Digital Storytelling in L2 Writing: The Effectiveness of *Storybird Web 2.0 Tool*

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ABSTRACT
At the beginning of the 21st century, computer-assisted instruction dominated most of the fields of language education. Within this frame, writing has evolved in second language education as a result of technological changes. There have been a great number of studies on the benefits of computer-assisted writing. On the other hand, some studies suggest that writing on a computer has drawbacks, especially for creativity and originality. To contribute to this ever-lasting debate, this study hypothesizes that computer-assisted writing has a positive role on generation Z (Gen Z). In a study by Adobe (2016), Gen Z students are found to see tech and creativity as an important and intersecting aspect of their identities. This case study explores the Turkish middle school students' experiences on the integration of a digital storytelling tool called Storybird in their English classrooms. The current study is conducted at a state school with the participation of 6 students who are in 8th grades. The main goal of this research study is to discover the students' overall reflections on writing English through Storybird web 2.0 tools. The data is collected through pre- and post- open-ended questionnaires, observations, and pictures. The results show that Storybird has a positive impact on the students' perspectives towards L2 writing. Accordingly, it can be deducted from the findings that Storybird can be used as an effective digital tool for enhancing L2 writing in an EFL classroom.
Keywords: Digital Storytelling, L2 Writing, Storybird, EFL learners, Gen Z

INTRODUCTION

Among the other four skills, writing is generally seen as the most demanding one by foreign language learners (Damavandi, Hassaskhah, & Zafarghandi, 2018). Also, learners who do not prefer the traditional pen and pencil way for writing even become more discouraged. These learners are specifically referred to as Gen Z learners when their ages are taken into consideration. People who are born and raised in similar years and historical environments are categorized into similar generations (Hernandez-de-Menendez, Diaz, & Morales-Menendez, 2020). Learners who are born between 1995 and 2010 are considered Gen Z (Rothman, 2014). These learners are born with technology, and it is quite usual for them to use digital applications in their everyday life. Now, teachers are obliged to learn the way of their students' communication style (Prensky, 2001). Accordingly, making the writing skill more technology integrated and interesting for those learners becomes a popular topic for the researchers.

Digital storytelling is one of the many ways of making L2 writing interesting and technology integrated into EFL classrooms. Nuñez (2017) defines digital storytelling as "telling and sharing of short stories (3-5 minute) accompanied with recorded sound (such as narration or music) and digital images (p.72)." Many studies support the idea that digital storytelling tools can enhance L2 writing (Damavandi *et al.* 2018; Balaman, 2018; Nguyen, 2017; Nazri, Shah, Yunus, & Zakaria, 2016). Nowadays, one can find various digital storytelling tools online and many educators utilize them in classrooms to enhance the literacy skills of foreign language learners (Towndrow & Tereira, 2018). *Storybird* is one of the online digital storytelling tools used by millions of teachers and students around the world as it provides an engaging writing setting for learners. High-quality visuals, guiding for writing and its user-friendly interface seem appealing for teenagers. The tool allows its users to write and publish their stories. Correspondingly, it enhances collaborative learning as it enables getting feedback from teachers and experts.

There are a larger number of studies on digital storytelling tools and their effect on EFL learners (Rance-Roney, 2008; Robin, 2008; Sadik, 2008; Towndrow & Tereira, 2018). However, the number of studies on the perspectives of EFL learners using digital storytelling tools for writing is rather low (Wertz, 2014). Moreover, the reviewed literature identifies only one study that focuses on the students' experiences with Storybird in an EFL classroom which is conducted in Malaysia with university-level students (Nazri *et al.*, 2016). There is not a significant study dwelling on the Turkish middle school students' experiences with the digital storytelling tool used for improving

