

How to Make Crab Soup: Digital Storytelling Projects for ESL Students

Elizabeth Iannotti (*The English Language Center*)

Crab Soup is a dish for special occasions in South Korean cooking. I became aware of this when a student wanted to feature her attempt at making this dish in her digital story project for my high level ESL class. Each student had to choose a story from their own experiences and create a digital version, using audio and images to tell the story. Now, three weeks in to the six-week project, we were way behind schedule. I was frantic. Many students still hadn't chosen topics or were spending too much time scanning and admiring their photos. There I sat – listening to my student describe the movement of the live crabs as she tried to clean them – and wondered, “How did I get here?”

In the summer of 2004, ESL colleagues Elizabeth Riker, Erika Heppner, and I heard about, became interested in, and jumped into *the new thing* in technology and teaching, digital storytelling. It was being touted among technology devotees as a powerful way to incorporate into a community a person's own story, combining the personal with the communal, told with that person's own voice, empowering people to speak of their own lives (“Understanding Digital Storytelling”). Using digital recording and video editing software, students could record their voices digitally and add images to support the story in a sort of A/V slide show. They could even publish on the web. I was intrigued.

The journey of learning a second language can take many years, depending on such factors as goals of the learner, when she began the journey, the amount of time she has dedicated to learning, the amount of exposure she has to the target language, her motivation, even genetics (Lightbown and Spada). It is commonly said of ESL practitioners that we are constantly looking for new ways to teach language—new materials and new tricks to keep learning interesting for the students and for ourselves. On a given day, I'll use lesson ideas from my junior high

school French class and that morning's *New York Times*. I am the MacGyver of the C-building. Give me a piece of wire, a grapefruit, and some silly putty, and I will teach the unreal conditional tenses. It was in this spirit that I began to explore digital stories with my students.

Just like any eager ESL instructor, I dove into the project. It wasn't an easy sell. I tried to warm my savvy, high-level students to the project with strings of second language teaching buzz words like *discourse level pronunciation practice* and *communicative fluency*. I promised that we would prepare our digital stories in class and that the entire project would be an exercise in speaking fluency and accuracy, with some writing and computer literacy practice on the side. But in the end, for most of my students, once I told them they were going to digitize a story from their own experiences, they were in.

We began by deciding what our stories would be. The stories proved harder to settle on than I had imagined. For our students, the capacity to tell a story in social, academic, and professional settings is vital to success in English. It is challenging to help students understand the idea that a story is as much about the audience as it is about the speaker. In this case, students understood that the story was going to be published on the class website and it needed to be clear and entertaining to the listener. Although it was key for students to choose a story that they wanted to tell, it was equally important to choose a story that would entertain others. I gave students examples and asked them to discuss what worked and what didn't. I took them through storytelling activities designed to elicit interesting, funny, out-of-the-ordinary experiences in students' lives. We used the process as a fluency exercise – students were asked for reactions and comments as we hashed out what their story might be. Through the process of creating the story, students were developing an understanding of story organi-

zation and transitions. It also brought to light the contrast between spoken and written English.

We then began a four week, one hour per week stint in the computer lab. Students had chosen stories and written two or three drafts with some help from their composition teacher, Peter Hoffman. They then scanned photos and practiced the recording, paying close attention to pronunciation, intonation, and emphasis, trying to master the theatrical elements of the story. Students sent me “audio drafts” to which I offered detailed feedback on how to improve their speech by practicing particular sounds, emphasizing particular words, and “hamming it up.” When students had a final audio draft, they combined image and sound in a simple program called Windows Movie Maker. Some, with time to spare, added music and image transitions.

It was wonderful to see the students so engaged in their mid-term project. I had emerged unscathed from another class project and even used it to trick students into learning English! Ha! The storytelling activities at the beginning of the project gave students ample opportunity for fluency practice and meaningful exchange. The topic was unquestionably relevant. Individual pronunciation training at the discourse level, with text authored by students, provided the means to draw students out of old pronunciation problems. The digital recording made it easier for me to assess students’ pronunciation; I took their files back to my office on my USB drive and listened carefully to their errors. I then created lessons that targeted those discrete sounds that caused students to stumble. Finally, I used their scripts to explore sentence-level stress, encouraging students to consider what words and ideas should be emphasized, contrasting function and content word stress.

I was patting myself on the back. Language learning? I could prove it. I saved original drafts and compared them to the final version. I heard improvement in discrete sounds, word stress, sentential stress and intonation. The project also encouraged experimentation with the lan-

guage as students repeatedly practiced, recorded, deleted, compared, asked questions, and consulted classmates on their recordings. Yet another benefit of project-based learning, the level of learner autonomy rose as we approached the finish line. All of this took place in the context and voice of the personal. They had taken risks, they had practiced, they had learned. Bring on the wire and grapefruit!

But I was exhausted. I couldn’t remember half of my students’ names; I could barely remember my own! Managing twenty-four projects was a daunting task, not to mention teaching the speaking, listening, pronunciation, and grammar that make up the standard course objectives for this class. As I pulled out my brand new, specially designed, gleaming Digital Stories Rubric and began to really listen to, watch and grade the projects, I realized that many of the students had gotten lost along the way. I witnessed a handful of projects that had images totally unrelated to the stories, made by students who had not heeded my pronunciation feedback (gasp!). The saddest of all, in some of the projects, the students didn’t really have a strong, engaging story. Where did I go wrong?

With any technology project, in ESL and all other disciplines, the scope of the project should be ambitious, but not beyond the limits of practicality. I had gone so far beyond the limits I could no longer see the barbed wire fence and warning signs at the border. There had simply been too many projects.

I am now an advocate at the college for digital story projects. I tell colleagues what an extremely enriching teaching experience this was and will be for the many digital story projects I intend to facilitate with my students in the future. The crab soup chef and her classmates were engrossed in their projects, telling stories about clothing design, career changes, family members, favorite trips, parakeets and many other memorable topics. When students presented the digital stories at the class premiere, they were sharing their cultures, values, life experiences, and most embarrassing moments. It was a wonderful learning experi-

ence for the students and for me. Still it was at times overwhelming. Whenever I find someone on whom to force my pitch I tell them to think about how many gray hairs they wish to cultivate, divide by two, and subtract three. That is the number of projects that they should facilitate in their classes. Digital stories rule one: keep it simple. Create groups and ask students to collaborate and seek ways to combine their stories to forge a common narrative. It might be a loss to the final product to reduce student voice in the project. A greater loss is an instructor's sanity.

At the English Language Center and around the college, ESL instructors are finding new

ways to involve technology in their instruction. We take whatever lab time, media services equipment, and Student Technology Mentors we can grab and try to turn them into meaningful, relevant, and authentic learning experiences for students. Digital storytelling provided that kind of learning experience for my students. As the instructor, I learned two very important lessons: first, you need a manageable project with realistic goals to ensure success for the students. Second, a young wife trying to make crab soup for her mother-in-law's birthday makes for an amazing digital story.

WORKS CITED

- "Digital Stories." DigitalStories.org. 8 April 2005 <<http://www.digitalstories.org/home.asp>>.
- Lightbown, Patsy M. and Nina Spada. "Factors Affecting Second Language Learning." *How Languages Are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. 49–70.
- "Understanding Digital Storytelling." *Center for Digital Storytelling*. 9 April 2005 <<http://www.storycenter.org/understanding.html>>.