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My first digital story: a case study with 5th grade Turkish English language learners

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Abstract

Writing in a foreign language is one of the hardest skills to acquire (Cumming, 2009; Richards and Renandya, 2002). Additionally, learners often lack the necessary motivation to write. However, with the help of current online technologies teachers may have a way to motivate their students to write more and improve their language skills. This qualitative case study investigated the implementation of digital story writing in a private K-8 school in Istanbul, Turkey. Sixty three 5th grade students composed their first digital stories using Storybird, a free online story reading and writing website. Classroom observation, interviews with the students and their teachers, and analysis of the written stories indicated that digital story writing is an effective technique in foreign language classrooms to promote writing. All students were highly motivated, wrote creative stories, and felt proud to publish their stories online. Teachers reported a positive change in student motivation and involvement with the writing task; they were pleased to implement digital story writing and determined to continue using it.

Keywords: English language learners; digital story; Web 2.0 tools; young learners; digital literacy

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Introduction

Innovations in technology have led to tremendous changes in learning and teaching (Blake, 2007; Whealan, 2005). Learning and teaching are no longer restricted by classroom walls or traditional paradigms. With the help of the Internet and WWW, learning can take place anytime anywhere. Also, learning philosophy has shifted away from behaviorism to socio-constructivism which emphasizes student-centered teaching, collaboration, autonomy, creativity, critical thinking, digital citizenship, problem solving, and decision making (Whealan, 2005). The English as a Second Language (ESL) field has been greatly influenced by these trends (Blake, 2007; Chapelle, 2003; Ferris and Hedgcock, 2003; Pennington, 2003). Technology has modified both language teacher education and language teaching practices (Blake, 2007; Salaberry, 2001). What is more significant is that, in order to function efficiently in the 21st century, students not only need literacy skills in their mother tongue and a second language, but also attain new literacies related to Information and Technology (ICT) use (Pim, 2013).

Internet technologies have created many new and significant opportunities for language education by providing prevalent authentic sources and communication and collaboration tools for learners and teachers. Learners have more opportunities to practice the four skills, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, as well as gain cross-cultural awareness and communicate with native speakers. If integrated with sound pedagogy, technology supports students' creativity, critical thinking, meaning construction, independent learning, and motivation; it also leads to collaborative, flexible, and effective learning environments (Brandl 2002; Grgurović and Chapelle 2007; Istifci, Lomidazde and Demiray 2011, Sadik 2008).

As a field itself, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is now in its 3rd phase, *integrative CALL*, having been preceded by the behaviorist and communicative phases (Warschauer 1996). In the current phase of CALL, Web 2.0 tools have acquired a crucial role. Web 2.0 tools are online open source software and applications that allow communication, interaction, collaboration, creation of content with multiple artifacts (e.g. audio, videos, and images), editing, organizing social networks, and sharing online (Alexandar 2006). Some examples of Web 2.0 tools are blogs, wikis, podcasts, social networking sites, photo and video sharing, mashups, and digital story tools.

The purpose of this research was to explore the feasibility of including digital story technique with 5th grade English as Foreign Language (EFL) students by examining both students' and teachers' experiences and perspectives. The study aimed at exploring how digital story technique is used with young learners; and additionally, providing recommendations and strategies for future researchers and teachers based on the results of this study.

Literature review

There are different definitions of digital story, but mainly, any story which is created by merging text with media, such as picture, audio, and/or video are referred to as a digital story (Lambert 2007; Robin 2006 and 2008; Sylvester and Greenidge 2009). Digital story and digital storytelling are often confused and used interchangeably. While a digital story can be on any topic or theme and written in any point of view, digital storytelling combines the art of telling stories with multimedia, told by first-person narration, and takes only a few minutes. For the purpose of this study, rather than digital storytelling, we focus on digital stories created online on the Storybird website with pictures and text.

A digital story task should not be considered as a supportive or additional language teaching technique, but, indeed, it should be added into the language curriculum as one of the main components. Digital story writing is also compatible with TESOL Technology Standards (TESOL 2008) and The ISTE National Educational Technology Standards.

Digital story writing was found to contribute to creativity, innovation, collaborative learning, and student motivation in L2 reading and writing (Ballast, Stephens, and Radcliffe 2008; Dogan and Robin 2008; Sylvester and Greenidge 2009). With the help of digital story tasks, students are engaged in authentic language learning environments which augment language acquisition (Chapelle 2003; Krashen 1985; Lightbown and Spada 2006).

