
Digital Storytelling to Promote EFL Students' Motivation and Efficiency in Content-Based Classroom

Jing Xie

College of Foreign Languages, China Three Gorges University, Yichang, China

Email address:

xiejing_ctgu@163.com

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Abstract: Digital story, featured with short and narrative personal video using images, voice, and sound effects to convey meaning, has become a powerful form for creative and engaging student projects. To exemplify whether it functions in Chinese EFL content-based classroom, this article reports on a one-year teaching project in which students were introduced to this new method and created digital stories in small groups in a content-based course in a Chinese university. The project aims to explore how digital storytelling can influence students' motivation and efficiency in EFL learning and to what extent. Various forms of learning products were collected, including digital story videos, slides of PowerPoint, and written reports related to their process of making digital stories. Results showed that digital storytelling opened a new door for EFL learners and can be an effective way to promote students' motivation and efficiency in EFL content-based instruction. Implications applicable to teachers of various contexts were concluded.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling, Motivation, Efficiency, EFL Learners, Content-Based Instruction

1. Introduction

"Digital storytelling changed my stereotyped impression on the way of teaching and learning completely...I had always been a reluctant student of English but this time I participated a lot and tried my best to create a better digital story with my partners ... nobody wanted to lag behind during the final presentation... I felt so proud of our group when we showed the video and shared our experiences of making such an English digital story in front of the audience...what a sense of achievement!" (One of the students said in his reflective journal, Spring 2015, translated from Chinese by the author)¹

Willingness is essential and has a great influence on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. As Gardner and Lambert (1972) divided motivation into two very general orientations: integrative and instrumental. The

majority of students in the author's class take the latter as the main motivation in their language learning since their main purposes of learning English is either to get a job or pass an examination (Rifai, 2010; Daskalovska, Gudeva & Ivanovska, 2012). The current situation in most Chinese universities is considering English as the first important foreign language and usually offered as a compulsory course for about two years or used as the major medium of instruction in classrooms of different majors. Besides, the demand of student's mastery of this world language in the society becomes more challenging than any time before. In this case, it is important for educators and teachers to adapt their teaching methods "to satisfy changing employer expectations of a college graduate" (Suwardy et al cited in Seow, Pan and Tay, 2013). This article tries to report on a one-year (two successive semesters) teaching project in which students learned for the first time to create digital stories in groups in a content-based course instructed in English: *Talking about Chinese Culture*. This content-based instruction (CBI) class require students to be able to understand and express their ideas and thoughts on concepts and terms related to Chinese culture. Digital storytelling is introduced to students as one of the forms of their learning

1 The reflective journals focused on three aspects of questions: Students' attitudes and opinions about digital storytelling, what they gained most from this new way of learning, and their suggestions. Their answers could be either in English or in Chinese for collecting more valid information. The Chinese versions were translated into English later by the author.

products for this course. In this article, the author discusses how the use of digital stories as final student projects creates inclusive classroom communities of practice and promotion of students' learning motivation. Student's journal reflection at the beginning of the article convinced us of the likelihood of using digital storytelling to successfully motivate the students in their EFL learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Storytelling in Education

Storytelling itself is an effective means of imparting knowledge, beliefs and traditions. In its multimedia form, a digital form of storytelling emerged about a decade ago from the Center of Digital Storytelling (Lambert, 2002), has been made popular since the late 1980s (Suwady et al 2013: 110). While digital storytelling has existed for several decades, its use in education has only been explored recently (Sylvester and Greenidge, 2009; Holtzblatt and Tschakert, 2011). Researchers in the field of education generally use it to refer to a distinct nonlinear narrative genre that uses new media technology to produce short, personal narratives using high-quality sound and images (Vinogradova & Linville, 2011). As it is concluded in the studies, digital stories—a high quality technology for integrating visual images, voice, music and sound effects with the personal narrative texts,—“both expand and accelerate student comprehension by booting the students' interest in discovering new ideas” (Burmark 2004). This technique can “effectively assist learning process in EFL classroom, helping EFL learners to ‘develop multimodal communicative competence by promoting a learner-centred environment’ and “... brings about new ways of thinking about and organizing materials and as a result increase students' motivation”, it also “engage reluctant students and makes every learner do his/her best to present the story perfectly for an audience.” (Mehri Razmi et al. 2014). As it is shown in Vinogradova's study (2011: 176), digital story projects allow students to deeply explore the cultural content of our content-based cultural instruction while using language in focused and purposeful ways, with the specific goal of developing fluency in the written and oral language. The researcher claimed in her study that digital stories “can be a powerful form for creative and engaging student projects” (Vinogradova 2011: 174). The story projects reflect CBI goals of helping students link meaningful content with language instruction so that they improve their disciplinary knowledge and academic language and literacy skills, preparing them to manage the language and sociocultural demands of their future academic endeavors (Grabe & Stoller, 1997)