their L2 writing in an English classroom, though. The main aim of this paper is to explore the middle school Turkish students' experiences in writing English by using an online digital storytelling website named *Storybird*.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Digital Storytelling in EFL Contexts
Digital storytelling is one of the most influential technology tools in foreign language learning classrooms (Nazri *et* al., 2016). Digital storytelling requires foreign language learners to push themselves for using multimedia applications to improve their literacy skills (Robin, 2008). There have been a great number of research studies on digital storytelling demonstrating the positive impact of it particularly in L2 contexts (Sadik, 2008; Damavandi *et* al., 2018; Robin, 2008; Balaman, 2018; Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2017). Researchers have been discussing the use of digital tools on multiple counts involving literacy skills, technology engagement, etc. (Rahimi & Yadollahi, 2017; Robin, 2008). On the other side, there have been studies concerning the students' perspectives on using digital storytelling tools in EFL classrooms (Castañeda, 2013; Nasri *et* al., 2016; Damavandi *et* al., 2018).

Mentioning certain definitions of the notion of digital storytelling can be a good way to start to examine the concept and what it includes. The Digital Storytelling Association (2002) defines the term as a modern version of traditional storytelling. Another description states "digital storytelling is a technology application that is well-positioned to take advantage of user-contributed content and to help teachers overcome some of the obstacles to productively using technology in their classrooms (Robin, 2008, p.222)". Castañeda (2013) summarizes the term as an integrative process that encompasses various types of technological materials like pictures, photographs, videos, audios to create a powerful and sentimental story.

There are seven main components of digital storytelling: (1) point of view, (2) a dramatic question, (3) emotional content, (4) gift of voice, (4) the power of soundtrack, (5) economy, and (6) pacing (Lambert, 2007; Robin, 2008). Each component contributes to the story in a different format to make it more authentic (Balaman, 2018). Also, digital storytelling is composed of three steps: (1) preparation, (2) production, and (3) presentation (Robin, 2008). At the preparation phase, the learners are supposed to decide on several points like topics, target audience, drafting, and editing the story. At the production phase, the learners are needed to combine their stories with suitable multimedia tools such as videos, audios, and pictorials. At the presentation phase, the learners are required to demonstrate their final story to the target audience (Robin, 2008).

After all, studies have shown that there are many pros of affiliating digital storytelling with education such as engaging students with the learning process, building authentic activities, and increasing students' interest in the subject matter (Gils, 2005). Although all of the definitions seem to differ from each other, they reach an agreement on the positive effects of using digital storytelling in classrooms.

Digital Storytelling and L2 Writing
Digital storytelling can be utilized as a writing tool for fruitful communication as it has the potential of allowing learners to transmit their designed messages in various modes by enlarging their representation in the EFL/ESL classrooms (Balaman, 2018). In the following paragraphs, the recent literature related to using digital storytelling in EFL/ESL contexts to increase writing skills will be discussed.

Damavandi *et* al. (2018) investigate the development of 15 EFL learners after using a digital storytelling tool named *Storyjumper*. The students' ages range from 15 to 17 and they are intermediate level students. The study has lasted for three months and the students are divided into two groups as a control group and an experimental group. Data is collected through pre and post-tests, semi-structured interviews, and students' reflective journals. Quantitative and qualitative data analysis is used in the study. The results recommend that *Storyjumper,* a digital storytelling tool used in the study, has a great potential for improving EFL learners' writing skills.

Similarly, Balaman (2018) compares the effects of digital storytelling on L2 writing with the conventional way of L2 writing. 43 university-level students whose ages range from 18 to 25 participate in the study. 31 of the students are female and 12 of the students are male. The researcher uses an experimental design by separating the participants into two groups as the control group and the experimental group. While the control group takes traditional writing instruction, the experimental group uses digital tools such as WeVideo and a video-editing tool. The treatment lasts 14 weeks. The data is collected by pre-and post-tests and a rubric. It is concluded that although both types are influential in improving L2 writing, L2 writing instruction with digital tools is more effective than the conventional writing type.

Rahimi & Yadollahi (2017) are the other researchers who focus on online digital storytelling to advance EFL students' literacy skills. The researchers question if there is a different impact of producing a story with an online

digital tool in comparison to its offline counterpart. 42 first-grade high school students whose ages range from 13 to 14 are the participants of the study. Key English Test is conducted for measuring the proficiency level of the students and the IT literacy scale is fulfilled by the learners. The major finding affirms the favorable power of online settings to improve the participants' reading and writing skills.

