5 Task-based language learning through digital storytelling in a blended learning environment

Serpil Meri-Yilan[1]

Abstract

This study investigated Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL) through Digital StoryTelling (DST) in a blended learning environment. Twenty-six Turkish university-level students prepared a DST individually and shared it with their peers in an online discussion platform. Each evaluated and graded others' DST performance based on an assessment scale. After this, they performed their stories in the classroom and similarly assessed their peer's performances. Ultimately, they were asked to give their self-reflection on the pros and cons of performing tasks online and in the classroom. Findings showed that TBLL through DST was more favoured than storytelling in the classroom and helped them to improve their speaking skills. The study suggested DST could be a positive approach in language learning and should be explored further in other language skills and multiple contexts.

Keywords: blended, digital storytelling, higher education, task-based language learning.

1. Introduction

Blended learning has come out of interest in online learning and enabled the integration of online learning with traditional learning in classrooms. With this

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How to cite this chapter: Meri-Yilan, S. (2020). Task-based language learning through digital storytelling in a blended learning environment. In K. Borthwick & A. Plutino (Eds), *Education 4.0 revolution: transformative approaches to language teaching and learning, assessment and campus design* (pp. 37-43). Research-publishing.net. https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2020.42.1085

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integration, TBLL can be achieved, as learners can focus on activities and tasks inside the classroom with the help of their teacher as well as outside the classroom by studying alone (Meng & Feng, 2019). Also, TBLL enables students to engage in tasks either for rewards or voluntarily for their own learning. The common definition of task in learning is regarded as an activity in which learners interact and which comprises the meaningful use of language (Bygate, 2018; Van den Branden, 2006).

Since speaking proficiency is directly proportionate to the performance of tasks, TBLL has attracted the attention of language teachers of speaking, and researchers in Second Language (SL) learning. Recent research in TBLL and speaking proficiency in online, classroom, or blended learning has indicated that:

- TBLL fosters learners' speaking proficiency because of language use in real situations and role plays (Aliakbari & Jamalvandi, 2010);
- TBLL encourages repetitiveness of tasks, which might, though, cause the neglect of learners' discussion skills (Malihah, 2010);
- TBLL motivates and engages learners with classroom learning more (Hashemifardnia, Rasooyar, & Sepehri, 2019);
- SL students as well as teachers have a more positive view on TBLL than direct tasks instruction in the classroom (Halici Page & Mede, 2018); and
- TBLL promotes learners' autonomy and self-regulated learning through teacher scaffolding (Lee, 2016).

"Task repetition" is an effective way to enhance proficiency development (Bygate, 2018, p. vi) in TBLL. Rather than performing the task repetitively, learners repeat some parts of the task instruction in a different environment, such as in a web-based environment or classroom. DST is regarded as a means

to implement tasks (Lee, 2014), by which they convey "information appropriate to that particular task to another person" (Cook, 2008, p. 257). However, there has been little research investigating TBLL through DST, especially in the area of face-to-face storytelling compared to online storytelling.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The present study was conducted as a follow up to a previous one (Meri Yilan, 2020), which looked into students engaged with performing a task through DST. Results showed that participants had a positive view on DST, so the author decided to investigate it further by adding TBLL through DST, which will be analysed in this paper.

Twenty-six students from a Turkish state university (21 females and five males) participated in the present study, which was made a compulsory part of their speaking course. All participants had intermediate English levels, as determined by their course test, and they had previously engaged with performing a task through DST.

2.2. Implementing TBLL through DST in a blended learning environment

Considering their familiarity with DST, a task was given to each of them based on Ribeiro's (2015) proposal for an integrated approach to DST: story circle, creation, and show. First, all of them were asked to prepare a mini seminar about either the importance of sport, a place for holiday, the advantages of living in a city, or the perfect job. Before this task, they were lectured about how to prepare and perform a mini seminar. Next, they were told to record either their video or both video and audio and post their recording on a class in Google Classroom created by their lecturer. By this, every student could see their peers' performances. After that, they were reminded to evaluate others' performance

according to an assessment scale given by the lecturer (i.e. introducing the topic, organising ideas, using expressions, and giving examples to points) and post their grade under the performance. Finally, they performed their seminar in the classroom in front of their lecturer and peers. In the meantime, each assessed and graded others' performances according to the scale and handed in their assessment of both performances to their lecturer.

2.3. Data collection instruments and analysis

Data were collected from self-reflection reports on their performance in both virtual and physical classrooms in April and May 2019. Students expressed their opinions on their feelings about DST and in-classroom storytelling. Data from each view were categorised under 'only pros', 'only cons', and 'both pros and cons', and analysed using Excel 2016.

