

Building Teaching Skills Through the Interactive Web Project Report

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Introductory notes

‘Digital Storytelling for Engaging Young Learners of English in Large Mixed Ability Classes’ is a project designed to motivate students to learn English as a foreign language for a purpose, to use the materials in a meaningful way, to develop their language and literacy skills by working on products that will exist beyond the classroom walls and develop their creativity by promoting collaboration and cooperative learning between the class members. By applying existing knowledge to generate new ideas, they are to create original work as a means of group expression. Technology is not to be the aim and the carrot at the stick reward, but an important and integral part in all the stages, a means and a tool to enhance the project work and display.

Overall project goal: Working in collaborative small groups, students - young learners of English aged 10 - will create, produce and deliver a new 4 -5 minutes long story based on a book or TV cartoon and present the characters, the plot and the resolution by writing dialogues between the characters with each student adding at least two lines to the story to be digitally recorded and published.

I. Background

Who are the learners?

The project is designed for ten-year-old state school students in grade 4, fourth year of learning English as a foreign language. There are twenty-seven of them in a class which is a typical number per class in Serbia. Although officially learning English from grade 1, many of them had begun even earlier, in kindergarten, and a considerable number of them attend private language schools. All of this makes them a large mixed ability class. According to the curriculum they are CEF beginners, A1 level, having two English lessons of 45 minutes a week. Digital natives surrounded by technology from their birth, they are very skillful in using it in their daily lives. They acquire the language easily due to the fact that they are exposed to English outside school as well since films and television series are not dubbed in Serbia, and they listen to foreign music a lot.

What is the setting?

Our primary school is a large, urban and modern one with more than 1200 students and 90 members of the staff. The average number of students per class is between 25 and 30. Although equipped with two ICT classrooms with about 50 computers half of which are not connected to the internet, it is difficult to use them on a regular basis because of the busy timetable and poor technical maintenance. For these reasons it can be said that our setting is a one computer classroom with only a laptop, speakers and a microphone and no internet connection for the time being. The student classroom is of a medium size with pretty much fixed seating arrangement but it is possible to rearrange it for group work.

What are the course goals?

In state schools in Serbia, English as a foreign language is a compulsory school subject. Throughout primary school, students have 72 lessons per school year, two lessons of 45 minutes a week, and they learn it from grades 1 to 8. It is the general English course preparing students for everyday use developing the four skills as well as their grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Teachers are allowed to choose a course book by the leading

ELT publishers from the list approved by the Ministry of Education. The students in this project use the course book *Sky Starter*, Pearson, by Brian Abbs and Ingrid Freebaim which is very suitable for their level and interests. The course goal is to, by the end of grade 4, enable students to: acquire essential classroom language; be able to listen to and understand short conversations and interviews; read instructions, dialogues and short texts; write short dialogues and paragraphs; produce controlled spoken chunks of language and use new grammatical structures and vocabulary items in short conversational dialogues on familiar topics.

What are the student needs?

Although predictability and routine are very important for young learners, especially at the beginning of introducing a new language, working with the course book only becomes monotonous for them and more often than not they start to lose interest and motivation. Varying the activities and using as many authentic materials as possible (e.g. stories, books and films) are some of the ways how to tackle this, but these are not easy to find, especially for this level of learners when their language proficiency is not developed enough. Like most children of that age, they enjoy and prefer student centered and interactive activities as well as learning by doing.

II. Issue or problem that started your project

With only a small number of teachers following innovative approaches and methods, the present English language teaching practice in Serbia is a traditional teacher-centred classroom using grammar based approach and a textbook as a dominant resource. In large mixed ability classes it is very challenging and demanding to engage the students and turn them into active participants in communicative activities. They are involved in whole class or individual activities most of the time which reduces their communicating to a minimum, especially for less able and shy students. Pair and group work is something to be avoided due to the noise and disorder it causes. Most often they are assessed by written summative achievement tests. English is taught as a school subject to be graded, not as a living language used for 'doing something' with it.

III. Initial solution and expected response

Taking all this into account, I decided to set up a project in the form of a digital story in order to promote group work, engage and motivate my students, to address their need for relevancy, provide a hands-on and active instructional format, meet the needs of diversity among them and apply emerging technologies. I wanted them to use English to interact, collaborate, communicate their ideas to each other, create and publish with peers for multiple audiences by using digital environments and media.

