



**DIGITAL STORYTELLING: AN OUTLET FOR EXPRESSION IN EFL CONTEXT**

*Metin TİMUÇİN*<sup>1</sup>

*Pelin İRGİN*<sup>2</sup>

**ABSTRACT**

By the help of innovative teaching practices, practitioners of education try to effectively amalgamate innovative media technologies into students' learning processes and activities. The best practices can be found in the cases where traditional ways of teaching and new media available are blended by transforming pedagogy and enabling productive ways for students to express themselves. In this respect, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teaching is no exception and, over the last few years, digital storytelling has entered into the agenda of language teaching practitioners as a powerful teaching and learning tool that enables both teachers and students to communicate in a digitally rich environment. Throughout the paper it is argued that digital storytelling has the potential of reaching far beyond the field of communication and that digital storytelling can be exploited as a versatile device to enable students to dwell on their creativity by making them involved in a digitally rich environment. The present paper also reports the findings of a qualitative study designed to explore how students weave fictional stories into a media enriched environment, and how the use of particular software sparks the creative writing among EFL students. The findings through archival documents and semi-structured interviews revealed that the use of digital storytelling is very likely to improve the EFL students' writing skills.

**Key Words:** Digital storytelling; CALL in EFL context; writing skill improvement.

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<sup>1</sup> Doç. Dr., Sakarya Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Bölüm Başkanlığı, e-posta: mtimucin@sakarya.edu.tr

<sup>2</sup> Öğr. Gör., Sakarya Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Bölüm Başkanlığı, e-posta: pelinirgin@yahoo.com

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## Introduction

The students that the teachers are supposed to handle in today's classes are utilizing technologies to support all aspects of their learning processes and as is accentuated by Conole (2008) "(technological) tools are appropriated in a variety of ways, depending on individual needs and preferences. Technology is not simply seen as an 'add on' for these students, it is central to how they organise and orientate their learning". Therefore, it would be suffice to say that the major change brought by Information and Communication Technology has made teaching more and more a profession, not only a vocation (Cornu, 2003) and such a change today urges teachers to adapt novel teaching/learning environments and see how new technologies both challenge them and offer new teaching facilities. Among the new tools available for teachers are virtual learning environments that provide access to organizing, storing, creating and producing resources. As is noted by Dudeney and Hockly (2012), increasing access to the internet and the rise of Web 2.0 communities and tools has meant that teachers and learners can not only access a wealth of teaching/learning material online, but they are also provided with the opportunity to take part in online communities, and more importantly, produce their own content. Learning environments that provide access to online materials are good means of autonomous learning and "students who thrive in online language learning environments that offer video, sound and text facilities appear to have strong individual study skills and an enjoyment for working independently" (Arispe & Blake, 2012). Although these communities and tools appear under different names such as digital campus, virtual schools, digital working environments, they are all based on a plurality of actors and on a plurality of activities.

Once narrated around campfires, stories and storytelling are both no exception in this sense. Digital media, in its current form and by its various usages, provides a prolific environment for stories that have been excessively used to share events, experiences, and values in various forms such as biographies, anecdotes and vignettes. In today's fast-moving world, these stories have been adapted to the digital environment, ranging from web-based forums to the micro blogging. Therefore it would be suffice to say, by the intervention of digital networks and social media, the traditional understanding of storytelling has changed. Today, stories are generally open-ended, hyperlinked, participatory, exploratory and unpredictable. Most of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 tools pick up the new types of storytelling and accelerate the process of creation and narration. And, this process of text making now "includes more possibilities for multimodal integration of words, images, sounds, among other modes in online, screen-based and mobile interfaces". (Domingo, 2014). This new version of storytelling emerged is described as "digital storytelling", being a modern expression of ancient art of storytelling (Sadik, 2008).

According to Mclellan (2006), this new form of storytelling is a powerful form of communication as it explores the different media and software applications. Growing up with speedy access to technology and its applications, students are changing their way of

communication, information processing and learning. Thus, digital storytelling can be regarded as an essential part of learning process to convey experiences about oneself, others or about the world as it offers opportunities to promote students' learning and engagement. Use of hypermedia software as the medium for teaching writing "allows for a natural, symbiotic relationship between the pedagogical concerns of the writing curriculum and the desire of most students to use computers" (Otlowski, 1998). As Raymond (2008) quite rightly says, in addition to the motivation to improve their writing skills, digital storytelling gives students "an outlet for expression". Moreover, by the use of creativity and the engagement of the students in self-centred projects, digital storytelling can enhance project-based learning and technology integration into the classroom (Xu et al., 2011). Given the value of raising the students' storytelling skills (Jones, 2001), the focus, on the other hand, should be on how to use the available technological tools to raise a consciousness and learner awareness regarding storytelling rather than the pure knowledge and skill of computer use. More specifically, what seems to worth to dwell on is how to combine the art of storytelling with various forms of digital tools in educationally meaning-making projects.

