International Conference
ICT for Language Learning

Teaching English to Young Learners: Pre-service Language Teachers' Use of Digital Stories

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Abstract

Digital storytelling, which is about the combination of media and technology with traditional storytelling to help students learn, has lately been considered as an effective tool in instructional environments. This paper examines the effects of the digital storytelling experience on pre-service language teachers' perceived self-efficacy towards integration of educational technology to teach English to young learners. With this aim in mind, the researcher prepared two-hours training on what is a digital story and how it can be prepared with educational purposes, more specifically language teaching. The qualitative study was conducted in Spring semester 2016-2017, at a pre-service teacher education department of a state university in Turkey. The data for the current study was gathered through pre-service language teachers' lesson plans and open-ended questionnaire. In order to be able to answer the research questions, the document analysis was carried out with lesson plans prepared by pre-service language teachers followed by the content analysis of pre-service language teachers' answers to the open-ended questionnaire with the concurrent themes noted down. The findings indicated that the participants of the study had self-efficacy towards integration of educational technology in TEYL. However, when their self-efficacy towards the use of digital stories in TEYL was examined, no such improvement can be observed. Implications for future research and policy makers are provided.

Keywords: Digital storytelling, pre-service language teachers, perceived efficacy.

1. Introduction

The spread of technology use, especially among youngsters in their daily lives, have steamed the discussions on the effectiveness of technology integration in educational contexts, yet how to meaningfully integrate computer technologies has remained unanswered despite the studies conducted with respect to this hot issue. The significance and benefits of computers in second and/or foreign (L2) language learning and teaching have excessively increased especially with the commencement of Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) in the 1960s and spread of personal computers.

Defined as the oldest form of instruction [1], stories and use of storytelling in the educational contexts have undergone through various changes as "stories have taken many different forms and stories have been adapted to each successive medium that has emerged" [2]. Moving further from its traditional sense, the developments in computer technology has had a significant impact on the art of storytelling by means of the digital transformation.

Digital storytelling has been defined in various ways and its use and benefits have been examined in the latest studies. While digital storytelling is described as the process of writing about a topic and adding various multimedia elements [3], such as voice, images, and background music, to create a visual story, it is also defined as a branch of storytelling that uses digital media to tell a story through art, oral history, creative writing, speaking, photographs, music, news clippings, digital video, the Web, graphic design, sound engineering, or animation [4]. A list of benefits of the use of digital storytelling in classrooms for teachers is suggested like catching the attention of learners and raising their interest in exploring new ideas, promoting discussions about the topics presented in a story, or enabling abstract or conceptual content to be more comprehensive [9]. Additionally, learners can be equipped with 21st century skills and multiple literacy skills including the ability to learn core subjects with integration of information and communication technology (ICT) by enabling learners to create their own digital stories, individually or in groups [5].

From this point forth, it is pointed out that the importance of pre-service teacher education especially in terms of technology integration requires special attention as pre-service teachers who succeed in educational technology efficacy may have a relatively better chance to own the role of change agents in educational technology by adopting technologies in a more effective way, receiving technical training, and integrating technology into their classrooms [6].

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Therefore, the following research questions were sought:

1. Does digital storytelling experience have an impact on pre-service teachers' self-efficacy in educational technology?
2. Does digital storytelling experience have an impact on pre-service teachers' personal disposition towards educational technology?

2. Methodology

A qualitative methodology was employed to investigate how pre-service language teachers' perceptions regarding their self-efficacy towards integration of educational technology to young learners classes changed without aiming at generalization but with the aim of 'relatability' of the findings in the relevant contexts [7].

The research was conducted in Spring semester 2016-2017, at a pre-service teacher education department of a state university in Turkey. Three sections (hereafter termed Classes A, B, and C) of the same Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) course were included in the research. All students were in their junior year, and the researcher was their instructor. A total of 13 participants from Class A, 14 from Class B, and 13 from Class C participated, for a grand total of 40 students. Due to aforementioned benefits of digital stories, the researcher prepared a tutorial session for two hours explaining the benefits and ways of integrating digital stories into teaching. Participants were asked to deliver their second micro-teachings by using digital stories not mandatory but voluntary based.

The data for the current study was gathered through participants' lesson plans and open-ended questionnaire. All the participants follow the same lesson plan format, and the time limit for teaching micro-teaching practice is 25 minutes with extra 5 minutes if they need to finish their performance. Four weeks were spared for micro-teaching practices since all participants perform in front of their friends and their instructor. Then, the participants were asked to answer the questions on the open-ended questionnaire prepared by the researcher. The questionnaire was prepared by consulting the related literature and field experts, and based on their feedback some questions were reformulated; thus, the questions were finalized. The questionnaire included five questions regarding participants' perceptions of the use of digital stories in TEYL. It took 15-20 minutes for participants to complete the open-ended questionnaire.