3. Results and discussion

Data showed that students had different views on TBLL through DST in the blended learning environment, comparing their performance in virtual and physical classrooms. Nearly all of them found TBLL through storytelling in the virtual environment more advantageous than in the classroom (see Figure 1 and Figure 2), as consistent with the study by Halici Page and Mede (2018). Data also indicated that Ribeiro's (2015) approach to DST is effective in improving speaking proficiency if students are familiar with DST.

Figure 1 presents that 24 students stated that DST was easier and effective as they were able to rehearse their performance in a comfortable way before recording their video and audio, and improved their speaking and autonomous learning, as they evaluated their speaking. However, one student found it difficult to both record and perform the task at the same time. Likewise, another student mentioned the difficulty in recording when performing but stated that she was happy since no one was around her.

Figure 2 indicates that 22 students noted that they found TBLL in the physical classroom more disadvantageous in that they were worried, anxious, and excited to perform it in front of the crowd. Notwithstanding its cons, ten of them expressed that they needed this kind of TBLL in order to prove themselves in every way of speaking English. Furthermore, two of them wrote that TBLL in the physical environment was effective to overcome their nervousness and improve themselves. Additionally, two of them thought that they had both positive and negative experiences in the physical TBLL environment in that they were very excited at first but were relaxed when they started performing the task.

All in all, this study shows that students felt that they improved their learning, especially speaking, due to the lower anxiety levels in the blended learning environment, corroborating studies by Aliakbari and Jamalvandi (2010) and Bygate (2018), and TBLL, particularly in the virtual environment, fostered learner autonomy in line with the study by Lee (2016).

Figure 1. Students' views on TBLL in Google Classroom

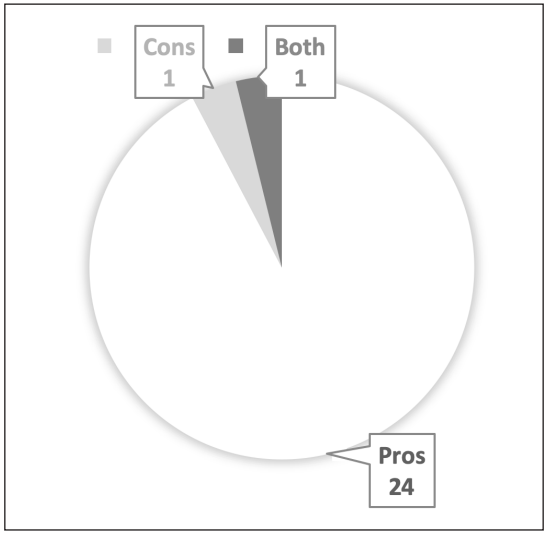
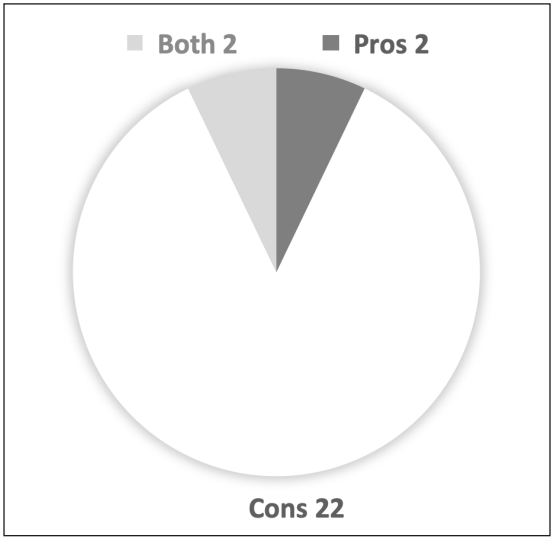


Figure 2. Students' views on TBLL in the classroom



4. Conclusions

This research showed that DST can be used as a means to diminish shyness and has a positive impact on students' speaking proficiency. However, it does not work alone to overcome their excitement, anxiety, and worry in the classroom. This study suggests that a well-designed collaborative learning activity through DST can be effective to promote learning. Further studies could develop our understanding of DST between different nationalities and countries in terms of other language skills or learning.

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Published by Research-publishing.net, a not-for-profit association
Contact: info@research-publishing.net

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Education 4.0 revolution: transformative approaches to language teaching and learning, assessment and campus design
Edited by Kate Borthwick and Alessia Plutino

Publication date: 2020/08/10

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Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover illustration: iStock.com/SiberianArt
Cover layout by © 2020 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-66-5 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-67-2 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)
ISBN13: 978-2-490057-65-8 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: août 2020.