

## PROMOTING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN THE PROCESS OF LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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*Abstract.* The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of Digital storytelling (DS) on the academic achievement, critical thinking, and learning motivation of university students learning English as a foreign language. DS increased students' understanding of course content, willingness to explore, and ability to think critically, factors which are important in preparing students for an ever-changing 21<sup>st</sup> century. The concept of digital storytelling and its use in the process of teaching English as a secondary foreign language is revealed. The results of theoretical analysis and practical use show that this technology contributes to both the development of communicative and creative skills and an increase in the level of digital literacy. This method makes the educational process more interesting, personalized and motivating for learners.

*Key words:* digital technologies, digital storytelling, critical thinking, project management.

### **Introduction**

The communicative approach to teaching foreign languages, firmly entrenched in modern didactic teachings, is aimed at bringing the learning process as close as possible to the conditions of real life and, consequently, real communication. The general trend in the modern philosophy of education is mutual learning in the educational process. The emphasis shifts from teaching to independent activity of students. In the context of this approach, the main trend in personal development theory is development through the integration of traditional and electronic educational space. Introducing technology in the process of learning a foreign language can motivate and help students learn the target language in a more engaging and accessible way as well as develop their digital and thinking skills.

Nowadays, students-millennials feel very comfortable with the World Wide Web using digital technologies and exploring different ways to utilize the tools on their smartwatches, cell phones, laptops, computers, etc. Technology can facilitate students' creative thinking and incentivize them to becoming more independent learners. However, it does not necessarily develop students' thinking and creative skills.

### **Didactic potential of DS technology**

The body and content of the information received requires critical reflection and careful analysis. Recently, we are paying increasing attention to the necessity of developing critical thinking, considering it the most effective way to develop students' skills in the field of argumentation and presentation of acquired knowledge.

Historically the idea of critical thinking dates to Ancient Greece. The founder of this theory is considered to be Socrates (5<sup>th</sup> century BC). The so-called "Socratic method" (or in other terminology "Socratic dialogue") is a communication technique based on dialogic question-and-answer communication. As noted by researchers of the theory of critical thinking R. Paul and L. Elder, it is Socrates that "established the importance of seeking evidence, carefully considering reasons and assumptions, analyzing basic concepts, finding out the meaning of not only what is said, but what is done" [8].

Numerous interpretations of the concept of "critical thinking" can be reduced to one definition by D. Halpern, who considers "critical thinking" as a type of mental activity that is characterized by

such traits as purposefulness, logic, balance, concentration, which increases the likelihood of achieving a goal in the decision process intellectual task [4, p. 23].

The essence of critical thinking technology lies in the formation of equal partnerships between students and the teacher himself. By interacting with students in the mode of critical thinking technology, the teacher ceases to be the main resource of information, transforming the learning process into a joint and exciting search.

To develop critical thinking, it is necessary to create and use special methodological tools that make it possible to fully implement the basic principles of teaching open communication through the development of critical thinking, namely:

- ability to solve problems;
- ability to draw conclusions and forecasts;
- ability to apply skills and knowledge in various situations;
- the ability to be persistent in solving a given problem;
- the ability to establish logical connections between phenomena;
- ability to listen to the interlocutor and cooperate with other people;
- the ability to tolerate points of view different from their own [2, p. 40].

As proclaimed by the researches, critical thinking is “effortful, careful, consciously controlled processing that maximizes the use of all available evidence and cognitive strategies, and purposefully strives to overcome individual biases” [10].

Didactics has accumulated a serious arsenal of strategies, tactics and techniques for implementing the idea of critical thinking into the process of learning. One of them is Digital storytelling – a modern pedagogical method based on a combination of multimedia technologies and traditional storytelling. This “blending” of technology and classical teaching resulted in appearing “of a separate direction in pedagogy – digital didactics” [14].

In the context of teaching foreign languages, digital storytelling is actively used as a tool for developing speaking, writing, listening and reading skills. Digital stories include text, images, audio and video, which allow students to immerse themselves deeper into the language environment, developing communicative competencies and critical thinking. Having entered the structure of didactics as a tool quite a long time ago DS, however, is still under serious scientific consideration due to the ambiguity of the concept itself, as well as the tools used (linguistic, didactic, technical).