Castañeda (2013) has conducted a case study searching for the effectiveness of digital storytelling in a foreign language classroom. Questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations are utilized as data collection tools. "This study's findings assert that digital storytelling can serve as a viable means to achieve meaningful goals in the foreign language classroom (Castañeda, 2013, p.56)" Lastly, Nazri *et* al. (2016) dwell on the experiences of 15 diploma students using Storybird as a digital storytelling tool in their ESL classrooms. Questionnaires and interviews are used as instruments in the study. Authors suggest Storybird for EFL classrooms for increasing the students' reading and writing skills. It also comes out that Storybird motivates the learners for collaborative working. Previous research accepts the digital storytelling tools as one of the most effective means utilized in classrooms especially in EFL settings (Robin, 2008; Sadik, 2008). Moreover, Hewitt & Scardamalia (1998) promotes collaborative digital writing for encouraging students to write as the activity is not limited to classroom hours.

Storybird as a Digital Storytelling Tool in English Classrooms
Storybird, founded by Mark Ury in 2010, is a digital storytelling platform supporting artful storytelling. Storybird is a colorful and engaging platform as it provides its users various prefabricated visuals and writing ideas. One of the most outstanding features of Storybird is its professionally ready-made digital visuals (Nazri *et* al., 2016). This visual diversity enables the users to pick and illustrate their stories in a short amount of time. This feature enables learners to focus more on writing than visuals (Menezes, 2012). The website gives chance to the user to write in different forms such as picture books, long-form stories, comics, flash fiction, poetry, and blogs. After writing their stories, users can select and drag the visuals to support their stories and publish them with the other writers. Also, other users can like these stories and comment on them. These interactive features may promote learners' English literacy skills, as well. The platform provides language learners 19 different categories from adventure stories to science-fiction ones. English learners may utilize the platform to develop their reading skills as well as writing skills. Storybird is also compatible with many learners of different ages and proficiency levels. Therefore, Storybird can help English language learners to boost their *critical and creative thinking* skills by reading and writing (Nazri *et* al., 2016).

Although educators believe that Storybird is a platform that improves language learners' literacy skills, there is limited research done on the implementation of Storybird in writing in EFL/ESL context (Menezes, 2012; Ramirez, 2013; Wertz, 2014; Nazri *et* al., 2016). Menezes (2012) demonstrates the student teachers' implementations through Storybird in primary schools and in a kindergarten however, there is not any data considering learners' views for using Storybird. Ramirez (2013) has conducted an action plan with Storybird in which two groups are compared in terms of their writing skills in English. The findings have shown that learners can become more autonomous writers in English as Ramirez (2013) has found that learners start using more complex sentences with rich vocabulary after using Storybird in their lessons. Additionally, Wertz (2014) has investigated the effect of Storybird on learners' narrative writing in a blended literacy camp. The main purpose is to combine using digital tools to enhance collaborative writing. Wertz (2014) has concluded that Storybird has assisted her learners to write and publish their digital books collaboratively. Literature indicates that Storybird boosts autonomous learning among English language learners and it is a convenient platform to organize their knowledge and share their knowledge with others (Menezes, 2012; Ramirez, 2013; Wertz, 2014; Nazri *et* al., 2016).

THE PURPOSE OF RESEARCH
The purpose of this study is to explore the middle school Turkish students' experiences in writing English by using an online digital storytelling tool called *Storybird*. With this goal in mind, this study addresses the questions below:

1. What are the participants' former perspectives on using a digital storytelling tool?
2. What is the participants' overall experience while using Storybird?
3. Do the participants' perspectives on digital storytelling tools change after using Storybird?

METHODOLOGY
Research Design
This research study follows a qualitative method for exploring the participants' experiences while using the digital storytelling tool called Storybird. Pre- and post- open-ended questionnaires and the researcher's observations are utilized to find out the learners' practice and their thoughts.

