Digital Storytelling and Oral Fluency in an English Reading Class at a Japanese University

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the effectiveness of digital storytelling (DST) in improving oral reading fluency by using the preview function of the software Photo Story 3. This application easily handles the recording and revising of a narration, which is an essential part of oral reading. DST is the art of telling stories through the use of various multimedia, such as text, still images, audio, and video. DST combines the functions of visualizing and verbalizing, which are essential for language comprehension and thinking from the perspective of cognitive neuroscience. The participants were 35 Japanese nursing students in Japan, who carried out DST utilizing nursing episodes from a textbook. Undertaking DST enabled the participants to learn to read deeply, visualize the story, and enjoy verbalizing their interpretation of the context, which is a skill lacking in most Japanese students due to the reading/translation teaching method.

Keywords: Digital Storytelling, Oral Reading Fluency, Photo Story 3, Reading Comprehension, Visualizing and Verbalizing

INTRODUCTION

The study of English in the Japanese classroom is focused on acquiring knowledge about the fundamentals of English, such as grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure, in preparation for entrance examinations for a university or proficiency tests for employment. The traditional reading class is conducted using the reading and translation method. Although oral reading is used in classroom settings, sentences in English are read individually or in a series by a student. The student must translate into Japanese the passages read aloud, with the teacher providing corrections to the translation when necessary.

There are two significant problems with this teaching method. The first problem is that the aim of the students in a reading class is to simply translate the text word-for-word from English into Japanese, leaving the students unable to enjoy the content or the story. The author has taught English reading classes for nursing students for more than ten years. In the early stages of her teaching experience, she prepared comprehension questions to determine whether students understood key messages in the story and attempted to encourage deep discussions of the content. However, the students were not interested in reading passages deeply or
interpreting them from various perspectives, and they were reluctant to answer comprehension questions. These problems made reading classes unfulfilling for both the teacher and the students and encouraged the teacher to seek new and interesting methods for teaching reading. The other problem is that students do not actively seek out phonetic, lexical, or morphological input unless they are highly self-motivated (Muroi, 2005). The extra time devoted to in-class translation means that the amount of oral pronunciation the students hear in any class period is limited. Most students do not prepare before class by reading the entire text aloud; therefore, they “tune out” the pronunciation of vocabulary when it is their turn to read aloud (Yoneoka, 1994). This is especially true for the nursing students in the author’s classes, who read textbooks containing difficult terminology. The students find it difficult to pronounce medical terms and often stop reading in the middle of the sentences. This pattern eventually leads to decreasing self-confidence in English. Therefore, there is an urgent need to help students enjoy reading and to re-energize language classes. One promising method is the use of digital storytelling (DST).

DST has been extensively practised in grade schools, middle schools, high schools, universities, and graduate schools in the United States to improve the comprehensive literacy skills of students (Behmer, 2005). For example, the University of Houston (2007) features a website describing “The educational uses of digital storytelling.” DST is a relatively new method in Japan. Based on its potential benefits, DST was introduced into a Japanese university nursing class to help students improve their levels of oral fluency and to increase students’ enjoyment of reading.

THE STUDY

What Is Digital Storytelling?

DST is a method that combines electronic media tools with traditional storytelling teaching methods. The method used in DST includes preparing digital pictures based on a story, recording the story or narration, adding music, if desired, and combining these various effects into a movie. Through this process, reading and learning can be made exciting and fun. Ohler (2007) states that DST is a new pathway to literacy, learning, and creativity. DST is an academic tool for exploring content and communicating what is understood, and it improves speaking and listening skills while it helps learners acquire the context of literacy. Ellis (2009) believes that DST is the key to excellent teaching and dynamic learning. Ellis notes that this is a unique method of communication that enables students to express their thoughts and ideas in their own unique ways, and it improves reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary.

Many other researchers (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Bendt & Bowe, 2000) have emphasized improvements in reading fluency through the practice of DST. Rasinski (2003), in particular, points out the importance of oral reading fluency. Rasinski emphasizes that oral reading fluency means more than reading accurately and quickly; it also involves reading with expression as a way to uncover the text’s meaning. In addition to improving the understanding and interpretation of the content, oral reading expresses emotions through voice inflection, suggesting that it is a speaking activity rather than a reading activity. Rasinski (2011) defines oral reading fluency in terms of three key components: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody (or expression). The third component of fluency, prosodic or expressive reading, is directly related to comprehension. Fluent readers embed the prosodic or melodic features of spoken language – stress, pitch variations, intonation, rate, phrasing, and pausing – in their voice (Dowhower, 1987, 1991; Schreiber, 1980, 1987, 1991; Schreiber & Read, 1980). This embedding of prosody shows that the reader is trying to make sense of the text.

Many benefits of digital storytelling have been reported. For the author’s first empirical study, the focus was on oral reading fluency in terms of visualizing and verbalizing. The next section explains the connection between oral
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