Integrating Digital Literacies in English Language Teaching --Based on a Digital Storytelling Project in an English Writing Course

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Abstract: Digital literacy has become a heated topic in language teaching in recent years. Scholars and educators around the world have tried to adopt new technologies to increase teaching efficiency and effectiveness. Digital storytelling, as a promising teaching method greatly integrating digital technologies practices and language learning, embraces the art of telling stories via digital media such as pictures, audios and videos. While international educators have studied this method for a long time, research on this field in China still remains few at present. Therefore, this research conducted a digital storytelling project in an English Writing Course in a College of Southern China. Based on this, the paper aims at discussing the feasibility and effectiveness of applying digital storytelling in EFL Classroom in higher education.

1. Introduction

One of the most essential goals of language education is to help students achieve literacy. Traditionally 'Literacy' refers to the ability to read and write. As the world has ushered in the information era, the definition of 'Literacy' has been changed accordingly. In the 1990s, the New London Group, represented by Gee, Gunther Kress and Norman Faiclough, put forward a new pedagogy of multiliteracies, which emphasized the ability to understand all type of texts including not only printed but also visual and textual connections like audio, spatial and gestural. [1] Later, Paul Gilster first formally introduced the term 'digital literacy' and defined it as the ability to understand the Internet language and make full use of it. [2] Although there is not a consensus on the definition of 'digital literacy', it often focuses on the literacy practices related to new technologies such as the internet and digital media.

'Digital literacies' has become a heated topic and attained general approval around the world. For example, in many European countries, digital competence is regarded to be strategically significant for citizens. The New Media Consortium predicts that it will become one of the major challenges in the way of technologies application in higher education. [3] Many scholars and educators have realized the importance of digital literacies, and have tried to adopt new technologies to increase teaching efficiency and effectiveness, among which the digital video is a promising one.

Digital storytelling, a teaching method that greatly integrates digital technologies practices and language learning, embraces the art of telling stories via digital media such as pictures, audios and videos.[4] While international educators have studied it for a long time, research on this field in China still remains few at present. Therefore, this research conducted a digital storytelling project in an English Writing Course in a College of Southern China. Based on this, the paper aims at discussing the feasibility and effectiveness of applying digital storytelling in EFL Classroom in higher education.

2. Digital Storytelling in Language Education

Digital storytelling is an effective method to foster the development of language skills. The process of making a digital story actually embraces "deep language acquisition and meaningful practice" [5]. In the completion of story, learners frequently practice language skills in the processes of writing and proofreading the script, orally presenting the story, listening to the recordings and

giving a presentation of their digital story. Although it does not directly focus on language training, this kind of activity indeed improves learners' language skills, especially writing skills. Kajder and Swenson [6] note that digital story work offers "a unique bridge to writing", which provides "an entry point" for learners to create their own texts. Moreover, digital storytelling projects can also "bridge the gap between in-class and out-of-class literacy practices" [7], which enlarges learners' exposure to the target language and provides them with authentic environment to practice language.

In the past decades, digital storytelling has been used in language education at different school level. Simple technologies like Microsoft PowerPoint, and more complex ones like iMovie and Power Editor have been utilized [4]. For example, in 2011, Stover launched a project at a elementary school, which encouraged first-grade students to tell their stories via the combination of pictures and audios. In a senior high school in Blanchester, students integrated musics, recordings and picture images together in a video to feature the person who was important for them [8]. In a undergraduate course in English for science, students were required to conduct a scientific experiment and reported the findings through multimodal videos [9].

Although these projects were implemented at different school level, they share a commonness that all of them match students' language level and technological capability. Moreover, during the implementing process, students were given opportunities to plan, design, produce and edit their own work independently, which was in accordance with the student-centered and autonomous learning principles.

3. Case Study

3.1 Context

The digital storytelling project was conducted in an English writing course in a college of Southern China. The course was driven by project-based learning approach that students were assigned different writing tasks during the course, one of which was to create a digital video on the topic of 'Environment Protection'. The project was implemented at the end of the course, after learning the writing techniques of exposition. Divided into 18 groups, 72 sophomores majored in Business English participated in the project.