### **Integration of Digital Storytelling into EFL Context**

The relevance of digital storytelling as a technology application in a teaching context is best emphasized by Robin (2008) by foregrounding its user-contributed content. 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 (Robin *ibid.*: 222). In foreign language education, on the other hand, digital storytelling has the potential of being a useful tool as long as language learners focus on the context-based language use, media literacy, critical and creative writing (Ohler, 2005). As Hwang et al. (2012) posits, "There are relationships between real world, living related scenarios, and knowledge learning". However, while language learners are creating digital stories, their efforts should be directed on bridging the gap between the traditional definition of literacy and technologies (Mullen & Wedwick, 2008). Gregori-Signes (2008) supports this view by stating that digital storytelling is one of the best ways to engage language learners in both traditional and innovative ways of telling a story. Digital storytelling can grant the opportunity for students to learn how to do research, write, deliver presentations, improve interpersonal skills, solve problem-based tasks, and use technology with multimedia tools. It can also encourage self-direction and personal initiative skills (McLellan, 2006). As far as teaching and learning practices concerned, "connecting into the world of digital media and bringing their study into the classroom expands repertoires of practice and engages students in the lively exploration of the rich and complex world of digital games and cultures" (Apperley & Beavis, 2011).

Digital storytelling provides various opportunities to EFL students. They organize their thoughts in a coherent way by designing and producing realistic artefacts (Xu et al., 2011). In addition, meaningful integration of digital storytelling into foreign language education is achieved if students are able to synthesize information and present it as they are engaged in

the learning process actively (Sadik, 2008). By such a way of storytelling, students can learn how to write stories that involve certain amount of creativity. They can express their ideas with reasonable coherence and accuracy and have a chance to deal with the mechanics of writing. The more they write their stories in a digital environment, the more they gain encouragement and confidence in writing. The use of interactive tools collaboratively and individually increases learners' awareness in writing as they focus on both functions and forms of language (Blin & Appel, 2011). More importantly, interactive nature of the learning environment "motivates the learner to write authentically and creatively for a responsive audience" (Tan et al., 2010). And, as Ciekanski and Chanier (2008) posit, "such a multi-dimensional learning environment, due to its process-oriented and collaborative nature, helps learners focus more on the writing".

Language learners can also practice the techniques such as brainstorming, clustering, listing, and free writing. As they can share their digital stories in a social media, they can increase their awareness in literacy. As inexpensive, and even free, software programs that allow "novice computers users to become digital media producers and editors" come forth, the teachers have the "option of showing previously-created digital stories to their students to introduce content and capture students' attention when presenting new ideas" (Robin,op.cit.).

### ***Research Questions***

Although most of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 tools might be unfamiliar to some teachers, it is now a common knowledge that majority of students are using these tools for the purpose of information gathering and sharing. However, while students live and indulge in a world led by constantly changing technologies, to what extent students are using this technology and technological devices available for learning purposes are a huge question mark. The present paper argues how students weave fictional stories into the media enriched environment, and how the use of a particular software sparks the creative writing among students. The following research questions guided the study:

- (1) How do the EFL students construct knowledge with digital storytelling?
- (2) To what extent do digital stories affect the writing skill of the EFL students?

### **Methodology**

#### ***Participants***

The subjects of the study are 16 (4F/12M) Turkish EFL university students studying at the Preparatory School of a state university in Turkey. Their ages ranged from 16 to 18. The participants' proficiency level in English language was determined as intermediate (independent users, B1, supposed to be able to understand the main points of a clear utterance, deal with many situations in daily life, and produce and describe events) based on the proficiency levels in Common European Framework (CEF). They have not written stories in a digital environment before, only two of them have written pen-paper based short stories.

