

Transforming Students into Digital Hakawati: Digital Storytelling in the AFL Classroom: Learners' Attitudes and Recommendations

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Abstract

In a small exploratory pilot study, Digital Storytelling was used to enhance language learning and engagement as part of an Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) program. Twenty-three AFL learners studying in a seven-week intensive Arabic summer program participated in the pilot study. Participants took a self-administered online survey that rated their experience creating digital stories in Arabic using three computer software programs and two iPad apps. The results of the pilot study suggest that Digital Storytelling (DS) can be an effective tool for enhancing Arabic instruction at multiple proficiency levels.

1.

Introduction

Digital Storytelling is a modern descendent of the ancient art of storytelling, an art that has been found in many cultures throughout history (Atta-Alla, 2012). A simple definition of DS integrates modern technology with the traditional definition of storytelling: one can say that DS is the art of telling a story using a digital medium. The emergence of digital storytelling as an educational tool occurred in the late 1980s (Robin, 2008). The impetus for use of digital storytelling in classrooms gained momentum in San Francisco when Dana Atchley, Joe Lambert, and Nina Mullen founded the San Francisco Digital Media Center in 1994. In 1998, the center was moved to Berkeley, California where it was renamed the Center for Digital Storytelling (Center for Digital Story Telling, 2014). In describing digital storytelling, Robin (2008) explains that:

“Digital storytelling allows computer users to become creative storytellers through the traditional processes of selecting a topic, conducting some research, writing a script, and developing an interesting story. This material is then combined with various types of multimedia, including computer based graphics, recorded audio, computer generated text, video clips, and music so that it can be played on a computer, uploaded on a web site, or burned on a DVD” (p. 222)

As the above description suggests, digital storytelling engages students in each of the four language skills: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. As a learning activity, it promotes collaboration when assigned to multiple students. As an additional benefit, it encourages students to practice typing in the target language; this is especially important for beginning Arabic students at the novice level, as the resulting finished product showcases simple typed Arabic statements in a manner that comes across as polished and professional. More advanced students benefit by using a modern, relevant medium to express complex ideas in a personally meaningful and engaging way.

In addition to its benefits for language learning, Digital Storytelling provides deep integration with Arabic cultural storytelling traditions. In Arabic culture, the *bakawati* or teller of tales played an important cultural role. At a time before the existence of digital media, and when it was unusual for individuals to own books, people gathered in public spaces such as the *qahwe* (coffee shop) to hear stories. There, the *bakawati* would recite stories and long tales such as the epics of *Antar Ibn Shaddad* and *Abu Zaid Al-Hilali*, to a rapt audience.

The stories told by the *bakawati* typically included conflict, which served to deepen audience involvement. Listeners often took sides, experiencing the characters' actions vicariously. Sometimes real fights broke out between listeners identifying with opposing factions in these imaginary conflicts. Often the *hekaya* (story) told by the *bakawati* did not end in one session, but rather were deliberately

drawn out in order to keep the audience engaged as they returned on multiple evenings to hear how the story developed.

The *hekaya* told by the *bakawati* served a role similar to that played by modern television serials, movies, and other forms of digital entertainment. As these modern forms of digital entertainment found their way into Arab countries in the second half of the 20th century, the traditional art form of storytelling that had been cultivated and developed by the *bakawati* over the course of centuries began to disappear. Reintegrating the use of storytelling in today's Arabic language classrooms provides a vehicle for teaching the four language skills in a way that is culturally authentic and historically correct. Arabic-language storytelling using digital media integrates the Arabic storytelling tradition epitomized by the traditional art of the *bakawati* with the modern digital storytelling media that replaced it.

2. Digital Storytelling in Research

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a comprehensive literature review of all DS research, a look at DS research in language classrooms suggests various benefits resulting from the integration of DS into foreign language learning. Many studies discuss DS in ESL and EFL classrooms (e.g. Atta-Alla, 2012; Tsou, Wang, & Li, 2006; Lin, 2003; Yao 2003) while others explore and evaluate the use of DS in FL classrooms. Pesola (1991), a pioneer in exploring the use of DS in FL teaching, identifies DS as a powerful tool for “surrounding the young learners with language”. Other studies (e.g. Egan, 2005; Sadik, 2008) have found that storytelling enhances the integration of language skills.

