Is Teaching English to Young Learners through Interactive Storytelling More Effective than Digital Storytelling?

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Abstract

English Language teaching is significant at early ages. Young learners have a big innate capacity to learn new languages during those years. In their first years of life, human beings observe the environment in which they grow up and try to understand the process of their own development. If they have an opportunity to observe the environment enriched by their parents, teachers, or friends, they will become more peaceful, creative, autonomous, and independent individuals. Even though they have a powerful learning ability, imagination, and memory, it is hard to take their attention and preserve it for a long time. Over the years, numerous teaching methods have been used to have more motivated, self-confident, autonomous learners. Therefore, for many years, educators have attempted to find out the most powerful way for teaching languages. Hence, they have used many strategies and techniques to make their lessons more joyful, efficient, and challenging. One of the most entertaining and captivating techniques in this regard is storytelling. It has a significant role in involving young learners in the learning process. It supports learners' imagination, creativity, understanding, self-confidence, self-awareness, language fluency, vocabulary knowledge, speaking and listening skills. This paper aims to identify the benefits of using interactive storytelling in

teaching English to young learners in comparison to digital storytelling. In the present study, a qualitative research method was used. In a classroom setting, teacher diary entries and video recordings were used to collect data. The research was conducted with 24 young learners at a language course in İstanbul, Turkey.

Keywords: *Storytelling, interactive storytelling, Digital storytelling, Young learners, Teaching English as a second/foreign language*

Çocuklarda Yabancı Dil Öğretiminde Etkileşimli Hikâye Anlatımı Dijital Hikâye Anlatımından Daha Etkili Bir Yöntem Midir?

Öz

Çocuklarda yabancı dil öğretimi dikkat çekici bir konudur. İnsanoğlu, yaşamının ilk yıllarında her yönden gelişime açık olduğu gibi, dil öğreniminde de doğuştan gelen büyük bir kapasiteye sahiptir. Eğer bu yaşlarda bulundukları ortamı serbestçe incelemelerine olanak sağlanır ve bu ortam aileleri, öğretmenleri ve arkadaşlarınca zenginleştirilirse, daha huzurlu, yaratıcı ve özgür bireyler olarak yetişirler. Her ne kadar çocukların algıları bu yaşlarda son derece açık olsa da, dikkatlerini uzun süre toplamakta zorlanırlar. Yıllar içinde, motivasyonu ve özgüveni yüksek özerk öğrenciler yetiştirebilmek için birçok öğretim metodu geliştirilmiştir. Bu süreçte, yabancı dil öğretmenleri, derslerini daha keyifli, etkili ve verimli hale getirebilmek için çeşitli teknikler denemişlerdir. Bunlardan en keyifli ve ilgi çekici olanlarından biri de hikâye anlatımıdır. Bu teknik, çocuk yaştaki öğrencileri kendi öğrenme süreçlerine dâhil ederek; onların hayal güçlerini, yaratıcılıklarını, özgüvenlerini, öz farkındalıklarını, dil akıcılıklarını, sözcük bilgilerini, dinleme konuşma yetilerini desteklemektedir. Bu çalışma, çocuklarda yabancı dil öğretiminde etkileşimli hikâye anlatımının önemine dikkat çekerek, bu tekniğin dijital hikâye anlatımından daha etkili olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. 24 okul öncesi öğrencisiyle gerçekleştirilen bu çalışmada nitel bir araştırma yöntemi kullanılmış ve veri toplama için öğretmen günlüklerinden ve video kayıtlarından faydalanılmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hikâye anlatımı, Etkileşimli hikâye anlatımı, Dijital hikâye anlatımı, Çocuklarda yabancı dil öğretimi

1.   **1. INTRODUCTION**

Over the years, many methods and techniques have been developed and used in teaching English to young learners. One of the oldest but the most efficient techniques is storytelling. There are numerous benefits of using storytelling in teaching languages to young learners. Wright (2008) states that stories offer a huge source of language experience for children. Furthermore, Onu (2013) says that "stories develop the young pupils' imagination and listening skills, besides involving them actively in the process of teaching/learning a foreign language." (p.135)

In early childhood, storytelling has a significant role in supporting kids' linguistic, social, and personal development. It helps them to express their feelings and thoughts, observe the language in a meaningful context, and improve their recognition and recall skills by communicating with their peers and teachers. Wright (2009, as cited in Paradowski, 2014, p.16) acknowledges that "[a]part from the two 'building blocks' of language – lexis and grammar – stories help build up fluency. This is obvious in the case of the receptive skill of listening, founded on a positive, lenient attitude to not comprehending everything and on developing the skills of searching for meaning, predicting, and guessing." Regarding this idea, storytelling has a big role in improving young learners' critical thinking skills.