### ***Data Collection Methods and Analysis***

The software that provided the digital environment for digital stories is Kerpoof Studio website operated by Walt Disney Company. Kerpoof Studio is one of the Web 2.0 tools, which comes with a suite of toolkits to create cartoons/comics (see website <http://kerpoof.com>). It is a free access software offering various possibilities for digital storytelling.

The personal thoughts of the students on writing and digital story writing were gathered via a pre-questionnaire before the implementation. The pre-questionnaire formed the basis to explore the views of the participants on digital storytelling and writing. Then, with a workshop presentation, the participants were informed on how to use Kerpoof to create digital stories. After having been introduced to the software, each participant of the study wrote a digital story of their own each week throughout a five-week period. The subjects were asked to share their digital stories with their peers on the blog specially designed by the researchers for the present research, and they were required to give feedback on each others' stories. Participants were not limited to a specific topic while writing their stories, and they were not given any information about the elements of a story before the first actual story writing experience. Only after they produced their first digital story, they were informed about the main elements in story writing and they were given feedback on their productions.

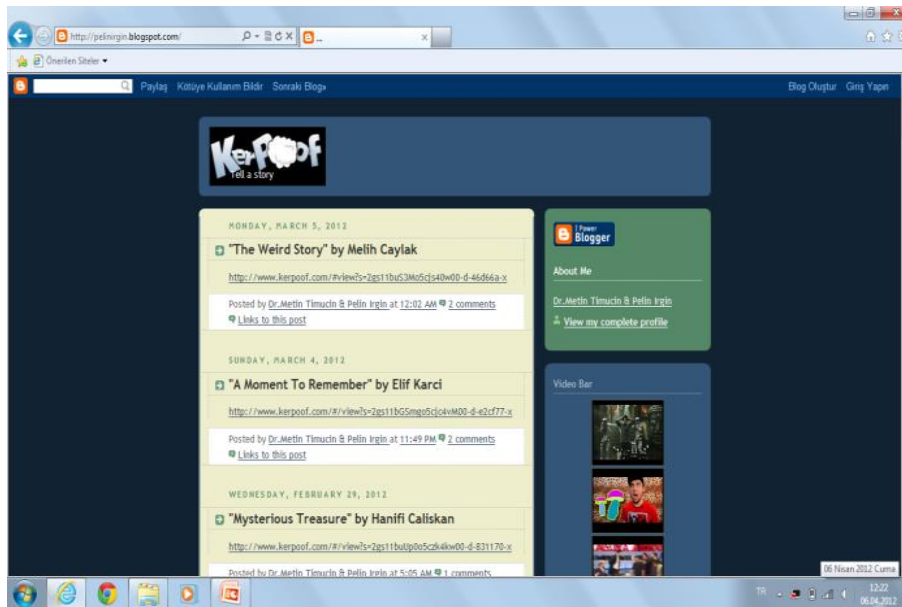


Figure 1. The blog designed to accommodate digital stories (totally 80 digital stories)

The collected data was analysed through open-coding data analysis steps. According to the open-coding data analysis, the conceptual codes in which the phenomena are grounded in the data were identified and labelled. The identified codes were grouped in themes or

categories. In the categorization process of the codes, words, phrases, and expressions that appear to be similar were included in the same themes or categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### **Findings and Discussions**

The findings of the collected data were processed through archival documents and semi-structured interviews. Archival documents, based on the documentation forms of the American **Psychological Association**, are the recorded materials and archives about the activities that allow the researcher to recall and relive the information during the data collection process. It is used broadly to make sense of the collected data in the research setting. As described in the data collection methods, the archival documents of the study included a pre-questionnaire, Kerpoof digital stories and the peer feedbacks on the blog.

As a result of the analysis of the collected data, four categories appeared to be foregrounding. These are:

- students' awareness in both media and visual literacy
- transforming the curricular content into the digital storytelling
- taking up multidimensional roles
- writing skill development.

### ***How do the EFL students construct knowledge with digital storytelling?***

#### *Students' Awareness in Both Media and Visual Literacy*

The idea behind the use of technologies in a digitally enriched learning environment requires digital literacy which promotes students' knowledge and awareness of how to use the Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 tools for educational purposes. In that sense, students are expected to develop abilities and literacy skills in handling the technological tools for information gathering and communication. To capture students' attention and interest in literacy better, it is crucial to identify various classifications in digital literacy. Digital literacy is divided into four different terms (Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009):

- Technological literacy - the skill of adequately computer use
- Visual literacy - the interpretation of the images in digital media tools to decode and encode
- Media literacy - the skill in creating and evaluating of the written and oral information in the digital media
- Information literacy - the ability to find, assess and synthesize the knowledge.

