

INTEGRATING THE OLD AND THE NEW: DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN THE EFL LANGUAGE CLASSROOM¹

Carmen Gregori-Signes

Universitat de València Estudi General
Carmen.Gregori@uv.es

Dr. Carmen Gregori-Signes is a full-time lecturer at the Universitat de València in the Language and Linguistics section of the Departamento Filologia Anglesa i Alemana. Her research interests include discourse analysis, media studies and the use of new technologies in the EFL classroom.

With the advent of new technologies and their consequent integration within the curriculum, teachers need to find attractive activities to substitute and complement more traditional ones. Digital storytelling is one possibility since it contributes to: a) the enrichment of the ePortfolio and b) the use of Web 2.0 technology for language learning. Digital storytelling engages students in both traditional and innovative ways of telling a story, since they learn how to combine basic multimedia tools (e.g., animations) with activities as varied as doing research, writing and delivering presentations (cf. Robin, 2005; Barrett, 2006a, 2006b). In this article, I pay attention to one type of digital story: Personal-Educational Digital Storytelling. I will expand on the adequacy of educational stories as a language learning and teaching tool in EFL and indicate some ways of using them in different subjects by sketching out some activities designed for such a purpose.

INTRODUCTION

With the advent of new technologies and their consequent integration within the curriculum, it has become a real challenge to provide both teachers and students with attractive activities to substitute, or at least complement, more traditional ones (cf. Pennock-Speck *et al.* on conditions for the use of ICT in this volume). As argued in Gregori-Signes (2008a), I see digital storytelling as a good candidate to do this since it contributes to: a) the enrichment of the ePortfolio, which is a need that is imposing itself and therefore should be developed, and b) the use of Web 2.0 technology for language learning. As argued by many authors (Robin, 2005-2008; Barrett, 2004, 2006a, 2006b), digital storytelling is a good way to engage students in both traditional and innovative ways of telling a story, since students learn how to combine

some basic multimedia tools (e.g., graphics or animations) with activities as varied as doing research, writing, delivering presentations, using technology, interviewing, improving interpersonal skills, learning problem-solving techniques, and assessment expertise (cf. Robin, 2005; Barrett, 2006a, 2006b).

Meadows (2003), cited in Robin (2008: 1), defines digital stories “as short personal multimedia tales told from the heart [...] the beauty of this form of digital expression is that stories can be created by people everywhere, on any subject, and shared electronically all over the world”. The result is a 2-5 minute film that has emerged from bringing together photographs, images, music and a narration usually in the author’s voice.

The type of digital storytelling that I have been attempting to develop moves away somewhat

from the original purpose of digital storytelling (cf. Center for Digital Storytelling, since 1993; Lambert 2007). I refer to this type of digital story, following Robin (2005-2006), as Personal-Educational Digital Storytelling (EDS from here onwards), in order to make it easier to differentiate it from the many different possibilities offered by the genre itself. That is, although EDS shares all the characteristics of digital storytelling as such, the difference is that it is created with an educational purpose in mind (Robin, 2007), thus being used not only as a tool for personal expression (cf. Meadows, 2003; Center for Digital Storytelling), but as a tool for teaching and learning.

In this article, I will expand on the adequacy of digital storytelling as a language learning and teaching tool and indicate some ways of using digital storytelling in different subjects by sketching out some activities designed for such a purpose in the field of English Studies.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING WITHIN THE COMMON EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK

As argued in Gregori-Signes (2008b: 1), in Europe, the Bologna Process is promoting innovation in teaching with great emphasis on technology. Technology is forcing faculty (cf. Pennock-Speck *et al.*, forthcoming) to rethink the curriculum in most academic disciplines in terms of content and teaching, and EDS is one genre that seems to fit these demands, since it is a flexible and adaptable tool which may suit diverse purposes. The adequacy of EDS as an educational genre in line with the principles laid out by the Common European Framework (CEF) can be summarised as follows (cf. Gregori-Signes, 2008a):

i) Innovating in teaching materials.

EDS brings together new technologies with more traditional means of teaching and learning, therefore fulfilling one of the objectives proposed by the Common European Framework (CEF) for Language Learning, allowing both teachers and students to innovate in the treatment and presentation of teaching and learning material.

ii) Motivation.

For most of our students, EDS is a brand new activity, with a very attractive final product. This may help raise motivation.

iii) Creativity.

The possibilities offered by the multimedia tools that are used in digital storytelling certainly invites students to be more creative and thus may help introduce and encourage different ways of learning/teaching English. Additionally, with regard to technology, its main advantage is that the basic multimedia tools (e.g., *Photostory 3*, *Windows Movie Maker*, *Ulead videostudio 11*, *Audacity*, *Free CD ripper*, etc.) used to build educational digital stories are easy to use (graphics, animated graphics, video, animation, text, photos, synchronous/asynchronous audio transmission; Paul and Fiebich, 2005) and are available to everyone, since a lot of the software used to build a digital story is freeware.

iii) Flexibility.