Project based learning lends itself to digital storytelling which fits into a variety of teaching methodologies. People learn more deeply, quickly and happily by making and adapting their own material than digesting the polished work of others. If involved directly in creating quality resources, students' active roles in purposeful language learning are initiated and consequently they 'learn by doing', improve their performance in writing, speaking and communicating and enhance their motivation. Digital storytelling also addresses all learning styles with visual elements, pictures and scenes for spatial/visual learners, creation of stories and dialogues for language-oriented learners, acting out for kinetic learners and examining

story to real-life situations and people for logical learners. In this project, three out of four basic PLB elements were involved: an extended time frame, collaboration and the construction of an artefact or performance of a consequential task.

The project was carried out at the end of school year as a consolidation activity with the aim to let the students demonstrate what they could do with the language they had learned by then and be creative at the same time. Normally, that would have been done as a summative achievement test or a short individual project work, but this time we gave something else a try.

Project Overview	
Topic	writing a play
Title	‘The Canterville Ghost’ by Oscar Wilde – a remake Angela Anaconda – a TV cartoon new episode
Level	beginners, CEF A1 level
Objective	Given the stem sentences and storyline worksheet, students will in small groups of 5 present the characters and write the plot and the resolution in the form of dialogues for a 3 – 4 minutes long story with each student adding at least two lines for the story to be recorded and published.
Number of lessons	4 x 45’
Grouping	5 – 6 students; heterogeneous
Subject(s)	English as a Foreign Language (3 x 45’) Art and Design (1 x 45’)
Materials	worksheet (graphic organizer), pencil, paper puppets, cardboard paper, sticks, glue, scissors, shoe box, crayons, markers, colour paper, toy furniture, digital camera or mobile phone
Resources	‘The Canterville Ghost’ puppets: http://expresspublishing.co.uk/students/canterville_ghost.html Angela Anaconda puppets: http://dancooper.tv/fashionfinds_1999/feb00/pages/angela-anaconda-1.htm
ICT	laptop, Movie Maker, YouTube , Glogster EDU , Micropoll
Lesson product(s)	5 digital stories
Web page(s)	‘The Canterville Ghost’ Digital Stories http://nadans.edu.glogster.com/the-canteville-ghost-digital-stories/ Angela Anaconda Digital Stories http://nadans.edu.glogster.com/angela-anaconda-digital-stories
Assessment	rubrics
Evaluation	online poll

IV. Response and reflection

Since my students are only 10, I was partially in charge of choosing the topic for the project, but took all the things they like into consideration. I announced that we were going to do a shooting of them role playing a story they were to create and one class immediately suggested their favourite TV cartoon – *Angela Anaconda*. However, I applied a less open-

ended approach with other class and asked them if they wanted to do a remake of the adapted story we had read and listened to a short time prior to the project – *The Canterville Ghost* by Oscar Wilde – and they agreed.

I wasn't going to publish the play where they appeared on the internet without their parents' written approval and decided to use the paper puppets instead of recording them acting it out. I thought that would also reduce the stress of first time publicly performing in English for broader audience. The work was organized in small heterogeneous groups of five or six students with more and less able students distributed equally in order to promote peer learning. The more able students took the roles of group leaders and willingly helped the poorer ones with dealing with the language by being sources of language and knowledge in their teams.

It took four lessons for the project: three lessons of English as a foreign language – one for grouping and coming up with the concept, another for writing the script and rehearsal and the third one for video recording – and an Art lesson for creating settings and paper puppets.

The target activity of the project was writing a play and technology was at the background until the first part was done properly. Only when the stories were finished and rehearsed did we use digital tools to wrap everything up. Before starting their work, students were presented the rubrics for assessment and asked refer to them again after finishing the story.

The students were recorded acting out their story by a digital camera, the videos were edited and the titles, captions and credits added by Movie Maker and each story was uploaded to a *Glogster EDU* webpage created for this project. I also created an online poll for the students, their parents, other students and their teachers to vote for the story they liked best.

V. Changes made

The biggest change for the students was the context of working on a joint project with lots of things to agree on and decide for themselves: the characters' features, the story development and its resolution. They faced a big and serious challenge: they had to come up with the story concept, present it in the form of a dialogue and use their English to do that. Apart from the stem sentences for characters' descriptions, most of the task was open-ended and I was really unsure if they were going to be able to carry this project out in the proper way. I knew that they had the knowledge for the tasks but was doubtful whether they would be able to make good use of it in that new and wider context. More often than not, they had been previously expected to use their English in familiar and rehearsed situations only.

The lessons were noisy, they used L1 quite a lot when deciding on the story concept and three lessons were barely enough. I went through their written dialogues and corrected only a couple of mistakes where they obscured the meaning. There were still quite a few errors in their final and recorded products, but I left them anyway, authentic and imperfect.