Egan (2005) makes the point that the introduction of imaginative approaches employing varied teaching tools and strategies, including storytelling, brings knowledge to life. He found that through such imaginative approaches, students' emotions are awakened, their cognitive skills develop effectively, and their engagement increases. Egan (2008) points out that deep sensations such as hope, fear and passion produce a lasting impact on the learning process. This point brings to mind the profound levels of audience involvement that occurred when listeners took sides with

the characters in the "*hakawati's*" stories. Sadik (2008) found that with proper training, Egyptian teachers were able to integrate DS into the classroom as a means of introducing technology in ways that increased students' engagement in the learning process. He found that students who produced DS projects took ownership of their own learning and were able to better understand curricular content and expectations as a result.

Tsou, Wang, and Tzeng (2006) observe that some foreign language teachers may be apprehensive about introducing storytelling into the classroom due to their already overloaded curricula. For such teachers, DS poses a burden by requiring them to locate appropriate stories for students who may not be able to handle independently the cultural and linguistic requirements the project imposes. As a solution, their research showed that through assisted technical help (a website specifically geared for teachers who want to use DS), the quality of instruction and learning is improved as students gain independence and subsequent enjoyment in producing their projects.

Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2011) evaluated the positive impact and increased student comprehension when storytelling is presented in a reading-aloud format for Saudi youths in the classroom. Their model is based on the teacher, rather than the students, reading aloud. Green (2013) alternatively provides a student-centered model, making the case that it is possible to design student-centered digital story projects by tapping into the tradition of storytelling and integrating Web 2.0 DS technologies. She further states that

“this transformative use of technology within the framework of social constructionism motivates language students to focus on the contextual use of language rather than basic vocabulary development. The case for digital storytelling is built on an intersection of secondary language acquisition theory, language learning, pedagogical understandings and instructional strategies” (p.23).

In addition to transcending basic vocabulary development, Houston (1997) argues that DS teaches other forms of written

discourse, allowing students to apply and extend the skills they acquire through storytelling to other assignments both within and outside their language classes. She found that DS can help students learn to structure their writing, develop their organizational strategies in an engaging way, and share their work with their peers. Yang & Wu (2012) conducted a year-long study which found that the use of DS in English language classrooms improved students' language achievement, critical thinking, and motivation.

Despite the wealth of research on DS in the foreign language classroom in general, and despite the importance of storytelling in the Arabic cultural and literary tradition, the authors of the current study did not find any studies that looked at the use of DS specifically for teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL). The current pilot study was designed to explore ways to begin to fill what appears to be a gap in the research on teaching AFL at a time when Arabic programs and classes continue to grow in popularity and attendance.

3. The Current Study

This small (n=23) pilot project studied students' responses to using DS in AFL classrooms. The study was conducted at a west-coast university where DS was implemented as part of the curriculum's core for four different Arabic proficiency levels taught in a seven-week summer immersion Arabic program.

3.1 Classes

The language and culture classes met five days a week with the sixth half-day dedicated to language study through film. The DS classes were conducted twice a week for an hour in the university's Multimedia Language Learning Center (MMLC), where all students had access to PC desktop and Mac computers.

3.2 Equipment

In addition to the MMLC's computers, all students had access to iPads which were part of the Arabic program's mobile lab. On

occasion, the DS classes were conducted in the regular language classroom using the mobile lab. At other times, students were given the option of working with the iPads outdoors. Some students brought their personal laptops to work on as they felt more comfortable using their own equipment.

3.3 Software

Three computer programs and two iPad apps were used for the DS assignments. The computer programs used were iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, and Microsoft Photo Story 3. Both iMovie and Movie Maker come downloaded on the MMLC's Macs and PCs respectively, while Photo Story is free-downloadable software provided by Microsoft for PCs. The iPad apps used were Movie Maker for iPad and Comic Life. Explaining Comic Life, macinstruct.com (2014) says:

“Comic Life is an award winning application for creating not just comics (obviously), but also annotated images, dynamic photo albums, greeting cards, scrap books, story books, and instruction guides and brochures. In the classroom, it is an excellent tool for creating reports of almost any kind. Comic Life allows you to create page layouts with boxes for images and text. Styles can be applied to create just about any type of ‘feel’ for your document. Captions can be created with tails in order to have thought balloons, speech boxes or just additional annotations. Filters are available to turn your digital images into a variety of hand drawn looking graphics to enhance the comic appearance of your work.”

3.4 Method

The research was conducted during the final week of the summer intensive Arabic program, after the students had completed

three DS assignments. Prior to administration of the pilot study questionnaire, all DS assignments had been provided and graded by the language instructor for each class. Another instructor with the needed technical knowledge served as the guide for the students and conducted the actual DS class. Two assistants who served as tutors for the Arabic program as well as additional MMLC staff provided hardware and software technical support and assisted the DS instructor. All instructors and tutors coordinated with each other and communicated on a daily basis about the classes and assignments.