The digital story technique helps teachers to design teaching activities easily within the framework of constructivism and learning by doing. Many studies in the field of language learning were conducted to determine whether digital story has an impact on the learners' language skills and motivation (Ellis 1993; Gomez, Arai, and Lowe 1995; Tsou 2003; Yang and Wu 2012).

In a case study research targeting high school fourth-year Spanish language learners, Castañeda (2013) examined 12 students' digital storytelling as they followed Lambert's (2006) digital storytelling process and process writing approach to create their stories. The students were highly motivated and the quality of the stories exceeded the expectations of the teacher and the researcher. The findings indicated an epistemological shift of the students' understanding of the purpose of the digital storytelling task from focusing on the language and technology to creating a meaningful, personal, and emotional digital story, and practiced real-world language use in the process writing and presentation of their stories. In another study by Dogan and Robin (2008), the elementary, middle, and high school teachers who attended a digital storytelling summer workshop and incorporated it in their curriculum reported positive effects of digital storytelling on student performance, 21st century skills, motivation and engagement levels.

Sadik (2008), in his study, attempted to show teachers how they can integrate digital storytelling into their curriculum and its effect on teaching and learning. He found that integration of the technology into the learning was not perfectly implemented: The majority of the students did not work collaboratively and had difficulty in terms of working in a small learning community, and, although the students were supposed to get help only when needed from the teacher, they frequently asked for help from the teachers. In addition, he observed

that the teachers did not have sufficient technological skills. Nevertheless, the use of digital storytelling tool, Photo Story, made students involvement in the tasks more effective, increased their motivation, and improved the students' informational technology (IT) skills. The findings of the study also showed that there is a need to encourage teachers to give opportunities to their students with more projects and problem-solving tasks to create communities of practice. The teachers also need to receive training for integrating technology into their curriculum.

Mokhtar, Halim, and Kamarulzaman (2011) conducted an action research to investigate the effectiveness of storytelling for communicative skills in language courses. The findings of the study showed that storytelling enhances students' progress in communicative skills like verbal and non-verbal language use, reading, and transferring knowledge. Through storytelling students gain opportunities to listen and speak the target language more often and teachers can provide more opportunities for students to practice the target language. Similar results were found by Tsou, Wang, and Tzeng (2006) indicating the effectiveness of digital story for developing listening comprehension skills. A multimedia storytelling website was developed to confirm how a web tool can facilitate the teaching and the learning process through storytelling. The effectiveness of the website was evaluated at an elementary school. Two classrooms were observed in this experimental study. In one classroom, both the teachers and the students created their own stories via the storytelling website, whereas, in the other classroom, traditional storytelling processes (pen and paper story writing) were administered. The results indicated that the storytelling website had positive effects on students' word recall, comprehension of the story, and language form recall. The storytelling website supported the students' creativity through the use of visuals, music, and sound effects. In addition, the teachers revealed that with the help of the website, the teaching process was easier and more effective because they prepared more authentic materials, integrated the culture of the language via storytelling, and created more active teaching and learning environments.

In another study, Yang and Wu (2012) tried to demonstrate the effectiveness of digital story on academic achievement in four different language skills. In the study they investigated whether there would be differences between the classrooms where the digital story and innovative technologies were made use of to increase students' involvement in the classroom activities and the classrooms where more traditional methods were used. In short, they examined the effectiveness of the digital story and lecture (with teachers trained in ICT) on students' academic achievement. The findings suggest that students in technology enhanced classroom show great improvement in English proficiency especially in listening, reading, and writing, and also the digital story enhances critical thinking, higher order thinking, and motivation.

Finally, digital storytelling was examined in a virtual environment by Xu, Park, and Baek (2011), and it was found to be more effective than traditional digital storytelling. The study also emphasized that students' writing self-efficacy can be enhanced through the use of the virtual learning environment.

Although there are studies on digital story and language learning, there seems to be a scarcity of research on its use with young learners of English. To fill this gap, this study was conducted with ten-year-old English language learners to examine the implementation of digital story writing and experiences and perceptions of students and teachers in terms of student writing skills – mainly their vocabulary use, organization, creativity in writing (see Appendix A for the rubric used in the study). The study also aimed at providing suggestions for teachers and for future researchers.

Method

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to investigate the implementation and results of digital story writing technique in 5th grade English as a foreign language classes in a private elementary school. The aim was to understand how digital story writing was used with young language learners, what the students and teachers reflections were; and therefore, a case-study research method was the most appropriate to gather in-depth data through multiple sources of information about a particular context (Creswel 1998; Merriam, 2009).

