PORTAL

# Applying Digital Storytelling Technology to a Problem of Practice in Education

By Robert Wyss

## Cultural and Educational Pressure to Excel

In an article on the principles of teaching and learning, Brophy (1998) points out that "productive contexts for learning feature an ethic of caring that pervades teacher/student and student/student interactions" (p. 8). Establishing and maintaining a supportive classroom environment represents one of the most pertinent challenges faced by educators everywhere. However, in recent years, creating cohesive classroom environments has become an even more fundamental issue for language educators in tertiary-level learning contexts in northeast Asia.

Although Japanese, Korean, and Chinese learners are, as a rule, polite, friendly, and cooperative with their professors and teachers, they tacitly view the experience of formal classroom learning as one in which they are engaged in battle with their peers for a meager percentage of available top grades. Northeast Asians grow up in fiercely competitive test-based educational systems where the path to individual academic success is fraught at every turn by steep grading curves and relentless parental and societal pressure.

Throughout their youth, northeast Asian learners are burdened with other people's (often unrealistic) expectations of them as they trudge onward and upward toward the single most important day of their entire lives: the day they sit for their college entrance exams. For many Asian students, their entire future is determined at a single stroke by their performance on the university entrance exams. Earning a degree from a top-ranked university in Japan, Korea, or China guarantees a top-notch professional career, enviable lifelong socioeconomic status, and the promise of enhancing one's family's social standing in the community.

On the other hand, failing to gain admission to a respectable university often means a life of hard manual labor and, in some cases, irreparable loss of face. Failure to excel academically has become a social taboo in northeast Asian cultures, one that sometimes leads to profound humiliation that Westerners can hardly fathom.

## A Radical Change Is Needed

Under such intense pressure to stand out academically among one's peers, these students are done no favors by the intensified dynamic of classroom competition in language learning contexts. Therefore, it is hardly any wonder that northeast Asian foreign language learners are reluctant to engage in communicative activities that require them to openly share their ideas, feelings, dreams, hopes, and fears with others. They find communicative classroom interaction unfamiliar and perceive it at best as a negligible step toward achieving the top grade. What's more, open verbal in-class communication in English hazards the unwelcome risk of losing face in front of the teacher and fellow students.

Notwithstanding such formidable psychosocial obstacles, it behooves EFL teachers to establish learning communities in their classrooms that encourage students to embrace opportunities for communicative learning. Communication necessarily implies cooperation, and on this subject Brophy (1998) also claims that "students are likely to show improved achievement outcomes when they engage in forms of co-operative learning as an alternative to completing assignments on their own" (p. 27).

The crucial point to be emphasized is that cooperative learning ultimately hinges on students' ability to relate to each other as partners, on their capacity for breaking the ice right at the start of the course, and on their willingness

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to continue relating to one another in noncompetitive ways throughout the semester. Northeast Asian students studying foreign languages must learn to make the radical shift from perceiving class peers as competitors vying for the precious and few hard-to-get top grades to valued partners participating in the overall shared effort of language learning.

In his discussion of the benefits of communicative language teaching, Brown (1994) claims that effective language learning requires cooperative, real-life communicative classroom interaction:

> Beyond grammatical discourse elements in communication, we [language teachers] are probing the nature of social, cultural, and pragmatic features of language. We are exploring pedagogical means for "real-life" communication in the classroom. . . . We are equipping our students with tools for generating unrehearsed language performance "out there" when they leave the womb of our classrooms. . . . We are looking at learners as partners in a cooperative venture. And our classroom practices seek to draw on whatever intrinsically sparks learners to reach their fullest potential. (p. 77)

## Digital Storytelling Shorts

Digital storytelling in the form of short film projects represents an approach to classroom interaction that specifically addresses the need for northeast Asian EFL university students to shift their perspective. This type of storytelling lowers their inhibitions about openly communicating in a foreign language and helps them develop rapport with one another as part of the greater goal of building a classroom community that promotes cooperative learning.

Students can benefit from digital storytelling lessons in several direct ways. They get a chance to introduce themselves to the rest of the class through low-risk activities. They can take their first important step toward building rapport with their peers, which will become an essential ingredient in all future collaborative class work (pair work, group projects, plenary discussions, debates, etc). They gain confidence in using the specific software needed to produce videos. They have ample opportunities to practice spoken and written narrative forms of English.

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Incidental objectives for students include learning personal details about peers as part of the overall goal of building a classroom community and expressing creativity and self-reflection by composing narratives about themselves.

## A Technology-Integrated Solution

Over the years, many EFL teachers have required students to give oral self-introductions in English in front of the class, an activity that often results in awkward, sometimes embarrassing situations both for the presenter and for the rest of the class. Students nervously and mechanically recite memorized scripts containing what they assume the teacher wants to hear, often forgetting significant portions of their presentations. Some students resort to attempts at masking their anxiety behind comic relief, which often fails to provoke laughter from the class and usually makes the situation even worse.

Digital storytelling activities allow students to access Windows Movie Maker or Apple iMovie software to produce short filmed self-presentations (3–5 minutes long) as a fun and nonthreatening alternative to traditional student-fronted self-introductions. Students collect photos and then write, narrate, and produce their own self-introduction short film to present to the rest of the class at the beginning of the semester.

Teachers can personalize these activities by having students choose topics about particularly meaningful episodes in their lives: childhood memories, a favorite trip abroad, academic and career aspirations, hopes and dreams for their country's future, and so on. Later in the course, pairs and groups can work together to make films with other aims, such as developing a creative ending to a story or rewriting the ending to a favorite fairy tale, novel, or movie. Social issues such as civil rights, couples living together before marriage, and mandatory military service can also be explored as topics for discussion and debate.

Northeast Asian students are well known for their proclivity toward all things technological. Therefore, digital storytelling serves the further purpose of enhancing student motivation to learn and practice English skills in the classroom.

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## My Experience With Digital Storytelling

My freshman English Academic Writing and English Academic Presentations classes at a top-ranked university in South Korea openly embrace activities and projects involving Web 2.0 and software technologies. South Korea boasts having more of its citizens with home Internet connections per capita than any other country in the world. Internet and software technologies have become emblematic of the country's culture. For its part, Japan matches South Korea's enthusiasm for high-tech gadgetry, as do an increasing number of people in all the major cities in China. Therefore, providing my northeast Asian students from these countries with the opportunity to extend their passion for technology to creative English projects makes sense.

As mentioned earlier, it is imperative that language learners be provided with opportunities to practice the target language in communicative classroom contexts. Digital storytelling offers students a low-risk means of introducing themselves to their classes and a safe way to build rapport with their peers, prepare and present English (target language) sentences in oral (narrated) and written (film script) form, and develop skill in using software tools that will be needed for other technology-based activities in the future.

In a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation, I take the class through each step in the process of using iMovie or Movie Maker software to research and produce video material. The effectiveness of assignments is enhanced when I go over practice examples with students before releasing them to work independently. The best digital storytelling Web site that I have come across in my research is *DigiTales: The Art of Digital Storytelling* (http://www.digitales.us), which contains sample stories that students can access, a helpful storyboard template, several links to resources, tutorials, and suggestions for peer review and commentary. Teachers might also consider modeling the activity by sharing a sample digital story film about their own life.

## Benefits

One of the main benefits of incorporating digital storytelling short film activities into your course curricula centers on the creation of a supportive and cohesive classroom environment in which students feel comfortable sharing personal facts about themselves in a nonthreatening way. In so doing, learners begin—right at the start of the semester—to overcome their inhibitions about openly relating to others. And most important, they begin to view their peers less as competitors and more as partners who share the same language learning goals.

## References


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