Participants

6 female students who are in 8th grades take part in this case study. Their ages range from 13 to 14. 5 of the participants are Turkish native speakers and 1 participant is a native speaker of Uzbek and Persian. While 5 Turkish students are 14 years old, the Uzbek student is 13 years old. 5 of the participants are Turkish native speakers and 1 participant is a native speaker of Uzbek and Persian. This bilingual participant has come to Turkey when she was 5 years old, and then she commenced primary school in Turkey. She has been taking her formal education in Turkish for 8 years. However, she has been raised by parents who do not know Turkish very well. Yet, the Uzbek participant is fluent and proficient in Turkish. All of the participants have taken the English course at state schools so far. They have taken the English course since they were 4th grades students. Each year, they have been exposed to English instruction for a minimum of 2 hours and a maximum of 6 hours. The participants' English proficiency levels are mixed. A former LGS (High School Entrance Exam) exam is administered as a standardized test designed and validated by MEB (Ministry of National Education) to determine the participants' English level.

Instruments

LGS exam as a standardized test:

To determine the participants' level of English, the researcher decides to use MEB's former high school entrance exam questions. The rationale behind using this examination is that the participants are preparing for LGS this year and they are familiar with the question styles.

Storybird as a digital storytelling tool

The researcher decides on the Storybird website to generate digital stories. The major ground using this website is that Storybird has a very handy interface and it provides great visuals to its users. Although the website is not free of charge, 30 days are allocated as a trial period and it is quite sufficient for the realization of the study. Also, a free assignment 'Friends Forever' is elected by the researcher as an authentic implementation in an English classroom would be in that way.
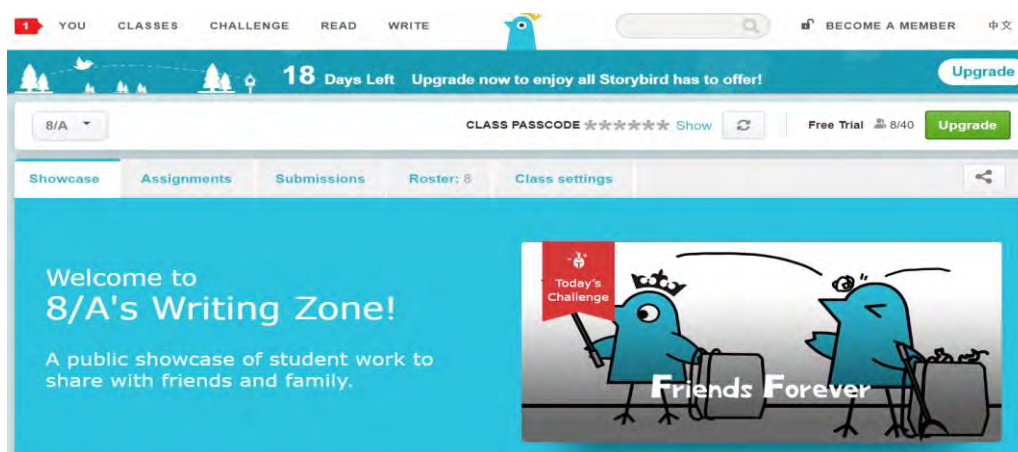

Figure 1: Storybird as a digital storytelling tool

Procedures

Because of the limitations in time and resources (Tongco, 2007), the purposive sampling method is conducted for investigating the participants' experiences with the digital storytelling tool 'Storybird'. The study is announced to the participants by the researcher (their English language teacher). It is indicated that it will be a non-compulsory supplement to the course. The study is conducted in four weeks and sessions take place during class hours. The duration of each session is 40 minutes. The LGS proficiency test is conducted in the first session. Then, the researcher distributes the pre-project open-ended questionnaires to the participants to be able to collect data considering their initial knowledge and thoughts about digital storytelling.