Context and participants

This qualitative case study included four 5th grade EFL classrooms and their three teachers in a private primary school in Turkey. A total of 63 students participated in the study. Each student created one digital story on Storybird individually as a class work. First, both the students and the teachers received training on how to use Storybird. Teachers created an online classroom utilizing Storybird for this study and added their students. The students then completed their stories in 2 weeks.

Storybird (See Figure 1) is an inspirational, simple, social, and shareable story reading and writing site which is open source and where readers, writers, and artists meet. It brings students, parents, and teachers together on a virtual platform. It is so easy to use that even very young learners can create a picture story. Teachers can open a free classroom account with up to 75 student accounts. Premium membership provides several features such as unlimited stories, downloads, custom covers, personalized profiles, and accelerated moderation; and for teachers and librarians it has pro and pro plus accounts which enable student/class management, grading, poetry, digital stickers, archiving, and one free pdf download of the story per student. A simple guide can be read at [http://storybird.com/books/storybird-a-simple-guide-for-teachers-and-students/\[a3\]](http://storybird.com/books/storybird-a-simple-guide-for-teachers-and-students/[a3]).

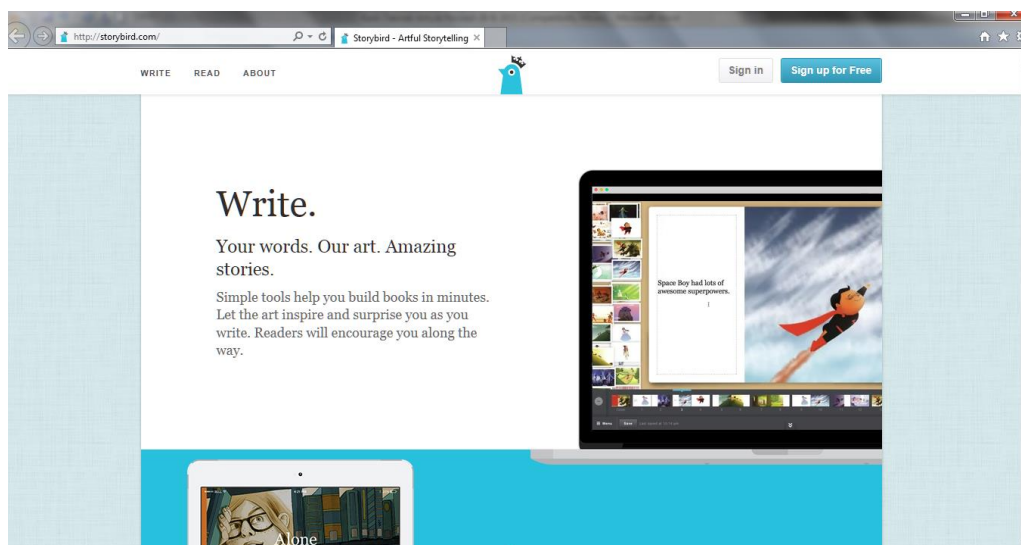


Figure 1

A sample screenshot of the Storybird website

Teachers create their classroom account by signing up as a teacher on the Storybird.com. Once they sign up, they can create their classes and add students individually or use the bulk upload or account generator options. After students receive their usernames and passwords, they can start writing their stories. Teachers may develop their own library by selecting stories for the classroom or they may create assignments by using the “Create an Assignment” option through which they can give a link to a Storybird story or other media sources. They can even set deadlines and upload a rubric. These learning management system (LMS) features, make Storybird an effective classroom tool. As announced on the Storybird website, an IOS application will be available in the summer of 2014, which will make it even more available and likely more popular in classrooms.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection which expanded over a month involved four phases: a) teacher training, b) student training and observations during the training, c) collecting the stories written by the students, and d) semi-structured and informal interviews with the teachers and students. As a first step, the researchers contacted three 5th grade writing instructors about the project. Upon mutual agreement and planning, the researchers gave one-hour training to the teachers in a smart classroom with an interactive whiteboard. In this training, teachers learned how to create class account on Storybird, how to write a story and comment on a story. They were provided with written instructions as well.

After the teacher training and workshop, the researchers visited each three classroom to give training to the students. They distributed a handout with visuals. During the training, students were observed in order to examine their attitudes and motivation both by the researchers and their teachers. Researchers asked questions such as, “Do you like story writing? How do you write your story? Do you use pen and paper? Have you ever written a digital story? Their answers and observational data were transcribed on a personal laptop.

