and illustrations 3. Meaningchildren always look for the meaning because if they find the meaning, they understand the story and, consequently, are motivated to try to improve their ability to understand even more 4. Fluencyfluency in speaking is connected with not being afraid of making mistakes and constructing meaning from a limited language -this involves intelligence and creativity 5. Language awarenessthanks to stories, children begin to 'feel' the foreign language and become aware of certain language items and sentence constructions which will enrich their thinking and gradually enter their own language production 7. Communicationstories and the follow-up activities develop a sense of being and having an audience as well as of sharing and collaborating; storytelling can thus help build up the child's confidence and encourage social and emotional development 8. General curriculumstories can be used to enlarge children's powers of awareness, analysis and expression; also to consolidate learning in other school subjects across the curriculum.

4 III. Teaching English Through using it

In the last decades, technology has become wonderfully accessible to teachers, students, parents, and the entire general public in most countries. More exciting than technology itself is how it can be applied in the classroom. The value of technology for early language learning lies in its ability to extend learning Volume XIV Issue V Version I 16 (G)

6. Stimulus for speaking and writing -the children are prompted to respond to a story by speaking and writing; they need to share their opinions of what they have listened to beyond the traditional curriculum. The foundation of future learning success should be patterned by using software and activities that help students learn how to think and learn. Modern technologies are very powerful because they rely on one of the most powerful genetic biases we have -the preference for visually presented information. Television, movies, videos, and most computer programmes are very visually oriented and therefore attract and maintain the attention of young children.

The technologies from which young children benefit most are those that are interactive and allow children to develop their curiosity, problem-solving ability and independent thinking skills. Children have to have an integrated and a well-balanced set of experiences to help them grow into capable adults who can handle social-emotional interactions as well as develop their intellectual abilities.

Nevertheless, there are many obstacles to overcome if technology, and specifically computers, is to be used effectively in the classroom. Because of the lack of programmes designed to promote some higherlevel thinking, it has become the teacher's responsibilty to design lessons which incorporate technology effectively.

IV.

5 Computer Aided Teaching and Learning

Computer-assisted learning is now available to most teachers and students. A well-designed computerassisted learning programme is believed to efficiently facilitate both teaching and learning processes. In recent years, the processing capabilities of computers have increased dramatically. One result of these trends has been the ability to provide highly visual and interactive learning environments on computers, and, along with this, learning environments become more complex.

All these aspects of computers have their uses in the educational application of computers. The use of a computer for listening exercises often provides not only sound, but also visual input providing students with more contextual clues. There is a number of specialised programmes that allow children with certain informationprocessing problems to get a multimedia presentation of content so that they can better understand and process the material. They are able to see the written words and see a visual image and hear the sounds -all at the same time. Combining these sensory modalities helps a child to more efficiently internalize information about a topic, especially if they have, for example, an auditory processing difficulty or a reading disorder.

There has been much debate over the use of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in the EFL classroom over the past decade, but there are many uses of computer in the classroom. CALL can be successfully employed not only for grammar practice and correction, but also for communicative activities. Successful communication learning is dependent on the student's desire to participate. When asked to communicate about various situations, students should also be involved in the actual situation. Decisionmaking, asking for advice, agreeing and disagreeing, and compromising with fellow students are all tasks that cry out for 'authentic' setting. It is in these settings that CALL can be used to great advantages. By using the computer as a tool to create student projects and provide context, teachers can employ the computer to help students become more involved in the task, thereby facilitating the necessity of effective communication within a group setting.

In language learning as well in science education, several studies have reported that students like learning language via computer technology (Shea 2000), and that, given the choice between learning text or audio and computer and video, they prefer learning via computers and video. A number of studies has investigated whether the simultaneous presentation of audio and visual information taxes cognition at the expense of comprehension. One hypothesis in this debate is that, because any symbol system can carry meaning, restriction of the flow of information to a single channel reduces the amount of data that must be processed and allows the learner to focus more effectively on the significance of the message. But, researches conducted by Hibbing and Rankin-Erikson (2003) and Boster, Meyer, Roberto and Inge (2002) have suggested that the use of multimedia in teaching helps students retain new information and facilitates the comprehension of difficult material. Consequentially, we can conclude that animated storytelling can provide educators with a powerful tool to use in their classrooms.

V.

6 Computer-Aided Storytelling

Throughout the ages, storytelling has evolved from an oral tradition to a digital display. With the advent of affordable digital videocameras, easy-to-use software, DVDs and the Internet, we can now tell and disseminate our stories in new and interesting ways. Today's twist on the oral tradition are animated storytelling and digital storytelling. While in traditional storytelling the fictional world is presented through the use of descriptive prose, in an animated story the picture is painted with several non-traditional elements, including sound, graphical characters and an animated storyline. Animated storytelling is the intersection between the age-old art of storytelling and the access to powerful technology that is easy to use.

In the following paragraphs we will present some of the issues considering the use of animated storytelling with young learners, as well as the benefits and the potential drawbacks of using computer-aided storytelling. The criteria for selecting animated stories will also be suggested. Finally, we will concentrate on several classroom activities. Animated storytelling advocates an integral approach, not simply using the story in isolation but within a sequence of tasks: previewing, while-viewing and post-viewing, always depending on the role chosen for the story.

7 a) The Power of Visual Learning and Animated Storytelling

Visual learning is a proven method in which ideas, concepts, data and other information are associated with images and presented graphically. Animated stories, picture stories, concept maps or plots are some of the techniques used in visual learning to enhance thinking and learning skills.