In regard to media literacy, the participants in the present study confirmed that creating digital stories has been a support in learning digital media and story-based media skills as they are engaged in media literacy.

Since the stories are publicly shared in a digital environment, they can also be educational materials for some other students. One of the participants stated: *"I pay attention not to make mistakes in written text of my digital stories because many people read and evaluate it."*(Student 2). Another participant said: *"I try not to make any mistake while writing my digital stories. I am sure that other students read it."*(Student 8). The participants not only learnt how to manage the digital literacy skill, but also learnt how to combine this skill with writing. Also, they understood that being involved in the storytelling through digital stories could develop their own learning and awareness on media.

Visual literacy is the ability to think and make meaning from the visual elements and to bring them to educational context. More specifically, visual literacy in language education can be defined as the use of visuals for the purposes of communication, thinking, learning, and constructing meaning. Sometimes words are not enough to explain thoughts and in such situations, verbal language is referred by using visual images. In this way, the complex and difficult nature of language learning can be made easier by the help of visual aids.

The visual elements included in the process of writing a digital story appeared to be an important element that made it easier for the students to make sense of the stories written by other students. As Adams (2009) stated, visual elements can deepen the meaning of a digital story. One of the participants defined his thoughts about visuals and visual learning by stating: *"When I do not understand the text, I look at the pictures to understand the story."* (Student 9). In addition to this expression, another participant defined the importance of visuals in language learning: *"I understand the stories better with the help of the background, characters which are visualized according to the context."* (Student 3). The participant strongly believes that visuals support learning as visual elements are combined with the other features of multimedia. The other participant had a similar idea: *"Visual elements in Kerpoof stories help me to understand the story."* (Student 7). The statements of the participants above demonstrate that visual elements play a key role in understanding the theme or main idea of the digital story as visual indicators draw attention to the points of interest and help language learners. The following screenshots, "A short trip" and "Twilight zone" created by two participants (Student 5 and 8), show the harmonious state of literacy in visual and textual context.



Figure 2. "A Short Trip (Student5) –Unedited Version of Student Production



Figure 3. "Twilight zone" (Student 8) –Unedited Version of Student Production

### *Transforming the Curricular Content into the Digital Storytelling*

Digital storytelling facilitates the transformation of already acquired knowledge into actual writing phase, and gives the students an opportunity of a reflection of their learning. One participant's statement supports this view: "I use the new words I have previously learnt in class while writing my digital stories, so I keep the words in my mind better." (Student 6). The



other participant clearly stated his preference by saying that *"I can use the structures I have learnt in the classroom while I am writing my stories."* (Student 1). Another participant said that *"using the grammatical structures and the new words in my stories helped me a lot in my English exams and quizzes"* (Student 4).

Students had an opportunity to repeat knowledge not only about the topics learnt in the classroom but also about the specific topics preferred by themselves and their peers because they could share the knowledge via the blog designed for the present study and give feedback to their peers' stories. The following quotes exemplify some participants' learning: *"I started to get higher scores in my writing exams"* (Student 2), and *"While you are creating stories, you are repeating what you have learnt in the classroom."* (Student 11).

#### *Taking up Multidimensional Roles*

Digital storytelling is an educational medium for the language learners as they are engaged in the active process of storytelling. With this active engagement, language learners could create their stories without defining themselves solely "a story writer". As digital storytelling, by its very nature, urges the learners to think linearly, design, and be creative, those who embark on the task of digital story writing take up multidimensional roles. Therefore, student role is not only of a writer but also of a reader, designer, creator and a publisher.

Participants in the present study noted that they were the creators of the stories in a social media. They also reported that they had designed their stories according to their own views, desires and creativity. Apart from this, digital storytelling is both an individual and a kind of a group work, where students give each other feedback. As digital stories can be presented in different types, it requires the practice of various skills. By the regular practice, the participants during the preparation and presentation of the digital stories in media could learn how to act as multidimensional roles, "negotiate meanings, and engage in a community of writing practice" (Elola & Oskoz, 2010). Therefore, it would be suffice to claim that digital storytelling is likely to help students to take up an assertive position rather than a submissive one.

