Discuss the use of digital storytelling in the teaching and learning of language and critically report on one journal article that investigates the use of digital storytelling in the language-learning context.

1. Introduction

Digital storytelling combines various types of multimedia – images, music, narration, text and video clips – to make a story that is appealing and interesting to a digital reader (EDUCAUSE 2007) and is increasingly used in teaching and learning (Afrilysanti & Basthomi 2011). It is an invaluable educational tool in relation to language learning because it can be used in a variety of ways (Thomas & Page 2011). Digital storytelling has the potential to influence the student audience and help them ‘make better meaning’ from the content they are exposed to. This report will discuss the potential and limitations of digital storytelling along with some fundamental technical information. It will then focus on one journal article that investigates the use of digital storytelling in language learning contexts.

2. Role of Digital Storytelling

Digital storytelling is an attractive educational aid because it ‘captivates and engages’ (Stanley & Dillingham 2011, p. 23) learners and helps develop artistic, technical, organisational and storytelling talents in students (Ohler 2005). It brings together language, literacy and technology and this makes it an appealing activity for students who are likely to already be surrounded by various types of digital media (Stanley & Dillingham 2011). Digital stories are often the personal story of the writer but may also be fiction, and may be based on a single topic or spread across many. Aside from the personal narrative, digital stories can also include a wide variety of different topics (Alexander 2011). However, there are...
limitations to digital storytelling. Ienotti (n.d.), an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and an avid supporter of digital storytelling, argues that it can be exhausting to supervise and guide the development of a whole class of individual students’ digital storytelling projects. She found that despite carefully checking the drafts of her students’ stories, many of her students ‘got lost along the way’ (p. 11). This lead her to conclude that although digital storytelling provided ‘meaningful, relevant and authentic learning experiences for students’ (p. 12) it needs to be kept simple with group work and ‘realistic goals’ (p.12). Also, there is a danger that students will be distracted by the technological side of digital storytelling and place less emphasis on the actual creation of the story. Stanley and Dillingham (2011) stress that the story is always more important than the digital presentation and Ohler (2008, p. 6) acknowledges that ‘no technology or special effects can replace a well-developed story with literary elements and personal voice’. Despite its limitations, however, digital storytelling has powerful potential to influence, captivate and engage learners of many disciplines.

3. Technology Use

Digital storytelling is aided by the multitude of available technologies and software packages that enhance, develop and produce it. Consequently, the way digital stories are created may vary according to this constantly changing digital technology (Alexander 2011) and the wide variety of supporting software. Windows Movie Maker is already installed on a large number of computers and, if not, it can be downloaded for free. Photos and videos can be imported and edited, and narration and music can be added. Microsoft Photo Story can also be downloaded for free. Photos can be dragged onto a window and then arranged to tell the visual story. The program also allows the user to add narration and music (Softonic 2013). Digital stories can also be created using Mixbox, Tikatak, Scrapblog, Microsoft Office
PowerPoint, Prezi or similar software. In addition, images can be downloaded from such sites as Google Images or Flickr and there are a number of free music sites where music can be downloaded. Audacity is free software for recording and editing narration. It is very easy to use an iPad for digital storytelling using such apps as Story, Sonicpics or Storyrobe (Huson et al. n.d.). In summary, it is clear that the array of new technologies and software products that can produce digital stories is somewhat vast and able to produce highly effective and engaging visual accounts.

4. Analysis of Case Study Presented in a Journal Article

The journal article, ‘Starting Language Schema for English-Language Learners: Teacher-Composed Digital Jumpstarts for Academic Reading’ (Rance-Roney 2010), offers a comprehensive illustration of how digital storytelling can support ESL learners’ academic literacy and reveals another way in which digital story telling can enhance teaching and learning. Rance-Roney describes teacher-composed digital storytelling as a way of supporting ESL learners who may be required to engage in ‘challenging academic text’. This is an interesting observation as digital storytelling is an excellent way of helping to scaffold content for ESL learners who face challenging materials. Rance-Roney goes on to say that at the very beginning of their learning, first providing learners with a digital story that offers cultural background to the text can help them to fully engage and ‘collaborate’ with the contents. Rance-Roney calls this a ‘digital jump-start’ (p. 386). To illustrate this, she uses the example of teaching an ESL class, reading and writing a unit on the USA Civil Rights movement. In order for her students to understand the importance of this history, and to be able to find the readings that they needed, they had to have considerable knowledge of the topic, be familiar with some words and phrases and be able to acquire a wider comprehension of the diverse nature of US society and politics. Rance-Roney and some of her fellow
teachers began to experiment with digital storytelling as a tool to provide these needs. This way of using digital technologies to scaffold students is a very effective tool in engaging with and imparting ‘supporting information’ to help students learn. Rance-Roney reveals that by using digital storytelling, they were able to scaffold reading, focusing on developing sentence structure and specific vocabulary with the aim of developing language capability. It is becoming increasingly common in the classroom that the potential of using technology to scaffold students’ learning has enormous potential. This trend is set to increase and hopefully, this will encompass the role of digital storytelling.

§ Digital Jump-Starts

To create a digital jump-start, Rance-Roney initially composes a script which gives background information and introduces frequently repeated vocabulary appropriate to the topic and then images are chosen to illustrate the new vocabulary with a word typed at the top of the image. Lastly, the script and supporting media are uploaded to the chosen software. The final digital stories can be used repeatedly in the classroom and the students can take them home. Rance-Roney notes that initially it took the teachers two to three hours to produce a digital story, depending on how careful they wanted to be, but as they got used to the process there was a considerable decrease in this time. The teachers made the following recommendations: choose subject matter that predicts but does not replace the topic, look at the story from the point of view of an ESL learner, use 10 to 12 key words that are important to the vocabulary of the topic, compose a script that is slightly challenging, keep content relevant and give the students encouragement to create their own digital stories. The teachers all agreed that digital jump-starts gave a ‘rich pre-reading experience’ (p. 394) and enabled students to be independent learners giving them ‘a critical sense of control over the English language’ (p. 394). Thus, the creation of digital stories to facilitate learning does take effort.
and some technological expertise; however, the advantages of using such technology can aid students’ retention, comprehension and enjoyability of their subject matter.

6. Conclusion

To summarise, it can be seen that from the very first lesson digital storytelling incorporates the four language learning elements of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Developing each of these ‘macro skills’ can be incorporated into the creation of a digital story as the lessons progress. Furthermore, this technological aspect of digital storytelling makes it appealing to students and encourages engagement and creativity. It is a valuable tool in a language-learning classroom and can bring the subject matter to life, as well as aid students’ comprehension.
7. Reference List