As argued above, EDS can adapt to a great variety of subjects which will, accordingly, demand a different use of the genre and a different response on the part of the students.

iv) A new view on more traditional ways of learning/teaching.

In terms of both oral and written narrative, EDS may demand from the student the use a wide range of stylistic devices such as bringing into play different registers (formal, informal, jargon, slang, formulaic expressions, specific vocabulary), different techniques of narration and dramatization, and more refined or general discursive structures of genres, to mention but a few; all in a different medium with new possibilities that were not possible before the advent of digital media.

TOWARDS A CHARACTERIZATION OF EDUCATIONAL DIGITAL STORYTELLING AS A TOOL FOR TEACHING EFL

In this section, I will outline some relevant aspects that make EDS a useful tool for the teaching and learning of EFL.

Personal vs. instructional dimension

As mentioned above, EDS will have to include the student's personal point of view, apart from the instructional content. That is, in creating educational stories, we do not expect the student to merely reproduce a summary report, and turn the EDS into a mere recollection of facts previously written by other authors, but to include their own personal dimension. The final product will necessarily have to reflect, in one way or another, the student's way of perceiving, interpreting and transmitting the knowledge s/he has acquired or is still acquiring, thus bringing to light the idiosyncrasy of a student or a group of students (the activity can be designed as a group or individual activity).

This is what differentiates EDS from other similar genres that have been with us for a long time, such as objects of learning or mere PowerPoint presentations. In this sense, Porter (2004: 13) refers to digital storytelling as the art of designing information, which he defines as follows: *"Designing information means going beyond the facts. What point are you making, what perspective do you want to present that hasn't been thought of before?"*. Consequently, by creating educational digital stories, students are given the chance not only of expressing different points of view about how to teach or learn about one particular topic or language feature (e.g., how do we express orders in English, what is the degree of imposition we want to express and how do we do so?), or how difficult a phonological feature may be for students of different mother tongues (e.g., stress on function words, or how young people nowadays interpret Shakespeare's ideas); but, most importantly, they are given the chance of making themselves heard. Before the coming of the Internet and digital storytelling, a lot of ideas worth considering and new points of view ended up dead and buried after a hot classroom discussion. This can be solved by publishing the best digital stories on the web, since this only requires asking the student's permission.

Skills development

When introducing a new activity, one has to look at the rationale for doing so. In the case

of EDS and as reported by several authors (cf. Barrett, 2006a, 2006b; Robin, 2006), there are a number of skills that are brought together during the process of creating a digital story. These include research and writing skills, organization skills, technology skills, presentation skills, interpersonal skills, or problem-solving skills, which, in turn, develop digital literacy, global literacy, technology literacy, visual literacy, or information literacy.

Although they are all important, one of the novelties and challenges for our students – presumably this will become less of a challenge as the tendency in education is to mix and promote the development of different skills in all subjects – is that EDS demands from the language student a synchronization between sounds, words and images, a combination that had hardly ever – if ever – before been demanded from them. That is, they are forced to *design information* rather than just write it. In the words of Davidson and Porter (2005: 12):

*Each digital story is no more than 3-5 minutes based on a script that is no more than one (1) page or five hundred (500) words. The art of shortening a story lies in preserving the **essence** of the tale—using the fewest words and images to make your point. By holding clarity about the essence of the story, the additional narrative can be pared down.*

That is, as has often been argued, in terms of writing skills, it is sometimes (depending on the purpose of the activity) more demanding to ask them to be concise than prolific. Moreover, the fact that EDS allows you to use a lot of *decorative* artifacts does not, by any means, make the task easier. As argued by Porter (2004):

A story should be remembered for its soul, not the bells and whistles. If you don't have a good or powerful story, script, and storyboard, then there will never be enough decorating that technology can do to cover it up. On the other hand, demonstrating exemplar craftsmanship with mixing the technical elements in artful ways to unfold your story creates compelling, insightful, original and memorable pieces of communication. The

richness of a good story can be diluted when technical elements are overused, distracting, or just plain annoying.

GOOD GRAMMAR AND LANGUAGE USAGE

In describing what elements are important for EDS, Robin (2006) adapted the seven-element list provided by the Center for Storytelling and expanded it to ten elements, i.e., the overall purpose of the story, the narrator's point of view, a dramatic question (or questions), a choice of content, the clarity of voice, the pacing of the narrative, a meaningful soundtrack, quality of the images, economy of the story detail and good grammar and language usage.