#### ***To what extent do digital stories affect the writing skill of the EFL students?***

##### *Writing Skill Development*

Writing is a skill going along with extensive skill sets. Some students are pretty talented in writing but some others have to practice for skill development. According to Kellogg and Raulerson (2007), students can learn how to write by writing. Similarly, Johnstone et al. (2002) stated that there were a reliable correlation between writing skill development and repeated practice. To build a better writing skill, a variety of feedback sources can be beneficial for students as they could provide error corrections and encouragement in writing (Kellogg & Raulerson op.cit.). Computer-based writing activities give a chance to both students and teachers to plan and monitor the process, and this facility is of a paramount

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importance throughout the completion of writing tasks (Fidaoui et al., 2010). It is also recommended that “teachers encourage student writing by encouraging the creation of affinity spaces in which students can create their own publicly available” products (Ware, 2008).

The views of the participants in the present study stated below support the role of the digital storytelling in writing skill development by emphasizing the importance of regular practice in writing.

*“The more we practice, the better we write.”* (Student 9)

*“There is a big difference between the first story and the last story I have written.”* (Student 6)

*“This is an experience for me. I believe that it has a great contribution. Maybe.... I can be a famous writer in the future.”* (Student 1)

In addition, the participants could express their ideas with reasonable coherence and accuracy, and deal with the mechanics of writing. Two participants reported their views as follows: *“I started to pay more attention to the meaning of sentences, words, punctuation, spelling while writing.”* (Student 11) and *“The comments on my stories helped me a lot to see my mistakes... and I improved my writing.”* (Student 8)

Moreover, participants reflected the increase in their willingness and confidence in writing by expressing the following thoughts:

*“I have not thought to write before and I didn’t need to write but this study encouraged me to write stories.”* (Student 15)

*“After I saw that I could write, I wanted to write more stories.”* (Student 3)

*“This study motivated me to write another story.”* (Student 14)

The digital stories shared by the participants in the blog also reflect the development in the writing skill and storytelling. Following figures are screen shots from the digital stories created by one of the participants at the beginning and at the end of five-week digital storytelling period.



Figure 4.“Little Giant”- the first digital story (Student 8)- Unedited Version of Student Production

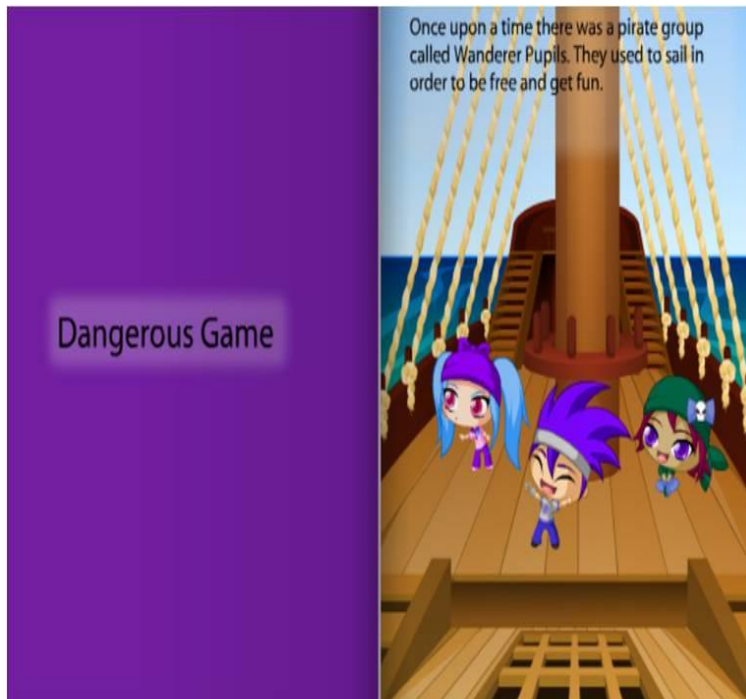


Figure 5.“Dangerous Game” - the fifth digital story (Student 8) - Unedited Version of Student Production

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As can be seen on the screenshots, the participant does not inform the reader about the title of the digital book, the setting and the characters of the story in his first digital story. Because of these ambiguities, it is a burden for the reader to comprehend the digital story meaningfully. However, at the end of the fifth-week period, the participant starts his story with the title "Dangerous game", and presents the reader in a particular setting, an actual time of the story and characters in the first page of the story. Besides, the participant supports the written text with the visual elements.