In the following session, the researcher introduces the Storybird to the participants and gives detailed information about how to use the tool. The researcher generates a class on the website named 8/A and gives the credentials to participants for signing up. After that, a writing task under the head of 'Friends Forever' is assigned. The students do not have the opportunity to do assignments out of the school as they do not possess personal computers and internet connections. Also, there is not a computer lab facility within the school. Therefore, the researcher allocates 30 minutes for each student by enabling them to use the researcher's computer for writing their stories. After all of the students finish and publish their stories. Then, the researcher reads the stories and gives feedback to each participant.
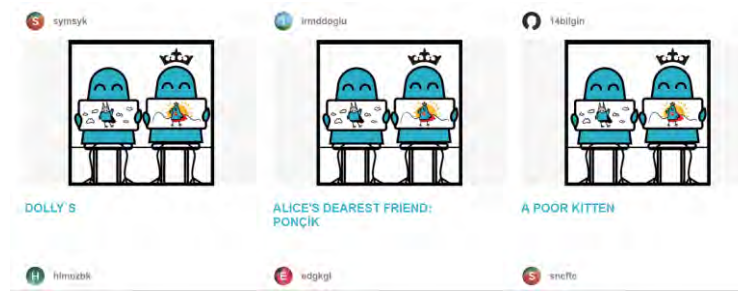
Figure 2: Covers of the participants' digital stories

At the end of the sessions, the researcher conducts a post-project open-ended questionnaire to the participants to obtain more information about their experience and reflections about writing a story on a digital platform. It should be noted that the language of the questionnaires conducted before and after the study is Turkish. The rationale behind using Turkish is to increase the participants' ability to express how they perceive their new learning experience and explain their inner thoughts about it.

Data Analysis
The data is collected through pre-and post- open-ended questionnaires and observations during the sessions. The questions asked in the questionnaires are generated based upon existing literature on digital storytelling. The responses are collected and analyzed through thematic coding. Both the observations and the responses given by the students help to determine basic themes and to interpret the answers. For the sake of anonymity, the participants are assigned codes as P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, and P6. Additionally, participants' ages and their nationalities are specified in parentheses.

FINDINGS
Former perspectives on digital storytelling
1. What are the participants' former perspectives on using a digital storytelling tool?
The data collected from the pre-project questionnaire helps to answer the first research question. It gives basic information about the participants' background knowledge and thoughts about digital storytelling. The responses to what they know about digital storytelling are somewhat similar. The participant P2 and P6 have had a misconception that digital storytelling is like a search engine giving information about any topic.

- "A story that gives information in online platforms" (*P2, Turkish participant, age 14*).
- "It helps to examine research studies…" (*P6, Turkish participant, age 14*).

The questions are asked for inquiring about participants' initial concerns about writing a digital story. There is a wide range of answers. Three participants stated that they feel anxious about writing a digital story. One of the participants confesses that she is somewhat comfortable with telling a story on a digital platform. The other two participants indicate that they are quite excited and curious about this new experience. However, all of the participants are worried about writing in a foreign language. They state that they have language concerns and they are afraid of making mistakes while writing English. Harmer (2001) puts forward that "computer screen frequently allows students to see their writing more objectively" (p.261). Likewise, in this study, the participants have conveyed their point of view thoroughly.

- "Firstly, I'll be afraid of telling a story in English as many people will be able to read my story. However, I will manage to be confident about it" *(P1, Turkish participant, age 14)*.
- "I think it will be quite fun. Writing in a second language may improve my intellect" *(P2, Turkish participant, age 14)*.
- "I'm excited about writing a story in English. I have never tried it before. It is worth trying" *(P3, Turkish participant, age 14)*.
- "No, I'm not sure that I can tell a story in English. I am not comfortable with it" *(P4, Uzbek and Persian participant, age 14)*.

It should be noted that the prudence of the participants in the study is similar to each other although they are different in certain aspects. "Our understanding of a task before we commence doing the work can affect the process we are going to embark upon" (Castañeda, 2013, p.52).

Overall experience with Storybird
2. What are the participants' overall experiences while using Storybird?