Still, the new experience was invaluable and exciting. We all enjoyed the work and the most significant accomplishment was the project's successful completion and its public aspect. What they specially liked is the fact that their stories would be published online, available to

not only other students, their friends, teachers and parents but to wider and unknown audience as well. That fact made them more concerned about the end product of their work. Sharing that work with others gave extra motivation to write in a new and creative way. Putting it on display is very important for young learners and technology had the leading role in that part. Today's new media provided an extensive array of tools to choose from in order to enrich and enhance the written and spoken language.

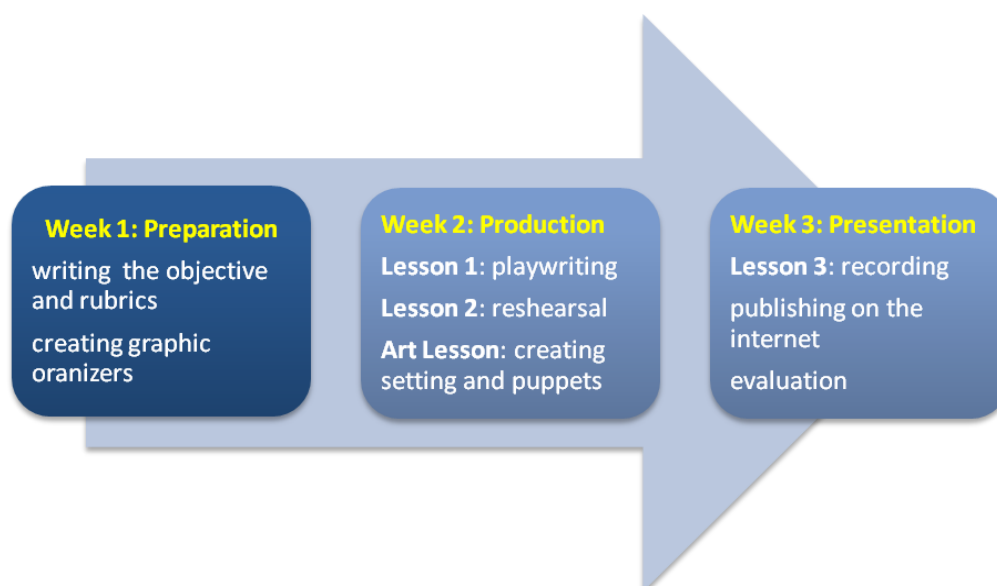
VI. Conclusion

The project had a positive and encouraging effect on both the students and me. I intend to incorporate this kind of project based work a couple of times per school year and map it onto curriculum goals. More guided and 'scaffolded' activities might prove better than open-ended ones and I will definitely go that way next time. I may want to try to use digital storytelling for scrapbooking, e-portfolios and even photo essays with older students or explore some new ways of integrating it in English language teaching in order to enhance it.

Digital storytelling can add sparkle to monotonous and repetitive activities and lessons. It is an active, not passive, process that produces an atmosphere of excited learning therefore being inherently appealing to young learners. It also offers the potential of real-world purpose in the form of new audience fostering a new level of enthusiasm for the learning process. For all the above reasons, I would recommend every teacher to give it a try and let the digital stories unfold.

VII. Project timeline and rubrics

Project timeline



Digital Story Rubrics

	Excellent	Average	Poor
Use of English (structures, vocabulary)	Correct use of structures and words	A few errors in structures and words	Repeated errors in structures and words
Participation	Takes an active part in story writing; adds new ideas	Sometimes takes part in story writing; shows partial interest	Does not take part in story writing; shows no interest in group work
Acting Out	Speech is clear and can be understood with ease	Speech is too fast or too slow, sometimes difficult to understand	Speech cannot understood
Story	Coherent; interesting; fun to watch	Mostly coherent; relatively interesting to watch	Incoherent, not interesting

VIII. Resources

1. *Digital Storytelling – Guide for Educators*, Midge Frazel, 2011, International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE), Eugene, Oregon
2. *New Tools for Learning*, John Davitt, 2005, Network Educational Press Ltd., Stafford, UK
3. Digital Storytelling: A Tutorial in 10 Easy Steps, J.D. Lasica, 2006, <http://www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/training/archives/page10096.cfm>
4. Focus on Basics: Less Teaching and More Learning, Susan Gaer, <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=385>
5. A project-based learning activity about project-based learning - a good how-to, step-by-step approach <http://www.sun-associates.com/lynn/pbl/pbl.html>
6. Project-based ESL Education: Promoting Language and Content Learning, Yan Guo, 2007, <http://www.atesl.ca/cmsms/home/newsletters/december-2007/project-based-esl-education/>