Also, the participants in the present study extensively applied the techniques "brainstorming and free writing" instead of "clustering and listing". The brainstorming technique helped the participants develop creative solutions during the creation of their digital stories. By this technique, they could think on ideas which they could write about, develop fictional characters, determine the viewpoints, develop a theme, create conflict, set-up a climax, and lastly deliver a resolution for the problem. Participants' responses in semi-structured interview revealed that they had done story-mapping and followed the stated steps in brainstorming before writing their digital stories in Kerpoof. One of the participants' responses supported the preference in brainstorming technique; "Generally, it is hard for me to find a topic and write about it, but I start to write after I think on an idea involving a situation." (Student 2). The other participant claimed that he thought on his story and wrote on paper first, and then created his story on Kerpoof.

It was observed that while creating their digital stories, the students preferred free writing and tended to start with an opening clause or sentence. When the Kerpoof digital stories they shared in the blog were analysed, it was found out that some statements such as "throughout the history", "one day", "once upon a time", "it has been many years", were among the most preferred ones.

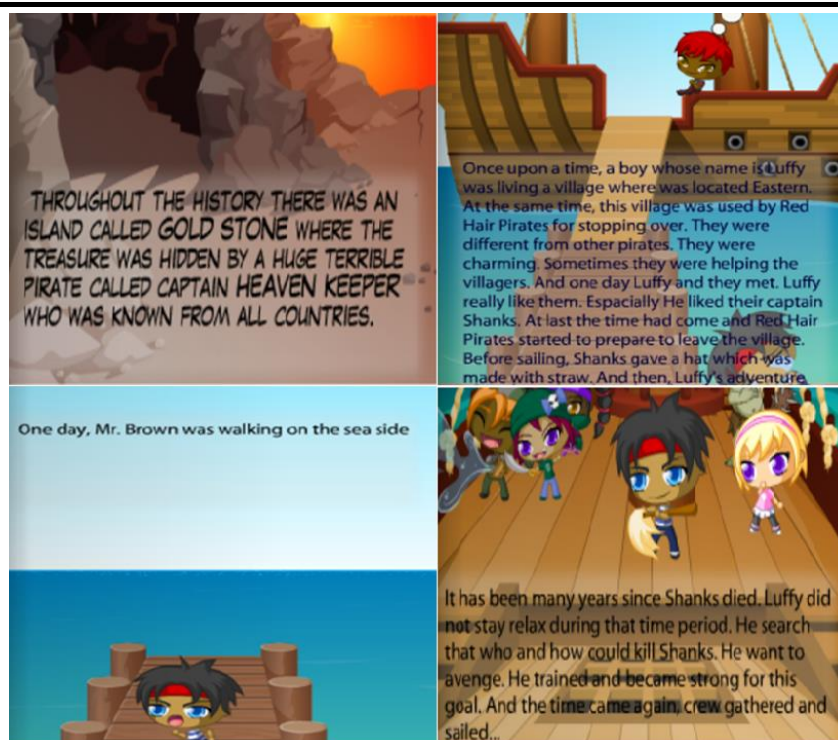


Figure 6. Samples for free writing: Opening clauses (Student 4, 6, 8, 11) - Unedited Version of Student Production

As can be understood from the transcribed data, enabling students to access to a technological tool that could help them to improve their writing in an EFL setting makes it easier for the teacher to make the students to create stories of their own without exposing them to drills and pattern practice that seem to fail to acknowledge the necessity of raising students creativity. Thus, digital storytelling serves more as a means of mapping towards the creation of their own stories in an environment that is familiar to the students due to its digitally rich nature.

## Conclusion

The purpose of the present article is to argue that digital storytelling can be utilized as a versatile tool to improve students' writing skills in an EFL context. It is also argued throughout the article that digitally rich media environments provide an important and critical ingredient for learning; motivation. Considering the fact that technology has had an impact on the students and that they are already transformed and come to the classes we teach with a familiarity with new technologies, digital storytelling offers a possibility of capturing students' interest. The findings of the present paper revealed that this interest is very likely to lead them to engage differently and more fruitfully in their writing skill improvement endeavour. However, it must be noted that the present paper does not claim that digital storytelling is a silver bullet; instead of using digital storytelling as a replacement for effective writing skill class, it would be wise to use it as a writing skill enhancement.

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