2.2. Digital Storytelling in Chinese Classrooms

Although digital storytelling has been commonly used and researched by teachers and scholars in various classrooms in foreign countries (Burmark 2004; Mehri Razmi et al. 2014;

Vinogradova 2011; Alameen 2011;), it is still relatively new to teachers and students in China and not commonly used as a way of teaching and learning in Chinese classrooms. But as digital storytelling requires only pictures, audios and background music and a computer or laptop, it is relatively easier and interesting for students of the new technology age in China to get to engaged in this new form of learning. They can integrate what they learnt about the course (the content and the language skills) into practical learning product by making their own stories, thus it might as well be an effective way to inspire student's interest and motivation in foreign language learning. Before offering this course to students, the author received specific training on digital storytelling, including its educational usage, the technology skills, and the process of creating a digital story in an American university. Observing the digital stories created by students in America and the positive research results shown in recent articles worldwide, the author intends to explore whether digital storytelling will have the same positive effect on promoting students' learning motivation in her Chinese content-based classroom.

2.3. Purpose of the Study

The author use digital storytelling in an intermediate-level course, *Talking about Chinese Culture in English*, in which students learn about main concepts of Chinese culture as well as some contents related to the comparison between Western and eastern culture. These classes have about 30 undergraduate students who have selected this course with the intention of improving their abilities of understanding their own culture in a foreign language and talking with people from other cultures about Chinese culture in a more free and fluent way. The author tries to apply student-centred digital storytelling method to this content-based classroom for a successive two semesters. The present study intends to explore whether digital storytelling can promote Chinese EFL student's learning motivation and efficiency in language learning process both in and after class to support the previous researches' findings (Vinogradova & Linville 2011; Alameen 2011; Suwady, Pan & Seow 2013). The author aimed at evaluating the effect of digital storytelling on students' motivation and efficiency in learning through students' creating and presenting of their digital stories related to the content of the course in small groups, expressing ideas through presentation, and constructing meaningful written reports about their digital stories in English. Implications for teaching practice is then explained.

3. Methods

3.1. Settings

In the university where the author works, students were provided with more accesses to advanced selective content-based courses either before or after they finished their

two years' compulsory College-level English courses, which demanded students' higher listening and speaking proficiency in English in order to understand the contents that the teacher aimed to instruct. *Talking about Chinese culture* was one of the courses offered by the author in English. Digital storytelling was introduced to this class to investigate its functions on students' motivation and engagement in learning. The one-year teaching practice started from 2014 Fall to 2015 Spring (September 2014 to June 2015).

3.2. Participants

54 students (about 30 each semester, 35 female and 19 male students, aged from 17 to 20) from China Three Gorges University participated in groups of four to create their own digital stories and then evaluations concerning their motivation, learning efficiency and self-evaluated improvement were made through questionnaire and written journals. The students were from different colleges of the author's university and their English levels varied greatly and their motivation and purposes of choosing this course differ from each other. This added difficulties to the teacher's practical teaching, especially for how to engage students of various English levels into classroom activities and satisfying their personal needs while making sure they could enjoy the learning process but not feel too demanding or less challenging.

3.3. Procedures

Step 1: Introducing digital storytelling to students

At the beginning of the Fall semester, the author introduced digital storytelling to students and discuss with them by showing its definition and educational usage in various levels of classrooms. Then online digital stories as well as the digital stories made by the teacher herself were shown to students to help them understand how digital story can be applied to integrate the contents with language skills in content-based language class. Then students were divided into groups of four according to their own selection of partners. After the first class, students were asked to search for information about digital storytelling and then integrate their information within groups before sharing with classmates and submitting them to the teacher. Then the teacher integrated students' research reports and encourage them to share with the whole class through email and QQ Group (functioning like Blackboard in the US universities), so that all the information can be shared and more knowledge about digital storytelling can be obtained by students from different groups.