The New London Group presented a definition of literacy which includes understanding and control of representational formats, such as visual images and their relationship to the written word. It could be argued that the same goes for storytelling. Also, Kress (1998) suggests that graphics hold more meaning and are central to the meaning of modern texts and meaningmaking systems. It is suggested that pupils better remember information when it is presented and learned both visually and verbally. Linked verbal and visual information helps students make connections, understand relationships and recall related details. With the powerful combination of visual learning and technology, students learn to clarify thoughts, organize and analyze information, integrate new knowledge, and think critically.

8 b) Benefits and drawbacks of using animated stories in the classroom

Telling, watching or listening to a story is a central part of classroom life. Actually, we can either read, tell, listen to, watch or play the story. From time to time it is good to use animated stories. Why and how? Some important benefits of using animated stories in the classroom are as follows: (1) the story can be repeated as many times as needed, (2) students learn that computers can help provide and execute useful ideas, (3) there are visuals, sound, animations, reading, also writing included at the same time, so they enhance understanding, (4) the story can be stopped at certain points to make it more interesting, to involve students or to clear certain meaning of it, (5) there are authentic sounds, voices and native speakers acting and reading the story, (6) children enjoy language learning with cartoons and animated storylines, (7) children gain confidence through repetition: by watching an animated story several times, children can learn through absorption and imitation.

There are, however, several potential drawbacks that teachers should note: (1) teachers have to be able to use the computer and software, (2) the computer does not always work when you need it, (3) children are used to passively watching TV at home on the sofa, so teachers should try to avoid the learners ”switching off” by providing stimulating activities where the child can interact with and learn from the computer.

9 c) Criteria for selecting animated stories

When selecting an animated story for use in the classroom, certain general criteria should be kept in mind:

1. Watchability -Is the story interesting? Would a young native speaker want to watch this video? 2. Completeness -The ideal animation tells a complete story or its section.

This idea of completeness is important for young learners whose primary motivation for watching a story is enjoyment.

4. Level of maturity -Children mature very quickly, so a group of 7-year-olds watching a story made for 5year-olds would probably reagard it as ”too childish.” On the other hand, using an animated story intended for older children with a group of younger children might lead to the children not being able to understand the concepts in the story.

10 Availability of related materials -Many authentic

stories now come with ready-made materials that can be used for language teaching. Other stories may have been adapted from books, which could be used in the classroom to support the animated story.

If animated story is being used for presenting language or for comprehension tasks there are, however, further factors which should be considered when selecting a story:

1. Degree of visual support -A good idea is to choose scenes that are very visual; the more visual the story is, the easier it is to understand.

Clarity of picture and sound 3. Density of language -This notion refers to the amount of language in a particular time. Animated stories in which the language is dense are more difficult for learners to comprehend. 4. Language content -In using an animated story to present language, an important factor to consider is the linguistic item presented in the scene. Another important factor is the amount of repetition of the language content. Authentic stories for young learners will often contain a lot of repetition. It is also useful to see if the linguistic content in the story can be linked to that of the language curriculum of the course book, thus providing a way to integrate storytelling into the course as a whole. Computer-Aided Storytelling in the EFL Classroom 3.

Length -The length of the story is important, it should not be too long, perhaps between four and seven minutes, depending on the learning objective.

11 2.

5. Language level -The language level of the story should be appropriate for the level of the class, having in mind the comprehensible input.

12 VI.

13 Using Animated Stories

Stories can be used to provide a variety and extra language practice by supplementing or complementing a course book. If the teacher is not required to adhere rigidly to a course book, animated stories can be used as short basic syllabuses in their own right, offering a novel alternative to the course book.

(1) talk to children about their experience of what will be the central topic of the story, (2) use a warm-up activity, (3) pre-teach the words words and phrases which are important for understanding the story, (4) use games to introduce the language needed, (5) children watch the story with sound off and then guess the topic and the content, (6) children read articles/stories connected to the topic, (7) learners predict the story by numbering the pictures from the story on the appropriate worksheet, (8) use the flashcards of the story and ask learners if they can guess what happens in the story.

14 b) Computer work (while-viewing)

In most cases, the teacher will want the learners to watch the animated story more than once. The aims for watching the story for the first time and further times will probably be different. The tasks to be completed while viewing a story for the first time are commonly associated with developing listening skills and, in particular, listening for global understanding. The activities for the second or third viewing are often associated with providing information and presenting or reinforcing language. During this stage pupils may listen for specific information or pre-taught vocabulary, grammatical structures, confirm the predictions made in the pre-viewing activity, stop the story to comment. c) Post-computer work (post-viewing)

Post-viewing activities are often connected to the idea of using language that came from the video or the video could simply have been used as a stimulus and the post-viewing tasks are not connected in any way to language found in the video.

For the post-computer work, the teacher has to prepare different materials such as pictures, word and sentence cards, flashcards, handouts, etc. Some animated stories are accompanied by ready-made materials that teachers can choose, print and simply take into the classroom. Activities which could be included into the post-viewing stage of animated storytelling are making posters, acting out a scene, rewriting a part of the story or writing dialogues.

In conclusion, practice has shown that a welldesigned animated storytelling application can motivate, save time, and help address learner weaknesses. In addition to increasing both student motivation and learning efficiency, the computer-aided storytelling can help young learners establish positive attitudes toward foreign language discourse. from Science Classrooms. Language Awareness 7(2). 69-89.

There are three main dimensions in which animated stories can add to learning in the whole school curriculum:

1. Stories can be used to reinforce conceptual development in children. a) Pre-computer work (pre-viewing)

Any pre-viewing activity will be associated with developing learner's comprehension strategies. Native speakers use many strategies to aid comprehension and these strategies can also be applied to learning a foreing language. Some of the suggested activities are as follows:

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Figure 1:

Figure 2:

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