The last one is particularly relevant in the field of EFL, since one of the main purposes in making students create an EDS is to provide them with the means to improve their command of English, and to do so, if possible, with a variety of activities that help them improve other skills apart from merely linguistic ones. Moreover, and due to the nature of the activity, EDS allows practice in written and spoken language (the students will have to write a script, previous to narrating the story), with one additional complication: when writing the script, they will have to bear in mind that they are writing a text to be read out loud. This can be taken as a good opportunity to demand from students a thorough review of spoken vs. written discourse features that may be useful to include in storytelling or, for the same purposes, of academic/instructional spoken vs. written discourse.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION AMONG PEERS

One of the purposes of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (2001) is to facilitate co-operation and communication between cultures. EDS, due to its easy production and the possibility of immediate web publishing, implies a fast exchange of information and access to the final products, thus facilitating in a way not previously possible a user-friendly tool that may serve the purpose of exchanging students' ideas and points of view

on the same topic; with no borders regarding, distance, time, or accessibility. On the other hand, EDS is a tool that can be used to help students overcome the shock of getting to know other cultures. For example, in the project I initiated with the UVEG (Gregori-Signes, 2006), one of the sections is Erasmus. In this section, I hope to upload more digital stories that will share experiences of Erasmus international exchange students. The idea is to include digital stories from both incoming and outgoing students. These will serve as a reference to get to know more about the people they may find in the University of Valencia and in Spain, in general, and also to talk about how some of them felt when going abroad. Figure 1 shows the layout of the webpage at the moment.



Fig. 1. UVEG. Digital Storytelling / Relato Digital. Valencia 2006

As can be seen in Figure 1 above, the web page provides access to the different categories: personal narratives, educational stories, Erasmus, digital stories in Spanish. The last one

has been included as a prompt for visitors to start creating examples of digital stories in Spanish, especially in the field of education and language teaching, since the genre is hardly being exploited yet in Spain. Each category provides, in turn, access to the individual stories, which can be viewed on any computer using *Windows Media Player*, *Real Player*, or *Media Player Classic*, among others. The stories have been uploaded to the University server, which converts them to *flv* format previous to publication on the Internet.

Content-based vs. English-usage subjects

In the Spanish university system, English Studies is organized so that there is a division between subjects devoted to the teaching of more general aspects of English usage (English language I, II, III) and subjects that pay attention to concepts as such (Phonology, Stylistics, History of the English Language, Pragmatics, Discourse Analysis, and literature-based subjects).

As is the case with other activities, different types of digital stories may suit different subjects. In principle, the types of digital stories could be said to correspond with any of the traditional genres that have been long in use in the language classroom (personal stories, historical events, narratives, persuasive discourse, etc. – cf. Robin, 2006 for a detailed description of the different types of digital stories). On the other hand, however, the (traditional) genre itself will have to adapt to the characteristics of the digital medium (cf. Rodríguez Ruiz, 2007), which will support the final version of the narrative, a fact that may cause an alteration of some of the generic conventions. Let me illustrate this with an example. A student is faced with the task of making a digital story on a critical analysis of the content of a poem. What tools does digital storytelling offer? The student will find that, in addition to words, she can express her ideas with images; that those images, can, in turn, be accompanied with her choice of music – music that is helping to transmit the impact that the poem had on her –; and on top of that she will also have to include her own voice and manipulate it according to what she wants to express (anger, happiness, disagreement). All these new elements certainly enhance or at least

change quite radically the possibilities that a written report has offered up to now.

Notwithstanding, there are also limitations (but those may also be changed if both teacher and student agree to do so), such as trying to keep the story within the limits of 500 words, the duration in time of the digital critical essay (4-5 minutes), the impossibility of including copyright material, etc. These limitations may not exist in the written version that the students have been providing up to now.

EXAMPLES OF EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

I will now outline some of the projects that are being (or will be) put into practice in different subjects in the Universitat de València (cf. Gregori-Signes, 2008a for more examples). The projects could be gathered under the following headings:

Peer to Peer Database

The purpose of this macro-project is to develop a series of personal-educational stories in different subjects, which will help students to understand some of the more complex or difficult aspects related to the English language. Examples may include: 1. Phonology: difficulties encountered when learning about English pronunciation (segmental and suprasegmental features); 2. Second Language Acquisition: e.g., how do I face a first encounter with secondary school students? 3. Discourse analysis: how can I make my friend understand the use of linking, or discourse markers in spoken discourse?

Personal Development

In subjects such as English Language, the student will be asked to do self-presentations, self-development, opinions about one particular topic, guides for job interviews, etc.

Intercultural values

Digital stories may help incoming students integrate into the Valencian and Spanish way of life in general, both at academic and socio-cultural levels. This type of stories could be developed as part of subjects such as History and Culture of English-speaking countries, Pragmatics, and Sociolinguistics.

Discourse organization and structure

Digital stories may also help in grasping genre and subgenre conventions (e.g., poetry, theatre, novel, persuasive discourse, advertisements, academic papers, etc.). They will try to synthesize and extrapolate the characteristics of different genres so that they can be used as a starting point of reference for a more in-depth study (reception and interpretation) of literary works or other types of discourse (e.g., advertising, sitcoms, newspaper articles). Once produced, they will also be useful for assisting

the students in the production of mini-examples of several genres. This is the case with Stylistics, where students are producing digital versions of detective stories (cf. Alcantud Díaz, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was to illustrate some of the advantages of introducing educational digital stories within the EFL classroom, as a multi-purpose tool that can help students to enjoy the learning process.

Notes

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