.After the student-training, the teachers followed their usual curriculum; they practiced story writing and process-writing but added an extra project hour in the computer lab to practice using Storybird . Once the students were familiar with story writing processes and using Storybird to publish stories, they were assigned to write a digital story on any topic of their choice during their two-week winter break. They were not restricted with word count or use of particular grammar or vocabulary items. .

After the stories were submitted online by the first week of the spring semester, teachers shared their Storybird accounts with the researchers so that they could read the stories. The second week of the semester, both the teachers and students were interviewed by using focus group interview technique to explore their attitudes, motivation, experiences and suggestions. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Observational and interview data were analyzed using content analysis by both researchers separately for the purpose of the interreliability. The content analyses included reading, rereading, sorting, coding, and grouping (Creswell, 1998). In addition, a rubric (see Appendix) was developed by the researchers based on literature review to analyze the stories in terms of language use, grammar, vocabulary, story length, creativity, discourse and plot.

Results

Observations during the training indicated that both the teachers and students were eager to learn and use the Storybird tool. When we contacted the teachers about our project, they welcomed us and added that they would love to learn how to use this tool in their classrooms. They did not report any problems or concerns during the training. During student training, students were very enthusiastic. They surprised us with their questions, such as, “Can we add sound or music?”, “Can we use our own pictures?”, and “Can we print out our stories?” Another positive indicator for us was that they wanted to read more stories aloud rather than ending our training for the day.

Interviews with the teachers revealed positive attitudes as well and high motivation to implement digital story writing. Teachers’ observations of the students were in parallel with our own observations: Students were engaged more than when they were asked to write a story on paper. Teachers stated that the overall quality of the writings were higher than the previous writings of the students in terms of length and creativity. In short, the engagement and motivation of the students for this task was higher than usual. One of the teachers stated:

Writing is the hardest of all production skills and it takes time to develop this skill. Students find it hard to start a writing task, especially writing for fluency. However, Storybird fed students’ imagination with its great visuals and led to the production of colorful, fun, and creative stories...Students were so engaged and excited that some even printed out the screenshot of their stories and brought them to the class. They were especially so enthusiastic to narrate them in the class.

Once the students finished their stories and published them online, teachers planned in-class activities. Each student created puppets for their characters; they projected the story on

the board; the student narrated his/her story using the puppets. Then, comprehension questions, guessing the end, or changing the end tasks were performed. Both teachers' observation and interviews with the students revealed that students felt more productive because the Storybird picture library gave them plenty ideas to create stories. A few students said that they had their story ideas in mind first and then searched for relevant pictures. Only 2 students indicated that they could not find relevant pictures matching the story they had in mind, and thus, they modified their stories based on the pictures they found. Similarly, some students expressed that they wished they could add their own photos, animation, and voice.

Although not common, some problems were encountered by the students during story writing. Because students completed their stories at home, a few students lost the username and password information to logon the classroom site, thus, they created their own individual accounts, and shared their stories with their teachers. Those students had technical help from their parents.

Content analysis of the digital stories was completed by using the rubric created by the researchers (see Appendix). Numerical findings are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Analysis of the stories based on the rubric

		Average	Mode	Overall Average
Creativity and Language	Visuals	3.25	4	2.75
	Vocabulary	2.6	2	
	Sentences	2.7	4	
	Adjectives	2.45	1	
Discourse	Coherence	3.55	4	3.4
	Cohesion	3.25	4	
	Plot	3.5	4	
	Characters	3.3	4	
Grammar and Mechanics	Grammar	3.05	3	3
	Mechanics	3	3	

Each criterion was evaluated out of 4 points: 1(Poor), 2(Average), 3(Good), 4(Strong). To evaluate creativity and language use, we analyzed the use of visuals by looking at the number of different pictures used and the match between the content and the pictures. We also counted the number of words, sentences, and adjectives. Almost all students used a variety of pictures matching their stories. Three of the students used only 1 picture throughout the story, but they reported that they were not able to add new pictures. The word count average was 178 with the lowest 76 and highest 303. The number of sentences average was 23, with the lowest 9 and the highest 40. The average number of adjectives used was 11.9, with the lowest 2 and highest 26. For discourse skills, we evaluated coherence, cohesion, plot, and character development. Topics varied and there was much imagination. For example, there were stories about a toilet germ, robot, monster, talking animals, and a mad scientist. The last items in the rubric focused on grammar and mechanics. The average score out of 4 was 3.05 for grammar and 3 for the mechanics. This shows that, based on the expected English language proficiency level for the 5th graders; the students have a good command of grammar rules and mechanics including spelling, capitalization, as well as punctuation. The overall average for creativity and language was 2.75, close to “Good,” and discourse skills were better with 3.4 averages, being close to “Strong”.