3.5 Participants

A majority of the 23 participants in the study were university students ranging from freshmen to graduate students. Only individuals who were 18 years of age or older participated in the study. Participants were of both genders. The participants' majors varied. They were at various proficiency levels in Arabic ranging from Novice through Intermediate to Advanced. As participants in an intensive residential summer language program, they came from various states in addition to the state where the research was conducted.

3.6 Data Collection

The authors used a questionnaire with 31 questions. Of these, 20 questions were closed-ended while 11 were open-ended. The first two questions ensured that participants were over 18 years of age, had read the informed consent form, and gave their informed consent to participate in the study. (Further participation was not possible unless these conditions were met.) The authors used Survey Monkey to administer the questionnaire. Each of the 23 participants answered the questionnaire at her/his own convenience. On average, each questionnaire took 10 minutes to complete. Survey responses were completely anonymous and had no bearing or impact on the students' grades. Some questions were answered by fewer than 23 students. Where this was the case, the total number of students who answered the question is noted.

3.7 Results

Survey Monkey provides results in both percentage and numerical formats. Both formats are included here. 82.6% (19 out of 23) participants in this study had never used DS in any class, while 17.4% (4 out of 23) had used DS in previous classes. As for using DS in an Arabic class, 87% (20/23) of the participants reported this to be the first time they used DS in an Arabic classroom while 13% (3/23) had previously used it. Respondents were asked to “check all that apply” in response to the question: “Before taking this class, had you ever used any of the following programs?” The answers were as follows: 5 out of 23 participants (27.1%) had previously used Comic Life; 6 out of 23 (26.1%) respondents had previously used Photo Story; 9 out of 23 (39.1%) had used iMovie while 10 out of 23 (43.5%) had used Windows Movie Maker; 13 out of 23 (56.5%) reported using Photoshop. (Although Photoshop was not used in the DS classroom to create digital stories, some may have used it to edit pictures). Four out of 23 respondents (17.4%) had never used any of these programs. Before taking the DS class, 85% or 17 of the 20 students who answered this question (three students did not respond) reported that they did not know how to use Comic Life, and 75% or 15 of the 20 who answered this question reported that they did not know how to use Photo Story.

Students were asked to rank the programs in order of their preference of usage for DS, with 1 being most preferred and 6 least preferred. The 21 responses received for this question are shown in Table 1; two respondents did not answer this question. Participants who reported the category “other” named the following programs: Adobe Premiere Pro and MS PowerPoint.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | N/A | Rating Avg | Rating Count |
|-----------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|
| iMovie on Computer | 23.8% (5) | 9.5% (2) | 9.5% (2) | 9.5% (2) | 14.3% (3) | 0.0% (0) | 33.3% (7) | 2.71 | 21 |
| Comic Life | 23.8% (5) | 42.9% (9) | 9.5% (2) | 9.5% (2) | 4.8% (2) | 9.5% (2) | 0.0% (0) | 3.47 | 21 |
| Photo Story | 14.3% (3) | 19.0% (4) | 19.0% (4) | 9.5% (2) | 9.5% (2) | 4.8% (1) | 23.8% (5) | 2.94 | 21 |

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|------|----|
| IMovie on IPad | 9.5% (2) | 0.0% (0) | 9.5% (2) | 14.3% (3) | 9.5% (2) | 14.3% (3) | 38.1% (8) | 4.0 | 21 |
| Photoshop | 14.3% (3) | 4.8% (1) | 23.8% (5) | 19.0% (4) | 4.8% (1) | 14.3% (3) | 19% (4) | 3.47 | 21 |
| Other | 14.3% (3) | 19.0% (4) | 0.0% (0) | 0.0% (0) | 19.0% (4) | 9.5% (2) | 38.1% (8) | 3.31 | 21 |

Table 1. Respondents rating of preferred program for DS

Additionally, the participants were asked whether it was easy to use the iPad, MMLC computers, and their own laptops to create their DS. The results are reported in Table 2. Two participants skipped answering this question.

| | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree | Rating Count |
|----------------|-------------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|----------------|--------------|
| iPad | 23.8% (5) | 19.0% (4) | 28.6% (6) | 9.5% (2) | 19.0% (4) | 21 |
| MMLC Computers | 4.8% (1) | 4.8% (1) | 28.6% (6) | 33.3% (7) | 28.6% (6) | 21 |
| Own Laptop | 14.3% (3) | 0.0% (0) | 52.4% (11) | 9.5% (2) | 14.3% (3) | 21 |