In order to equip students with technological capability, students were provided a 45-min technical training at the beginning. They were taught how to edit videos through Power Editor briefly, like adding soundtrack, audio narration and other visual and sound effects. During the project, students mainly went through five stages, including Language Input, Scripting, Data Collection, Editing and Sharing, among which the Language Input, Scripting and Sharing sessions were done mostly in class while the other sessions were finished after class with the instructions from the teacher. The processes are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Summary of the Project Processes

Session	Time	Tutorial focus	Student activities
Language input	90 min	To teach language points and writing techniques	Group discussion; Watch videos
Scripting	45 min	To plan project work; To develop writing skills	Brianstorm; Write scripts; Peer review
Data Collection	90-120 min	To give technical support	Take pictures; record videos
Editing	90-120 min	Video editing	Learn editing tools Edit video
Sharing	45 min	Sharing session	Present videos in class; Peer review videos

3.2 Data Analysis

At the end of the project, totally 18 groups of students presented their video in class and received feedback from both the teacher and the classmates. By analyzing the videos, the research found that the multimodal resources used in the videos consists of visual, aural and textual materials, such as pictures, video recordings, musics, monologues and subtitles. In terms of the visual part, 66.7% of

the videos stories were presented through pictures and 33.3% were through video recordings. As for the aural, all students chose to tell their stories through monologues and 55.6% of them inserted music in the video. In the textual, 50% integrated subtitles in the work. Samples of students' works are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2 Samples of Students' Videos

Samples	1	2	3
Screenshot			
Resources	Pictures, music, monologues, subtitles	Video recordings, music, monologues, subtitles	Pictures, monologues

4. Discussion

Different from traditional writing tasks which emphasize the written language, the digital storytelling project encourages students to express their ideas in a multimodal way, with the combination of visual, aural and textual resources. Being the 'digital generation', students are used to such a creative and multimodal way of expression. Compared with the monotonous writing lessons, the digital storytelling projects are much more appealing for them, which in a sense can motivate students to learn the language [4]. In this project, students presented to be much more active and enthusiastic that they would like to spend large amount of time and efforts making the videos. In addition, most students improved technical proficiency after finishing the video. The traditional tasks in language education are usually confined to textual or oral forms, such as writing a paper or giving an oral presentation. However, in this project, students needed to learn multiple technical techniques like how to shoot pictures, insert soundtracks, edit the video recording and so on, which greatly promoted their digital literacies. Apart from this, they could develop other skills such as research, organization, interpersonal and problem-solving skills that can help them "thrive in increasingly media-varied environments" [10].

Nevertheless, there are some challenges teachers need to pay attention to. First of all, as Robin reminds, [4] students may spend lots of efforts and time to achieve the technological proficiency. Therefore, before the editing process, it is necessary for the teacher to spend time on the technical training. Second, students may be distracted by the "fascinating technology" from the academic knowledge [5]. In this case, the teacher need to provide enough language input and emphasize the language accuracy and proficiency in class. Third, it is tempting for students to find resources on the Internet, which leads to the infringement of copyright. Therefore, the latitude of what materials can be used needs to be clarified clearly at the very beginning. A more effective solution is to encourage original productions. All these challenges may prevent the popularity of digital storytelling practices. However, as the Office of Technology Assessment pointed out, this to some extent results from a lack of vision on the potential of utilizing technologies in education. [11]

5. Conclusion

As digital literacies become increasingly important in the 21 century, it is urgent to explore effective ways to integrate technologies into education. Based on the practice, the research found that the integration of digital storytelling can motivate students, improve their language skills and digital litercies, as well as cultivate their multiple skills such as problem-solving, research and organizing skills. Though the implementation is sometimes considered difficult and time-consuming, it is believed its advantages outweigh disadvantages. As language teachers, we should exert the great potential of new technologies to increase teaching efficiency and effectiveness.

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