Step 2: Investigating students' personal needs for selecting the course

In order to investigate the students' personal learning needs and objective of selecting this course, as well as their knowledge and attitudes towards the new form of teaching and learning---digital storytelling, a questionnaire was designed including students' personal needs and motivation of learning, the evaluation methods they expected, the the importance of the four language skills they think of, and their knowledge and attitudes about digital storytelling. The survey was conducted in Chinese in order to collect more valid data. 17 items were included regarding to the above aspects, among them 9 were multiple choices questions related to the reasons, motivations, personal learning needs, 3 were questions requiring written answers regarding to students' short-term and long-term goals of learning, another 4 were multiple choice questions related to digital story with choices marked from 1 to 5 (according to Likert scale). Quantitative analysis would be made to find out students' knowledge and attitudes about this new way of learning. Another item is about the importance of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Students were asked to rank them in order of importance according to their personal learning needs and objective for this course.

Step 3: Choosing a topic and creating digital stories

Students were allowed to choose topics that most interest them about the course contents, and cooperate with other members of the group in and out of class. They were encouraged to share ideas and thoughts on the topic with their group members and the teacher. Such group work were encouraged and guided by their teacher throughout the whole academic year. Then the teacher introduced a couple of useful tools/software for creating digital stories and provided guidance when necessary. But it was mainly the student themselves finding solutions to the problems they faced within their own group to facilitate peer-assisted learning and increase a sense of achievement.

Step 4: Sharing videos and reflections in final Presentation

During the final presentation, each group was given a chance to show their digital story to the audience, including students from other groups, some foreign teachers and other teachers from the author's department. After the show, a reflective presentation (each group was provided with a list of questions to reflect on their process of creating digital story to enhance critical thinking and deep learning) would be given by group members one by one. Peer evaluation and feedback from teachers were collected according to the evaluation rubric designed by the teacher (See Table 1).

Table 1. Rubric for Final Presentation.

Rubric for Presentation on Chinese Culture Fall 2014 Group Number: _____ Topic: _____

Criteria	1	2	3	4	5
Clear Topic Statement					
Digital Story: interesting and closely related to the topic					
Digital Story: Attractive Visuals and effective					
Speaking: Narrative-content					
Speaking: Narrative organization					
Speaking: clear pronunciation, fluent and natural					
Presenter is clear and to the point					
Presenter maintains eye contact with audience, and is confident					
PowerPoint Slides are clear and not crowded (if there is any)					

**The 5-point Scale:* 1=Does not Meet the Standard... 3=Meets the Standard... 5=Excels at the Standard

General Comments on the Performance of the Group: _____

General Grade: _____ out of 60

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were drawn from a pre-survey, reflective journal and semi-structured interview in two successive semesters. The survey was aimed to gather information about students' personal needs and goals about the course, and their knowledge and attitudes about/toward digital storytelling. The data were analyzed through both quantitative (frequency analysis) and qualitative approach. The reflective journal was conducted either in Chinese or in English according to the students' preferences in order to gather most valid information about their experience, perceptions and suggestions of this new way of learning.

Students' Products of learning

The students were encouraged to finish the following tasks under the guidance of the teacher in each semester.

- Printed reports of information on digital storytelling (finish individually or in groups, submit to the teacher in the first month, to help students to have enough understanding about this new teaching method)
- Digital story videos (3-5 minutes long, including images, recorded audio, recorded interview, written narration of the story, background music etc.; finish in groups)
- Final presentation (video playing in groups, individual presentation, PPT slides & written reports)
- Reflective journal (either in English or in Chinese, finish individually after final presentation)
- Students' digital stories were evaluated in the final presentation based on the above rubric.

4. Results and Discussion

Results of this study provides evidence about how digital storytelling meets students' personal needs and objectives in learning, and promotes students' motivation as well as efficiency in content-based classroom, which is in consistent with the existed research results in other countries.

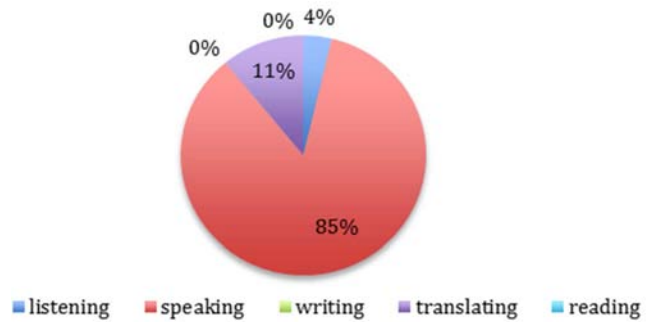


Figure 1. The most important language skill student want to improve in this content-based course.