The current study is conducted to find out whether teaching English to young learners through interactive storytelling is more effective than digital storytelling. The results obtained from 24 preschoolers show that in many aspects of children's development, interactive storytelling is more effective and beneficial than digital storytelling in teaching English to young learners.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1. Young Learners

There are many differences between teaching English to young learners and to older learners. Young learners love discovering their environment, listening to songs and stories, taking part in role play activities, playing games, drawing, building things, playing with puppets, or solving puzzles. They learn everything indirectly by observing their environment, and better if they can use their senses (touch, hear or see), and interact with the others. While they have a strong memory, they also have a shorter attention

span than older learners. They can get bored easily. While older learners have better developed social, motor, and intellectual skills, young learners have limited skills. Cameron (2001, as cited in Aldabbus, 2012, p.2) states that "young children may learn a foreign language especially effectively before puberty because their brains are still able to use the mechanisms that assisted first language acquisition", also known as 'the critical period hypothesis'. Thus, teaching a foreign language at early ages is crucial to catch those innate brain mechanisms. As Krashen (1987) points out, language learning and language acquisition are different processes. While language acquisition is a natural process, language learning is more of an instructional process. Young learners acquire their native languages indirectly from their environment. At that point, conveying the message is more important than the correctness of language. Young learners may not speak fluently enough or pronounce the words correctly, however getting the message accurately is more important than producing. On the other hand, the term 'learning' refers more to the language form. In order for learning to take place, young learners need to be supported with a rich curriculum and varied materials. Classrooms and curriculums enriched with drama techniques, storytelling, digital storytelling, games, puppets, flash cards, illustrations, video, and internet-based activities play a crucial role in their language development process. Linse (2005) specifies that there are many techniques that can be used for teaching English to young learners in the classroom; such as TPR, drama, storytelling, songs, puppets, role play activities, games which are developed based on the children's ages, interests and needs. She also mentions that teaching English in a meaningful context by feeding children with relevant vocabulary items and patterns in a communicative way helps them to focus on the content and communication rather than the language structure. Therefore, well-designed curriculum activities should be integrated with the target language and the culture. While doing this, the children's age, cognitive, psychological, physical development, as well as their language learning needs and interests should be taken into consideration. Environment should also be enriched with technological devices and digital materials such as computers, projectors, smart boards, video recorders and so on.

2.2. Storytelling
Children are natural language learners and storytelling is a very beneficial educational tool for young learners. It is one of the best techniques for

teaching languages to young learners, not only for L1 learners but also for L2 learners. Storytelling is a traditional but very effective tool for conveying and sharing experience among people. Stories have a very significant role in human life. As Wright (2008) describes, stories are like our minds' food. On the other hand, Hsu (2010, p. 7) defines storytelling as "the use of voice, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and interaction to connect a tale with listeners". However, storytelling is not just telling a story by using voice, facial expressions, gestures, or eye contact; it also creates our mind and imagination, and makes us build a strong bridge with people and make sense of the external world. There are many advantages of using stories in a language classroom, such as psychological, linguistic, word knowledge and instructional ease. Linse (2005) says using storytelling with young learners creates a great learning atmosphere to receive meaningful and comprehensible input. Storytelling helps young learners to develop their listening and speaking skills. It helps them to increase their vocabulary knowledge and pronunciation skills. Besides, it is helpful for students to improve their critical thinking abilities. Stories enhance young learners' prior knowledge by making them engage with new meaningful input. Each story includes a variety of tones, a sequence of events, characters, and settings; as well as social, cultural, psychological, educational, or moral messages.