Discussion

This study examined the process of implementing digital story technique in 5th grade EFL classrooms from the perspectives of young learners and their teachers. Overall, they study showed that digital story technique is very applicable in young learner classrooms, with positive student and teacher attitudes, high student motivation to write and engagement in follow-up activities involving four skills. As the teachers observed and indicated during the study, a digital story tool like Storybird can easily be incorporated into a curriculum, especially “writing for fluency”. Considering the fact that writing is a difficult skill to be acquired by second language learners, and it is what teachers often struggle with most to get students to do, using a digital story tool may offer a solution for these problems. Storybird provides interesting pictures that boost students’ creativity and give them impetus to start writing. It is also equipped with necessary tools to develop a picture map for students to plan their stories, edit and revise as much as necessary before they decide to publish them. Maybe because of these digital tools, or the novelty effect, teachers observed that students’ writings were longer and were of better quality in terms of discourse, language and use of creativity. This observation was supported by the analysis of the stories as well in this study. The 5th grade students had willingness to write and create a story using a digital story tool. By the help of the digital story tool, their use of vocabulary, their creativity in forming a story, and their motivation were quite high, which showed that use of digital story tool can be an effective way of improving writing skills and increasing motivation in writing classes.

In line with the literature (Ballast, et al. 2008; Castañeda 2014; Dogan and Robin 2008; Sylvester and Greenidge 2009), we also found that the digital story tool increased student motivation in language classrooms. Our participants’ motivation was quite high as observed by their teachers and the researchers. They were enthusiastic about sharing their stories with

their classmates, teachers and even with the researchers. We believe this was because writing was no longer an individual process; they knew they would publish their stories online to reach a richer audience, which gave them more ownership and enthusiasm to write. Such ownership and a meaningful, personal writing experience allowed them to construct and apply their writing skills knowledge and become better writers.

The teachers also came up with a follow-up activity; after students wrote their stories, they created puppets out of papers and fabric and used them to narrate their stories in the classroom. The participation was higher than previous writing class activities as reported by the teachers. As can be inferred and as indicated in the teachers' comments on the follow-up activity, such activities promote the listening and speaking skills of EFL learners as well.

Although digital story can be implemented easily in any language classroom, there are some requirements teachers need to take into account. The fundamental requirement is to integrate digital story into curriculum within the framework of student-centered, meaningful, communicative language learning, and process-writing approaches (Sadık 2008). Especially the teachers of young children should give more opportunities to the kids to draw and/or write and share their own stories (digital or text) as stories are crucial for young learners' cognitive development (Solomon 2010). Secondly, in addition to the required hardware and software necessary for digital projects, both teachers and students need to have the necessary computer literacy skills, learning strategies and self-directed learning skills that are demanded by such multimedia projects. Last, but not the least, teachers also need to have the enthusiasm to initiate such technology tasks with their students.

Pedagogical implications and further study

School administrators need to support and motivate teachers to use technology in their classrooms. However, it should be highlighted that technology itself does not improve foreign language learning. Only when implemented with sound pedagogy can technology enhance language learning. Most of the Web 2.0 tools require minimum technical skills, thus, both teachers and students can be trained in a short time to use these tools for different kinds of tasks and projects. As it was the case in our study, university faculty can collaborate with schools not only for research but also for training purposes, which will provide valuable benefits for both parties.

This study just scratched the surface of the significant use of digital story with young learners of English. Future research is needed in different settings and with different age groups of language learners for transferability of the study results. Moreover, using the digital storytelling process which includes audio narration, students' speaking and listening skills, and their motivation to speak can be examined if a software tool which allows animation and voice recording is used.

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Appendix

Rubric

Criteria	1	2	3	4 (strong)
Creativity (match between picture and content)				
Vocabulary				
Count of vocabulary				
Count of sentence				
Count of characters				
Content Details (use of adjectives)				
Coherence				
Cohesion (discourse markers)				
Plot (introduction-development-conclusion)				
Grammar				
Mechanics (spelling-punctuation)				