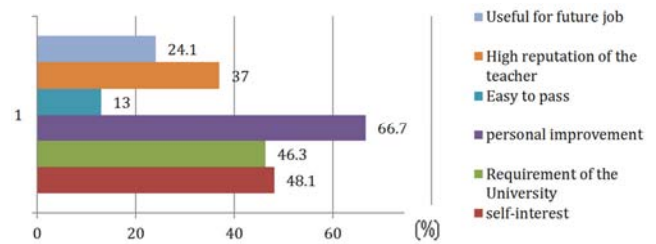


Figure 2. Students' personal reasons for selecting this content-based course.

Figure 1 shows that the majority of the students regard speaking as the most important skills they want to improve through this course. The next is translating because there is translation test on Chinese Culture in CET-4 (College English Test Band 4).

As it is shown in Figure 2, though the number of students who choose the course out of interest or for personal improvement is large, still an accumulated (83.4%) of them choose the selective course either for passing it easily to get credits, using it for future job or just fulfill the requirement of the university. That means their motivation is both instrumental and integrative. Though the latter counts relatively more, they are not certain about how to achieve the goals and sometimes feel frustrated when they want to talk in

English. We can see that students' reasons for selecting this course differ to some extent, but it is indicated that they attach more importance to their own personal improvement and interest in the language they are learning. Students' personal needs are what the teacher should understand and always keep

in mind in the process of classroom instruction.

When making clear about students' needs and goals, it is also necessary for the teacher to know what the students' response might be when being introduced the new way of digital storytelling.

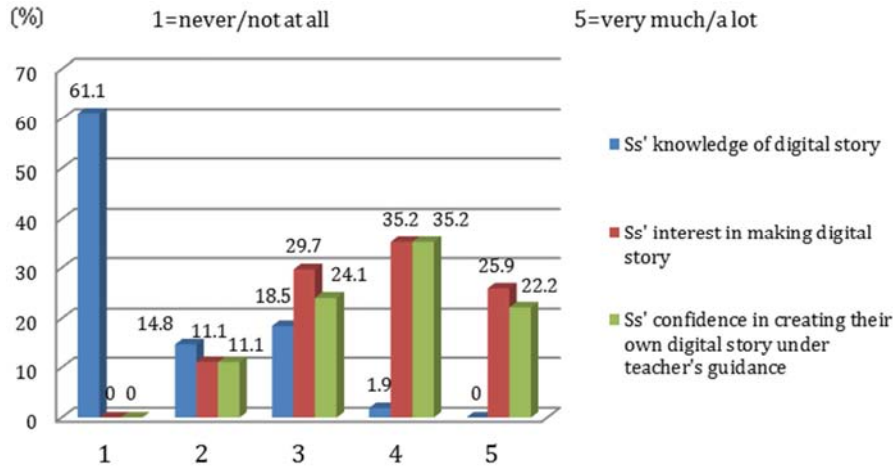


Figure 3. Students' knowledge, interest and confident about (making) digital story.

Figure 3 shows that most students had no knowledge about digital storytelling, and it is also the first time they heard about using digital storytelling in classroom instruction. But their views are quite favorable about this new way of learning, and have much confidence to create their own digital story if the teacher helps to guide them to the right direction.

The following figure (Table 2) shows the topics students selected for their digital stories, which covered the most representative parts of Chinese culture. Different from only sitting in classroom to listen and obtain knowledge that the teacher teaches, they discuss in group about their perceptions on the topic, thinking about new way of showing this part of Chinese culture through their stories. They cooperate and encourage each other as team member, agree or disagree with each other until they reached an agreement. In this process of discussing and creating a new story, critical thinking and deep learning enabled. Students showed great interest in such activities and even stretched out to collect necessary images, attitudes or opinions from friends or families in other universities and even other countries. It was obviously shown that the students create better digital stories in the second semester since they are more familiar with the method and software.

