Facilitating Second Language Acquisition through Digital Storytelling

F.X. Risang Baskara

risangbaskara@gmail.com

English Letters Department, Universitas Sanata Dharma

Abstract

This study was conducted to investigate the experiences of students who used digital storytelling to facilitate second language acquisition with English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in university. Thirty students enrolled in an EFL English Speaking class in university level participated in this study. Presentation scores, notes on preparation and presentation, and teachers' reports showed that the EFL students made improvement in their acquisition of the English language after approximately four weeks of instruction and reports were given regarding the role of digital storytelling in that instruction. It was concluded that digital storytelling can enhance students' motivation and confidence in using the English language to make a classroom presentation and can assist with language acquisition in EFL students.

Keywords: *English, presentation, digital storytelling, second language acquisition*

Introduction

Storytelling is one of the resourceful functions of digital media. Moreover, using digital media to tell a story is not only a method to put together thoughts and ideas, but also to share a story with family, friends, and potentially the world. When we apply new technologies and believe its role in the classroom settings, a new form of storytelling has emerged. As such, students are provided with new technological tools. Digital storytelling is of vital significance for teaching concepts and information. According to Robin digital storytelling is a technology application that is well-positioned to take advantage of user-contributed content and to help teachers overcome some of the obstacles to productively using technology in their classrooms (2006: 709). As Meadows (2003) mentions, "Digital Storytelling makes use of low-cost digital cameras, non-linear editing software and notebook computers to create short, multimedia stories" (189). He also states that digital stories are not quite like any previous form of broadcast material (189).

Digital stories provide opportunities for student's control of learning process, boosting their learning confidence and learning motivation. According to Robin (2008), at its core, digital storytelling allows computer users to become creative storytellers through the traditional processes of selecting a topic, conducting some research, writing a script, and developing an interesting story (220). There are many advantages in using digital storytelling in the classroom such as developing communication skills, practicing to ask and answer questions, expressing opinions, and improving the language and computer skills. Considering this fact, technological atmosphere in the classroom should be created for students in order to make them more technologically literate designers, learners, and thinkers.

Being allowed to have and manipulate language data in multiple media may provide learners with the interaction that they need to acquire a second language. Recent years have shown an increase in the interest of using computers for language teaching and learning. With the introduction

of multimedia computing and the Internet, the role of computers in language instruction has become an important issue confronting a large number of instructors around the world (Warschauer & Healey, 1998). After reviewing the literature, there are many indications that computer technology may provide many benefits for the acquisition and application of English language skills. Computer interactions also enhance communication skills and strengthen language through computer support group interactions (Bourdon, 1999). Therefore, a search for a specific digital storytelling approach and the experiences that EFL learners had using the technology to improve their language acquisition in order to see how the computer-based learning guide might meet the needs of those learners.

Significance of the study

This study may help EFL learners in university level by providing them a new perspective on the integration of technology into the language learning that may result in a shift in technology use. By attempting to provide a clear picture of what and how to integrate digital storytelling, one can learn about how to facilitate meaningful use of technology into second language acquisition and at the same time, motivate students. In addition, the findings of the study can be of use to syllabus designers and EFL instructors. In addition, teacher and syllabus instructors can benefit from the findings of the study and develop a better understanding of the role of digital storytelling instruction. Although Indonesian educational system has made great attempt in its general educational area, growth in technological supports that facilitate educational advances, have been slower. The use of computer software and hardware has not been fully explored. In addition, no previous study has examined the potential of digital storytelling in facilitating second language acquisition.

Research Questions

Second language acquisition is a complex topic. Many unpredictable variables influence second language acquisition and consequently complicate research on the topic. The research conducted was exploratory and grounded in qualitative methods, yet it was identified three questions that guided the observations, interviews, field notes, and findings. Based on the purposes of the study, the following research questions drive the study,

1. Do students perceive digital storytelling as a useful tool for learning English?
2. What experiences did the students have using digital storytelling?
3. What can interviews and observations discover about the effect of digital storytelling for EFL students in university?

