

Engaging young learners of English with digital stories: Learning to mean

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ABSTRACT

Using a digital story to teach English to pupils in primary schools is not a new enterprise in the field of TESOL. However, this learning platform remains under-practiced in Asian primary schools where English is socio-politically viewed as a foreign language. To fill this gap, we implemented digital storytelling (DST) to engage children in the creation of digital stories and in learning to mean in a multimodal way. This article specifically describes our experience of using DST as a pedagogical innovation with pupils of 10-12 years old. In this DST project, pupils jointly created digital stories as multimodal texts. In this respect, they utilized different linguistic resources (e.g., Javanese, Bahasa Indonesia, and English) as well as visual and technological affordances, which assisted them in voicing their real-life experience through digital stories. The practical implication of the project is that primary school teachers of English can experiment with DST to engage pupils in meaningful project-based language learning.

Keywords: Digital stories; digital storytelling (DST); project-based language learning; young learners of English

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Practical context

Teaching English to children in primary schools has been a global issue all over the world because English is included in part of the school curriculum (Pinter & Zandian, 2015; Widodo, 2016), and most parents encourage their children to learn English at an early age because of the commonly-held belief that 'earlier means better' (Bekleyen, 2011; Cameron, 2003). Many attempts (e.g., task-based language teaching) have been introduced to enhance the quality of teaching English to children around the globe, but most of the ELT practices in primary schools center on rote learning/memorization and drilling (e.g., vocabulary and grammar exercises) as reported by Hawanti (2014), Hardman and A-Rahman

(2014), and Widodo (2016). A few ELT practices engage children in meaning making-oriented activities or tasks. Children are still viewed as language knowledge transmitters, but in fact, they are active meaning makers. In this digital era, children have a vast amount of experience in meaning making digitally with their playmates, peers, and even with adults through social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, blogs, and WhatsApp. This implies that children are active digital technology users. With this in mind, the use of digital stories for teaching English to children can be a nuanced learning platform for children to learn English differently. The extant research on the use of digital stories in primary schools (Jones & Chapman, 2017)

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suggests that children are active meaning makers as they engage in a digital storytelling (DST) project. Informed by this empirical evidence, we would like to report our experience of using DST with children whose age ranged from 10 to 12. We consider this as a pedagogical innovation because a very few ELT practices emphasize digital stories as an English learning platform, particularly in the Asian context (e.g., non-English speaking countries).

The DST project reported in this article was part of a larger action research study in which a genre approach was incorporated into the project (see Widodo, 2016). It was also part of the school curriculum program so as to provide pupils with more English lessons and engage them in the creation of digital stories as multimodal texts. The school is located in a rural area of East Java, Indonesia. When the project was implemented between 2015 and 2016, English was a required course in the school. Only one English teacher with a bachelor degree in English Education was employed in the school. Generally, in a primary school context, there is a severe shortage of trained primary school teachers of English as reported in previous studies (see Copland, Garton, & Burns, 2014).

In the school where the project was situated, from Grade 1 to Grade 6, English lessons met once a week. Prior to the start of the project, we convened a meeting with the school principal, the English teacher, and pupils to explain the project in Bahasa Indonesia regarding the benefits of the project. We also distributed informed consent form sheets to pupils' parents. After we discussed and negotiated the project with the English teacher, the school principal, and the parents, a total of thirty (30) children (Graders 4-6) were recruited to participate in a digital storytelling (DST) project. This participant recruitment was based on pupils' willingness to take part in the project and upon their parents' approval. The pupils started learning English since pre-schooling and learned in primary school since they were in the first grade. They were fifth and sixth graders when the project commenced. All the pupils were competent in two languages: Bahasa Indonesia and Javanese. They came from families with different socio-economic backgrounds (e.g., entrepreneurs, farmers, government employees, teachers, casual workers). This DST project featured digital stories that included still images with background music and animation transitions.