Dvalidze (2017) states that storytelling can enhance intercultural understanding and communication in many ways. She suggests that stories allow students to seek their own cultural roots, understand different cultures, and get to know unfamiliar people, places, and situations. Stories can also "offer insights into different traditions and values" and "help students to understand how wisdom is common to all people and all cultures" (p. 72). While they provide insights into universal life experiences, they can also support students to consider new ideas and notice similarities and differences among cultures around the world. Furthermore, storytelling encourages cooperation between students. Philips (2000) expresses that storytelling is an essential educational tool since human language is involved, and that it should be used in early ages for language teaching to inspire young learners' imagination and to extent their creativity. In addition, storytelling improves kids' cognitive and linguistic skills. As storytelling is an interactive process in its nature, it improves social interaction. With storytelling, affective filters reduce, and positive attitudes increase. As stated in Paradowski (2014), "[o]ne of the unique benefits of

stories is the sense of sharing and co-operation created in class, which few other activities are able to attain. Storytelling is a shared social experience that can promote both emotional and social development. Well-designed follow-up activities asking the students to swap ideas and associations evoked by the stories, speak their opinions and preferences, and voice their reactions otherwise encourage genuine communication and free expression in the classroom." (p.15)

21st century children are born into technology, and technology has a crucial role in achieving information. Many technological devices, such as computers, tablets, smart boards, projectors, speakers, video recorders, are used in the classroom. Today- in the digital era-, children are fond of using technology. Bull & Kajder (2005, p.23) defines digital stories as combining "a series of still images with a narrated soundtrack to tell a story." On the other hand, Lambert (2010) describes digital storytelling as a "journey" with a few "steps" to be taken (p.9), and proposes seven steps that may encourage storytellers to create their own meaningful stories with the help of media tools.

2.3. Theoretical Background

Schunk (2012) states that "[l]earning involves acquiring and modifying knowledge, skills, strategies, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. People learn cognitive, linguistic, motor, and social skills, and these can take many forms" (p. 2). Learning occurs if a child is involved in the learning process and if the experience creates a change in her/his behavior, beliefs, knowledge or skills. Learning is an active and life-long process; it never ends. There is a great number of theories and approaches about how children learn. These are so crucial to identify children's learning processes, stages, styles, needs, and interests. In this section, we will be talking about major theories that have inspired the current study.

Piaget (1970, cited in Aldabbus 2012) suggests that children are active learners and thinkers. Children construct their own knowledge from their environment in a series of developmental stages. Piaget (1967, cited in McCloskey, 2002) says that children develop through specific stages, and he categorizes the child's developmental stages as follows: The sensory-motor stage (from birth to 2 years) during which children learn through physical interaction with their environment, the pre-operational stage (from 2 to 7 years) where they need concrete ideas, the concrete operational stage

(from 7 to 11 years) during which children start doing some abstract problem solving, and the formal operational stage (from 11 to 15 years) where they can make use of abstract thinking. As the participants of our study are at Piaget's pre-operational stage, they learn to use language by representing the objects with images and words. At this stage, there is a rapid language development. Pre-operational stage children are less egocentric, and they perceive that other children may feel and think differently. They observe, explore, and learn through their own individual experiences.

Vygotsky, another foremost cognitive psychologist, puts more emphasis on social interaction. According to Vygotsky (1962), children learn through social interaction. The concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) is developed by Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) defines ZPD as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance collaboration with more capable peers" (p.86). According to this hypothesis, in a supportive environment provided by a more knowledgeable person, the learner reveals higher learning performance. Collaborative working boosts learning achievement by sharing ideas and skills or by exchanging experiences, because each child has her/his own capacity to solve a problem. Hence in this study, we conducted collaborative/interactive storytelling and noticed its great contribution to young learners' language learning performance.

In the late 1970s, Stephen Krashen proposes his renowned 'comprehensible input hypothesis'. According to the hypothesis, "[h]uman acquire language in only one way-by understanding messages, or by receiving comprehensible input" (Mitchell & Myles, 1998, p. 26). He mentions the importance of the comprehensible input for second language acquisition, as well. Therefore, in this study, we notice the importance of receiving comprehensible input through storytelling for young learners and its many great contributions to their language improvement. Regarding this study's findings, interactive storytelling is more supportive than digital storytelling in conveying meaningful input to young learners in a foreign language classroom.

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a popular method developed by James Asher. For Asher (1977), teachers should give directions to students in the target language, and then students should listen to the commands and respond by using their bodies. TPR emphasizes the importance of the listening skill in language development. Asher explains three hypotheses

about learning a second language. The first one is "listening precedes speaking", according to which language is first acquired by listening. The second hypothesis is about effective language learning needs. In human brain, right hemisphere is the controller of physical movements, therefore language learning must be blended with actions. Third hypothesis is that language learning should take place in a stress-free atmosphere. Teacher should focus on the comprehensible input by using his/her body movements, gestures, mimics, tone of voice in a positive atmosphere. Additionally, he mentions the value of giving comprehensible input with meaningful repetition combined with a variety of realia and informative illustrations, posters, and props in a positive environment; so that the students internalize the simple words and learn the complex grammatical structures. This technique inspired us while conducting our study. We used it in our storytelling sessions to make our students more active participants by making them use their body language in a positive atmosphere, and to foster their minds to get meaningful input and communicate with their peers and teachers.