Taking into consideration the didactic approach, B. Porter suggests that Digital storytelling “takes the ancient art of oral storytelling and engages a palette of technical tools to weave personal tales using images, graphics, music, and sound mixed together with the author’s own story voice” [9]. From technical point of view DST is considered “a multimedia story combining verbal, non-verbal and technological means to create a story” [3].

B. Robin defines digital storytelling as a method that combines storytelling and the use of digital multimedia tools to create and present personal or collective narratives, aimed at developing students’ language and communication skills [11]. Modern Russian authors consider digital storytelling to be a type of traditional storytelling performed in a digital format [13]. Thus, we note that the above given definitions do not contradict, but rather complement each other, which allows us to conclude that digital storytelling is a teaching method through which students receive a kind of small-form media product using digital tools to create a story with interactive elements.

One of the key benefits of using digital storytelling in language teaching is its ability to motivate learners and increase their interest in learning a language. Current research confirms the idea that using digital storytelling impels learners, making them more involved in both the creation and presentation process, which in turn significantly increases their interest.

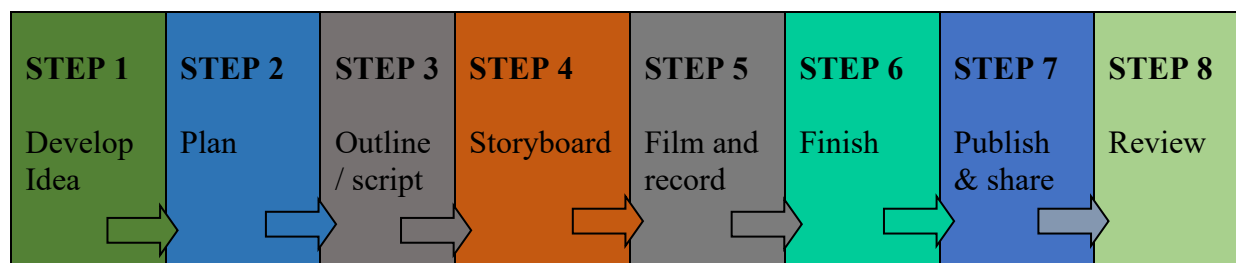
Many researches note that integrating technology in storytelling moves students from working on traditional skills to preparing them for the century with highly developed technology [7; 11].

The didactic potential of DS in English lessons is extremely high, since it allows solving several important educational tasks simultaneously: improving the perception of vocabulary and grammar, saving time on consolidating the material, taking into account the individual needs of students, developing communication skills, etc.

Before we come to the analysis of implementing this technology into the process of learning, we should remember that the structure of the lesson using the technology of development of critical thinking consists of three stages:

- challenge
- comprehension
- reflection.

These are mostly generalized phases which may be further divided into a number of steps in accordance with the purpose of the lesson. There are 8 steps for creating digital storytelling (Pic. 1).



**Picture 1. Steps for creating digital storytelling**

As a decision-making process, critical thinking has characteristics affecting the final result. Now we will dwell upon every step taking into consideration the target, the algorithm to achieve it, and the strategies to be used:

*Step 1:* think about the purpose you would like to reach and outline it;

*Step 2:* choose the topic of your story and brainstorm your thoughts using a mind map – run through most rational options to reach the purpose;

*Step 3:* determine the sequence of the events, write a simple script/narrative with 350 words, and practice reading the script before recording;

*Step 4:* use storyboard to help organize your thoughts and the presentation;

*Step 5:* create your digital story using available tools like your cell phone, a digital camera, and free apps. The story should be short, about 2 minutes long with no more than 20 images. It is better to have original photos as a storyteller;

*Step 6:* upload your story to the web and share it with your network;

*Step 7:* you can invite group mates, friends and family members to watch the digital story and share their feedback.

Step 1 and Step 2 are logically the elements of *Challenge*, while Steps 3-6 correspond to the phase of *Comprehension*. The final stage of DS – *Review* – accords with the third stage of critical thinking, i.e. *Reflection*, and may be referred to as ‘intellectual reflection’ (in terms of psychology). It is activated in the process of consideration of the subject matter, the idea and purpose of the project completed.