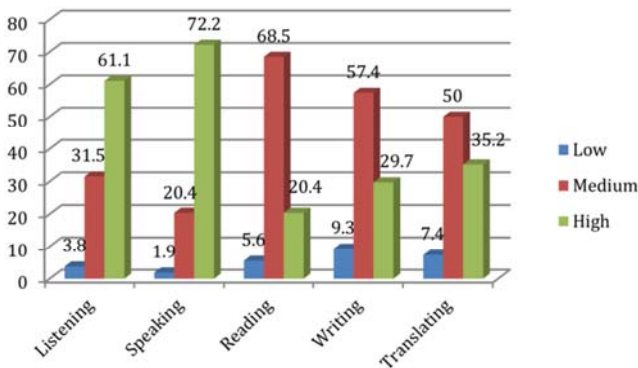


Figure 4. Students' goals on improvement of levels of their English language skills.

It is shown in Figure 4 that students have high expectations on the improvement of their listening and speaking skills in this course, and for other skills, mostly medium. It means students are clear about their weaknesses as non-English majors and are determined to improve it. Such urgent need of students provide a good opportunity for the teacher to practice digital storytelling in class since it will enable students to speak and participate more frequently and deeply than they do in the traditional way of teaching. This has been indicated in Sadik summary of the impact of digital storytelling as a convergence of four student-centred learning strategies: student engagement; reflection for deep learning; project-based learning; and the effective integration of technology into instruction (2008).

Table 2. Students topics of digital stories in two semesters.

Fall 2014	Spring 2015
Culture of Our Hometown	Chinese Tea Culture
The Spring Festival	Culture of Our Hometown
Chinese Tourism Culture	Traditional Chinese Medicine
Chinese Food: Jiaozi	Chinese Cheongsam
Chinese Architecture	Confucius
The History of Chinese Animation	Chinese Festivals: Dragon Boat Festival

In the reflective journal, students reflected positively on the following three questions about this new way of teaching and learning:

- How do you think of using digital storytelling in content-based class?
- What do you benefit most from this new way of learning?
- What are your suggestions for this course?

Students' response and comments on the first question, the percentage represented how many times the students

mentioned such attitudes/comments in their response:

I like this completely new way of learning and benefit a lot from the process of creating our own digital story. (92%)

I'm technology-attached and creating digital story gives me opportunity to use what I'm specialized into doing something I want to learn. It's really impressive and encouraging. (86%)

I think digital storytelling is an original and effective way to express a specific topic in content-based class. (90%)

Making digital story is so interesting and enjoyable--- we share our ideas, exchange views, design our own story together with the materials we liked. I never feel I'm alone. (85%)

My greatest gratitude goes to my teacher for bringing such a wonderful way of learning into our classroom teaching. (86%)

Digital storytelling enables me to think deeply more than before about the topics in Chinese culture. (80%)

The above reflections could represent most of the students' perceptions and attitudes towards digital storytelling in this class. They liked the new way of learning because they felt free to think and do what they were interested and their efforts were highly acknowledged by the teacher and group members.

Besides, students also benefited from digital storytelling in different aspects, which was verified through their work as well as their reflective journal at the end of the semester.

It seems too hard at the very beginning...never made any video in my life!... I'm not sure whether I can make it or not but will try anyway since it sounds interesting...Now I become familiar with the way to create digital stories...can't wait to share the story with my families and friends! (Female student, aged 20)

...We work as groups of four always and that makes me feel more confident. It helped me understand the value of team work and enhanced our friendship (Female student, aged 19)

...I never thought I could have enjoyed a selective course so much! The whole learning process is like building something completely new: we need to follow the instructions but use more of our own ideas and creation to make a meaningful story so that we can share it with our foreign audience in the final presentation. (Male student, aged 19)

This new way of teaching and learning bring each member's advantage into full play, which makes the task much easier but more interesting to finish since we share a lot of time talking and discussing together. (Female student, aged 21)

I was motivated to learn in an active way instead of just listening to the teacher talking, because everybody is trying to make a interesting story. (Male student, aged 20)

It's challenging to learn the new technology and create a video by myself, but you can't imagine how happy and excited I am when I see the final version of our story! (Female student, aged 20)

My language skills are greatly improved, especially speaking, writing and technology skills...(Male student,

aged 19)

These benefits students obtained indicated that they were quite positive about using digital storytelling in classroom teaching. As it was found in Vinogradova's et al. (2011: 193) experience, students come to realize and appreciate the content-based language learning as they develop and demonstrate their meaningful content knowledge through the stories. Though the task of creating their own stories with the content they learned is not easy, they were able to engage themselves in different stages of the task in groups with the teacher's guidance. Digital story was rediscovered as an effective method in this one-year teaching practice to engage students' visual and auditory senses in a way that the written text alone cannot. As it is shown in the final presentation, the students not only developed their academic skills during this process regarding their language skills, abilities of integrating various materials, critical thinking, but also created some products of learning in English which they can share with foreigners to help them get real knowledge and interest about it. Students can be greatly motivated to learn the value of a language simply by having opportunities to see the language in use and to experience the benefits of learning a foreign language through practice.