Reasons for the implementation of the DST project

The use of digital stories or digital storytelling (DST) in English classrooms has been much investigated. Empirical evidence suggests that digital stories or DST can have a considerable bearing on learners' knowledge and language and literacy development (Jones & Chapman, 2017; Widodo, 2016). Previous studies on the use of DST in language learning centered on adult learners, but the extant literature rarely focuses on young learners, such as children of 10-12 years old (Pappamihel & Knight, 2016). To fill this practical gap,

this article reports on the use of digital stories in an Indonesian primary school context. To begin with, we would like to sketch out background information on English in Indonesian primary schools. English has been included in part of the primary school curriculum Indonesia since 2000s (Hawanti, 2014; Widodo, 2016). There is no official or prescribed English language curriculum; primary school English teachers develop or prepare their own English curriculum documents, such as syllabi, textbooks, and test papers. Many teachers still rely upon and use nationally published EYL textbooks. Hawanti (2014) reported that English teachers taught these textbooks to children. These textbooks contained test-oriented exercises. These exercises were structured based on themes and speech acts. Recent empirical evidence (Widodo, 2016) shows that English teachers' practices do not provide much room for pupils to engage in different English activities that are relevant to their daily life.

As children engage with different digital tools, such as laptops, mobile phones, and iPads and interact digitally with their peers on Facebook and Instagram, involving pupils in the creation of digital stories is timely in the contemporary teaching of EYL. In this article, a digital story is defined as a multimodal text created with technological tools (e.g., Windows Movie Maker, Microsoft PowerPoint, or Microsoft Photo Story 3) that interweave images, background music, sound, and scripts/subtitles (if any). To meet this need, the DST project was implemented for a number of reasons. Firstly, the use of digital stories encourages children to participate in different learning tasks, such as navigating and documenting life experience; collecting photo or video data to create a story; using technology when creating the story; and learning integrated language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Secondly, the creation of a digital story allows children to collaborate and share their stories with each other. This can build and enhance students' collaboration skill. Thirdly, with digital stories, pupils can practice their English language in integrated and creative ways because they need to use different resources, such as vocabulary, grammar, and non-linguistic resources to create meaning and think creatively of how these resources hang together to communicate the intended message/meaning. Fourthly, because a digital story takes the form of a video, students can play back this video as a source of reflection for learning. They have the opportunity to review and learn from this video. Thus, we believe that this project encourages children to gain multidimensional experience in meaning making that involves the use of pupil's first or native language and English. From a psychological viewpoint, DST could build pupils' self-confidence in speaking English through digital stories because they could record and edit their oral performance. Repeated oral performance allows pupils to listen to their own voices and reflect on their own speaking performance.

The implementation of the DST project

Digital storytelling (DST) is an artful combination of personal voice, images, music, sound, and/or text, usually presented as a short video of 3-5 minutes (Lambert, 2013). It can take various forms, such as “artistic videos, documentaries, Claymation [a type of stop motion animation, which makes an object appear to move on its own], and screenplays” (Ranker & Mills, 2014, p. 441). Before we implemented this digital storytelling (DST) project, we introduced pupils to fundamental language components, such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. We also taught them daily expressions in English in order to build their self-confidence in expressing ideas in English. This foundational lesson took four weeks. In Week 5, we initiated the DST project as a pedagogical innovation. In this project, the pupils went through several learning activities (e.g., group formation, topic brainstorming, field observation, outlining and drafting, creating a digital story, and sharing). To begin with, we asked the pupils to form a group of 6 members because the class comprised 30 students. In each group, the pupils played different roles as a story narrator, photographer, script writer, language resource provider, language editor, and digital story creator. This role assignment aimed to optimize pupil involvement in this project-based language learning.

Following this group formation, the pupils brainstormed some possible topics (e.g., *farming, rural environments, schools, traditional markets*) which could be developed into a story. They discussed and negotiated these topics, and finally they decided to choose “Farming” because they felt that their village was famous for horticultural farming. Then, they narrowed down this horticultural farming into five sub-topics, such as *eggplant farming* (Group 1), *watermelon*

farming (Group 2), *corn farming* (Group 3), *onion farming* (Group 4), and *dragon fruit farming* (Group 5). In each of the groups, they needed to choose specific onion farming activities (e.g., *weeding and watering onions*). This depended on what reality the pupils experienced when they visited these different farms and what specific scene/event they wished to photograph. After the pupils discussed the more specific focus, we discussed and negotiated what sort of a story they would draft. Because we focused on a narrative text type, we picked a personal narrative, a story containing an account of significant incidents/events in pupil life. Thus, in this personal narrative, the pupils were supposed to tell what they observed in the field or on farm.