The technology of DS is something anyone can do no matter what level of experience they have in telling stories or using technology. It is a way for people to share their experiences in creative ways. The use of digital storytelling is very motivating both for students and teachers, and if students are motivated in accomplishing their digital story projects, they are likely to get more success in the learning activities.

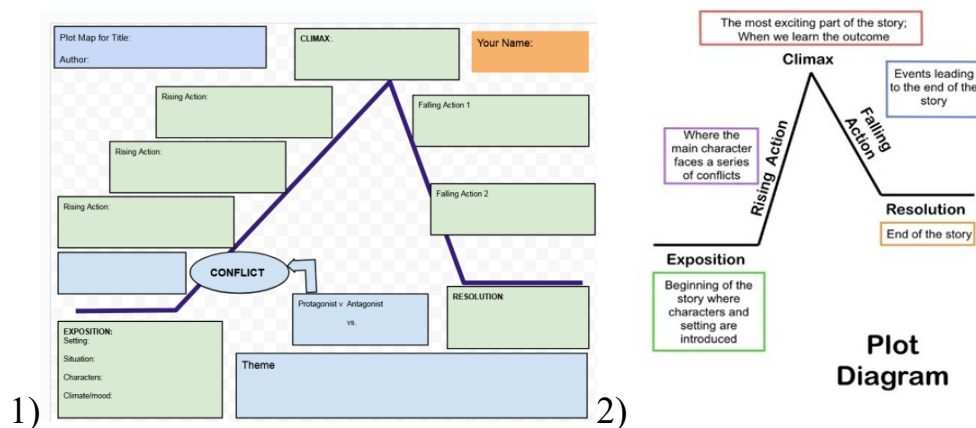
To develop creative and critical thinking skills, a digital storytelling course was designed for the students of the faculty of Foreign Languages (Bokhtar State University named after N. Husrava), Republic of Tajikistan. This course is based on critical thinking approach to studying a foreign language.

There are different types of storytelling, for instance, personal stories, folk and fairy tales, creative writing and stories about cultures and places. In the Digital storytelling project, the students were working on, special attention was focused on personal stories and featured a particular emotional point of view.

Given the possibility to tell their personal story about any topic, the students wrote stories about everyday life – people, places, events, their personal experience, focusing on the moment of transformation. It could be, for example, a story about a grandma or a grandpa, a pet, or getting a first bicycle, their first teacher, etc. The topics they did their first digital stories on were the following: “Loss”; “Loneliness”; “Perseverance”; “Reconnected”; “Winning”. The students appeared to be obsessed with very personal topics.

Developing the idea and planning the story, i.e. creating a story map (or a mind map), is an effective first step to get learners thinking about story elements, the kind of story they want to create, the main events, characters and setting. In other words, a student decides on major important issues: if he/ she is the main character, or they will show the story about someone else; what plot would appear to be appealing to their audience and would make them feel what the author feels or how the situation would affect them, whether the story would hook the viewers.

To create a story map (a mind map) the students are offered a graphic organizer (Pic. 2). Here are the two examples of diagrams which are downloaded for free on different platforms:



Picture 2. Story plot diagrams

The analysis of DS technology showed that Step 3 (“Outline / script”) is the most important and challenging one. Generating narrative writing requires serious cognitive processes. As stated by Abdel-Hack and Helwa, “It is considered the most complex skill because it goes through different stages, i.e. prewriting, writing and editing to reach its final product. It is an individual process which requires thinking strategies; that allows individuals to express themselves competently in a foreign language” [3]. Thus, the prewriting phase should be aimed at providing students with proper writing techniques which will help them “to craft a compelling story with engaging characters and a cohesive plot” [7].

The script written, the student must select pictures, photos, or animation for each episode. They are to make a *Storyboard* (Pic. 3):

- What does your story look like visually?*
- Sketch out your ideas with a “storyboard”.*

Project Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Page: \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_

By: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_


Picture 3. Storyboard

Digital stories provide students with excellent opportunities to facilitate their learning abilities, to better practice course content from linguistic point of view and enhance learning motivation.