Table 2. It was easy to use iPad, MMLC computers and own laptops

Elaborating on their ratings of ease of use for the iPad, 5 participants said they had never used an iPad before which made it more difficult for them; another 7 expressed their frustration with glitches in the Comic Life app and its compatibility with Arabic language fonts. With respect to ease of use of the MMLC computers, one respondent found them easier to use (than other options) because she /he used PowerPoint. Regarding

using their own laptops, 5 respondents stated that doing so allowed them more flexibility in preparing and collecting material for their DS. The participants ranking of their preferred computer for creating DS was as shown in Table 3. Three participants skipped answering this question.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | Rating Count |
|---------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|-----------------|
| iPad | 40.0% (8) | 20.0% (4) | 10.0% (6) | 30.0% (6) | 20 |
| MMLC PC | 30.0% (6) | 35.0% (7) | 30.0% (6) | 5.0% (1) | 20 |
| MMLC Mac | 5.0% (1) | 20.0% (4) | 55.0% (11) | 20.0% (4) | 20 |
| Own Laptop | 25.0% (5) | 25.0% (5) | 5.0% (1) | 45.0% (8) | 20 |

Table 3. Participants' computer preference for creating DS (1 most preferred and 4 least preferred).

Fifty percent of the participants who responded (10/20) reported that they did not experience any technical difficulties creating their DS, whereas the other half reported technical difficulties. Three participants did not respond to this question. The reported difficulties were mainly related to using certain fonts in Arabic on the iPads. Additional problems included computers crashing while students were working on their projects, as well as audio-related issues.

Eighty percent or 16 out of the 20 that answered this question said that DS helped them practice the language and the vocabulary learned in class. In addition, 65% (13/20) said that DS helped them improve their language skills by helping them communicate in Arabic and interpret Arabic media and texts. Moreover, 85% (17/20) said that DS helped them improve their Arabic language skills by giving them the opportunity to present written (typed) and spoken material in Arabic and demonstrate what they had learned. Sixty five percent (13/20) said that DS helped them see their progress in Arabic and 70% (14/20) said that it helped them learn a new technology. Seventy five percent (15/20) of the respondents agreed that DS is a fun and effective tool for assisting language learners in practicing their target language and 60% (12/20) said that DS helped them expand their learning experience and encouraged their language learning beyond the classroom. Eighty percent (16/20) recommended using DS in language learning classrooms in general and for learning Arabic in particular.

Some of the feedback on what students liked best about the DS experience included the following:

- “Being able to refer back to it to listen to pronunciation. Being able to think creatively in Arabic.”
- “I had the freedom to talk about subjects that I am interested in, not just be subject to what is talked about in class.”
- “Making presentations that later required vocal application of information.”
- “Using the Comic Life and Photo Story programs helped a lot. Keeping the project simple was perfect. The opportunity

to speak about ourselves gave us valuable time to practice exactly what we were learning in class. Overall, it was a great course, and I think it was well organized.”

- “It's innovative.”
- “Seeing all of our projects come to fruition and be printed.”

4. Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of the current study suggest that DS can be an effective tool for teaching AFL. As many participants indicated, it helped them practice the target language, use new vocabulary, interpret Arabic texts, and communicate in Arabic. DS gave participants an opportunity to present oral and written Arabic material, trace their progress in learning the language, learn new technology skills, and demonstrate what they had learned. Commenting on how the DS experience helped students learn Arabic in general, one participant said, “It was another resource in which to display what I have learned thus far”. Another said, “It was fun and overall user friendly”, while another commented “... at first I was frustrated by it, but in retrospect learned a lot.”

The majority of the students were pleased with their DS experience. While what most students liked best about DS were the finished products, the comments showed that some students enjoyed the challenge and learning opportunities provided by DS beyond the traditional language classroom. These comments show that when assignments are student-centered and the DS learning experience is customized to students' interests and needs, DS can be a motivating factor in promoting Arabic language learning. In this pilot study, students maintained positive attitudes toward DS in an Arabic classroom despite the technological challenges some faced.

With respect to the preferred program to use, the participants in this study chose Comic Life (total 66.7% or 14/21) followed by iMovie, Photo Story, and other programs (each at 33.3% or 7/21), while Photoshop ranked at 19.1 % (4/21) and iMovie on the iPad was the least preferred (9.5% or 2/21). However, a different set of students may be more comfortable using other software programs

and apps. In terms of ease of use, students ranked the MMLC computers as the easiest, followed by iPads and then their own laptops.