To answer the second research question, the post-project questionnaire is conducted after the participants submit their stories to the researcher. Generally, the participants mostly denote the ICT problems they have confronted during the task. Problems related to internet connection are also mentioned by participants.

- "I haven't done a task by using a computer before. That's why I struggle with the project" (*P5, Turkish participant, age 14*).
- "I lost the internet connection and my battery died. It caused the extension of time" (*P2, Turkish participant, age 14*).
- "I haven't got much experience with computers, so it was hard for me to manage the task" (*P3, Turkish participant, age 14*).

Final perspectives on digital storytelling
3. Do the participants' perspectives on digital storytelling tools change after using Storybird?
Findings show that all of the students are proud of their stories. One of the major themes found after analyzing the responses is publishing. All of the participants reveal that they are excited about publishing their stories as real readers may read and like their stories. It can be concluded that the participants' previous concerns related to digital storytelling have changed after using the website.

- "I felt like an author. I was proud because everybody can see and read my story" (P5, *Turkish participant, age 14)*).
- "After I published my story, someone using Storybird liked it. It was amazing" *(P2, Turkish participant, age 14).*
- "When I shared my story, I saw that there were people who were reading and liked it. I was proud of myself" (*P1, Turkish participant, age 14).*
- "Writing a story in English was the thing that I was proud of. I wrote a story and published it on a website. Maybe, I will be a good writer in the future" *(P4, Uzbek and Persian participant, age 13).*

DISCUSSION
This case study explores students' experiences in English writing and perceptions of utilizing Storybird as a digital storytelling tool. The major findings of qualitative data support that Storybird is a good tool for encouraging the participants to write in their foreign language. The previous perspectives on digital storytelling have differed after they have got familiarized with the tool.

As the main problem stated by the participants is technology literacy, it should be considered to instruct them in this field systematically before conducting such research studies. Many studies are supporting the idea that using technology improves learners' language skills (Damavandi *et* al. 2018; Balaman, 2018; Nguyen, 2017; Nazri, Shah, Yunus, & Zakaria, 2016; Harris, 2011). Therefore, the participants' technological literacy should not be ignored in favor of the results of a study.

The results of data analysis also support the idea that having a real audience creates an authentic language learning environment. Moreover, the opportunity to publish the stories on Storybird and sharing them with other readers create a sense of ownership. Similarly, Damavandi *et* al. (2018) find that the participants take advantage of the *'constructivist nature of the digital storytelling'* (p.69) and they take responsibility for writing their stories.

CONCLUSION
The present study is a small-scale case study and it is limited both in time and in technological facilities. However, the observations and the responses of the participants given in questionnaires represent a high level of discernment considering the digital storytelling practice. The findings of the study posit that Storybird is an effective tool providing learners a real-life environment in foreign language classrooms especially in writing sessions. Furthermore, having real readers within the website motivates the participants for accomplishing their tasks and it creates a real publishing setting for them. Finally, the collected data reveals that the previous concerns of the participants related to language and technology have switched to positive feelings such as satisfaction about their story.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A
Pre-Study Open-Ended Survey Questions
1. What do you think of digital storytelling?
2. Have you ever come across an online digital story? If yes, can you describe it briefly?
3. What do you know about digital storytelling?
4. What kind of technology / technological applications do you use?
5. How comfortable do you feel when using these various technologies?
6. How do you feel about telling a story in English? Do you feel comfortable with that? Please explain.
7. How do you feel about telling a story about yourself in English? Do you feel comfortable with that? Please explain.
Appendix B
Post-Study Open-Ended Survey Questions
1. What were your technological problems in digital story writing?
2. What were the challenges of writing stories in English for you?
3. Was it a positive experience for you to use technology when writing stories? Why?
4. Was writing the digital story in English a positive experience for you? Why?
5. What technological challenges have you faced when writing digital stories?
6. What challenges have you encountered in terms of language when writing digital stories?
7. What was the part of the digital story you wrote that you were most proud of or loved?