Following this brainstorming activity, in Week 7, we told the pupils to visit the chosen farm and photographed what they observed. Pupils had also an interview with farmers working on farm in order to enrich their ideas and their interpretations of what they observed. This field observation allowed the pupils to see and capture different scenes/events (e.g., *farmers are weeding grass*) that interested them. It also plays a role in building pupils’ funds of knowledge that could facilitate the pupils in generating ideas during a story writing process. In Class Period 8, the pupils discussed and selected the self-taken photographs to create a story because they captured many photographs. After the pupils selected the photographs, we guided them how to write a story based on a series of self-taken pictures or photographs. Firstly, we introduced the pupils to sketching out key words or vocabularies describing the situation of the chosen photographs (see Figure 1). The goal of this was to help the pupils connect appropriate words with what was seen in the picture.



Figure 1. The role of vocabulary in picture-assisted narration

Afterwards, we explained how to caption each of the self-taken photographs. These captions could serve as a catalyst for developing a story draft. Figure 2 shows how we scaffolded the pupils to write captions. These captions could also guide the pupils to organize their ideas. While scaffolding the pupils to caption the chosen photographs, we used Bahasa Indonesia and Javanese so

that the pupils could generate ideas easily. We allowed the pupils to use any English dictionary and translation software. To help pupils generate ideas, we asked them such prompt questions as (1) *What do you see?* (2) *Do you see people in the photograph,* and (3) *If so, what are they doing?*



Figure 2. An example of captioning pictures

We, then, taught the pupils to recognize common moves of a story, such as (1) orientation: characters/actors, social roles, settings/scenes, and temporal indication; (2) a series of events: Doing,

happening, sensing-emoting, saying, being, and behaving; and (3) coda: the closing of a story. Table 1 is an example of a story that we used to explain different moves of a story and its lexico-grammatical features:

Table 1: An example of a story that guided pupils to recognize moves and lexico-grammar of the story

- **Orientation:** I get used to going farming at weekends. In the morning, I always visit my dragon fruit orchard *nearby my house*.
- **A Series of Events:** When I visit my dragon fruit orchard, I prune some dragon fruit branches so that **these dragon fruits** can bear/produce more fruits. Sometimes, when **dragon fruits bloom**, I pollinate them because **this kind of fruit cannot pollinate** themselves. I weed some grasses *before I fertilize* the dragon fruits.
- **Coda:** I love going farming, and I am proud of being a farmer family member.

We taught this idea organization over four class periods so that the pupils were familiar with the rhetorical feature of the story. We also guided the pupil to notice some lexico-grammatical features in the story by bolding actors (subjects), underlining verbs (processes), and italicizing discourse markers (conjunctions, referents) in clauses of the story. During the identification of key words and captioning, we spent a great deal of time on language and knowledge building because most of the pupils were unfamiliar with some technical words in English (e.g., *propagation, pruning, weeding*), but they knew those words in their first (L1) and second (L2) languages (Javanese and Bahasa Indonesia). Thus, the role of L1 and L2 was important in language and knowledge building. The pupils created a storyboard based on the captions they made before. They narrated each of the selected photographs.

In Weeks 8-10, before children jointly created a digital story, they collaboratively outlined and drafted a story of between 100 and 150 words. Five pupils in one group co-wrote a story, and this collaboration enabled them to contribute ideas to the completion of the story. During the writing time, they used Bahasa Indonesia (L2) to pool and organize their ideas together. They sometimes used their L1 when they discussed specific

words. After the pupils completed the story in Bahasa Indonesia, they translated it into English with the help of translation software and manual and electronic bilingual dictionaries. We also helped the pupils find out appropriate words or vocabularies to express their ideas. Both Bahasa Indonesia and Javanese enabled the pupils to organize their ideas. This suggests that the use of both L1 and L2 allows pupils to make language as well as content issues clearer. The extract of pupils' story draft: "Our Beautiful Village" is shown in Figure 3.