The participants' most preferred tools were aligned with these choices as 65% or 13/20 preferred to use the university's language learning center's computers followed by 60% (12/20) who preferred the iPads. Such choices are understandable because the educational institution's computers were already set up with the software programs the DS instructor anticipated needing (e.g. audio recording programs and basic photo editing programs). Another reason for this preference was the ease of storing work in progress on the MMLC computers using each students' account, without needing to use flash drives, worry about losing work, or fear of another student inadvertently jumbling the work in progress. With the increased spread of tablet ownership among students, the authors anticipate that using tablets to create DS will become the most preferred tool if each student has a tablet and/or if the educational institution can afford to dedicate a tablet for each student or can find a way to create students' personal accounts on such tools so that no other user has access to another person's account on the same tablet.

5. Limitations and Challenges

While the results of this small pilot study suggest that the attitudes of learners were largely positive toward using DS in an Arabic language classroom, the process of incorporating DS into the AFL classroom is not free of challenges. The challenges that the authors anticipate are in the areas of technology and content knowledge. On the technical front, many teachers of Arabic may not have the technical skills needed to produce a DS and may lack the needed skills to help students understand the steps involved in the production process. The professors and participants in this study had access to a Multi Media Language Lab complete with modern equipment and expert technical support personnel, but this may not be the case for every language teacher. In situations where such resources are not available, lack of teacher proficiency in

understanding and overcoming the technical difficulties users face could potentially impede the DS production process.

Furthermore, the teachers themselves may need assistance to understand and operate certain programs (such as audio and video or photo editing programs) that could be used in conjunction with DS. As for content knowledge, Arabic teachers may feel that DS is not the preferred medium for them to use in providing content to their students, nor the right medium for the students to use to complete their assignments. Some Arabic teachers come from a very traditional teaching environment where ‘teachers teach and students learn.’ Teachers from such traditional backgrounds might not feel comfortable venturing into a new field of education replete with technology that, while empowering for the students, may be intimidating for the teachers. However, all of these challenges are manageable if Arabic teachers are convinced of the importance and effectiveness of using DS in their classrooms.

Students also may have objections to the use of DS as part of their Arabic learning experience. While the majority of responses received in this pilot study were positive, the technology aspect was not without its (occasionally vociferous) detractors. Examples of some of the negative responses to open-ended survey questions include:

- “It was difficult to type and control things on Comic Life on the iPad.”
- “Program needs bug fixes because it was slow while using it and the compatibility with Arabic needs improvement.”
- “I had not used an iPad much before, though relatively intuitive some students were definitely frustrated.”
- “It was helpful in helping me to learn Arabic, but it was a bit overwhelming to try and make a good story and incorporate what we learned in class.”

On the basis of their teaching experience and the results of this pilot study, the authors suggest the following steps for Arabic teachers planning to adopt DS into their AFL classes:

- Provide students with opportunities to personalize their DS. Encourage them to create a digital story that is

personally meaningful while incorporating the material learned in class.

- Make sure to take time to share, display and publish the students' digital stories and use each one to initiate discussions in the target language.
- Use scaffolding and increase the complexity of the assignments as the students' proficiency level increases.
- Be familiar in advance with the software you will ask the students to use so you can guide and assist them with troubleshooting should the need arise.

6. Conclusion

The majority of the participants in this study, at varied proficiency levels, found DS an effective tool for learning Arabic as a foreign language. These findings are in alignment with what other research looking at DS in language classrooms has found (e.g. Pesola 1991; Wilson 1997; Robin, 2008; Sadik, 2008; Yang & Wu, 2012). The attitudes of the students in our Arabic language classrooms were largely positive toward using DS in their classes. Despite the technological problems some faced, DS helped them develop and practice the four language skills and allowed them to reflect on and trace their progress as they compared the DS they produced at the beginning of their courses with those that they produced later. In an educational environment where common core standards for Arabic language classrooms are emerging, and where the three modes of communication are stressed, DS can be a very useful tool. Teachers can use DS not only for the presentational mode but also for the interpersonal and interpretive modes. For example, once students have created their own digital stories they can then listen to, read, respond to, ask questions about, and report on the digital stories produced by their peers. The digital medium can empower Arabic learners not only to tell stories but also to listen to and reflect on them. The results of this pilot study suggest that digital storytelling has the potential to engage and empower Arabic students individually and collectively, by transforming each student into a digital *hakawati*.

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