During the 1990s, Blaine Ray, a high school Spanish teacher expands this method. In his TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling) Method, he includes simple but rich stories with the most commonly used words, phrases and structures in the target language. He is influenced both by Stephen Krashen and by James Asher. He combined Asher's "TPR" and Krashen's "comprehensible input" to make students familiar with the target language easily and quickly while increasing teacher-student interaction (Ray & Seely, 2012). TPRS has contributed to our study by helping us to identify the young learners' psychological, physical and language needs through choosing appropriate stories.

Howard Gardner, in his 1983 book, Frames *of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, proposes that all people have different kinds of intelligences. He mentions eight intelligences; visual-spatial, musical, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinesthetic, verbal-linguistic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and naturalistic. Then he adds one more intelligence - existential. He suggests that each of the intelligences develops in different degrees at different times, therefore encouraging young learners to explore themselves in early ages is very significant. Teachers need to figure out their students before teaching and to offer them a rich, fruitful, challenging, and instructional environment. In addition, while promoting their different intelligences, teachers should strengthen their weak sides and encourage

them to discover themselves. Considering the importance of the multiple intelligences theory enabled us to identify our students' individual needs, interests, and abilities. It also provided us with the idea of applying both storytelling types -interactive and digital- in our curriculum by being aware of their individual differences. Gardner's Theory had a crucial role in designing this study.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Questions

The present study is guided by the following research questions:

1) Is interactive storytelling more effective than digital storytelling in teaching English to young learners?

2) What are the benefits of interactive storytelling in English Language teaching to young learners?

3) What is the most effective storytelling type for English Language teaching to young learners regarding their linguistic, psychological, and social development?

3.2. Design

In the present study, a qualitative research method was used. This research was conducted with 24 young learners at a language course in İstanbul, Turkey during the fall semester of the 2019-2020 academic year. The language proficiency level of the learners was beginner and the age range was 5-6 years.

The curriculum was designed according to the students' age, needs, learning styles and   interests. Lessons were planned in order to develop young learners' receptive skills as well as their productive skills, plus their vocabulary knowledge and pronunciation skills. Ten story books, which also had digital versions, were selected. Students were separated into two groups. One of them was the interactive storytelling group, and the other one was the digital storytelling group. Each group had 12 students, 6 girls and 6 boys. Before attending the interactive storytelling and digital storytelling sessions, students were supported with warm-up activities including visuals, flash cards, puppets, word game cards, songs and short videos related to the story's context, target vocabulary, language structures and patterns.

Each week in the interactive storytelling session, the teacher acted the story out on the stage by using her tone of voice, mimics, gestures, and body language. Stage decoration changed each week and was designed according to the topic of the book. She told the story on the stage by singing the book's song and wearing relevant costumes. She asked questions related to the story and the students gave oral answers. Same week the digital storytelling group watched the same story on the smart board. Each story lasted 4-5 minutes. While they were watching, teacher paused to take the students' attention and to emphasize the important parts of the story and asked the same questions that she asked to the interactive storytelling group. Questions were meaningful, appealing, and relevant.
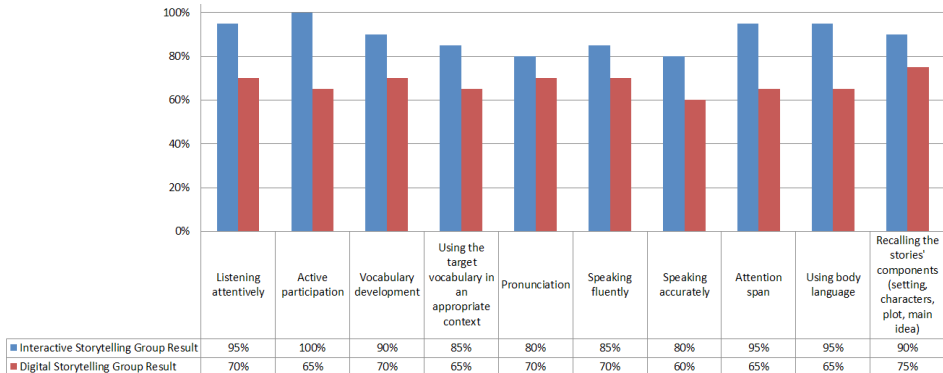
3.3. Data Collection

The teacher diary entries and daily video recordings were used to collect data. After each storytelling session, teacher took notes about the students' improvements in the categories stated below. Each week students' weekly performance was graded out of 10 points for each category. The entries were transcribed, rated, and compared by the teacher.