Digital storytelling facilitates the acquisition of new vocabulary and grammar structures, as students apply the learned words and grammar in the context of their stories. By creating stories, students are forced not only to memorize, but also to actively use new vocabulary, which helps them better understand and consolidate the material. This process allows students to see language in action and use it to convey meaning, and not just to complete learning tasks.

The comprehension phase of the project is the phase of production. Here technology is to be most effectively used to accomplish the task planned. Modern technological facilities provide students with a wide range of effective yet low-cost multimedia software – *Playbuzz*, *Storyhouse*, *iMovie*, *Movie Maker*, *Medium* and dozens of others. These multimedia tools are “valid constructive tools for transformative student learning which emphasizes production, thinking, collaboration, and project management” [12].

When planning a DS project, the teaching staff are to profoundly elaborate the target task by planning the major elements of the content and multimedia considering the final perspective. For example, the Bokhtar University students were provided with the following information:

*One Day from my Life*: 5-8 photos/videos that detail and explain daily activities and routine, meals and responsibilities. Maximum 2 minutes.

*My Journey Learning the English Language*: 5-10 photos/videos. Share how you started learning English language. Maximum 2 minutes.

*All about Me*: 10 photos/video share the birthplace; childhood; interests, hobbies, favorite things or likes/dislikes; dreams and goals. Maximum 3 minutes.

*Meet my Family*: 5-10 photos/videos that introduce a student’s family with names/relationships, descriptive adjectives and comparisons. Maximum 2 minutes.

Digital storytelling helps to organize study time effectively, as it simultaneously includes training in several language aspects: reading, writing, listening and speaking. The teacher can integrate project preparation over several lessons, gradually adding new vocabulary, grammar and phonetic skills necessary to create the final story. This does not require separate study of each aspect of the language but saves time due to the integrated approach. At the same time, digital storytelling helps students to faster engage in the process and to a greater extent than with standard exercises, since they create a holistic product, which increases the effectiveness of learning. Digital storytelling is advantageous as it allows students to work on projects at their own pace and grants for more effective consideration of individual needs. This makes learning more flexible and adaptive, which is especially relevant in the context of digital education.

One of the most important aspects of teaching English is the development of communicative competence. Digital storytelling requires students to actively communicate both within the study group and with the teacher. To create stories, students must discuss their ideas, work on the script, edit texts and present their projects, which train all four types of speech activity. In the process of creating and discussing stories, students also develop skills in collaboration and critical thinking, which is an important part of communication. As J. Lambert emphasizes, digital storytelling creates opportunities for real communication, where students can discuss their stories with teachers and classmates, improving their oral communication skills [6].

### **Conclusion**

Thus, digital storytelling is an effective method of teaching foreign languages at different levels. This powerful tool promotes the teaching of foreign languages through an interactive approach. The undeniable advantages of this technology are increased motivation, high didactic potential and technical competence, which is important when learning a foreign language. Its use makes graduates that possess 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, including positive attitudes, responsibility, teamwork, foreign language proficiency, analytical thinking, and creativity. Digital storytelling strategies can be viewed as challenging tools not only for studying a foreign language, but for any other academic performances.

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## РАЗВИТИЕ КРИТИЧЕСКОГО МЫШЛЕНИЯ ПОСРЕДСТВОМ ЦИФРОВОГО РАССКАЗА В ПРОЦЕССЕ ОБУЧЕНИЯ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ КАК ВТОРОМУ ИНОСТРАННОМУ

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*Аннотация.* Целью данного исследования является изучение влияния цифрового повествования на академическую успеваемость, развитие критического мышления и мотивацию к обучению студентов университета, изучающих английский язык как иностранный. Цифровое повествование повысило понимание студентами содержания курса, готовность исследовать и способность критически мыслить – факторы, которые важны для подготовки студентов к постоянно меняющемуся 21 веку. Раскрывается концепция цифрового повествования и его использования в процессе преподавания английского языка как второго иностранного. Результаты теоретического анализа и практического использования показывают, что данная технология способствует как развитию коммуникативных и творческих навыков, так и повышению уровня цифровой грамотности. Данный метод делает образовательный процесс более интересным, персонализированным и мотивирующим для обучающихся.

*Ключевые слова:* цифровые технологии, цифровое повествование, критическое мышление, управление проектами.

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