However, because of the limit of time and energy of the teacher, the first attempt of this new method was not without problems. In their journal, students also gave suggestions about how to use digital storytelling more effectively in future content-based course, which were valuable resources for the teacher to make necessary modifications in the second semester.

...it is the first time we try to make our own video...If we are better trained about how to use those tools and software, we would be able to create better digital stories... (Group leader 1, female, aged 20)

Hope the teacher can provide us more opportunities to participate in more interactive classroom activities between groups as well as teacher-students...(Group leader 2, male, aged 19)

One story seems not enough for us to practice...it would be better if the teacher allow us to practice more...I'm sure we could progress a lot if we could get a chance to make another story...(Group leader 3, female, aged 20)

etc. ...

The above advices show the necessity of calling for prompt and professional technological support from not only the teacher, but also the relevant multimedia center or workshops of the university, as it has been practicing in American universities, to make the video creation process more accessible for students.

One unexpected result of the teaching practice was expressed by some of the author's colleague. As they know what was being practiced in the classroom through daily communication, they came to the author's classroom to observe students' final presentation, and was surprised to find out how students was motivated to create those products of learning and how strong their sense of achievement was when doing the final presentation. After watching the students'

digital stories, several teachers showed interest in applying this method in their teaching to see how it works among their students. But they also expressed their worries about how to use digital storytelling effectively in their large-scale classroom and the needs of students' are being trained about how to use the necessary software to make videos.

5. Implications and Challenges

The study shows that digital storytelling can positively influence Chinese students' motivation and efficiency in an EFL, content-based classroom. Several implications can be drawn for language teachers and students in different fields.

Digital storytelling not only increased students' interest and motivation, but help produced various student learning products which brings the strong sense of achievement, this, in turn, greatly stimulated Students' passion and motivation and improved their efficiency in content-based learning.

Digital storytelling enables students to reflect on what they are learning critically and creatively, thus enhance deep learning instead of passive/rote learning, which is the most valuable result of integrating digital storytelling into large-scale Chinese EFL classroom where a number of reluctant students were usually feel neglected. Project-based group learning is an efficient way to make the large-scale classroom into small groups so that students can work within their own groups, thus no students would be neglected. And the advantage of grouping students in a large-scaled class is that students may have stronger sense of competition and achievement during the process since they will show what they did in the final presentation. Digital storytelling also enable EFL teachers to teach from a completely new and inspiring perspective, and student-centered classroom become easily accessible.

However, to make digital storytelling a common practice in more type of classrooms, teachers and educators still face some of the following challenges.

- Attitudes and willingness to adopt the new method of teaching and learning
- Requirement of technological skills for both teacher and students
- Team-spirit VS individuality
- Fair evaluation for teamwork
- Ways to ensure all the groups members in a large-scale class to work efficiently

Though, taking those challenges into consideration needs much effort. The results of the study testified a promising prospect of digital storytelling not only in EFL content-based instruction, but also various contexts of classrooms.

6. Conclusion

This article described a one-year teaching practice about how digital storytelling was integrated into content-based classroom to promote EFL students' motivation and learning efficiency. Even though the study was limited in scope and time, the fact that the changes could be observed obviously in students' interest and engagement in class activities indicate that students

learned more efficiently about the content through making digital stories about it. Creating digital stories not only develop students' academic skills and knowledge about the contents instructed in class, but also produce personal cultural stories that they can share with friends from other countries. They are also free to share the video with their families or online, which makes the digital storytelling project more meaningful and promising to motivate and engage students in effective language learning. The other benefit of using digital storytelling is that it makes the learning process more enjoyable by allowing students freedom to share their personal experiences and use their talents for technology skills with their peers. Therefore, the study might measure some weights but further studies needs to be conducted on large-scales and in various classroom contexts to make the study more valid. Further research may also examine the possibility of using digital storytelling in other types of courses or may compare the efficiency of digital storytelling with other teaching and learning method.

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