1. Listening attentively
2. Active participation
3. Vocabulary development
4. Using the target vocabulary in an appropriate context
5. Pronunciation
6. Speaking fluently
7. Speaking accurately
8. Attention span
9. Using the body language
10. Recalling the story's components (setting, characters, plot, main idea)

Each week, same stories were used both for the digital storytelling and the interactive storytelling groups. After ten weeks, developmental reports were compared.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At the end of the ten weeks, many differences, in terms of their language, social interaction, behavior, and psychological development, were noticed between the two groups. Graph 1 shows the average percentages of the two groups based on the ten criteria mentioned above.

	Listening attentively	Active participation	Vocabulary development	Using the target vocabulary in an appropriate context	Pronunciation	Speaking fluently	Speaking accurately	Attention span	Using body language	Recalling the stories' components (setting, characters, plot, main idea)
Interactive Storytelling Group Result	95%	100%	90%	85%	80%	85%	80%	95%	95%	90%
Digital Storytelling Group Result	70%	65%	70%	65%	70%	70%	60%	65%	65%	75%

Graph 1. Average percentages of the two groups

The students in the interactive storytelling group were more active than the students in the digital storytelling group. Their attention span was also longer than the other group. They were much more attentive, and motivated to listen to the story and to answer the questions. During the session they had fun and laughed, and used their body language, gestures, and mimics while they were answering the questions. They came to the stage, close to the teacher, voluntarily. They felt the story, answered all the questions correctly and participated a lot in the class. At the end of the interactive storytelling session, they wanted to stay more in the classroom to take part in the story. They wanted to touch and see the materials closely. They did not just answer the questions, they also added their background knowledge by using relevant vocabulary and language structures to interact with the teacher and their friends.

Based on our data, the students in the digital storytelling session were less active than the ones in the interactive group. Their attention span was notably shorter. While they were watching the story, they lost their attention and missed some parts of the story. They were all inactive during the session and did not show emotional reaction in order not to miss the details. Only a few of the students wanted to watch the story again. They were passive listeners, and some of the kinesthetic and interpersonal students got bored.

While interactive storytelling group students could remember all vocabulary and use them in the appropriate context easily, digital storytelling group students could not. During the ten weeks, interactive storytelling group students participated in the sessions more willingly than the other group. While interactive storytelling group students' self-confidence and language

awareness increased, their language anxiety level decreased. Even though digital storytelling group students' language awareness and self-confidence increased, their language anxiety level increased as well. Interactive storytelling group students interacted both among each other and with their teacher much more courageously than the other group. Digital storytelling group students did not use their body language as much as the interactive storytelling group students while they were defining a word or a notion. Whereas digital storytelling group students had difficulties to remember the stories' details, interactive storytelling group did not. They recalled all the details and tried to explain their understanding with the words that they learned during the sessions.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to provide an overview of the effectiveness of teaching English to young learners through interactive storytelling rather than digital storytelling. Children are natural language learners. They acquire language first by listening, and then after getting enough meaningful input from their environment they start producing the language patterns. Listening, speaking, writing, and reading are the major language skills. At the early ages, listening and speaking skills of the language learners should be developed. Pronouncing the words, structures or any components of the language fluently is more important than using language accurately. At this point, storytelling is a very valuable technique to encourage young learners to speak. It is beneficial both in terms of social interaction and learning. Our findings show that teaching English through interactive storytelling is a more effective technique than digital storytelling. It has significant contributions to young learners' overall language development, as well as to their listening comprehension skills, speaking fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, vocabulary development, active participation in the learning process, body language use, understanding language in a meaningful context, analysis and synthesis skills. During the interactive storytelling session, students were much more attentive than their peers in the digital storytelling session. They were not only focused on the story, but they were also actively involved in the process and felt the story's message. At the end of the ten weeks, according to students' data reports, the students in the interactive storytelling group learned more vocabulary and more new language structures than the students in the digital storytelling group.

In this paper, we discussed the benefits of using interactive storytelling and digital storytelling in an English language teaching classroom for

young learners. Both storytelling types can be used for young learners. Notwithstanding the benefits of digital storytelling, interactive storytelling is more effective for young learners.

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