Setting

The setting for this research was Sanata Dharma University, which is located in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. In English Department, Faculty of Letters, Sanata Dharma University, the English language courses designed for undergraduate students emphasize on developing their oral communication skills. Students find such courses a challenging task, especially when it comes to speaking in class and assessed by the lecturer. The performance of many students tend to be on the average, with very few of them are slightly above average grades. One of the English language courses that students of English Letters Department need to enroll is Speaking IV. This course is aimed at developing the strategies and skills necessary for effective oral presentations.

In this course, the students seem to have boredom and lack of motivation and participation during the Speaking course. Students may be influenced by lack confidence in participating in class presentations because students' classroom discussion consists primarily of recent issues and in-depth analysis. Lengthy and elaborate presentations are avoided due to poor vocabulary and fear of making mistakes. Digital storytelling presentation format is introduced to help student to improve their presentations skills and develop their second language proficiency. At the core of this study was also the creation of a motivating learning environment that would allow students to

develop both their speaking and organizational skills and encourage autonomous learning, thus facilitating the students' second language acquisition process in the classroom.

Participants

There were thirty students enrolled in the EFL class at the time of this research project. They were in the fourth semester in their study in the Department of English Letters, Sanata Dharma University. The EFL course was the Speaking IV, and students received their English credit by successful completion of this course. The class was heterogeneously mixed and the English language proficiencies were varied. All of the students were in the tenth grade and between the ages of 19-21.

Analysis and Findings

The project took place in the beginning until the end of the semester. The students used *Pecha Kucha*, one of the digital storytelling formats, to help their presentation in the classroom. *Pecha Kucha* is a simple presentation format where 20 images are shown, each for 20 seconds. The images advance automatically and the presenter will talk along to the images. The presentation format was created by Astrid Klein and Mark Dytham of Klein Dytham architecture in Tokyo Japan, in February 2003. It was first designed as an event for young designers to meet, network, and display their work in public (*Pecha Kucha*, 2013). The presentation format is very concise and effective. It was designed so that it can easily gather the audiences' attention. Presentations are limited to 20 slides, each shown for only 20 seconds (set up to automatically advance), for a total time of 6 minutes and 40 seconds. The presentation format requires the presenters to use less words and more relevant pictures and graphics appropriate to the topic (Artyushina *et al.*, 2011).

By using *Pecha Kucha*, the timing that the students have for each presentation was as follows: 6 minutes and 40 seconds for the presentation itself, followed by a question

and answer session discussing several issues raised by the speaker (which lasted roughly five minutes). Given this timing, 10 presentations were allocated to each lesson; the project was thus completed in 4 lessons, or slightly around four weeks. The presentation was assessed according to the marking grid used in university levels to evaluate oral exams. The speakers were also required to hand in written reports of their preparation and presentations to allow a fair assessment of the amount of effort they had put into this project.

After reviewing the informal interview notes, I found that ten of the thirty students (33%) had little prior experience working with computer software before using the *Pecha Kucha* format. Fifteen of the thirty students actually had access to a computer at home, but they used the computer primarily for Internet surfing or to play games. They all reported they did not seem to have a fear of computers. They all seemed to have a desire to work more with computers.

The students made comments before they used the *Pecha Kucha* program that reflected their confidence that utilizing digital storytelling could improve their language learning. One student replied that he had not used the computer much in his classes, but he had always heard that technology helps students learn; therefore, he was excited about the opportunity to be able to simply use a computer. Another said that in his previous high school, the use of technology was more established than teacher-led instruction, so he felt that the lack of technology use that he had experienced in the university seemed "backwards" to him. Students realized the importance and value of the use of technology in the learning process in general, and disappointment that technology was not used more often in more or all of their classes was apparent.

When the students were observed during their interaction with *Pecha Kucha*, there were much other information. Students needed to know very little about computers to use the *Pecha Kucha* format. Students who used the format for the first time completed a *Pecha Kucha* guideline that

familiarized the students with its basic format.