Upon the completion of the story, in Week 11, we trained the pupils how to operate Microsoft Photo Story 3 (see Figure 4) to create a digital story. We chose this software for three main reasons: (1) it is freely downloadable; (2) it is more user-friendly compared to other video making videos (e.g. Windows Movie Maker); and (3) this software includes basic features of digital stories, such as scripting, narration recording, motion customizing, sound effects, and background music.

This training took three class periods because most of the pupils were unfamiliar with this software. In Class Period 14, children created a digital story using Microsoft Photo Story 3. They imported the text, the photographs, and background music together into the software. Pupils' creation of the digital story took two class periods. After the creation of the digital story in

groups, the pupils shared their digital stories with each other. In this project, we did not implement story circles because of time constraints. In Weeks 15-16, the pupils had to prepare for a final school exam. Despite this, they

were enthusiastic about the project and appreciated each other's digital stories because they felt that the digital stories were collective work that they never created before. The pupils also felt proud of their digital stories.



Figure 3. An example of pupils' draft: "Our Beautiful Village"



Picture 4: Photo Story 3 Software

Reflection on the implementation of the DST project
Generally speaking, the digital story creation project provided pupils with a new avenue of voicing their own story in a multilingual way and sharing and discussing their life experiences through the creation of digital

stories. It empowered children to be multimodal narrative text creators. Throughout the process of digital story creation, the pupils were actively engaged as problem solvers as they made decisions about the images, thought about captioning photographs, and co-

edited a digital story draft. They could voice their ideas based on the photographs they took. The creation of digital stories could democratize the ways children created a story using a variety of affordances, such as images, music, and animations. Equally important, the pupils used first and national languages as well as English to make meaning of the chosen photographs in order to create a story that really represented their experience. They also exploited different meanings or messages manifested in the chosen photographs. In this respect, photographs could help the pupils generate ideas. This visual artifact represents what the pupils experienced during the field observation.

On another note, using a digital story as a platform, the pupils had the opportunity to speak English in a non-threatening way because they could edit their spoken text. They could practice their English in an authentic way because they wanted to voice their life experience in English. They creatively and critically crafted their own stories using multimodal resources such as a variety of images and sound. During the DST project, one thing that impressed us is that children utilized translation software because they wrote their stories in Bahasa Indonesia and translated the stories into English. We view this translation as a translanguaging meaning making process. For this reason, the use of both first/national language and English is encouraged. In the DST project, we implemented different types of scaffolding, such as modeling how to write a story, how to collect/capture photographs on farm, how to conduct an interview with farmers, how to prepare a script, and how to operate Photo Story 3. This scaffolding or mediated learning plays a crucial role in helping pupils complete their digital story project.

By engaging pupils with digital stories, they more creatively crafted their story based on the pictures taken by themselves. We observed that three language areas about which most of the pupils were concerned were vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Therefore, we provided pupils with additional language-focused tutorials. Moreover, collaborative learning was able to engage the pupils in a series of DST tasks. By working jointly on digital stories along with role assignment, the pupils could assume their responsibility. As the use of technology was concerned, at the outset, we had to make sure that the pupils were literate in or familiar with technology (e.g., a laptop or a desktop) and editing software (e.g., Microsoft Photo Story 3) because they might not know how to operate computers. Although most of the children were digitally literate, we spent some time training them to use editing software, Microsoft Photo Story 3. We also had to train the pupils how to critically collect and select relevant photographs and sound to create a story so that such non-linguistic resources could give meaning to the story. Another challenge that we experienced is training the pupils how to give meaningful feedback on their peer story drafts and digital stories. As mentioned earlier, we did not implement story circles or presentation due to time constraints.

Engaging children with digital stories as a product of digital storytelling (DST) is a time-consuming activity, but the DST project is rewarding as pupils are actively involved in documenting/collecting, sorting out, creating, analyzing, and combining visual artefacts with written text (Robin, 2008). For this reason, DST as a child-centered pedagogy is recommended in primary schools. EYL teachers should ensure that pupils are familiar with computers, digital media, and editing software; and they are equipped with information literacy, media literacy, narrative literacy, and visual literacy. They should also guide or scaffold pupils how to draft a story and make use of digital story making software. On another pedagogical note, EYL teachers may implement digital storytelling with different genres (e.g., procedures) and technological tools (e.g., Windows Movie Maker).

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