Document analysis was carried out with lesson plans prepared by participants followed by the content analysis of participants' answers to the open-ended questionnaire with the concurrent themes noted down. To increase the inter-rater reliability, another researcher was consulted to analyze the answers. With regard to qualitative data analysis, the results obtained from the open-ended questionnaire were categorized with the principle of the Pattern-Coding Approach to reach more well-grounded conclusions [8].

3. Findings

The first part of the results deals with the distribution of use of stories in micro-teaching practices. The participants firstly needed to choose between story reading and storytelling. The second decision they needed to make was about integrating digital facilities while telling the story or not.

The majority of the participants preferred to integrate stories in their micro-teaching practices as a storytelling technique (67.5 %). However, when that percentage is closely examined, it can be seen that only 40 % of the participants benefited from digital storytelling while 27.5 % of them employed traditional storytelling without using any digital facilities, which necessitates the careful analysis of the reasons that participants provided in the open-ended questionnaires.

The second part of the findings will be comprised of the responses gathered by using the open-ended questionnaire. Firstly, they were asked whether they think technology should be integrated, and the second part of the question was about asking them to share possible uses. All of the participants reported that technology can be integrated into language teaching, and they provided several possible benefits.

The majority of the participants thought technology can be integrated in language teaching to practice what is taught while only 12 of them touched upon the use of technology for variety and fun factor. To specify the target language learner group for technology use, the participants were asked to comment on the possible technology uses with young learners. They all reported that technology can be

beneficial in TEYL. To gain deeper understanding, they were asked to provide their ideas on which purposes technology can be incorporated into TEYL.

Participants provided five main areas for the uses of technology in TEYL. The themes reveal the fact that participants mainly focused on the characteristics of young learners referring to the attention span, cognitive development, and age factor. The most frequent response was about using technology to entertain young learners (N=36) while the least frequent one with the response of reaching multiple intelligences.

It can be inferred from the findings that almost all the participants report a reason to integrate technology into language teaching and specifically TEYL. Therefore, it becomes a necessity to provide their responses regarding their preferences to use and not to use digital stories in their second micro-teaching practices.

The reasons for using digital stories in TEYL show similarities with the purposes they reported to integrate technology in TEYL. The majority of the responses referred to the features of digital stories such as pictures, sounds, etc to visualize the story for young learners. Besides, participants stated that using digital stories would increase curiosity and get young learners' attention. Moreover, they reported one benefit for teachers, which is about being able to monitor the students and manage the classroom. On the other hand, the participants who did not use digital stories in their micro-teachings also provided several reasons. The reasons mainly stemmed from personal factors such as not feeling comfortable or not feeling confident enough. Nevertheless, they also reported some reasons related to digital stories such as being difficult, time-consuming, or being mechanical. To understand how they perceived the use of digital stories in a longer run, the fifth question was formulated questioning their perceptions of the possibility of the use of digital stories in their future career with young learners.

Participants, who reported that they would use digital stories in TEYL in their future careers, provided four main responses. Two of them were related to their experience in using digital stories in micro-teaching practices and seeing its effectiveness and also their own ability to make use of them whereas the other two were referring to two conditions. Participants pointed out that if they had more training on how to make use of digital stories and if the institutions they are going to work had required facilities, they would integrate digital stories into their teaching career. When it comes to the participants who reported negative responses, the reasons mainly resulted from their perceptions of the efficiency of digital stories in language teaching since they considered digital stories as time-consuming and ineffective in TEYL.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine the effects of the digital storytelling experience on pre-service language teachers' perceived self-efficacy towards integration of educational technology to TEYL. Self-efficacy towards technology is often believed malleable in a very short duration such as a one semester time period [9] and [10] and may be most malleable early in learning and become more set with experience, if the context and task remain relatively stable[11]. Namely, if pre-service teachers are exposed to educational technology effectively in their learning as early as possible, it can have a critical impact on their long-term development of technology efficacy. In line with the literature, the results of the study also indicated that the participants of the study had self-efficacy towards integration of educational technology in TEYL. However, when we look at their self-efficacy towards the use of digital stories in TEYL, no such improvement can be observed. As opposed to the earlier findings of previous studies [9] and [10], self-efficacy proved to be malleable in a short duration. However, in the current study, a number of participants reported that they did not feel themselves confident enough to integrate digital stories into TEYL micro-teaching practices. While shaping an individual's identity as a teacher who integrates technology for her curricula is an essential step in the professional development process [12], a one-time digital storytelling experience alone did not succeed in promoting pre-service teachers' thoughts beyond their school years. This warrants a longer-term project that systematically promotes lifelong learning. The reason why their self-efficacy regarding the integration of digital storytelling in TEYL did not improve was justified by participants with factors such as the inadequacy of training, not finding it efficient, or personal factors. This is also in line with what is provided by participants about their integration of digital stories in TEYL in their future career since they pointed out some conditions to be fulfilled such as having more training and necessary technological facilities.

Future research could be conducted with a larger group of students and in different educational levels to further investigate pre-service language teachers' self-efficacy towards the integration of digital stories into language teaching and specifically TEYL.

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