All of the students began the preparation at the component of the *Pecha Kucha* format. Ten of the thirty students showed at least a 20% increase in their first presentation scores. Overall, and in only four weeks, the students made an increase of 10.50 points in their second presentation scores.

In the follow-up class discussions after each presentation, the students volunteered to answer questions from the audiences. The questions to which they responded only required brief responses, but their voluntary class contributions reflected the confidence that they had gained in their ability to function at least conversationally using the language. When interviewed after their interaction with *Pecha Kucha*, only five students retained his original preference of conventional one-to-one teacher instruction in the classroom. Other students felt that more time using *Pecha Kucha* format might have helped them to increase their presentation scores.

By the third week using the program, slowly it was possible to reduce the amount of group time using *Pecha Kucha*, and the amount of individual consultation was increased. When the observation records of the students using *Pecha Kucha* were analyzed, there were ten of the thirty students, who almost always asked either their peers or teacher for assistance, had reduced the amount of times that they needed additional instruction. The longer they used *Pecha Kucha* format, the more comfortable they became with it and the more confidence they gained in their ability to perform the tasks independently and correctly.

From the teacher's report, it was stated that using computers along with teacher-directed instruction could be an essential component for assisting the students to function better in an English language context. It was also stated that helping EFL students develop their speaking skills would be a logical instructional starting point, especially when learners have low literacy levels in English or even their native language. It was also essential for the teacher to not only focus on the classroom presentation, but also to include more practice using Digital storytelling to assist all students with other skills that are related to speaking skills such as reporting, negotiating, clarifying, and problem solving. It was also necessary to reevaluate the instructional strategies; some said that they intend to include communicative and whole language instructional approaches that may involve the use of Digital storytelling.

Future Action Planning

Second language acquisition is an area of study in which the variables are so numerous and unpredictable that it is difficult to isolate any particular method or intervention and accurately determine an effect. Nonetheless, a teacher's professional research goal is to continue to find ways to help students improve their second language acquisition skills. Since the recent literature shows some indication that *Pecha Kucha* or other digital storytelling formats may be a possible and valuable tool to improve second language acquisition, it was necessary to continue to conduct research in this area.

There is also the concept of instrumental and integrative motivation that has been especially influential in the field of second-language acquisition (Ullman, 1997). It is also interesting to address the learning style differences that may affect a students' language learning. Perhaps the inclusion of innovative digital storytelling formats should be accompanied with ways to address the individual learner, while recognizing and addressing the learning style in each learner. Therefore, the next future research in this area of second language acquisition will certainly address these issues.

Conclusion

Even though much remains to be learned about second language acquisition, this study shows that use of digital storytelling can at least facilitate second language acquisition. It seems that students perceived *Pecha Kucha*,

as one the digital storytelling formats, to make a positive difference in the students' language acquisition and their confidence in their improved language skills. Second language acquisition has potentially great practical importance for educators since reading and writing are influenced by language development. Research findings should be of interest to second language materials writers, second language curriculum developers, and classroom teachers in identifying complementary relationships between second language acquisition and the use of technology and multimedia.

While this study has focused on the second language acquisition process from the perspective of the language, the learner, and assistance to the learning process, it is important to point out that learning styles and environment of second language acquisition have a remarkable impact on second language learning. This is especially true for EFL students. English level is not better than it had been as the result of teaching without respect to the students' learning styles and without computer-assisted. Reid (1998) shows that knowledge of learning styles, environment may be used to maximize students' potential for learning, and that effective management of learning styles even promotes successful language development. A better understanding in what learning style preference among adult students by the finding from the measurements would help determine the strategies or provide design management training sessions, curriculum, instructional strategies, career counseling, and classroom practice and a foundation for EFL-related research in the country whose native language is not English. Therefore, many other issues regarding students' language learning need to be researched and addressed when finding alternative and beneficial influences on second language acquisition in EFL students.

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